Romance beyond Obsession: Mourning Lost Love in Alice Munro's "Bardon Bus"

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Abstract

In her short-story "Bardon Bus," from her 1982 collection *The Moons of Jupiter*, Canadian writer Alice Munro dissects the memories of a middle-aged woman living in Toronto about a love affair she had had a few months earlier, while on a research trip to Australia, with an anthropologist whom she just names "X." Through a constant time-leap from the Australian past to the Canadian present and back, Munro describes the strategies that the unnamed main character develops in order to deal with the sense of loss after the end of the affair. In this essay the influence and effects of love on female and male individuals, as exemplified in Munro's story, will be analysed under the light of emotion and romantic love, and in relation to the masquerade of femininity, within the framework of Sara Ahmed's theories and other feminist theoretical trends. The connection and/or the clash between the emotionally charged past and the loveless present is revealed to grow and strengthen its influence on the narrator's psyche under the mask of romantic love, a stereotype that takes its roots from conventional and sexist assumptions about love and its absence.

Keywords: Alice Munro, "Bardon Bus," short story, feminism, emotions.

Un idilio más allá de la obsesión: el duelo tras la pérdida del amor en 'Bardon Bus', de Alice Munro

Resumen

En el relato "Bardon Bus," perteneciente a la colección *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982), la escritora

canadiense Alice Munro diseccionа los recuerdos de una mujer de mediana edad que vive en Toronto, en relación con una aventura amorosa que vivió unos meses atrás, en el curso de una estancia de investigación en Australia, con un antropólogo al que se refiere con el término "X." Mediante un constante ir y venir desde el pasado en Australia hasta el presente en Canadá, Munro describe las estrategias que desarrolla la protagonista del relato para gestionar los sentimientos de pérdida tras el final de la aventura. En este artículo se analizarán el influjo y los efectos del amor sobre los personajes femeninos y masculinos, tal como aparecen en el cuento de Munro, bajo el prisma de las emociones y el concepto de amor romántico, así como en conexión con la mascarada de la feminidad, todo ello en el marco de las teorías de Sara Ahmed y otros enfoques feministas. El vínculo y/o la confrontación entre el pasado lleno de emociones y el presente ausente de afecto revela un incremento y un fortalecimiento de su influjo en la psicología de la narradora, bajo la máscara del amor romántico; un estereotipo que se asienta en presupuestos convencionales y sexistas en torno al amor y su ausencia.

Palabras clave*:* Alice Munro, "Bardon Bus," relato, feminismo, emociones.

1. INTRODUCTION

"Bardon Bus" is a story about love and luck and apparently accidental meetings. Alice Munro wrote this story in 1982 for her *Moons of Jupiter* collection. Unlike several other stories that had been previously published in literary journals,[i] this story was written specifically to be published in that volume. As Munro herself has declared, she wanted to deal with a mixture of feelings arising from love, eroticism and sadness:

> In a story called "Bardon Bus" I want to have a kind of feeling of hysterical eroticism. Very edgy and sad.

> This came to me from the feelings I get sometimes in women's dress shops. It's a feeling about the masquerades and attempts to attract love. (qtd. in Howells 78)

This is an idea she had already hinted upon somewhere else:

> I wrote it here last summer when I was down for weekends, and I was getting a very strange feeling from Queen Street. It was of a kind of almost hysterical eroticism. It was something about women's clothes and the very, very whorish makeup that women were wearing. (qtd. in Rasporich *22-23*)

These comments allude to the subtle net of connections Munro establishes between femininity and the construction of masks in relation to love and to social acceptance. All throughout "Bardon Bus," these connections are used to define both the main characters and their contexts. Although they grow tighter and more complex as the story progresses, the main themes are never lost; especially the way love and its socio-cultural ramifications constrains the ego, rather than expand it, and redefines it in unexpected ways when the source of affection disappears.

