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The Self as Seen: The Epistemic Function and Limits of Shame in *Dance of the Happy Shades*

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Abstract

In Munro's fiction, shame typically arises when characters have done nothing wrong, through being seen, compared, and exposed. This article therefore treats shame not as derivative of gender, class, or maturation, but as an experience with ethical and epistemic significance of its own. Drawing on Bernard Williams, it argues that shame enables Munro's characters to recognize "what I am," while departing from Williams's model in two respects. First, the internalized spectator is often the mother, of whom the character is herself ashamed, creating a nested structure in which the standard of evaluation derives from the very person who is its object. Second, recognition does not lead to transformation, because the self remains bound by familial, gendered, class, and regional constraints. Munro thus separates the cognitive function of shame from its constructive function: shame discloses the self without necessarily enabling action.

Keywords

Alice Munro; Dance of the Happy Shades; shame; Bernard Williams.

1. Introduction

Alice Munro's first collection of short stories, Dance of the Happy Shades, was published in 1968 and contains fifteen stories. One noteworthy detail is that the emotion driving these stories is almost always shame. In "The Time of Death," the girl feels uneasy because the floor in her own house is not as clean as that in her neighbor's; in "Thanks for the Ride," Lois "wraps herself up tight" after being slighted; at the end of "Sunday Afternoon," Alva, who was working a summer job, anticipates not relief but "a new and still mysterious humiliation"[5]. Yet at the same time, none of these scenes involves any wrongdoing, which inevitably raises the question: if nothing wrong has been done by anybody, why would people arise a sense of shame? What is the function of shame in Alice Munro's novel?

Existing scholarship has approached these scenes roughly along the following lines. Feminist criticism reads such scenes as the disciplining effects of gender scripts. For instance, Coral Ann Howells argues that Munro's fiction destabilizes the concept of "identity," because the protagonists' sense of self is far more unstable than the term "identity" implies[1]; Beverly Rasporich observes that Munro's protagonists 'do not easily, or clearly always want to, divest themselves of their femininity'[2]. Another framework comes from the Bildungsroman, which reads shame as a necessary cost of coming of age, as in Margaret Atwood's reading of *Lives of Girls and Women* [3]; regional and class-based approaches, meanwhile, read it as an experience of downward class mobility. All three approaches are tenable, but they share a common way of treating our keyword "shame".These throries may transform shame as a symptom of another subject—of gender order, of maturation, or of class—rather than as an ethical experience that has content of its own. Bernard Williams offers another possibility. In *Shame and Necessity*, he challenges a familiar progressivist narrative according to which the Greeks' "shame culture" later developed into the modern "guilt culture," rendering shame an inferior moral emotion. Williams argues that shame possesses an epistemic function that guilt lacks: guilt can direct one

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toward the victim and demand reparation, whereas shame can illuminate what the subject itself is.[4]

I reads *Dance of the Happy Shades* through Bernard Williams's framework, however, its purpose is not to use the stories as illustrations of a philosophical theory. Munro does indeed present shame as a primary means through which her characters come to know themselves, but she departs from Williams's model in two respects. First, Williams argues that the internalized spectator in shame is someone whose judgment the subject respects, and shame is therefore not heteronomous. In Munro, however, the spectator is often the mother, someone before whom the daughter herself feels shame. Second, Williams holds that shame can indicate what the subject ought to become, whereas Munro's characters do not undergo a transformation after their recognition is achieved.

2. Shame Beyond Wrongdoing

Williams's distinction between shame and guilt is grounded in two sensory images: guilt is rooted in listening to the voice of judgment within oneself, whereas the most primitive experience of shame is associated with seeing and being seen. He writes that the basic experience associated with shame is being seen by others, "being seen in the wrong condition by the wrong people"; the psychological model of each emotion contains an internalized figure, which in shame is some observer or witness, and in guilt some victim or enforcer. The roots of shame lie in exposure in a more general sense, in being at a disadvantage, and in the loss of power. This has two consequences. The first concerns its object: the sense of shame evokes contempt and ridicule in others, diminishes the agent's self-respect, and is directed toward "what I am"; guilt evokes anger and resentment, and the response can be redirected through reparation, so that it is directed toward "what I have done." The natural response to shame, therefore, is not reparation but hiding. The second concerns its conditions, that since what triggers the sense of shame is being seen rather than the violation of a rule, shame can occur in the complete absence of wrongdoing. Williams specifically warns against assuming that shame is triggered only by failure in competitive and self-displaying achievements; "failure to act in some expected way of self-sacrifice or mutual cooperation" can trigger it as well.

