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Shadow in Alice Munro's Fits and Child's Play

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Abstract

The Canadian writer Alice Munro's story collections are replete with intrigue and intense anticipation of diverse emotions because of her unique technique of going back and forth in time. Her stories are tantalizingly edgy and explore the psyche of each of her limited number of characters by delving deep into them. Her characters dark in shade as they are, in the stories "Twist" and "Child's Play" conform to the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung's major archetype of the SHADOW. This paper aims to explore the dark realms of Jung's SHADOW and identify them in the major, enigmatic characters of Peg, Marlene and Charlene by Alice Munro.

Keywords - Alice Munro, Archetype, Carl Jung, Dark, Shadow, Unconscious

Introduction

'The beast in us is very much alive- just caged most of the time.'(Jeremiah Abrams and Connie Zweig p.xxi) Shadow is a part of our personal unconscious and it develops naturally in every young child. Carl Jung has described the inseparability of the ego and Shadow in himself in his autobiography- 'Memories, Dreams and Reflections'. He classifies the Shadow as one of the major archetypes in the personal unconscious. 'All traits and capacities that are hidden and exiled into the shadow contribute to the hidden power of the dark side of human nature. The shadow by its nature is difficult to apprehend. It is dangerous, disorderly and

forever in hiding, as if the light of consciousness would steal its very life.’ (Abrams and Connie Zweig p.xvii)

This paper explores this dark side of human nature, the shadow as Jung named it in Alice Munro’s two stories- ‘Fits’ and ‘Child’s Play’ and examines how it influences the characters and in turn the entire content of the two stories.

Methodology

Shadow as defined by Carl Jung is identified in the two stories of Alice Munro through careful dissection of the main characters- Peg in Fits and Marlene and Charlene in Child’s Play. Reading between the lines has made Alice Munro’s portrayal of Jung’s shadow crystal clear. “Jung saw the shadow as a part of the core of life within the nature of the God image in the human psyche. The dark side offers us a powerful entrance into the denied life of man.” (John P. Conger 87)

Fits

Munro’s exquisitely woven story ‘Fits’ is a befitting portrayal of SHADOW and how it is not revealed in the ego state. It is the story of Peg and Robert, who have been married for the past five years; and their elderly neighbours, the Weebles. Munro has created light and shade effect throughout the story in her own unique way and has left the reader to discern the perfect fit in the jig-saw puzzle of the thrilling story. As is her usual style, she draws the curtain to bring before the reader the stark nakedness of the shadow, only at the very end of the story.

Peg’s Discovery

Peg ‘accidentally’ discovers a shocking fact while she goes to the Weebles to deliver eggs that the farm woman had given to her as the Weebles were not home the previous day. She reports straight to the police that she has found Walter and Nora Weeble dead. Munro describes Peg as a small, slim and reserved woman, with a graceful walk and a quiet demeanor. She is “self contained” taking courses each winter painstakingly writing tests and preparing papers. She seems to enjoy working hard at the papers. Yet Munro gradually unfurls Jung’s Shadow in this extraordinarily timid woman. The day when the Weebles are found dead, murdered Peg goes up their driveway to the side door. She knocks lightly at first and then harder. Finding no response she takes the eggs up to the kitchen all the time calling out to the Weebles. Then she starts to climb towards the bedroom of the retired couple and finds the bedroom door open. She leaves the house, closing the door after her and heads straight for the police station. Peg reports for work calmly and makes coffee at the Gilmore Arcade, the store where she works. When Karen, her friend at the store is informed about the terrible murders and she shouts to tell Peg, Peg calmly replies “I know”. Celia, the customer doesn’t like Peg’s attitude but Karen talks to Peg after Celia leaves- ‘Both the Weebles are shot dead, Peg. Did you know that?’ Peg said, ‘Yes. I found them.’ ‘It was a murder –

suicide,' Peg said. 'He shot her and then he shot himself. That's what happened.'(Munro116)

Karen is taken aback at Peg's cool, stable voice and asks her if she screamed or if her legs buckled to which Peg replies that she doesn't remember. Karen is shocked that Peg has not uttered a word about it and when she asks her Peg replies-'I knew you would find out pretty soon. (Munro116)

SHADOW in Peg

The stark reality of Peg's shadow can be found through Karen's words- 'I always believed Peg and me to be friends, but now I am not so sure.'(Munro115)

