Boys and Girls

by Alice Munro

My father was a fox farmer. That is, he raised silver foxes, in pens; and in the fall and early winter, when their fur was prime, he killed them and skinned them and sold their pelts to the Hudson's Bay Company or the Montreal Fur Traders. These companies supplied us with heroic calendars to hang, one on each side of the kitchen door. Against a background of cold blue sky and black pine forests and treacherous northern rivers, plumed adventures planted the flags of England and or of France; magnificent savages bent their backs to the portage.

For several weeks before Christmas, my father worked after supper in the cellar of our house. The cellar was whitewashed, and lit by a hundred-watt bulb over the worktable. My brother Laird and I sat on the top step and watched. My father removed the pelt inside-out from the body of the fox, which looked surprisingly small, mean, and rat-like, deprived of its arrogant weight of fur. The naked, slippery bodies were collected in a sack and buried in the dump. One time the hired man, Henry Bailey, had taken a swipe at me with this sack, saying, "Christmas present!" My mother thought that was not funny. In fact she disliked the whole pelting operation--that was what the killing, skinning, and preparation of the furs was called – and wished it did not have to take place in the house. There was the smell. After the pelt had been stretched inside-out on a long board my father scraped away delicately, removing the little clotted webs of blood vessels, the bubbles of fat; the smell of blood and animal fat, with the strong primitive odour of the fox itself, penetrated all parts of the house. I found it reassuringly seasonal, like the smell of oranges and pine needles.

Henry Bailey suffered from bronchial troubles. He would cough and cough until his narrow face turned scarlet, and his light blue, derisive eyes filled up with tears; then he took the lid off the stove, and, standing well back, shot out a great clot of phlegm – hss – straight into the heart of the flames. We admired his for this performance and for his ability to make his stomach growl at will, and for his laughter, which was full of high whistlings and gurglings and involved the whole faulty machinery of his chest. It was sometimes hard to tell what he was laughing at, and always possible that it might be us.

After we had sent to bed we could still smell fox and still hear Henry's laugh, but these things, reminders of the warm, safe, brightly lit downstairs world, seemed lost and diminished, floating on the stale cold air upstairs. We were afraid at night in the winter. We were not afraid of outside though this was the time of year when snowdrifts curled around our house like sleeping whales and the wind harassed us all night, coming up from the buried

fields, the frozen swamp, with its old bugbear chorus of threats and misery. We were afraid of *inside*, the room where we slept. At this time upstairs of our house was not finished. A brick chimney went up one wall. In the middle of the floor was a square hole, with a wooden railing around it; that was where the stairs came up. On the other side of the stairwell were the things that nobody had any use for anymore – a soldiery roll of linoleum, standing on end, a wicker bay carriage, a fern basket, china jugs and basins with cracks in them, a picture of the Battle of Balaclava, very sad to look at. I had told Laird, as soon as he was old enough to understand such things, that bats and skeletons lived over there; whenever a man escaped from the county jail, twenty miles away, I imagined that he had somehow let himself in the window and was hiding behind the linoleum. But we had rules to keep us safe. When the light was on, we were safe as long as we did not step off the square of worn carpet which defined our bedroom-space; when the light was off no place was safe but the beds themselves. I had to turn out the light kneeling on the end of my bed, and stretching as far as I could to reach the cord.

In the dark we lay on our beds, our narrow life rafts, and fixed our eyes on the faint light coming up the stairwell, and sang songs. Laird sang "Jingle Bells", which he would sing any time, whether it was Christmas or not, and I sang "Danny Boy". I loved the sound of my own voice, frail and supplicating, rising in the dark. We could make out the tall frosted shapes of the windows now, gloomy and white. When I came to the part, *WhenI am dead, as dead I well may be* – a fit of shivering caused not by the cold sheets but by pleasurable emotions almost silenced me. *You'll kneel and say an Ave there above me* —What was an Ave? Every day I forgot to find out.

Laird went straight from singing to sleep; I could hear his long, satisfied, bubbly breaths. Now for the time that remained to me, the most perfectly private and perhaps the best time of the whole day, I arranged myself tightly under the covers and went on with one of the stories I was telling myself from night to night. These stories were about myself, when I had grown a little older; they took place in a world that was recognizably mine, yet one that presented opportunities for courage, boldness, and self-sacrifice, as mine never did. I rescued people from a bombed building (it discouraged me that the real war had gone on so far away from Jubilee). I shot two rabid wolves who were menacing the schoolyard (the teachers cowered terrified at my back). Rode a fine horse spiritedly down the main street of Jubilee, acknowledging the townspeople's gratitude for some yet-to-be-worked-out piece of heroism (nobody ever rode a horse there, except King Billy in the Orangemen's Day parade). There was always riding and shooting in these stories, though I had only been on a horse twice — the first because we did not own a saddle — and the second time I had slid right around and dropped under the horse's feet; it had stepped placidly over me. I really was learning to shoot, but could not hit anything yet, not even tin cans on fence posts.

Alive, the foxes inhabited a world my father made for them. It was surrounded by a high guard fence, like a medieval town, with a gate that was padlocked at night. Along the streets

of this town were ranged large, sturdy pens. Each of them had a real door that a man could go through, a wooden ramp along the wire, for the foxes to run up and down on, and a kennel — sometimes like a clothes chest with airholes — where they slept and stayed in winter and had their young. There were feeding and watering dishes attached to the wire in such a way that they could be emptied and cleaned from the outside. The dishes were made of old tin cans, and the ramps and kennels of odds and ends of old lumber. Everything was tidy and ingenious; my father was tirelessly inventive and his favourite book in the world was Robinson Crusoe. He had fitted a tin drum on a wheelbarrow, for bringing water down to the pens. This was my job in the summer, when the foxes had to have water twice a day. Between nine and ten o'clock in the morning, and again after supper, I filled the drum at the pump and trundled it down through the barnyard to the pens, where I parked it, and filled my watering can and went along the streets. Laird came too, with his little cream and green gardening can, filled too full and knocking against his legs and slopping water on his canvas shoes. I had the real watering can, my father's, though I could only carry it three-quarters full.

The foxes all had names, which were printed on a tin plate and hung beside their doors. They were not named when they were born, but when they survived the first year's pelting and were added to the breeding stock. Those my father had named were called names like Prince, Bob, Wally, and Betty. Those I had named were called Star or Turk, or Maureen or Diana. Laird named one Maude after a hired girl we had when he was little, one Harold after a boy at school, and one Mexico, he did not say why.

Naming them did not make pets out of them, or anything like it. Nobody but my father ever went into the pens, and he had twice had blood-poisoning from bites. When I was bringing them their water they prowled up and down on the paths they had made inside their pens, barking seldom — they saved that for nighttimes, when they might get up a chorus of community frenzy--but always watching me, their eyes burning, clear gold, in their pointed, malevolent faces. They were beautiful for their delicate legs and heavy, aristocratic tails and the bright fur sprinkled on dark down their back — which gave them their name — but especially for their faces, drawn exquisitely sharp in pure hostility, and their golden eyes.

Besides carrying water I helped my father when he cut the long grass, and the lamb's quarter and flowering money-musk, that grew between the pens. He cut with they scythe and I raked into piles. Then he took a pitchfork and threw fresh-cut grass all over the top of the pens to keep the foxes cooler and shade their coats, which were browned by too much sun. My father did not talk to me unless it was about the job we were doing. In this he was quite different from my mother, who, if she was feeling cheerful, would tell me all sorts of things – the name of a dog she had had when she was a little girl, the names of boys she had gone out with later on when she was grown up, and what certain dresses of hers had looked like – she could not imagine now what had become of them. Whatever thoughts and stories my

father had were private, and I was shy of him and would never ask him questions. Nevertheless I worked willingly under his eyes, and with a feeling of pride. One time a feed salesman came down into the pens to talk to him and my father said, "Like to have you meet my new hired hand." I turned away and raked furiously, red in the face with pleasure.

"Could of fooled me," said the salesman. "I thought it was only a girl."