The protagonist in "Bardon Bus," as in other stories in the collection, is a middle-aged woman who happens to be a writer. Throughout the story this character, who is also the narrative voice, remains unnamed. The plot is apparently simple: a nameless woman (the first-person narrator), living in Toronto after a few months stay in Australia in order to do some research for a commissioned book, reflects upon a love affair she had in the course of her stay there with an anthropologist she just names "X" and whom she had briefly met years before in Canada. As she tells us, they had a short but intense affair in Australia while living there together, disconnected from their previous ordinary lives and obligations (he had recently divorced his third wife). In short, they shared a happiness the narrator now misses and longs for. As the story progresses, we get to know more details and information about the narrator's context: the flat where she is living now in Toronto is owned by Kay, a woman ten years younger,

who has had several lovers and has just broken up with another one. We are also told how the narrator meets Dennis, a friend of X she had already been introduced to in Australia, goes out for dinner with him, and has an interesting conversation with him about love, sex and dependence regarding both men and women. As the story progresses, her narration turns into an unsettling reflection on her present depressing circumstances, and soon we also learn about her struggles to overcome the loss of love. By the end of the story, the narrator seems to get over her emotional crisis, and just then knows that Kay is about to start a relationship with X, whom she has accidentally met during a visit to her ex-lover Roy.

Before delving into the notions of love, emotion, and the management of grief deriving from the absence and/or failure of love feelings, it might be useful to give an overview of the different reactions Munro's short story has provoked amongst researchers and critics. For example, while Coral Ann Howells (78-80) makes a fairly positive assessment of the story, stressing Munro's successful combination of past and present discourse, other critics such as Brad Hooper (71-72) are not so enthusiastic. Hooper precisely dislikes Munro's handling of time in the story and its "disjointed chronology" (72). Ajay Heble adds an interesting reflection on the fact that Munro structured the story in short numbered passages (which is, admittedly, an unusual narrative strategy in the author):

> In "Bardon Bus," Munro's division of the story into thirteen numbered sections suggests that order has given way once again to an interest in fragmentation. The comforts of sequence and connection have been abandoned here in favour of the surprises that come out of secrecy. (138)

Brenda Pfaus focuses on the narrator's personality, "an intuitive, detached (at times cynical) moral critic commenting philosophically on present action and past experience, in terse often clipped sentences as she reflects on her reality" (84). More recently, Munro's story has been analysed under the perspective of feminism and gender discrimination (Staines 60-78), as well as its significance in relation to the stories that precede and follow it in *The Moons of Jupiter*

(116-135). Magdalene Redekop examines "Bardon Bus" under the light of its connection to motherhood and lack, as well as the relevance of sex and repression in the establishment of love relations throughout the text: "Here […] Munro refuses to give sex a hygienic place that is in pure nature, apart from cultural constructions" (159). Similarly, in her essay "Phallicism and Ambivalence in Alice Munro's 'Bardon Bus'," Elizabeth Shih has analysed the story in relation to motherhood, phallicism and psychoanalysis. Finally, Andrea F. Szabó's article "Alice Munro's Australian Mirror Stories" focuses on the Australian context of both "Bardon Bus" and "The Jack Randa Hotel" (1995), also in connection with the gothic concept of romance as used in Charlotte Brönte's *Jane Eyre*.

As can be seen from this brief overview, only Redekop's, Shih's and, to a lesser extent, Szabó's analyses venture to tackle one of the core elements in the story: the management of love and the strategies used in order to deal with an emotional break-up and its aftermath. This article will try to expose the way Munro presents the evolution of grief and mourning of a lost love in the main character, the contingency and provisional nature of love feelings in heterosexual relationships, and the way social expectations force women to develop a masquerade of femininity to achieve the ultimate goal of loving/being loved. It is my contention that the analysis of this text may greatly benefit from a focus on emotions, love, sex and the cultural effects of time and age regarding gender. Being a story about love and the consequences of its absence, emotions play a crucial role in "Bardon Bus," even though on the surface the text may merely look like a random collection of impressions about life and love narrated by a still love-struck middle-aged woman.