The shame in *Dance of the Happy Shades* almost entirely belongs to this type. In "The Time of Death," the girl who feels that her feet are unclean and that the floor in her own house is not as clean as her neighbor's has committed no blameworthy act; the entire content of her shame is a comparison, which requires only the gaze of others, even if that's out of imaginary. "Sunday Afternoon" develops this structure into the plot of the story as a whole. Alva works as a summer employee in the home of a wealthy family, and Mrs. Gannett's dissatisfaction is never expressed directly, but is conveyed through her continual corrections of the way Alva working. Nowhere in the story is Alva shown to have done anything wrong; what makes her situation humiliating is that she is treated like a piece of furniture whose feelings need not be taken into consideration. At one point, Mrs. Gannett's cousin kisses her. She experiences a lightness of confidence and suddenly feels that she is not so far removed from these people after all; but the kiss itself carries the casualness of a gesture made from above, and the story immediately withdraws this confidence. At the end, Munro writes:

But things always came together; there was something she would not explore yet—a tender spot, a new and still mysterious humiliation. [5]

The tone of this sentence is worth noting. Humiliation here is not an event that has already occurred, but something foretold, something to be expected; it is described as a "place" that has "not" yet been explored, and is thus understood as part of the knowledge of the self—something not yet acquired, but bound to be acquired sooner or later. This goes beyond psychological description: it identifies humiliation as a source of knowledge.

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“Thanks for the Ride,” in turn, demonstrates the form taken by the response to shame. Lois is approached by two boys from out of town, taken out, and then casually dropped off again, with no one paying any attention to her feelings throughout the encounter. The narrator observes, “But I did not want to talk any more, having discovered another force in her that lay side by side with her hostility, that was, in fact, just as enveloping and impersonal.”[2] Bernard Williams’s notion of *hiding* takes the form of detachment and indifference here.: Lois cannot leave the scene, so she makes herself impossible to see into while remaining there.

For comparison, there are examples where Munro writes about guilt. In “Boys and Girls,” the narrator puts her younger brother on the roof in order to attract the adults’ attention, and, recalling the incident, says, “But whenever I saw the brown and white checked coat hanging in the closet, or at the bottom of the rag bag, which was where it ended up, I felt a weight in my stomach, the sadness of unexorcized guilt.”[5] Yet this guilt is described as “ineradicable,” and it leads to no act of reparation—the narrator neither tells anyone about what happened nor does anything to counteract it. In Williams’s analysis, this is precisely the limitation of guilt when it operates on its own: “It can direct one towards those who have been wronged or damaged, and demand reparation in the name, simply, of what has happened to them. But it cannot by itself help one to understand one’s relations to those happenings,or to rebuild the self that has done these things and the world in which that self has to live. Only in the sense of shame can do that,because it embodies conceptions of what one is and of how one is related to others.”[5]Moreover, Williams suggests the structure of shame contains the possibility of taking control of guilt and benefiting from it. But in “Boys and Girls,” this takeover does not occur: guilt remains where it is, and shame does not take it over. This is precisely the question to be addressed in the third section of this essay.