Karen has become suspicious about a lurking shadow in Peg and she can no longer decipher Peg's true nature. Karen now comes to terms with the dual nature of Peg and Munro exposes for the first time in the story how craftily Peg hid her shadow. When Robert rushes back to Peg without eating what he had ordered, he had expected Peg to want to go home, get relaxed and tell him all about the murders. But all that she wanted was her usual lunch- a roll with ham and cheese. Robert looks at Peg's lilac coloured coat hanging on the washroom door. 'On the lilac coat, there was a long crusty smear of reddish-brown paint, down to the hemline....How did she get blood on her coat?'(Munro118)

Word spreads around and Robert too is a little perplexed that Peg hadn't bothered to let him know that she was the one who discovered the murders. People around Peg can't really fathom the depth of the dark shadow inside her serene carefully camouflaged exterior. 'He himself felt troubled, even slightly humiliated, to think that he hadn't known; Peg hadn't let him know.'(Munro 118)Even Peg's younger son Kevin ponders why Peg hasn't bothered to tell him when he was home down in the basement watching television all morning. Both her sons want to know the details. 'Mom? Did you scream?'(Munro 124)

But Peg answers all their queries in her own placid, unruffled way that astonishes Robert. 'The only thing more apparent than usual to Robert was her gracefulness, lightness, quickness and ease around the kitchen' (Munro 124). Peg is described as someone who does not reveal her true nature even to those who are apparently very close to her. Even her family is clueless about the lurking shadow, baring its teeth inside her pure innocent looking self. Munro prepares the readers and allows them a peep into the shadow that Peg represses throughout the story. Her extraordinary calmness baffles all and creates a mystery, making the readers more curious to know the real Peg.

Peg's Explanation

After dinner Peg finally tells Robert her side of the story. She says she knew something was wrong when she started climbing the stairs- "I knew there wasn't anybody but me alive in the house. Then I saw his leg, I saw his leg stretched out into the hall, and I knew then, but I had to go on in and make sure" (Munro 125). She explains that Walter Weeble had taken his shoe off and pulled the trigger with his foot. She seems resolute with her

explanation as if she was present when the entire incident had taken place. Her son Clayton reminiscences that he used to be afraid that Peg or her ex-husband would kill him during their fights and hearing this Peg seems to undergo a dramatic change- “She who always seemed pale and silky and assenting, but hard to follow as a watermark in fine paper, looked dried out, chalky, her outlines fixed in steady, helpless, unapologetic pain.” (Munro 126)

It seems it is Clayton who shows the mirror to Peg and also to the readers, for the first time, in the story hinting what Peg might be capable of doing making her finally yield to her shadow, acknowledging its presence inside her. She is helpless in stopping it as Dr. Jekyll is helpless stopping Mr. Hyde who ultimately overpowers the goodness in him.

Jekyll himself becomes aware of this danger after he finds himself involuntarily turning into Hyde. This was an enormous shock to him. He had expected to be able to move from Jekyll to Hyde and back again at will, but now he finds that Hyde is taking over. (Sanford 31)

Robert’s mind is now churning with one question that he wanted to ask Peg.

‘A discrepancy, a detail, in the midst of so many abominable details....One discrepancy, one detail- one lie- that would never have anything to do with him.’(Munro130)

Robert’s Shocking Discovery

Robert now comes mentally closer to the shadow of Peg and Munro successfully heightens the thrill to strike the final, unexpected cliché on the reader. Robert realises that the constable had described the entire incident to him in the afternoon and had explained how the force of the shot pushed Walter Weeble backward. ‘His head was laying out in the hall’ (Munro 131). Robert puts in the final puzzle together and realises Peg couldn’t have had the need to go into the bedroom to see what had happened as she could see Walter Weebles head out in the hall and not his foot as she had described to him. Munro in her characteristic style leaves the reader to ponder over the pros and cons of the story and why Peg was plagued with the fit that compelled her to do the ghastly act. She also meticulously creates Jung’s shadow in Peg making her dark side obvious to the reader only at the very end of the story. Her character’s shadow is explicitly explained and can be analysed quite seemingly with ease. The way Munro describes Peg completely repressing her shadow and maintaining a calm, composed exterior throughout the story revealing the darkness of her shadow at the end is characteristically exact and precise as Jung’s description of Shadow when he says- “A lack of understanding of what goes on in the unconscious is dangerous because it means that we are afraid to confront the shadow and therefore do not develop the capacity to deal with evil.” (Snowden 151)

Child’s Play

The narrator of ‘Child’s Play’, Marlene has a dark background- a shadow that takes the readers into the unfathomable depths of her unconceivable, dark will. The story commences with Marlene meeting her friend Charlene who she finds a strong resemblance

with. Marlene enjoys her differences with Charlene, at the same time connecting with her in spite of their stark contrasts- “She tanned, I freckled. We both had brown hair but hers was darker. Hers was wavy, mine bushy. I was half an inch taller, She had thicker wrists and ankles. Her eyes had more green in them, mine more blue.” (Munro190). This is in sharp contrast to the theory of homophily (first defined by Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1954) that says homophily is the principle that a contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people. Both girls share their lives led so far and their family history and feel an intimate connection discussing sweet nothings.