The nature of love is exposed not through deep philosophical examination but through the protagonist's ordinary or even trivial musings and observations of the world around her. As has been suggested, on the surface it would seem as if banality ruled the narrator's flow of feelings and she herself had little to do or say in relation to it all (Skagert 62), thus leading her to brood over some sense of light-hearted fatality concerning her life, as when she reflects upon a dream she has recently had, towards the end of the story: "I can't describe it very well, it sounds like a movie-dream of heaven,

all banality and innocence […]. I can't apologize for the banality of my dreams" ("Bardon" 127).[2] As we shall see, both dream and fantasy play a significant role in sustaining notions of romantic love in the narrator's mindset, and also contribute to her descent into mourning and grief, in the sense that they "contaminate" her memories of the time she spent with her lover and distort them by turning them into an idealized and unreal matter, that "rare state of content" the narrator mentions when describing her dream (127).

2. AFFECTION AND THE REPRESENTATION OF LOVE

Idealisation in connection to emotions is one of the basic ingredients of romantic love. But love can also be analysed under a different light. In this respect, the nature of basic affections like love, grief or happiness, which are feelings that play a crucial role in this short story, may acquire a deeper meaning if analysed using Sara Ahmed's theory about emotions in conjunction with the notion of romantic love. Ahmed formulates her theory starting from Freudian psychoanalysis and then progresses towards feminist and queer theory by underlining the cultural qualities shared by emotions, in such a way that any feeling (love first and foremost, but also fear or happiness) can be claimed to be a socio-cultural construct defining different subjectivities, always in relation to larger communities (Bleiker and Hutchinson 124). This approach distinctly contrasts with a strict psychobiological understanding of affect, wherein emotions tend to be theorized not as thoughts (cultural constructs) but as strict bodily sensations (124).

In her seminal work, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), Ahmed dissects two traits that characterize love according to Freud: identification and idealisation. While the former can be understood as "the desire to take a place where one is not yet" (126), i.e. the desire to become like the object or other in the future (thus expanding the space of the subject), idealisation is not directed at the object, but rather derives from a need or desire to reaffirm the ego, as Ahmed herself states: "the ideal object, as with the ego ideal, is an effect of the ideal image that the subject has of itself" (127).

In "Bardon Bus," the narrator's apparent inability to overcome her own awareness of romantic failure gives way to an obsession about both the object of love and the past time-space context she spent with him. This obsession, in my opinion, also seems to be at the root of the "randomness" and "unpredictability" Howells mentions in relation to the sequencing of the narrated events (79). More importantly, Howells points at a crucial question: the importance of ageing and the subsequent loss of the "powers of sexual attraction" as a key factor determining love, especially as experienced by women (80), hence the conflict or confrontation mentioned above between the ideal and the real in relation *both* to the subject and the object of love. If we follow Ahmed's reading of emotions we will find that, besides the differences between identification and idealisation, she also uses Freud's differentiation between "anaclitic" loved objects and "narcissistic" ones (*Cultural Politics of Emotion* 125). In the former, an external object is the primary object of love, while in the latter the self is the primary object of love. Interestingly, in narcissistic object-choices the person can love what he/she him/herself is, was or would like to be; or else someone who was once part of him/herself, all of which is reduced to a primal distinction between heterosexual and homosexual love. From this reasoning stems the conventional Freudian identification of anaclitic love with heterosexuality, and of narcissistic love with homosexuality; an identification that seems to be far from fixed or sustainable since "[t]he boy who makes an anaclitic object-choice based on paternal love and protection is as liable to turn out gay as is the boy who makes a narcissistic object-choice and loves himself from his adoring father's perspective" (Dean 124). We might even go as far as confronting Freud's stance that

