

Proposition de plan détaillé de commentaire littéraire :

“The Office”, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, 1968, Alice Munro

Introduction:

-incipit

-1st person narrative, so auto-diegetic female narrator: a narrating "I" talking about herself, so a retrospective account

-passage falls into four parts:

- It opens with the narrator's sudden decision, or revelation that she must have an office
- It is followed by her guilty acknowledgement (which sounds like a confession) that she is a writer.
- Then, we are given explanations for her sudden decision
- Finally, the passage ends with her husband's assent and her reaction to it.

-What is striking in this passage is this constant to and fro movement between timidity and boldness. This is really what structures the passage, at least on its surface.

-It may be relevant to analyse the way Munro, through this structural element, succeeds in building up a female writer's identity as well as providing the reader with a reflection on the art of writing itself.

-My analysis shall be threefold. I will first focus on the in-betweenness to which the narrator is subjected, then I will dwell on the closely-knit link between identity and spatiality and finally I will show what makes of this piece a self-reflexive text on the process of writing itself.

I) In-betweenness between timidity and boldness

a-The Decision, on a personal level as a housewife

It is repeatedly presented as daring then undermined:

- "I think I ought to have an office" l.3"
- "ought to": MODAL = attempt at distancing this decision of hers from emotions
- choice of the verb "think" implies her uncertainty about her decision.

HOWEVER

- "simple but audacious" l.2, "fantastic" l.4: daring, bold
- "a finicky requirement, a piece of rare self-indulgence" l21-22, boldness is conveyed through the words "finicky" and "indulgence"

b-*The Decision* on a family level

- "I launched, instead, into a high-flown explanation" l.29 : "a high-flown explanation" reveals her lack of assurance when faced with her family
- **BESIDES** her boldness is nipped in the bud by her family's reaction:
 - Her husband's reaction: "Go ahead if you can find one cheap enough" is **all** my husband had to say to this." l.51-51
 - Her children's reaction : "the most dashing skepticism and unconcern" l.57-58

- NOT ONLY IS SHE IGNORED BY HER OWN KIN BUT ALSO BY OTHER PEOPLE SO BY EXTENSION BY SOCIETY

c-The Decision as a female writer

- "but here comes the disclosure which is not easy for me: I am a writer" l.8 as if being a female writer were a guilty secret, a crime, something to be ashamed of. // A CONFESSION
- Feeling of shame strengthened by the way the narrator presents herself as a writer:

"I am a writer " l.8: First, a bold attempt at identification with BE (=)

"I write" l.10 Then, reduced to the process itself

"I try to write" l.10 The use of the verb "try" conveys the idea of an acknowledgement of failure/defeat

The way the narrator announces she is a writer is paralleled with people's reaction: "how wonderful and good for you"l.14 " well, that is intriguing"l.15 to end up with a reductive "Ah!" L.19

Wishing to have an office amounts to claiming a proper identity as a writer

II) Identity and Spatiality

Building up an identity as a writer requires a place to write.

a-The house = a haven

- a garden "no lack of space" l.7
- A pleasant place: "it is pleasant and roomy and has a view of the sea " l.5
- A functional place: "appropriate places for eating and sleeping, and having baths and conversations with one's friends" l.5-6

Polysyndeta to insist on the welcoming dimension of the house

- Use of adjectives: a womb: "sheltered/warmed" l.48-49

YET / HOWEVER THE HOUSE IS ALSO PRESENTED AS A JAIL

b-The house = a jail

- A jail preventing her from building up her identity as a writer: " encumbered/bound" l.49
- A gendered aspect:"ironing" v. "watching TV" l.1-2
- Man / House: "the house rearranges itself as best it can around him" l.33
- Man / working at home : "Everybody recognizes that his work exists." L.33
- Woman / house: "She is the house; there is no separation possible" l.40
commodification/objectification of women
- A woman behaving like a man in a house would be "outrageous" l.36 "an offence against nature"l.38
- SO, URGE TO GO OUT OF THE HOUSE TO EXIST AS SOMETHING ELSE THAN A HOUSEWIFE

"walk in/out" l.39-40

- "a fierce lawful quiver of freedom" l47 = freedom cannot be achieved in the house

c-The Office

- The place required to build up her identity as a writer

- "It was really the sound of the word "office" that I liked, its sound of dignity and peace. And purposefulness and importance." L.27
- She finds her office at the end of the passage but its "dignity" and "importance" is toned down by the proximity of "a drugstore and a beauty parlour" l61 as if to mock her ambition of being a writer.
- **YET IT IS WORTH NOTICING** that the office she is about to rent is uptairs: "up the stairs" l.62 which could be construed as her elevation from the status of housewife to the one of writer.
- SO, spatiality is undeniably linked to the building up of one's identity.

But even though this passage reflects on the building up of a female writer's identity through spatiality, it equally does so by presenting the reader, in this very narrative, with all the elements that constitute literature.

III) A self-reflexive writing on the art of writing itself

a-Writing requires specific elements:

- "a typewriter, or at least a pencil, some paper, a table and chair" l.22
- An office: Worth noting the determiner "The Office" in the title; the whole passage revolves around this place; it is **THE** room that will give all its sense to the act of writing.

b-What makes a writer?

- The recognition of his/her work
- A readership

c-What makes his/her talent?

- aptly peppered intertextuality:
 - "The Office" reminds the reader of A Room of one's own (1921) by Virginia Woolf
 - there's also a reference to The Mark on the Wall, (1917) by Virginia Woolf "Maybe I would sit and stare at the wall" l.26
 - Munro's own writing process she compares to a house with several rooms
- the use of free direct speech: "how wonderful, and good for you, and well, that is intriguing"ll.14-15
- Epiphany BUT here a mock epiphany "The solution to my life occurred to me while I was ironing a shirt" l.1
- Reflecting on the art of writing: a narrator commenting on the words she uses; an assessment as well as a deconstruction of the process of writing: "too emphatic and emotional terms" l.42

Conclusion:

A story about story-making as well as a demonstration that female writers are as talented as male ones.