After the grass was cut, it seemed suddenly much later in the year. I walked on stubble in the earlier evening, aware of the reddening skies, the entering silences, of fall. When I wheeled the tank out of the gates and put the padlock on, it was almost dark. One night at this time I saw my mother and father standing talking on the little rise of ground we called the gangway, in front of the barn. My father had just come from the meathouse; he had his stiff bloody apron on, and a pail of cut-up meat in his hand.

It was an odd thing to see my mother down at the barn. She did not often come out of the house unless it was to do something – hang out the wash or dig potatoes in the garden. She looked out of place, with her bare lumpy legs, not touched by the sun, her apron still on and damp across the stomach from the supper dishes. Her hair was tied up in a kerchief, wisps of it falling out. She would tie her hair up like this in the morning, saying she did not have time to do it properly, and it would stay tied up all day. It was true, too; she really did not have time. These days our back porch was piled with baskets of peaches and grapes and pears, bought in town, and onions and tomatoes and cucumbers grown at home, all waiting to be made into jelly and jam and preserves, pickles and chilli sauce. In the kitchen there was a fire in the stove all day, jars clinked in boiling water, sometimes a cheesecloth bag was strung on a pole between two chairs straining blue-back grape pulp for jelly. I was given jobs to do and I would sit at the table peeling peaches that had been soaked in hot water, or cutting up onions, my eyes smarting and streaming. As soon as I was done I ran out of the house, trying to get out of earshot before my mother thought of what she wanted me to do next. I hated the hot dark kitchen in summer, the green blinds and the flypapers, the same old oilcloth table and wavy mirror and bumpy linoleum. My mother was too tired and preoccupied to talk to me, she had no heart to tell about the Normal School Graduation Dance; sweat trickled over her face and she was always counting under breath, pointing at jars, dumping cups of sugar. It seemed to me that work in the house was endless, dreary, and peculiarly depressing; work done out of doors, and in my father's service, was ritualistically important.

I wheeled the tank up to the barn, where it was kept, and I heard my mother saying, "Wait till Laird gets a little bigger, then you'll have a real help."

What my father said I did not hear. I was pleased by the way he stood listening, politely as he would to a salesman or a stranger, but with an air of wanting to get on with his real work.

I felt my mother had no business down here and I wanted him to feel the same way. What did she mean about Laird? He was no help to anybody. Where was he now? Swinging himself sick on the swing, going around in circles, or trying to catch caterpillars. He never once stayed with me till I was finished.

"And then I can use her more in the house," I heard my mother say. She had a dead-quiet regretful way of talking about me that always made me uneasy. "I just get my back turned and she runs off. It's not like I had a girl in the family at all."

I went and sat on a feed bag in the corner of the barn, not wanting to appear when this conversation was going on. My mother, I felt, was not to be trusted. She was kinder than my father and more easily fooled, but you could not depend on her, and the real reasons for the things she said and did were not to be known. She loved me, and she sat up late at night making a dress of the difficult style I wanted, for me to wear when school started, but she was also my enemy. She was always plotting. She was plotting now to get me to stay in the house more, although she knew I hated it (because she knew I hated it) and keep me from working for my father. It seemed to me she would do this simply out of perversity, and to try her power. It did not occur to me that she could be lonely, or jealous. No grown-up could be; they were too fortunate. I sat and kicked my heels monotonously against a feed bag, raising dust, and did not come out till she was gone.

At any rate, I did not expect my father to pay any attention to what she said. Who could imagine Laird doing my work – Laird remembering the padlock and cleaning out the watering dishes with a leaf on the end of a stick, or even wheeling the tank without it tumbling over? It showed how little my mother knew about the way things really were.

I had forgotten to say what the foxes were fed. My father's bloody apron reminded me. They were fed horsemeat. At this time most farmers still kept horses, and when a horse got too old to work, or broke a leg or got down and would not get up, as they sometimes did, the owner would call my father, and he and Henry went out to the farm in the truck. Usually they shot and butchered the horse there, paying the farmer from five to twelve dollars. If they had already too much meat on hand, they would bring the horse back alive, and keep it for a few days or weeks in our stable, until the meat was needed. After the war the farmers were buying tractors and gradually getting rid of horses, that there was just no use for any more. If this happened in the winter we might keep the horse in our stable till spring, for we had plenty of hay and if there was a lot of snow – and the plow did not always get our roads cleared – it was convenient to be able to go to town with a horse and cutter.

The winter I was eleven years old we had two horses in the stable. We did not know what names they had had before, so we called them Mack and Flora. Mack was an old black

workhorse, sooty and indifferent. Flora was a sorrel mare, a driver. We took them both out in the cutter. Mack was slow and easy to handle. Flora was given to fits of violent alarm, veering at cars and even at other horses, but we loved her speed and high-stepping, her general air of gallantry and abandon. On Saturdays we went down to the stable and as soon as we opened the door on its cozy, animal-smelling darkness Flora threw up her head, rolled here eyes, whinnied despairingly, and pulled herself through a crisis of nerves on the spot. It was not safe to go into her stall, she would kick.

This winter also I began to hear a great deal more on the theme my mother had sounded when she had been talking in front of the barn. I no longer felt safe. It seemed that in the minds of the people around me there was a steady undercurrent of thought, not to be deflected, on this one subject. The word girl had formerly seemed to me innocent and unburdened like the word child; now it appeared that it was no such thing. A girl was not, as I had supposed, simply what I was; it was what I had to become. It was a definition, always touched with emphasis, with reproach and disappointment. Also it was a joke on me. Once Laird and I were fighting, and for the first time ever I had to use all my strength against him; even so, he caught and pinned my arm for a moment, really hurting me. Henry saw this, and laughed, saying, "Oh, that there Laird’s gonna show you, one of these days!" Laird was getting a lot bigger. But I was getting bigger too.

My grandmother came to stay with us for a few weeks and I heard other things. "Girls don't slam doors like that." "Girls keep their knees together when they sit down." And worse still, when I asked some questions, "That's none of girls’ business." I continued to slam the doors and sit as awkwardly as possible, thinking that by such measures I kept myself free.

When spring came, the horses were let out in the barnyard. Mack stood against the barn wall trying to scratch his neck and haunches, but Flora trotted up and down and reared at the fences, clattering her hooves against the rails. Snow drifts dwindled quickly, revealing the hard grey and brown earth, the familiar rise and fall of the ground, plain and bare after the fantastic landscape of winter. There was a great feeling of opening-out, of release. We just wore rubbers now, over our shoes; our feet felt ridiculously light. One Saturday we went out to the stable and found all the doors open, letting in the unaccustomed sunlight and fresh air. Henry was there, just idling around looking at his collection of calendars which were tacked up behind the stalls in a part of the stable my mother probably had never seen.

"Come to say goodbye to your old friend Mack?" Henry said. "Here, you give him a taste of oats." He poured some oats into Laird’s cupped hands and Laird went to feed Mack. Mack's teeth were in bad shape. He ate very slowly, patiently shifting the oats around in his mouth, trying to find a stump of a molar to grind it on. "Poor old Mack, said Henry mournfully. ”When a horse's teeth’s gone, he's gone. That's about the way.

"Are you going to shoot him today?" I said. Mack and Flora had been in the stables so long I had almost forgotten they were going to be shot.

Henry didn't answer me. Instead he started to sing in a high, trembly, mocking-sorrowful voice. *Oh, there's no more work, for poor Uncle Ned, he's gone where the good darkies go.* Mack's thick, blackish tongue worked diligently at Laird's hand. I went out before the song was ended and sat down on the gangway.

I had never seen them shoot a horse, but I knew where it was done. Last summer Laird and I had come upon a horse's entrails before they were buried. We had thought it was a big black snake, coiled up in the sun. That was around in the field that ran up beside the barn. I thought that if we went inside the barn, and found a wide crack or a knothole to look through, we would be able to see them do it. It was not something I wanted to see; just the same, if a thing really happened it was better to see, and know.

My father came down from the house, carrying a gun.

"What are you doing here?" he said.

"Nothing."

"Go on up and play around the house."