3. Mother as Spectator: The Nested Structure of Shame

Williams explicitly rejects the equation of shame with a fear of public opinion. The loss of power in shame, he argues, is not constituted by the actual presence of a spectator. The gaze of an imagined other is enough. And that internalized other "is indeed abstracted and generalised and idealised, but he is still potentially somebody rather than nobody." [4]In the chapter "Necessary Identities" he puts it more precisely: the internalized other is one "whose views the agent would respect." This condition does decisive work. If the spectator were arbitrary, shame would amount to no more than the fear of being found out, and would not deserve the name of an ethical emotion; only when the subject grants that the gaze is entitled to look can shame tell him something true about himself. The spectator who recurs throughout *Dance of the Happy Shades* is the mother — and the attitude Munro's daughters take toward their mothers is precisely what fails to satisfy this condition.

In "Walker Brothers Cowboy," the mother's most conspicuous trait is her maintenance of respectability: she dresses so as to look unlike the poor people around her, and walks "like a lady shopping"; her verdict on the song her husband has made up for selling is that it is not the least bit funny, and she is glad that Dungannon, where they used to live, falls outside his territory. The narrator’s attitude toward this is ambivalent. On the one hand, her mother’s actions embarrass her; her father offers another, more carefree world—walking, talking about history, and joking—while her mother is left under the light in the dining room, doing needlework. On the other hand, the narrator’s sensitivity to the family’s decline in class status may itself have come from her mother: without her mother’s insistence on respectability, the change in the family’s circumstances might never have been recognized as a fall. The narrator could simply have treated the change in their circumstances as her father does, as something that could be made into a song. The daughter's capacity for shame originates with her mother, "Red Dress—1946" carries this structure to its clearest point. The story opens with the mother

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sewing her daughter's dress for the dance; the daughter is ashamed of everything about her mother, including her gestures, her outmoded handiwork, the unfashionable way she curls her daughter's hair. All of her shame occurs in the imagined condition of being seen by her friends. The ending, however, reverses the direction of the gaze. The dance over, the daughter comes home to find her mother sitting up under the light:

She was just sitting and waiting for me to come home and tell her everything that had happened. And I would not do it, I never would. But when I saw the waiting kitchen, and my mother in her faded, fuzzy Paisley kimono, with her sleepy but doggedly expectant face, I understood what a mysterious and oppressive obligation I had, to be happy, and how I had almost failed it, and would be likely to fail it, every time, and she would not know.[5]

What is worth noting here is that the daughter has done nothing wrong, so obviously this is not a sense of guilt. The person imposing the burden is the mother, the very person the daughter has been ashamed of all evening, so neither is it shame in Williams's sense — that gaze does not possess the standing the daughter herself acknowledges; and the content of the burden is "to be happy," which is not something that can be accomplished by trying, so that the obligation is one it is structurally impossible to discharge, and the daughter can only go on "almost failing it," time after time. Shame thus takes on a nested structure, which means that the daughter is ashamed of her mother and, at the same time, ashamed of herself under her mother's gaze, while the standard governing the second shame derives from the object of the first.

Williams's analysis comes into a dilemma fails here does not mean that shame degenerates into mere social pressure. The daughter's reaction is not a fear of being found out but a judgment about herself. Shame's cognitive function is preserved; what changes is what it discloses. It no longer tells the subject "what I am in the eyes of those I respect," but tells her instead that the standard by which she evaluates herself comes from a source she does not credit and cannot escape. In this context, the protagonist’s autonomy is weaker than what Williams assumes. One further point deserves attention. Williams holds that the model of the internalized other shows shame to be, by its very nature, a more narcissistic emotion than guilt. Yet the obligation "to be happy" at the end of "Red Dress—1946" does not point back at the daughter herself; it points to her mother's need: the daughter must appear happy so that the mother waiting under the light will not be disappointed. Shame here binds the subject to another person's situation instead.

The foregoing may be set beside Magdalene Redekop's claim that Munro locates the radical separation between self and Other in the mother-daughter relationship, and that she registers the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of that separation.[6] What this article would add is that the separation is not only one between self and Other but one between a standard of evaluation and its source.