> complete object-love of the anaclitic type is, properly speaking, characteristic of the man. It displays the marked over-estimation which is doubtless derived from the original narcissism of the child, now transferred to the sexual object. This sexual over-estimation is the origin of the peculiar state of being in love, a state suggestive of a neurotic compulsion, which is thus traceable to the impoverishment of the ego in respect of libido *in favour of the love object*. (qtd. in Samuels 67, emphasis added)

This development of "object-love" on the part of men and of narcissistic inclinations on the part of women leads to men loving women who love themselves, and women loving the love that is directed at them, a difference that, according to Ahmed, reveals a heterosexual logic (*Cultural Politics of Emotion* 125-126). It may also be important to bear in mind, though, that this notion of difference can appear not only in heterosexuality but also in other types of relationships or sexual tendencies. In the case of homosexuality, for example, we might argue whether the subject (be it gay or lesbian) seeks differences in other scopes of his/her lover's individuality, such as character, physical peculiarities, ideology, lifestyle, etc., in order to make for the lack of difference regarding biological sex. Ahmed, following her Freudian analysis of emotions, remarks that "identification involves *making likeness* rather than being alike; the subject becomes 'like' the object or other only in the future" (126).

The concept of romantic love, according to contemporary feminism, certifies a link "between structural determinism and an essentialist conception of emotion," an essentializing conception of love that may even be traced in second-wave feminism (Jónasdóttir 39). In this respect I would like to stress the extent to which such conventional interpretations of emotions steer away from a "liquid" or unstable conception of love and tend to fix attitudes to emotions in terms of sensibility and receptiveness as regards sex and gender. Some significant feminist theorists explored this issue especially in the seventies. Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*, in particular, is one of the most notorious examples of a thorough description of the mechanisms that rule romantic love. Firestone wrote her book in 1970, a time not too far away from the writing of "Bardon Bus," hence the depiction of love and relationships in the story might easily fit into some of Firestone's assumptions on the same topic. Even though western society has greatly changed through the last decades, and even though both the concept and the experience of love have gone through major shifts in meaning, Firestone makes several interesting remarks. Specifically she states that men seem to be "unable to take love seriously as a cultural matter; but they can't do without it altogether" (127), and that even though a woman may know that romantic "idealization, which she works so hard to produce, is a lie […], her whole identity hangs in the balance of her

love life. She is allowed to love herself only if a man finds her worthy of love" (132).

In relation to Firestone's idea that women tend to rely on their love life in order to attain identity, in "Bardon Bus" we find very different reactions and responses regarding love in either female character (the unnamed narrator and Kay). Here the concept of an emotional masquerade applied to femininity becomes relevant, as we saw in Munro's earlier quotation, insofar as both in the case of the narrator of the story and Kay there seems to be a genuine intention to love the "other," thus equating emotions to femininity, and in both cases their efforts end in failure and loss. However, in the case of the narrator, loss brings about grief and obsession, whereas in the case of Kay it brings about a desperate need to find another "other," not so much as a sexual conquest but as a search for an ideal partner. From a feminist point of view, therefore, love can be seen as an "ideological mask" to justify the exploitation of women. Firestone attacks romantic love as a form of "corrupted" love, even though she claims that love is "good in itself" (138). From my point of view, however, the notion of love we can extract from "Bardon Bus" is that any and every form of love is in itself a social and cultural construct, no matter whether romantic or not, good or evil, and therefore is in any case liable to corruption.

An alternative interpretation of love as a contingent emotional phenomenon, also labelled "confluent love" (Jónasdóttir 40), which usually reinforces sexualisation as its basic drive as opposed to a more spiritual/idealized version of love, does not guarantee the elimination of gender discrimination or inequality either. Indeed, it may only lead to a more sexualized or physical type of romantic love, where gender roles remain fixed and delineated by their conceptual boundaries (40).