Verna

Marlene now describes her loathing for Verna as she gains confidence and trust in Charlene. Marlene lives in a rented house and – ‘Verna’s grandmother rented the rooms at the back and we rented the rooms at the front.’(Munro193). Marlene’s father has a regular job as a teacher and her mother and Verna’s grandmother though not particularly friendly are cordial. Verna then comes in the summer and immediately Marlene dislikes her- ‘From the beginning I had an aversion to her unlike anything...I said that I hated her, and my mother said, How can you, What has she ever done to you?’(Munro 194). Verna is described as a child with special needs. Even Marlene accepts that she is not unpleasant despite her characteristic squint. She cannot read and write and her speech too is obstructed. ‘She was skinny, indeed so narrowly built and with such a small head that she made me think of a snake.’(Munro 195) Marlene detests the way Verna interferes with her though in all innocence. She despises everything about Verna, even the red and green peppermints that she innocently stuffs in Marlene’s mouth. ‘And the name Verna- I dislike that.’ (Munro 196). There are two major alternative psychological explanations on why homophily occurs between strangers. One suggests that people when similar to oneself are more positively reinforcing because they affirm one’s own viewpoint (Byrne, 1971); the other suggests that we use our own viewpoint as an anchor to determine whether or not another person is likely to be a trustworthy friend. (Kaplan and Anderson 1973)

The Shadow in Marlene

By this time Marlene is aware of her shadow and thinks her mother is a hypocrite as she sympathizes with Verna even though Marlene thinks that her mother too dislikes Verna. Marlene’s mother stifles her shadow and pretends to be sorry for Verna and kind to her. She tries pacifying Marlene telling her that Verna has come only for a short duration. She later tells Marlene to be kind to Verna only for a little while longer as they would move out of the place soon. Marlene’s mother also tells her that she cannot imagine that Marlene is so mean. ‘How can you blame a person for the way she was born? How is it her fault?’(Munro 196) But Marlene thinks otherwise. She has seen even grownups smirk and smile at people who ‘were simple or a few bricks short of a load’(Munro 196) Marlene can sense the shadow lurking underneath people as they feel superior and Marlene believes that

this dark shadow even exists inside her mother. As Marlene starts going to school, Verna is also put in a special class in a special building within the same campus. Marlene carefully avoids her at school and is enraged and despises her clumsy ways during her playtime. Finally, to Marlene's relief her family shifts to another bungalow three blocks away from that house. Marlene meticulously avoids Verna as far as possible because- 'I suppose I hated her as some people hate snakes or caterpillars or mice or slugs. For no decent reason' (Munro 200). Marlene creates a dreaded picture of Verna as she describes her loathing for Verna in details to her friend Charlene. Her hatred for Verna gets transferred to Charlene as she imagines Verna to be someone who is to be despised and loathed and someone whose sole motive is to torment Marlene which is actually quite contrary. Both the girls are at a two week camp and thoroughly enjoy themselves when Charlene claims to have seen Verna at the camp and is visibly petrified of her. To Marlene's shock, she learns that Verna and twenty of the specials have been brought in to enjoy the camp. From then on Charlene helps Marlene to dodge Verna as she sincerely believes Verna would harm Marlene. When finally Verna recognises her, Marlene says- 'I can't look at her, I'd be sick.'(Munro 203) Charlene fears that Verna may harm Marlene and her belief stands firm that Verna is evil. 'She's got the longest fingers I have ever seen. She could just twist them round your neck and strangle you. She could.'(Munro 204)