He sent Laird out of the stable. I said to Laird, "Do you want to see them shoot Mack?" and without waiting for an answer led him around to the front door of the barn, opened it carefully, and went in. "Be quiet or they'll hear us," I said. We could hear Henry and my father talking in the stable; then the heavy shuffling steps of Mack being backed out of his stall.

In the loft it was cold and dark. Thin crisscrossed beams of sunlight fell through the cracks. The hay was low. It was rolling country, hills and hollows, slipping under our feet. About four feet up was a beam going around the walls, We piled hay up in one corned and I boosted Laird up and hoisted myself. The beam was not very wide; we crept along it with our hands flat on the barn walls. There were plenty of knotholes, and I found one that gave me the view I wanted – a corner of the barnyard, the gate, part of the field. Laird did not have a knothole and began to complain.

I showed him a widened crack between two boards. "Be quiet and wait. If they hear you you'll get us in trouble."

My father came in sight carrying the gun. Henry was leading Mack by the halter. He dropped it and took out his cigarette papers and tobacco; he rolled cigarettes for my father

and himself. While this was going on Mack nosed around in the old, dead grass along the fence. Then my father opened the gate and they took Mack through. Henry led Mack away from the path to a patch of ground and they talked together, not loud enough for us to hear. Mack again began to searching for a mouthful of fresh grass, which was not found. My father walked away in a straight line, and stopped short at a distance which seemed to suit him. Henry was walking away from Mack too, but sideways, still negligently holding on to the halter. My father raised the gun and Mack looked up as if he had noticed something and my father shot him.

Mack did not collapse at once but swayed, lurched sideways, and fell, first on his side; then he rolled over on his back and, amazingly, kicked his legs for a few seconds in the air. At this Henry laughed, as if Mack had done a trick for him. Laird, who had drawn a long, groaning breath of surprise when the shot was fired, said out loud, "He's not dead." And it seemed to me it might be true. But his legs stopped, he rolled on his side again, his muscles quivered and sank. The two men walked over and looked at him in a businesslike way; they bent down and examined his forehead where the bullet had gone in, and now I saw his blood on the brown grass.

"Now they just skin him and cut him up," I said. "Let's go." My legs were a little shaky and I jumped gratefully down into the hay. "Now you've seen how they shoot a horse," I said in a congratulatory way, as if I had seen it many times before. "Let's see if any barn cats had kittens in the hay." Laird jumped. He seemed young and obedient again. Suddenly I remembered how, when he was little, I had brought him into the barn and told him to climb the ladder to the top beam. That was in the spring, too, when the hay was low. I had done it out of a need for excitement, a desire for something to happen so that I could tell about it. He was wearing a little bulky brown and white checked coat, made down from one of mine. He went all the way up just as I told him, and sat down on the beam with the hay far below him on one side, and the barn floor and some old machinery on the other. Then I ran screaming to my father. "Laird’s up on the top beam!" My father came, my mother came, my father went up the ladder talking very quietly and brought Laird down under his arm, at which my mother leaned against the ladder and began to cry. They said to me, "Why weren't you watching him?" but nobody ever knew the truth. Laird did not know enough to tell. 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 unexorcised guilt.

I looked at Laird, who did not even remember this, and I did not like the look on this thing, winter-paled face. His expression was not frightened or upset, but remote, concentrating. "Listen," I said in an unusually bright and friendly voice, "you aren't going to tell, are you?"

"No," he said absently.

"Promise."

"Promise," he said. I grabbed the hand behind his back to make sure he was not crossing his fingers. Even so, he might have a nightmare; it might come out that way. I decided I had better work hard to get all thoughts of what he had seen out of his mind – which, it seemed to me, could not hold very many things at a time. I got some money I had saved and that afternoon we went into Jubilee and saw a show, with Judy Canova, at which we both laughed a great deal. After that I thought it would be all right.

Two weeks later I knew they were going to shoot Flora. I knew from the night before, when I heard my mother ask if the hay was holding out all right, and my father said, "Well, after tomorrow there'll just be the cow, and we should be able to put her out to grass in another week." So I knew it was Flora's turn in the morning.

This time I didn't think of watching it. That was something to see just one time. I had not thought about it very often since, but sometimes when I was busy, working at school, or standing in front of the mirror combing my hair and wondering if I would be pretty when I grew up, the whole scene would flash into my mind: I would see the easy, practiced way my father raised the gun, and hear Henry laughing when Mack kicked his legs in the air. I did not have any great feelings of horror and opposition, such as a city child might have had; I was too used to seeing the death of animals as a necessity by which we lived. Yet I felt a little ashamed, and there was a new wariness, a sense of holding-off, in my attitude to my father and his work.

It was a fine day, and we were going around the yard picking up tree branches that had been torn off in winter storms. This was something we had been told to do, and also we wanted to use them to make a teepee. We heard Flora whinny, and then my father's voice and Henry's shouting, and we ran down to the barnyard to see what was going on.

The stable door was open. Henry had just brought Flora out, and she had broken away from him. She was running free in the barnyard, from one end to the other. We climbed on the fence. It was exciting to see her running, whinnying, going up on her hind legs, prancing and threatening like a horse in a Western movie, an unbroken ranch horse, though she was just an old driver, an old sorrel mare. My father and Henry ran after her and tried to grab the dangling halter. They tried to work her into a corner, and they had almost succeeded when she made a run between them, wild-eyed, and disappeared round the corner of the barn. We heard the rails clatter down as she got over the fence, and Henry yelled. "She's into the field now!"

That meant she was in the long L-shaped field that ran up by the house. If she got around the center, heading towards the lane, the gate was open; the truck had been driven into the

field this morning. My father shouted to me, because I was on the other side of the fence, nearest the lane, "Go shut the gate!"

I could run very fast. I ran across the garden, past the tree where our swing was hung, and jumped across a ditch into the lane. There was the open gate. She had not got out, I could not see her up on the road; she must have run to the other end of the field. There gate was heavy. I lifted it out of the gravel and carried it across the roadway. I had it half way across when she came in sight, galloping straight toward me. There was just time to get the chain on. Laird came scrambling though the ditch to help me.

Instead of shutting the gate, I opened it as wide as I could. I did not make any decision to do this; it was just what I did. Flora never slowed down; she galloped straight past me, and Laird jumped up and down, yelling, "Shut it, shut it!" even after it was too late. My father and Henry appeared in the field a moment too late to see what I had done. They only saw Flora heading for the township road. They would think I had not got there in time.

They did not waste any time asking about it. They went back to the barn and got the gun and the knives they used, and put these in the truck; then they turned the truck around and came bounding up the field toward us. Laird called to them, "Let me go too, let me go too!" and Henry stopped the truck and they took him in. I shut the gate after they were all gone.

I supposed Laird would tell. I wondered what would happen to me. I had never disobeyed my father before, and I could not understand why I had done it. Flora would not really get away. They would catch up with her in the truck. Or if they did not catch her this morning somebody would see her and telephone us this afternoon or tomorrow. There was no wild country here for her, we needed the meat to feed the foxes, we needed the foxes to make our living. All I had done was make more work for my father who worked hard enough already. And when my father found out about it he was not going to trust me any more; he would know that I was not entirely on his side. I was on Flora's side, and that made me no use to anybody, not even to her. Just the same, I did not regret it; when she came running at me I held the gate open, that was the only thing I could do.

I went back to the house, and my mother said, "What's all the commotion?" I told her that Flora had kicked down the fence and got away. "Your poor father," she said, "now he'll have to go chasing over the countryside. Well, there isn't any use planning dinner before one." She put up the ironing board. I wanted to tell her, but thought better of it and went upstairs and sat on my bed.

Lately I had been trying to make my part of the room fancy, spreading the bed with old lace curtains, and fixing myself a dressing table with some leftovers of cretonne for a skirt. I planned to put up some kind of barricade between my bed and Laird’s, to keep my section

separate from his. In the sunlight, the lace curtains were just dusty rags. We did not sing at night any more. One night when I was singing Laird said, "You sound silly," and I went right on but the next night I did not start. There was not so much need to anyway, we were no longer afraid. We knew it was just old furniture over there, old jumble and confusion. We did not keep to the rules. I still stayed away after Laird was asleep and told myself stories, but even in these stories something different was happening, mysterious alterations took place. A story might start off in the old way, with a spectacular danger, a fire or wild animals, and for a while I might rescue people; then things would change around, and instead, somebody would be rescuing me. It might be a boy from our class at school, or even Mr. Campbell, our teacher, who tickled girls under the arms. And at this point the story concerned itself at great length with what I looked like – how long my hair was, and what kind of dress I had on; by the time I had these details worked out the real excitement of the story was lost.