3. LOST LOVE AND ROMANCE IN "BARDON BUS"

Together with her use of idealisation as a means to distance herself from a painful reality, the narrator of "Bardon Bus" uses key words as a strategy to sublimate feelings propelled by lack of love; for example, the term "Bardon Bus" makes reference to a bus-line from her former

life in Australia, an itinerary plagued with emotional memories of her lover and herself together, but at the same time the name can be interpreted as a symbol for the transient, volatile and movable quality of love feelings as well as a substitute in the absence of the "real thing" (love). Likewise, the letter X symbolizes and simultaneously substitutes the "real" presence of lover: "[U]sing just the letter, not needing a name, is in line with a system I often employ these days. I say 'Bardon Bus, No. 144,' and I see a whole succession of scenes. I see them in detail; streets and houses" ("Bardon" 112).

Finding or reaffirming identity, so crucial to this story, proves to be a tough task for the narrator, as she constantly returns to writing about her lover. As Georgeann Murphy points out: "if the self can be forged by the act of writing, it can be lost in attraction to the opposite sex" (45). Furthermore, as Katherine J. Mayberry suggests, verbalising the experience and narrating failures and obsessions, especially regarding emotions, may actually bring about or even worsen the very pain that narration intends to prevent or appease (30). The more the narrator writes about her love obsession, the more she loses her own identity. As she reminisces about the love affair, the gap between the character's present actions and her memories from the past is enlarged, thus "alienating" the reader from her narration. In Munro's own words, the more personal stories "are carried away from the real" (qtd. in May 54), an assertion that also emphasizes the tense and difficult coexistence between present and past narration, the "dialectic between present and past, experience and understanding" (Duncan 19).

Love implies an approximation to an ideal that binds both subject and object of love together, even in spite of heteronormative conventional thinking, and probably because of the tendency towards difference in the case of heterosexual relationships. Right from the start, the female first-person narrator in "Bardon Bus" tries to conflate the impression her lover made on her with her own personal context, as when she says: "I think of being an old maid, in another generation. There were plenty of old maids in my family. I come of straitened people, madly secretive, tenacious, economical" ("Bardon" 110), a remark on herself and her family that is coupled, shortly after, with a description of her lover: "I call him X, as if he were a character in an

old-fashioned novel, that pretends to be true. X is a letter in his name, but I chose it also because it seems to suit him. The letter X seems to me expansive and *secretive*" ("Bardon" 112, emphasis added). By using similar expressions to describe both the narrator's personal background and the way she identifies/remembers her lover, Munro remarks the very need to find sameness in difference, a need that traps the subject in love when love dies away or when correspondence is not fulfilled.

This need also reveals the suitability of the narrative text as a place for meeting: the meeting of narrator/character and reader, in such a way that both a "meeting by observing" and a "meeting by identifying" can be sustained between the two of them, in Keith Oatley's terms (444-446),[3] the more so because Munro does not create an overtly relatable main character. In this way, the reader may identify with the narrator while at the same time watching her from a distance.

Even from a first reading of "Bardon Bus" it seems clear that the narrator establishes emotional links with objects and displays a troublesome relation with herself in terms of identity. Masquerading—in direct relation to femininity but also tangentially with homosexuality—plays in this sense a crucial role, as we see in several scenes and situations along the story, for example when the narrator describes how her friend Kay once disguised herself as an old woman, "with a gray wig and a tattered fur coat" ("Bardon" 116). This tendency towards the masquerade of femininity reappears later on, when the narrator goes out to buy some earrings and enters a shop where a boy is being dressed up as a lady: "[A] beautiful young lady, who is not a lady at all but a pretty young boy dressed up as a lady, emerges from the shelter of the mirror. […] [H]e is the prettiest and most ladylike person I have seen all day" (125-126). This vision prompts in the narrator memories of herself when she was a child and performed her own masquerades of femininity:

> I remember how when I was ten or eleven years old I used to dress up as a bride in old curtains, or as a lady in rouge and a feathered hat. After all the effort and contriving and my own enchantment with the finished

> product there was a considerable letdown. […] There is a great fear and daring and disappointment in this kind of display. ("Bardon" 126)