The Shadow Emerges

When it is the last day at the camp, both the girls- Marlene and Charlene are 'wading about aimlessly in the swimming pool'. (Munro 206) The water at the pool is up to their chest. Both the girls are busy in their fun and frolic amongst a little chaos as some children are also packing and leaving for home and some are called up from the pool to accompany their parents. Amongst this confusion Charlene shows Marlene that Verna is happily coming towards them wearing a pale blue rubber bathing cap. There are motor boats circling and starting a race as they make waves and plenty of noise too. Both the girls watch Verna coming towards them in all innocence. Children shout and scream as they try to regain their footing because of the turbulent waves. There is utter confusion all around and Verna is lying out and floating leisurely under the water. In a little while the shadow overpowers both the girls- 'Charlene and I had our hands on her, on her rubber cap' (Munro 221). Marlene has thought out everything-even if they are questioned, she can make it appear like an accident as if to keep their balance they had to catch hold of the rubbery object, without realising that it was Verna's cap. Though both the girls did not premeditate the act yet what is done has been done consciously. 'Consciously, because our eyes did meet as the head of Verna tried to rise up to the surface of the water' (Munro 232). Both the girls enjoy the act as the final outcome of their suppressed hatred for Verna and finished doing it in a little over two to three minutes- "Charlene and I kept our eyes on each other rather than looking down at what our hands were doing. Her eyes were wide and gleeful as I suppose mine were too. I don't think we felt

wicked, triumphing in our wickedness” (Munro 232). Their job done, both the girls part from each other and overhear people’s voices rising above the din claiming that Verna has gone missing. But by that time both the girls leave the camp.

The Aftermath

Years pass by and Marlene has no contact with Charlene except when Marlene happens to see her wedding picture in the newspaper. Marlene is now a graduate in anthropology. Charlene writes to her fifteen years later congratulating her on writing a book. But Marlene does not reply back. And after Marlene retires from the University, she is forwarded another letter from the University. This time the letter is from Charlene’s husband who tells her that Charlene is in Princess Margarret Hospital in Toronto as she has been diagnosed with cancer and has a short time to live. Against her will, Marlene walks over to the hospital and finds Charlene asleep only to be told by the nurse that she has been very eager to meet Marlene and hands over a sealed envelope. Marlene reads the note in which she is asked to meet Father Hofstrader at the Cathedral at Geulph who only can help Charlene. Marlene straightway goes to Geulph and reaches the Cathedral where she finds Father Hofstrader unavailable as he is on a vacation. A young priest asks for her purpose of visit and upon being told that she seeks Father Hofstrader for a dying women’s confession, he agrees to send him a message reluctantly. Marlene assures the priest that she would take care of his transportation to and fro. But Marlene herself is not ready to confess- ‘But no. It’s not for me. What is done is done. Flock of angels, tears of blood, notwithstanding.’(Munro 230) She refuses to face her shadow. As Edward C. Whitmont puts it- “When we refuse to face the Shadow or try to fight it with willpower alone, saying, “Get thee behind me, Satan,” we merely relegate this energy to the unconscious and from there it exerts its will power in a negative, compulsive, projected form.” (Whitmont 17)

Conclusion:

The 15th century Indian Mystic poet and saint Kabir says-

*“Bura jo dekhani mai chala; Bura na milya koy
Jo dil khoja apna Mujhsa bura na koy”*

Which means- (I went around the world searching for the bad and evil and found no one; And then I peeped inside my soul and found nobody was as evil as me.)

The same thoughts reverberated in Jung’s mind when he says- “Modern man must rediscover a deeper source of his own spiritual life. To do this, he is obliged to struggle with evil, to confront his shadow, to integrate the devil. There is no other choice.(Connie Zweig and Jeremiah Abrams,1991, p.240) The Sufi poet Rumi too, surprisingly, echoes exactly the same thoughts. He says-‘If thou hast not seen the devil, look at thine own self.’(Zweig and Abrams, 1991 129) In the contemporary times more and more people are engulfed by their Shadow making them commit heinous crimes. The Shadow has been recognized since the times of Kabir and has been identified even in the contemporary times in the real lives of men

where man has become greedy and hungry for power, lust and money. He does not hesitate massacring men, feeding his shadow with innocent blood. His shadow finds content in the agonizing cries of people and their terrorized faces. Had man recognised his shadow and accepted it, it would have been convenient for him to keep it in control thereby reducing a lot of bloodshed and animosity in the world and fostering peace and brotherhood. Both the stories of Alice Munro strikingly unfurl the dark shadow in Peg and Marlene and Charlene. Though Charlene seeks forgiveness for her cruel act, both Peg and Marlene keep their shadow intact. Charlene becomes aware of her shadow and recognizes it as she lies dying. Munro intends to say that she dies in peace. Peg and Marlene attempt to hide their shadow from the public eye but do not attempt to conceal its existence completely. The characters in these stories are portrayed in a complete humane and natural manner and can be identified by most readers as such darkness is present in all. Munro leaves the readers to ascertain for themselves what happens to Peg and Marlene as she completely expels them from her canvas. It may be assumed that both Marlene and Peg die a restless death as they do not come to terms with their shadow till the very end.

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