It was later than one o'clock when the truck came back. The tarpaulin was over the back, which meant there was meat in it. My mother had to heat dinner up all over again. Henry and my father had changed from their bloody overalls into ordinary working overalls in the barn, and they washed arms and necks and faces at the sink, and splashed water on their hair and combed it. Laird lifted his arm to show off a streak of blood. "We shot old Flora," he said, "and cut her up in fifty pieces."

"Well I don't want to hear about it," my mother said. "And don't come to my table like that."

My father made him go wash the blood off.

We sat down and my father said grace and Henry pasted his chewing gum on the end of his fork, the way he always did; when he took it off he would have us admire the pattern. We began to pass the bowls of steaming, overcooked vegetables. Laird looked across the table at me and said proudly distinctly, "Anyway it was her fault Flora got away."

"What?" my father said.

"She could of shut the gate and she didn't. She just open' it up and Flora ran out."

"Is that right?" my father said.

Everybody at the table was looking at me. I nodded, swallowing food with great difficulty. To my shame, tears flooded my eyes.

My father made a curt sound of disgust. "What did you do that for?"

I didn't answer. I put down my fork and waited to be sent from the table, still not looking up.

But this did not happen. For some time nobody said anything, then Laird said matter-of-factly, "She's crying."

"Never mind," my father said. He spoke with resignation, even good humour the words which absolved and dismissed me for good. "She's only a girl," he said.

I didn't protest that, even in my heart. Maybe it was true.

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Introduction

‘‘Boys and Girls’’ was first published in 1968 in *The Montrealer*, before it was collected with fourteen other stories and published in Alice Munro’s first edition of short stories, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968). The story, narrated by a young girl, details the time in her life when she leaves childhood and its freedoms behind and realizes that to be a ‘‘girl’’ is to be, eventually, a woman. The child begins to understand that being socially typed entails a host of serious implications. Thus becoming a ‘‘girl’’ on the way to womanhood is a time fraught with difficulties for the young protagonist because she senses that women are considered the social inferiors of men. Initially, she tries to prevent this from occurring by resisting her parents’ and grandparents’ attempts to train her in the likes, habits, behaviour, and work of women. This resistance, however, proves to be useless. The girl ends the story clearly socially positioned as a girl, something which she apprehends with some trepidation. The story is thus a feminist parable of sorts, where a girl bucks against a future that will prevent her from doing, socially, whatever she might please. Although most of Munro’s work does not have such clear and cogent feminist interest, this story eloquently attests to how women worked during this century to change their social position substantially.

Munro’s fiction writing evinces subtle but definite changes throughout her career, and one of the pleasures of reading her fiction is noticing these developments. Nevertheless, ‘‘Boys and Girls’’ is also representative of Munro’s work as a whole, as the story’s formal strategies can be linked to general trends in her writing. For example, Munro is known for her use of irony, and this story contains numerous ironic flourishes. As the girl protagonist is being groomed to curb her wild behaviour and pay attention to her manner of dress and her looks in general, Munro lavishly fleshes out the appearance of the mother, whose labour intensive housework makes it necessary for her to ignore such things entirely. Thus, as the young girl is trained to be vain, an adult woman is presented whose lifestyle in fact precludes such vanity. The girl’s mother ties up her hair and wraps it in a scarf, and favours simple clothing that suits her workaday habits.

Characters

Henry Bailey

Henry Bailey is a farmhand. He is like a part of the narrator’s family, sharing meals and his life with them. He is mainly a source of entertainment for the children, probably since he does not appear as an authority figure, as the children’s parents clearly do. Thus, they can enjoy his teasing of them a great deal, and he, for his part, seems to enjoy thrilling them with his more spectacular accomplishments (like spitting very well).

Father

Like the narrator’s mother, the father figure in the story seems a likable, decent and hardworking man. He humours his children, finding ways to praise them that pleases them a great deal. Like his wife, he seems to view a future in which his daughter will eventually leave off helping him to become, exclusively, a help to the mother.

Female Narrator

The character who narrates this story does so with the hindsight of maturity, although she describes events from her childhood and manages to provide the reader with a youthful point of view. She describes the period in her life when her carefree childhood ended, and she began to feel as if she must conform to various expectations. The traditional socialization undergone by middle-class girls at this time was something she resisted, as she perceived that the roles and choices allotted to women were less attractive and various than those allotted to men. However, regardless of this resistance, she describes how she gradually capitulated to accept this socialization. The narrator is like the lively, frisky horse Flora in the story, a living thing with energy and will that is finally entrapped and used by forces greater than herself.

Laird

Laird is the narrator's younger brother, a seemingly sweet little boy whose helplessness is, at first, contrasted to the narrator's greater ability to be of help to her mother and father in the house and on the fox farm. However, as the story progresses, this image of babyishness falls away as it becomes clear that Laird will be the one to take the narrator's place at their father's side, a position the young narrator hoped would always belong to her. By the end of the story Laird has been taken into the company of men, and his sister, the narrator, has been relegated to the ranks of being ''only a girl.''

Mother

The narrator's mother seems to be an exemplary woman, one who fulfills the duties of a homemaker with energy and verve. The portion of the story that describes what goes on inside the farm house shows her putting in a day's work that matches the energies of the men working outside. She looks forward to the day when her daughter will be older and so able to relieve more of her labour's burden. She seems to enjoy the company of her daughter; the narrator tells us that she talks freely about her past and things in general when they are working together.

Themes

Coming of Age

In some respects, ''Boys and Girls'' is a classic coming-of-age tale. Most societies have either cultural narratives or cultural rituals that bespeak the end of childhood and the entry into adulthood. The way that this shift in a boy or girl's life is depicted will tell a great deal about the values of a particular culture. If the tale is about a boy who goes on his first hunting expedition, then the reader surmises that bravery is paramount to what makes a boy a man in that society. What, then, marks the transition from girlhood to young womanhood? It is this problem that Munro takes on in ''Boys and Girls.'' Interestingly, Munro first depicts the young girl narrator defining herself like a boy seemingly would do. She thinks up stories at night in which she is a hero who is brave and saves other people from peril. However, when this girl begins to think of herself as a gendered person, she no longer thinks in terms of heroic qualities that will have some larger social effect, but instead begins to focus on her person itself (her relative beauty or plainness). Will she be ''pretty,'' she wonders? Will a certain ''fancy''

material for a dress enhance her looks? Coming of age for a young girl at the historical time of this story, then, seems to rest on the future potential of this girl's ability to attract men, and thus her marriageability. Bravery and independence, those qualities that will lead persons to successfully make their public and professional way in the world can be contrasted to this more private and personal mode of self-valuation. Thus, when a woman writer takes on the problem of female coming-of-age as it might have occurred during the first half of this century, what ensues is a parable about how the girl retreats from the public and enwraps herself in the space of private worries.

Style

Allusion

When a writer makes an ''allusion'' within a story, he or she refers to a well-known event or thing that is supposed to conjure up associations that are relevant to what is going on in the story. In saying that her father's favourite book is *Robinson Crusoe*, Munro creates an allusion in her story. This novel by Daniel Defoe is about a man who, on a colonial venture from England to South America, is shipwrecked and becomes the only survivor washed up on an island off the South American coast. Finding he cannot build a seaworthy vessel to contend with the surrounding coast and sea with the implements he has at his disposal (which he either saves from the sunken ship or makes himself), Crusoe goes about building himself a home and a farm and taming and grooming his environment to his purposes. He spends many years alone. Eventually, he witnesses a group of South American Indians land on his island who prepare to kill a hostage from another tribe they have taken in war. Crusoe saves this unfortunate Indian and then the book goes on to depict an idealized relation between the two men in which the Indian, in profound gratitude, willingly and happily submits to Crusoe and becomes his slave. Crusoe dubs the Indian ''Friday'' to commemorate the day he saved him, and the day he received a companion, for he has been very lonely. Contemporary critics, not surprisingly, have read this last portion of Defoe's book as the dreamy wishes of a European man who imagined that the natives of colonized lands greeted their demise or bondage with little dismay or resentment. Like the fur company's calendar, Defoe's book idealizes the history of colonialism, to the clear benefit of those who had the upper hand. By linking this book to her father within a story that contests women's secondary status to men, Munro aligns Crusoe to her father and herself to Friday. Like Crusoe, she suggests, her father does not recognize that she does not accept her inferior social status.