Munro exposes here the need not only to "be" what the mother is, in mock imitation and at the same time through repetition of performative routines, but also to desire femininity as the full realisation of a "complete" woman, this realisation proving to be a disappointing artifice, a "product", from the child's innocent perspective, and an unsatisfied or unfulfilled desire from the mature narrator's perspective, thus longing for the boy's youth as a *sine qua non* condition to embody desirability. The narrator's childlike persona stages her masquerade as a "longing for plenitude with the mother," an unconscious imitation of the mother (Shih 76). By contrast, the narrator's middle-aged impersonation despises the permanence of the masquerade into old age, a time when it seemingly starts being ineffective. Curiously enough, her obsession about ageing and decay is directly and exclusively connected to femininity, as there is no mention of any such process affecting men:

> I'm half convinced that a more artful getup would have made a more powerful impression, more dramatic clothes might have made me *less discardable* […]: the fat woman with pink hair; the eighty-year-old with painted-on eyebrows; they may all be thinking that they haven't gone too far yet, not quite yet. ("Bardon" 124-125, emphasis added)

The narrator's obsession with ageing is probably as important as her obsession with loss of love in "Bardon Bus," in the sense that ageing implies loss of desirability. This view on bodily decay derives from a heteronormative male perspective on women, a point of view that, while apparently being shared by the female narrator at the beginning of the story, may reveal a "panicked masculinity" in the characters of X and Dennis (Shih 81): a panic that seems to be fought back whenever the male must strive to be completely and unambiguously male, as in the case of X, or whenever femininity is denied by means of apparent misogyny, as in the case of Dennis (Shih 81-82). The need to be as heterosexually masculine as possible betrays

both in X and Dennis the fact that masculine identity, as Judith Butler asserts, is constituted by means of sexual difference, inasmuch as it is attained by a prior prohibition of homosexuality (150). The two female characters, on the contrary, display a concept of womanliness deeply rooted in instability and masquerading, either by means of performative gestures, poses or attitudes conventionally understood as "feminine" or, as mentioned before, by dressing or making up in a stereotypical feminine way in order to clear off any doubts about their heterosexuality.

Nevertheless, the contemptuous vision on women that apparently characterizes Dennis's train of thought, and which might justify Firestone's statement that "men can't love" (135), may not be as clearly misogynistic as might seem at first sight. The bluntness of his assertions when he talks with the narrator could even be claimed to betray an honesty missing in X's softer, gentler, and seemingly more insincere approach to women. Dennis remarks that "women are the lucky ones […] [b]ecause they are forced to live in the world of loss and death" ("Bardon" 122), and he is probably expressing his true belief, harsh though it may seem. The kind of "luck" Dennis talks about, however, is disconnected from female experience and reality; hence the narrator craves for "new definitions of luck" towards the end of the story (128), in order to overcome grief from the absence of the lover. Ahmed states, regarding loss and grief:

> [T]he loss of the object is compensated for by 'taking on' the quality of the object. Mourning and grief become an expression of love; love announces itself most passionately when faced with the loss of the object […]. Love has an intimate relation to grief not only through how the subject responds to the lost object, but also by what losses get admitted as losses in the first place. If I can imagine that the person who has lost 'could-have-been-me,' then the other's grief can also become my grief. (*Cultural Politics of Emotion* 130)

Specifically in connection with the main topic in the story—grief for and obsession about a lost love—mourning and love seem to be tightly linked together as far as the lover's desire to "be like" the

object of love is concerned. This is exactly what Kay, the other female character in the story, refers to when she says: "It's always the desire to see yourself reflected. […] Love always comes back to self-love. […] Obsession and self-delusion" ("Bardon" 117). By using the word "self-love" Munro explicitly names the need of finding oneself in the other and validating (or completing) one's own identity through this "other" whose presence fills in this desire in the subject, and whose absence awakens or arouses the same need.