4. The Limits of Recognition

The narrator of "The Office" rents an office in order to obtain a position in which she is not sheltered by her family. She writes: "Then I know how the rest of the time I am sheltered and encumbered, how insistently I am warmed and bound."[5] The verbs "sheltered" and "bound" merits further attention. Here, “shelter” does not carry a positive meaning. Rather, it constitutes a form of constraint: the protagonist leaves home and rents an office precisely because she wants to escape this constraint. Yet the subsequent events of the story show that renting an office cannot undo this positioning. The landlord repeatedly disturbs her in seemingly humble and courteous ways, eventually forcing her to give up the office. What she comes to realize is not “I can change my circumstances,” but “I have been in this position all along.”

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"The Peace of Utrecht" places the same structure on the most difficult material of all: the care of a sick mother. The sisters' feelings toward their mother contain disgust, and that disgust is not something they chose:

But we grew cunning, unfailing in cold solicitude; we took away from her our anger and impatience and disgust, took all emotion away from our dealings with her, as you might take away meat from a prisoner to weaken him, till he died.[5]

The stripping away of all emotion is described by the narrator herself as a slow wasting, set alongside the wasting that the disease works upon the mother. The source of that withdrawal the story accounts for elsewhere: the mother's illness is felt first of all as a social embarrassment — "So bizarre was the disease she had in its effects that it made us feel like crying out in apology (though we stayed stiff and white) as if we were accompanying a particularly tasteless sideshow."[5] Thus, the sisters' sense of indebtedness to their mother does not arise from any particular, contingent act; rather, it is rooted in the logic of social organization. This is precisely the situation at which Williams's critique of the modern moral system is directed. In the final chapter of *Shame and Necessity* he offers a direct diagnosis: what ails the modern is a Platonic conception of an impersonal moral self, a longing to separate the critical self from everything a person has contingently become; and "the idea that the relations of human beings to society and to each other, if properly understood and properly enacted, can realise a harmonious identity that involves no real loss" is an illusion of modern political thought.[4]

""The Peace of Utrecht" answers to both points. The sisters cannot separate the critical self from all that they have contingently become, because the person who feels the disgust is themselves. And between them and their mother no course without loss is available: bringing her home, leaving her in the hospital, being patient with her, keeping their distance from her, etc. Each of these acts involves a real loss, and the story gives no indication that one of these losses is less important than another.

5. Conclusion

The sense of shame completes a recognition, yet produces no change, needs to be understood in its own setting. What Munro writes about are women in southwestern Ontario between the 1940s and the 1960s. In that position, "remaking the self" is not an option available on demand. The narrator of "The Office" rents a room in which to write and is driven back out of it by her landlord's courtesies; the whole prospect facing the daughter of "Red Dress—1946" is one dance after another to which she must be invited; all the sisters of "The Peace of Utrecht" can do is choose between a loss on the side of their mother's illness and a loss on the side of their own lives. There is warrant for this in Williams himself: once the world of supernatural necessity has withdrawn, he observes, human beings become free in a metaphysical sense, but the real obstacles to our freedom are not merely metaphysical but psychological, social and political — the constraint imposed by the power of others. What Munro's characters are subject to is constraint of just this kind. This article therefore inclines to the view that the break between the cognitive and the constructive functions of the sense of shame is in the first instance a fact about a situation, and not a conclusion about human nature.

Lastly, I hope to address an intellectual-historical bearing as well. Williams's defence of the sense of shame in 1993 belongs to the broader late-twentieth-century reaction against Kantian moral philosophy: what he means to deny is the pure moral subject, unaffected by luck, whose moral standing is determined entirely by voluntary action. That denial has its costs, and Munro had already set them out in fiction thirty years earlier: if the autonomous moral self is given up, then so is the ethical prospect that takes the form of self-improvement. Williams tries to fill the gap with shame, asking it both to disclose the self and to indicate a direction; Munro stops at

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disclosure. This need not be counted a deficiency in her. What she refuses is perhaps just that narrative structure which converts suffering into insight and shame into growth — a structure that requires the sufferer to get something out of the suffering for it not to have been in vain. Munro does no more than let her characters see what they are, and then lets the story end. If this reading holds, what *Dance of the Happy Shades* offers is an account of self-knowledge: that in certain cases, the attaining of a recognition cannot issue in action.

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