Foreshadowing

In a story about a young girl's feelings about being trapped into a position she is not looking forward to, the subplot concerning the two horses bought to be used for fodder is an instance of foreshadowing. Although any reader will understand that the success of the fox farm depends upon the sacrifice of these two animals, Munro's attention to Flora's attempt to run away nevertheless provokes feelings of pity for the animal whose life will end while it is in its prime. The inevitability and unpleasantness of this animal's fate foreshadows the fate of the girl protagonist. No matter how hard she tries to resist her future, she is destined to lose to forces greater than herself.

Subplot

The story of the two horses comprises a subplot within the larger story that is ''Boys and Girls.'' Subplots usually serve a specific function in a story. They may provide a counterpoint to the larger plot, outlining a sub-story that contradicts or parodies the main goings-on, or, as in the case of this subplot, they may serve to underscore the main events. The horses' fate is determined and dismal, and so is the fate and future of the girl narrator. Munro's clever interweaving of the larger plot and this subplot makes for a tightly constructed and powerful ending to the story.

Essays

A Rite of Passage

Although Alice Munro knew from the time she was 12 years old that she wanted to be a writer, her first collection of short stories was not published until 1968, when Munro was well into her adulthood. Since then, however, she has remained one of Canada's top authors, and her work has crossed the world's boundaries; her writing has been translated into 14 languages and her works are widely anthologized. Her writing often features the world she knows best, the Depression-era southwestern Ontario of her early years. In *Dance of the Happy Shades*, from which the story ''Boys and Girls'' is taken, Munro presents the hardscrabble childhood of her youth. Critics and readers responded to this collection positively, noting her evocation of place as well as her understanding and depiction of the gender roles that characterized the time period. For this collection she won the prestigious Governor's General Award, an honour that would be bestowed upon her several times.

''Boys and Girls'' may be termed a rite-of-passage story, for it tells of a significant event that helps one girl to recognize and accept the womanhood that is her future. The 11-year-old narrator lives on her family's fox farm. For years she has helped out her father, but that winter she realizes that her mother is expecting her to become more of a ''girl''—working in the house, for instance, instead of in the fox pens. The narrator resists such efforts at transformation. However, when her father intends to kill a mare in order to feed the foxes, with no forethought, the girl frees the panicked horse. The girl is not surprised to later learn that her father has recaptured and killed the mare. What does surprise her, however, is that he is not angry with her transgression; after all, as he says, '''She's only a girl.''' And perhaps also surprising to the girl is her own reaction to his statement: ''I didn't protest that, even in my heart. Maybe it was true.''

One of the most striking features of the story is Munro's presentation of how the ideas suggested by ''boy'' and ''girl'' come into opposition; this opposition is reflected in all facets of the narrator's world. Still, the story slowly builds to this conclusion, for as it begins, the narrator and her younger brother, Laird, have both firmly allied themselves with their father; they spend their time watching their father work, skinning the foxes. Their mother, however—the homemaker—dislikes this bloody business.

Clearly, the narrator has given thought to the differing roles of men and women and has chosen to identify herself with the male sphere. She sees the inside of the house as her mother's territory, a

territory she does not care to inhabit. Outside the house is the real world, the world of foxes and commerce and vibrancy. Even her bedroom, part of the inside house, is not a sanctuary but instead an ''unfinished'' space she shares with her brother. Marlene Goldman has written that this space remains ''undifferentiated,'' implying the same state in the children—that they have not yet accepted their respective labels of ''girl'' or ''boy.'' The children are so alike they even share the same fear: ''inside, the room where we slept,'' instead of outside, with its chilling winter. At the beginning of the story, it is the outside world in which the girl participates. She has a summer job of giving the foxes water with the ''real watering can, her father's,'' while Laird only carries a ''little cream and green gardening can, filled too full and knocking against his legs and slopping water on his canvas shoes.'' The girl's subtle boast emphasizes her belief that she has access to the male tools and thus the male identity. The girl compares working side-by- side with her father to working in the house with her mother. Her father remains silent, while her mother often would tell her stories. The girl, however, gets a ''feeling of pride'' working with her father that she lacks with her mother. Clearly, housework and ''women's work'' do not have the same value as the male, outside work. She feels her role on the farm is assured—her father even refers to her when speaking to a feed salesman as '''my new hired man,''' which makes her ''red in the face with pleasure.''

The girl has no expectations that her daily life will change. By this point she has fully embraced the male identity, even down to the stories she tells herself at night in which she plays a rescuing hero and then rides down the main street on a horse to receive the townspeople's gratitude, even though the only person to ever do so is the man who plays King Billy during the town's yearly parade, itself a state of make-believe. One day, however, she sees her mother by the barn. This itself is the first sign that something is amiss, for ''[I]t was an odd thing to see my mother down at the barn. She did not often come out of the house unless it was to do something— hang out the wash or dig potatoes in the garden.'' The girl overhears part of her mother's words—''And then I can use her more in the house, . . . It's not like I had a girl in the family at all.''

Despite this conversation, the narrator does not expect anything to change. As she puts it, ''Who could imagine Laird doing my work . . . It showed how little my mother knew about the way things really were.'' Her statement shows that not only does she believe her help to be indispensable to her father, but that, because of her male work, she believes herself to be superior to her mother—more knowledgeable and more useful. Her acknowledgment that ''I did not expect my father to pay any attention'' to her mother's words further shows that she has placed herself on an equal level with her father; as the only family representatives of the male identity, they share the secrets of the farm; her mother, trapped in the house and in her female body, remains ignorant.

Despite her protestations, at this point the girl enters into a new stage, one in which she is no longer able to securely latch on to her chosen identity. For throughout the winter she hears ''a great deal more on the theme'' and admits, ''I no longer felt safe . . . The word girl had formerly sounded to me innocent and unburdened, like the word child; now it appeared it was no such thing. A girl was not, as I had supposed, simply what I was; it was what I was to become.'' That winter other challenges to the

girl's right to occupy the male sphere are launched. As Goldman points out, with her grandmother's visit, the narrator learns lessons about how girls are expected to come under societal control: girls don't slam doors, girls keep their knees together when they sit down, and the worst of all, in response to a question, '"That's none of girls' business."'

To what extent these lessons influence the narrator is unknown to the reader at this point. Only later does the reader learn that the girl has taken to ''standing in front of the mirror combing my hair and wondering if I would be pretty when I grew up.'' The stories she tells herself at night have changed, too; although they start out the same, they switch so that she no longer does the rescuing but suddenly a male figure is rescuing her. Her belongings have similarly taken on the trappings of femininity: old lace curtains as a bedspread, a dressing table with a skirt. She also has grown dissatisfied with the bedroom she shares with Laird. What she had previously presented as a common space, where the two siblings cheerfully engaged in storytelling and singing, she now plans to divide with a barricade. When this transformation happens is unknown to the reader, but clearly it has been building up before her fateful encounter with Flora. In fact, it is likely that the narrator deliberately withheld this information from the reader, mirroring the way she has kept herself from understanding the true meaning of her actions. The narrator's ability to hide pertinent details has already been demonstrated in her exclusion of how her father feeds the foxes—''I have forgotten to say what the foxes were fed. My father's bloody apron reminded me.'' That the story opens with the dead, bloody bodies of the fox shows that the narrator has left out this detail in an attempt to present her favoured father in the best light possible.