Interestingly, whereas Dennis's attitude seems to be defined by his sharp and merciless description of male-female love relationships, both the narrator's and Kay's attitude towards love denote masochism, "the only way in which the narrator can sense the boundaries of her fragile ego and so be assured that she still exists; so too is with Kay" (Shih 84). In a similar way, both women tend to resort to nostalgia "as a coping mechanism" in the absence of love or in the aftermath of a break-up (89).

The narrator tries to use different strategies to fight grief, with varying results: at the beginning of the story she seeks identification with the love object by means of fantasies, nostalgia and dreams, but when this tactic fails she resorts to letting eroticism and sexuality flood over her psyche, with the result of increasing anxiety derived from longing and desire. Eventually, she tries to find pleasure in the ordinary and simple nature of reality, as when she goes to Rooneem's Bakery and just watches the street, producing apparently random unconnected reflections about the world around her, snippets of a larger net of interconnections, i.e. accepting reality as a way to overcome pain and frustration (Martin 144). This strategy proves to be much more successful and probably lets her find the stamina to accept the revelation awaiting her at the end of the story (144). This final acceptance of reality, and her subsequent resignation to "let go" and accept loss for what it is, may also be seen as a way out of the above-mentioned masochistic impulses and obsessions (Heble 138). This could also be seen as a turn in the notion of ageing, no longer a negative aspect but a positive one. As Beverly Jean Rasporich states: "transformation and change is the condition of the female life and it is also adventure for Munro's heroines who take their leads from the mother-philosopher figure" (70).

In spite of the narrator's progress out of her emotional crisis, dependence on desirability still implies a strong link between happiness and romantic love, in the sense that there is a process of idealisation affecting both the love object and love itself. Idealisation has such a strong presence in "Bardon Bus" that the inner conflict between love and the need to be desired remains unsolved until the end of the story. If we accept, in line with Ahmed's suggestion, that happiness implies "a specific kind of intentionality" ("Happy Objects" 33), then we may claim as well that the narrator in "Bardon Bus" is intentionally seeking a change from the state of mourning and grief in which loss of love has left her, a change into some kind of emotional improvement, while at the same time heavily relying on chance and the above-mentioned "new definitions of luck," which may lead to a displacement in the focus of the subject-lover, as can be seen by the end of the story.

In "Bardon Bus," events and the characters' reactions to them go hand in hand without any explicit judgement on the part of the narrator as to their "good" or "evil" value: Munro leaves the task of establishing moral judgement to the reader. This detachment from moral judgement is paired with a sense of both futility and fleetingness regarding the experience of love, as we see in the narrator's reminiscence of the affair: "We were not afraid to use the word love. We lived without responsibility, without a future, in freedom, with generosity, in constant but not wearying celebration. We had no doubt that our happiness would last out the little time required" ("Bardon" 113).

The story itself flows in and out of the present or the past tenses, through a succession or sequencing of events that become thematically interconnected in spite of their seemingly arbitrary or casual appearance. For instance, the fact that the narrator has had an affair with X and is trying to recover from her lost love in a flat that happens to be owned by Kay, who happens to have just broken up with Roy, an anthropologist who happens to be a friend of X, another anthropologist who happens to meet Kay, who happens to fall in love with him, etc. The apparent denial of conventional narrative structure in the story (as regards a clear introduction, development, and climax/conclusion) runs parallel to the accidental, unstructured or

"liquid" quality of the love processes depicted. In Munro's story, events are presented as a kind of tidal flow constantly adding new layers of meaning with each new interconnection. The effects deriving from all those interconnections, nevertheless, create a kind of build-up in the narrator's psyche, as she eventually reaches a stage where she can no longer put up with the unstructured and random state caused by pain and grief: "There is a limit to the amount of misery and disarray you will put up with, for love, just as there is a limit to the amount of mess you can stand around a house. You can't know the limit beforehand, but you will know when you've reached it" ("Bardon" 127).