The spring began as any other spring. Yet, as her father prepares to kill Flora, a mare he has purchased with the intention of feeding her to the foxes, the girl undergoes a drastic transformation, particularly so in comparison to her reaction at the killing of another horse a short time before. When that horse was killed, the girl's legs were a ''little shaky,'' but she felt ''all right'' after going to the movies that afternoon.

The girl has already identified herself to some extent with Flora, a high-strung horse, for Flora, like the girl and even the foxes, experiences confinement. Clearly, the structure and description of the farm itself reinforce such ideas of entrapment. The foxes, which the girl recognizes as beautiful but hostile, live in a ''world my father had made for them.'' She describes the fox pens, which Goldman points out are ''spaces in which bodies are confined and controlled,'' as bordering the streets of a town; inside the pens the foxes restlessly ''prowled up and down,'' much as Flora, when let out of the barn, ''trotted up and down and reared at the fences, clattering her hooves against the rails.'' Goldman further comments on the house and the farm: the dark, hot kitchen that ''imprisons'' the mother and threatens the narrator; the fields that surround the farm and the gates that restrict traffic are an ''enlarged version of the pen''; even the town itself is an ''inescapable enclosure.''

When Flora is brought out of the barn to be killed, the girl states, ''It was exciting to see her running, whinnying, going up on her hind legs, prancing and threatening like a horse in a Western movie, an unbroken ranch horse, though she was just an old driver, an old sorrel mare.'' The horse brings to life

the narrator's fantasies, though now generally rejected, of the female striking against imposed societal expectations and becoming a creature strong in its own right. Flora breaks away into a meadow where a gate has been left open. The girl's father shouts to her to shut the gate. It is at this moment that the girl breaks irrevocably from her self-imposed male-identified position. Her desire to free the female horse is stronger than her desire to please her father. She knows however, that the horse will be recaptured, and that freedom is only an illusion. For the first time in her life, she disobeys her father. ''Instead of shutting the gate,'' she recounts, ''I opened it as wide as I could. I did not make any decision to do this, it was just what I did.'' While the girl returns to the house—''inside''—her younger brother becomes a man; he remains ''outside'' and goes along with the men to track down and catch Flora. This is the point at which the narrator admits to the changes that she has been undergoing; she opens her heart up to the truth. She has become a ''girl.''

Marlene Goldman calls ''Boys and Girls'' a ''narrative which highlights the almost invisible societal forces which shape children.'' By the end of the story, the sister and brother have firmly stepped into the roles that society has extended to them. ''Boys and Girls'' also introduces two themes that reappear in Munro's writing: the burden of femininity and the women's need to break free.

Source: Rena Korb, ''A Rite of Passage,'' in Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 1999. Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers.*

Boys and Girls | Penning in the Bodies: The Construction of Gendered Subjects in Alice Munro's Boys and Girls

She also looks at the very different worlds—outside and inside, the male sphere and the female sphere— described by Munro in the story. ''My father was a fox farmer.'' So begins Alice Munro's short story ''Boys and Girls,'' a narrative which highlights the almost invisible societal forces which shape children, in this case, the narrator and her brother Laird, into gendered adults. There is no doubt that males and females are biologically distinct at birth. Yet the behaviours and roles ascribed to each sex on the basis of this biological distinction are not natural. In this study, then, when I speak of gender, I refer not to sex, but to this set of prescribed behaviours.

Children, as the text clearly illustrates, do not evolve naturally into gendered adults. Instead, the construction of gendered subjects constitutes a form of production. Yet unlike other systems of production, the mechanisms which assist in the creation of gendered adults remain invisible; they seem natural, and for this reason they are taken for granted.

One such ''invisible'' mechanism, central to the production of gendered adults, involves the division and control of space. In ''Boys and Girls,'' spatial divisions and the control of space within the home

and on the farm are emphasized by a narrator still young enough to remark upon details which the adults ignore. As a result of the narrator's relatively innocent and inquisitive perspective, the reader can appreciate how the division of space facilitates two seemingly disparate systems of production: farming and the construction of gendered adults.

As a farmer, the father cultivates wild animals for the purpose of consumption. As the narrator explains, he ''raised silver foxes in pens.'' The word ''raised'' refers to silver foxes, but the term offers more than this strictly referential meaning. It can also be understood within the familial context: people often speak of raising children. The plurality of the word opens the text to diverse readings— readings which introduce the possibility of a correspondence between the two systems of production.

In particular, the father raises the foxes in ''pens''—spaces in which bodies are confined and controlled. As the narrator explains, he took great pains to build a miniature city for his captives: ''alive, the foxes inhabited a world my father made for them.'' Moreover, the pens resembled a medieval town ''padlocked at night.'' This image of the enclosure and the concomitant distinction between inside and outside (indoor and outdoor) recur throughout the text.

Early on, the house takes on the properties of the pen. The dark, hot, stifling kitchen imprisons the narrator's mother and threatens to imprison the narrator. Similarly, the fields surrounding the farm and the gates, which restrict traffic, become an enlarged version of the pen. Finally, the town itself and the outlying farms are conceived of in terms of an inescapable enclosure. As a result of these replications of the enclosure, the father's occupation and his role in establishing and supervising the boundaries between inside and outside take on greater significance and begin to reflect a far more pervasive cultural project.

The Marxist critic Ivan Illich sheds light on the nature of this project when he suggests that the capacity to enclose, essentially a male privilege, was the key factor responsible for the emergence of industrial society and wage work as we know it today. Illich states that the economic division of labour into a productive and a non-productive kind was pioneered and first enforced through ''the domestic enclosure of women.'' As he explains, men became the ''wardens of their domestic women.'' Thus, the narrator's father, in his capacity as guardian and gate-keeper penning in the bodies, performs a task which supports industrial society and wage work, and ultimately, capitalist production.

In addition to enclosing the foxes, the father in ''Boys and Girls'' also controls a specific space within the home. When not working out of doors, he carries out his activities in the cellar, a room which is white-washed and lit by a hundred-watt bulb. By definition, white-wash is ''a solution of quicklime or of whiting and size for brushing over walls and ceilings to give a clean appearance.'' Figuratively speaking, ''white washing'' suggests clearing ''a person or his memory of imputation or [clearing] someone's reputation.'' In this case, the presence of white-wash in the male domain suggests that an attempt is made to ''give something a clean appearance''— something which may be fundamentally unclean.

Furthermore, the intense light which illuminates the space also reflects the father's desire to control or, more specifically, to manipulate one's impression of his territory. In his book *Power/ Knowledge*, Foucault studies the use of light in various structures in terms of the desire to maintain an arbitrary, yet powerful force. He concludes that ''a form of power whose main instance is that of opinion will refuse to tolerate areas of darkness.'' Thus the white-wash and the bright lights in the cellar effectively undermine the seeming neutrality of the father and his activities.

Initially, although sensitive to the details of the procedure, the narrator takes it for granted that the father's work—the raising of foxes—is an ideologically neutral activity, one without agency. It simply ''happens'' in the fall and early winter that he ''killed and skinned and sold their pelts to the Hudson's Bay Co.'' But the commercial basis of the slaying undercuts any claims to neutrality. The father's occupation is enmeshed in a cultural discourse which imposes specific views upon the world.

The narrator, however, remains unaware of the implications of her father's activities for some time. She feels safe in the male sphere and enjoys the ''warm, safe, brightly lit downstairs world.'' She feels threatened, not by the male domain or the icy winter world outside, but by the ''inside,'' the ''unfinished,'' upper portion of the house, the bedroom which she shares with her brother Laird. Unlike the clearly delineated male territory below, the bedroom remains undifferentiated. Neither male nor female, the space is fraught with danger. Poorly lit, the room specifically threatens their link with the male domain. In the darkness, the children must fix their eyes ''on the faint light coming up the stairwell'' in order to retain their connection with the male sphere.

The unfinished state of the room can be taken as an image of the undifferentiated consciousness of the children. Laird has not yet adopted a gender role associated with the father. Nor has the narrator been forced to sever her connection to the father and take up an identity aligned with the mother. This hypothesis concerning her male orientation gains support from the nature of her nocturnal fantasies.

In the stories she tells herself late at night, she casts herself into the role of heroic subject. As male saviour, she rescues people from a bombed building, shoots rabid wolves and rides ''a fine horse spiritedly down the main streets.'' Yet nobody except a male, ''King Billy,'' ever rode a horse down the street. Before her subjectivity has been constituted, her body fought over and conquered, these dreams of male heroism seem attainable.

By the end of the story, however, her gender role has been established. This psychic division is replicated on the level of a spatial division, signalling the children's acquisition of gendered subjectivity. The bedroom is divided into two halves—one for the boy, the other, for the girl. Even the stories the narrator tells herself have altered. The plots start off in the old way, but then ''things would change around, and instead, somebody would be rescuing me.'' No longer the valiant hero, she becomes the victim in need of rescue.

Further proof of the narrator's initial alignment with the father lies in her assurance that she is his ''hired man.'' During the day, rather than help her mother in the house—a job she abhors—she assists her father in looking after his captives. While watering the foxes, secure in her position, she looks scornfully upon her little brother's efforts to assist. Too small to handle adult tools, Laird toddles along with his pitiful gardening can—an overtly phallic object. In boasting that she ''had the real watering can, my father's,'' the narrator further emphasizes her belief that she has access, not to the father's actual member, but to the privileged symbolic system aligned with the phallus.

By aligning herself with her father, the narrator thus accrues a measure of the status associated with the set of signifiers which attend the phallus, including ''law,'' ''money,'' ''power,'' ''knowledge,'' ''plentitude,'' ''authoritative-vision,'' etc.

As a result of this access to a particular set of signifiers, her relationship with her father differs dramatically from the connection she has with her mother. The contrast can be best understood within the inside/outside paradigm. Father and daughter engage in the context of outer space—space that is ''structured, interpreted and rendered meaningful by social discourse produced by the system of intellectual and cultural traditions.'' The narrator literally joins her father on the outside (the out of doors) where they do work that is ''ritualistically important.''

The relationship the narrator has with her mother, on the other hand, contrasts sharply with the silent, disciplined relationship she has with her father. Once again, to use the inside/outside paradigm, the association between mother and daughter, which occurs within the house, reflects the qualities of ''inner'' space. Louise Forsyth explains that ''inner'' space is also the realm of ''the imaginary, of spirituality, of memory.'' The narrator enters this space when she tells herself stories, and the mother, in sharing her memories with her daughter, also enters this space.

The mother does not belong to the powerful ruling elite, the patriarchy. Thus, she cannot control her daughter by utilizing the strategy available to the male. Whereas work done out of doors is ''ritualistically important'' or real, work performed indoors is ''endless, dreary and peculiarly depressing.'' For this reason, the mother treats her daughter as a fellow prisoner and their association is characterized by speech and openness.

At bottom, the separation between inner and outer space is arbitrary. No undisputed boundary separates inside from outside or nature from culture, unless, as Derrida argues, ''it is granted that the division between exterior and interior passes through the interior of the interior or the exterior of the exterior.'' That is to say, the supposed border which divides the space must either pass through the ''inside'' or the ''outside.''

While the separation between inside and outside may be arbitrary, these divisions are upheld by the virtually intractable force of opinion and tradition. Moreover, as we shall see, the placement of specific objects within either space affords a tremendous amount of cultural information concerning power

relations. For instance, in exchange for the pelts, the family receives calendars. As the narrator explains, the Hudson's Bay company or the Montreal Fur Traders supplied them with ''heroic calendars to hang on both sides of the kitchen door.'' At first, in the context of the discourse of production, calendars seem out of place. Why does the narrator not refer to the receipt of a more logical item such as money? Yet upon closer examination, calendars prove to be an apt symbol, one which, like the word ''raised,'' underscores a connection between the father's economic occupation as a farmer and his role as a producer of gendered subjects.

For one thing, the placement of the calendars on both sides of the kitchen door links the father's work, the production of animals, to the domestic sphere (the kitchen being the area within the home most closely connected to females). Secondly, mimicking the device of mise en abîme (the story which tells a story about telling a story, ad infinitum), the calendars not only ''speak'' as a result of their placement on the kitchen door, but they also tell a story by way of their depiction of the colonization in the northern wilderness.

The calendars depict nature being conquered by male adventurers in all their plumed flag-planting majesty: territory is claimed and controlled. This depiction, in turn, recalls culture's age-old project of mastery over nature. Furthermore, the opposition between culture and nature illustrated by the calendar is closely aligned to a more general, cultural opposition between male and female.

Derrida argues that throughout history nature has been opposed to a chain of cultural institutions. Moreover, as Derrida and other critics have pointed out, these institutions have been traditionally aligned with the male, while the realm of the natural has been long associated with the female. Thus, by placing the calendars on both sides of the kitchen door, the aperture of the female domain, and by supplementing this with an illustration of the colonization of the wilderness, the calendars underscore the correspondence between the colonization of nature and the colonization of gendered subjects—specifically female subjects.

Finally, the natives within the calendar illustration, who bend their backs to the portage, have, like the foxes, been co-opted into the cultural project. Both foxes and natives exemplify bodies named by the discourse of production. The farmer transforms the foxes into ''pelts'' just as the early explorers transform the indigenous people into ''savages'' by imposing limited interpretations of their beings upon them. Both farmer and explorer reduce bodies, fragment them into raw material and conscript them into the service of production.

Thus the seemingly insignificant detail of the placement of the calendar with its depiction of the colonization of the wilderness provides a diachronic perspective of the farmer's activities—a perspective which enables one to see that the enclosure of the foxes' bodies and the bodies of the other family members (who also ''inhabit a world . . . [their] father made for them''), replicates our forefather's enclosure of the feminine wilderness. Moreover, the calendar solidifies the connection, first established through the use of the word ''raising,'' between the two types of production: farming and the raising of gendered adults.

Slowly but surely, as a result of these spatial arrangements, the narrator's position on the outside—her tenuous alignment with the male—is threatened. The first threat is delivered by the father's hired hand, Henry Bailey. After the foxes are skinned, Bailey takes a sackful of their bloody bodies and swipes at the narrator, saying ''Christmas present.'' This gesture subtly suggests a connection between the narrator's current fate and that of the foxes. Throughout the story, Bailey relishes the prospect of the narrator's acquisition of her gender role with its concomitant enforcement of subjugation to the male. When he comes across the narrator and her brother fighting, Bailey laughs again, saying, ''Oh, that there Laird's gonna show you, one of these days!''

Yet another threat arrives in the form of a feed salesman. The father introduces his daughter to the salesman as a hired man. The salesman responds according to the dictates of culture: no female is allowed on the outside. He reacts to the threat of her presence by treating the father's remark as a joke: ''could of fooled me,'' he says, ''I thought it was only a girl.''

Other challenges to the narrator's connection to the father and her right to occupy the male ''outside'' space are launched from within the household itself. Female family members begin to coerce the narrator. Efforts to restrict her behaviour occur at every level of existence. For example, her grandmother tells her, ''girls don't slam doors like that'' (control of her movement through space); ''girls keep their knees together when they sit down'' (control of the body); and when she asks a question, she is told ''that's none of girls' business'' (control of consciousness itself).

In a similar bid for control, the narrator's mother confronts the father in front of the barn one fall evening, demanding that he relinquish his right to the girl's labour. The mother explains that, according to his law, the child should remain with her inside the house. In confronting the father at the barn, the mother transgresses the culturally established boundary between inside and outside. The narrator remarks on the scandal, noting how unusual it was to see her mother down at the barn. From her privileged, male-vantage point, the narrator looks on her mother in the same way she looks on the foxes. The narrator does not comprehend that the hostility she sees in the foxes' ''malevolent faces'' is a response to their enforced captivity. Similarly, her mother's behaviour is interpreted, not as an expression of frustration and disappointment, or loneliness, but as a manifestation of innate wickedness and petty tyranny.

Ultimately, the narrator gives way to the variety of pressures directed at her. Once again, the two systems of production are shown to be linked: at the same time as the horses are butchered, the children's gender roles are fixed. The slaying of the horses recalls the initial butchering of the foxes. In effect, both horses and foxes are part of the chain of production, with the horses' bodies filling a crucial gap in the system. To ensure the continuation of the process, the foxes must be fed, and they are fattened on the bodies of the horses.

As I have suggested above, drawing attention to the use of such words as ''raised,'' to the father's role as the warden of the foxes, and to the placement of the calendars on both sides of the kitchen door,

the cycle of production on the farm parallels the production of gendered subjects within the family. The familial discourse—a discourse which is ''absolutely central to the perpetuation of the present, phallocentric order''—must also be fed; it too requires bodies.

Understandably, the narrator neglects to mention the butchering of the horses. She represses the information until the end of the story, claiming that she merely ''forgot to say what the foxes were fed.'' More likely, her desire to omit the information is connected to her wish to leave the image of her father untarnished. She has a vested interest in preserving the white-wash that protects the powerful figure to whom she is allied. Perhaps she believed that a denial of the operation would ensure her protection. With the butchering of the horses, Henry Bailey reappears, as does the initial menace inherent in Bailey's ''joke,'' swiping at the protagonist with the sack of dead foxes.

When they learn that the butchering will take place, the narrator and her brother make their way to the stable, where they find Bailey ''looking at his collection of calendars.'' The reappearance of the calendars recalls the initial discussion concerning the placement of the calendars on the kitchen door and the significance of their portrayal of the colonization of the wilderness.

Unlike the calendars in the family kitchen, however, Bailey's calendars are ''tacked up behind the stalls'' in a part of the stable the mother ''had probably never seen.'' Bailey's calendars are hidden from the mother for good reason: they are almost certainly pornographic. At this point the link between the calendar and the colonization of female bodies becomes explicit: the father's ''stable''—a pen for livestock—becomes a pen for Bailey's pinup girls, women who have received a specific projection of male desire.

In keeping with this brutal character, Bailey treats the butchering of the first horse, Mack, as a bit of fun. When the narrator asks if he is going to shoot the horse, Bailey breaks into a song about ''darkies'': ''Oh there's no more work, for poor uncle Ned, he's gone where the good darkies go.'' In effect, foxes, savages, horses, and now ''darkies'' fall under the category of those bodies supposedly aligned with nature. When there is no more work for a fox, a horse, or a Black, in the terms outlined by the discourse of production, they are condemned to death. The ''pen'' of the patriarchal, capitalist institution has the power to inscribe and erase each and every one of them.

Despite Bailey's enjoyment of power, it is the father who ultimately shoots the horse. Bailey laughs as the horse kicks its legs in the air ''as if Mack had done a trick for him.'' The image of the horse's death has tremendous impact upon the narrator. In the midst of other thoughts, the memory intrudes upon her consciousness; she sees ''the easily practiced way her father raised gun, and hears Henry laughing when Mack kicked his legs in the air.'' Bailey's laughter is particularly unnerving because it fully exposes his delight in power based on sheer inequality.

The narrator recognizes this as an abuse of power, not due to any innate feminine instincts, but as a result of her own experience. She, too, lorded power over an innocent victim; when Laird was younger,

she told him to climb to the top beam in the barn. ''Young and obedient,'' as trusting as the horse led to slaughter, Laird did as he was told. When her parents rushed to the scene, her mother wept, asking her why she had not watched him. Perhaps as a result of her mother's distress, the narrator's behaviour later fills her with regret. She felt a weight in her stomach, the ''sadness of unexorcised guilt.''

In addition to finding the display of power distasteful, after the shooting the narrator can no longer continue to separate her father from his hired man. After the shooting, her father's ''easy'' practiced movements and the hired man's laughter coalesce. The white-wash dissolves. The father loses his innocence. On some level, the narrator realizes that it was never her mother who would ''act out of perversity . . . to try her power'' but her father, the person she had trusted all along. However, it is only when the men try to shoot the second horse, Flora, that she radically breaks from her male-identified position.

In many respects, Flora resembles the spirited horse of the narrator's nocturnal fantasies. When the men try to pen her in, to use her for their own, limited ends, the mare makes a run between Bailey and the father. For the first time, an inmate dares attempt to escape. Immediately the father calls to his daughter, telling her to shut the gate and lock the horse in. Yet, instead of carrying out his instructions, she opens the gate ''as wide as she could.'' Without deliberating, she frustrates her father's project of separating inside from outside and she challenges his unquestioned right to legislate who moves across these borders.

Laird, watching his sister's scandalous behaviour, cannot comprehend why she disobeys her father. When the men swing by in their truck, he begs them to take him along. As they lift him into the truck, the little boy becomes a man: he joins the hunting party. Upon his return, he brandishes the streak of blood on his arm, behaving as if he just beheaded a lion instead of shooting a geriatric horse. No matter, the mark of blood and the domination of the Other continue to function as a crucial element in the rites of manhood. The boy cements his alliance with the father on the basis of their mutual triumph over nature.

The narrator, however, distanced from the father's activities, looks upon the spectacle and sees it for the sad charade it is. She knows that there is no longer any viable distinction to be made between nature and culture—in this case, wilderness and civilization—and that, when these distinctions are made, they are imposed by more powerful forces upon the weaker. After helping the mare to escape, she sums up the hopelessness of the situation: Flora would not really get away. They would catch up with her in the truck. Or if they did not catch her this morning somebody would see her and telephone us this afternoon or tomorrow. *There was no wild country here for her to run to, only farms* [emphasis mine].

At night, the heroes return to assemble around the table. Laird denounces his sister, telling everyone that she let the horse escape. Rather than deny the accusation, the narrator bursts into tears and fully

expects to be sent from the table for her unseemly, ''feminine'' behaviour. But her behaviour is taken for granted. Yet why should she be asked to leave the room? The kitchen is to be domain, after all.

Relishing his newly acquired power, Laird points out that she is crying, but the father tells him ''never mind.'' For the first time, the family treats her as a female. Her father shows her the same kind of consideration he showed her mother the night the latter confronted him at the barn. He listened to the mother's complaints, ''politely as he would to a salesman or a stranger, but with an air of waiting to get on with his *real* work'' (emphasis mine).

As the narrator herself predicts, her refusal to participate in the father's project of spatial control ultimately severs her connection to him. After she defies him she realizes ''he was not going to trust me anymore, he would know that I was not entirely on his side.'' The use of the word ''side'' further emphasizes the spatial transformation whereby the narrator permanently aligns herself with Flora. (The horse is aptly named, suggesting a relationship to nature and, by extension, the female.) Like her mother and the other natural bodies (foxes, savages, horses, and darkies), she becomes ''unreal.'' The father has only to seal her fate by naming her and he does so ''with resignation and even good humour.''

Assuming his right as the giver of names, a male privilege which extends as far back as the first male—Adam—the father pronounces the words which ''absolved and dismissed'' the protagonist for good: ''she's only a girl.'' The act of naming constitutes yet another form of enclosing. However, in order for these words to have any power over her, she must accept the name—which she does, saying, ''I didn't protest that, even in my heart. Maybe it was true.'' If being a girl means refusing to sanction violence and the abuse of power, then she must indeed be a girl. In the end, brother and sister take up their ''rightful'' positions, acquiescing to the pressures which divide them physically and psychically. The cultural discourse has been inculcated. A revolution in the cycle of production is complete.

One final note. Although this is the ostensible conclusion, the read must keep in mind that the story is not told by the child. The mature narrator speaks from the margins (space that is not rigidly monitored), the only position where the cultural project of production remains scrutable. Thus, like the hostile foxes, who even after death continue to exude a strong primitive odour ''of fox itself,'' the narrator's identity has not been completely fixed by an ideology which accords her a role and set of behaviour on the basis of her sex. The consistent tension between the bitter, mournful adult voice and the child's idealistic perception suggests that she continues to resist and criticize the patriarchal system which names her.

Source: Marlene Goldman, ''Penning in the Bodies: The Construction of Gendered Subjects in Alice Munro's 'Boys and Girls','' in Studies in Canadian Literature*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 1990, pp. 62-75.*

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