This is the point where the narrator goes beyond acknowledging the trappings of romantic love and its pernicious effects on her and actually starts taking effective measures in order to fight them. Her recollection of an encounter she had with a previous lover who used to follow her after they had broken up is very illustrative of this (painful) progression towards independence from romance. After the ex-lover makes a scene where he declares, in a dramatic and overacted manner, that she is "free" of him, she reflects: "He was in desperate need, as I am now, and I didn't pity him, and I'm not sorry I didn't" ("Bardon" 126-127). The man "used to follow" the narrator after the break-up, but she unabashedly declares she would be willing to do the same about X: "Thank God I don't know where he is. I can't telephone him, write letters to him, waylay him on the street" (126).

Here we can see a striking parallelism with Firestone's above-mentioned remark about men's inability to take love as a cultural matter. On the one hand, the scene with the narrator's ex-lover illustrates his idealization of women, as well as his reliance on "falling in love" rather than on actually loving. On the other hand, the two male characters, Dennis and X, stand for very conventional male positions as regards sex and love: Dennis appears to be a cynic who relishes on misogynist comments about women and the burdens that their emotional side bring upon them, whereas X is characterized not so much by what he says but by his actions and his behaviour, and impersonates the role of a womanizer who goes through different love affairs, as well as marriages, without much emotional commitment.

He does not say much throughout the story, indeed. It is significant that one of the few remarks that seem to come from him is actually produced by a fictional version of him, within the context of a fantasized sex scene the narrator imagines in a moment of sexual need: "We almost finished each other off" ("Bardon" 124).[4]

In either case, Munro characterizes the male attitude to love as ruled by pragmatism and a will to conquer rather than to share. In theory, this would mean that both Dennis and X reject the conventional logic of romantic love—the idealization of one and only one lover as a soulmate—either through sarcasm and cynicism (in the case of Dennis) or through lack of genuine commitment (in the case of X). The fact that X approaches love as a collector of affairs or sexual conquests seems to suggest a connection with the idea of "sexual inequality" between both genders, a concept whose presence is essential, in Firestone's opinion, for love to exert its destructive effects on women (130). Dennis also portrays this ideology of inequality and discrimination in several of his remarks, especially in the course of his conversation with the narrator when he asks her for dinner in Toronto in the present timeline. He says: "Think of the way your life would be, if you were a man. […] Men fall in love with younger women. Men want younger women. Men can get younger women" ("Bardon" 121). A little bit further, in the same conversation, he makes another generalization, this time about women: "A woman your age can't compete […]. You can't compete with younger women. […] So the men have this way of renewing themselves, they get this refill of vitality, while the women are you might say removed from life" (121-122). Women, following this patriarchal reasoning, are tied up by their biology: the fact that their bodies age plays a far more relevant role in their "chances" regarding love and relationships than in the case of men, who seem to be "naturally" attracted to younger women and apparently need not worry about their own physical decay.

The fact that, especially in western societies, success for women seems to depend on "their desirability to males" (Person 258), reinforces the social and economic marginalisation of those women who choose to be or live alone; thus, rather than an expression of choice or chance, being alone is considered some kind of emotional or social failure for women. The narrator in "Bardon Bus" is also tied

by this social constraint. In this respect she seems to be imprisoned not just by sexual/emotional dependency but, most importantly, by the demands imposed on her by conventional assumptions around love and the roles of men and women in heteronormative love relationships: after the end of the affair she is currently living alone (marginalisation); she is no longer young (ageing); and she is no longer beautiful (desirability). Having lost the attributes that traditionally allow for romance, she resorts, at first, to memories, dreams and fantasies, and finally to a reliance on chance and a change of luck as providers for happiness.

Together with this slight optimistic change of perspective, nevertheless, by the end of the story we also see a growing yearning on the part of the narrator to disappear from her own narration, most likely allowing a displacement in favour of Kay, the younger and more beautiful woman and, overall, probably a more suitable embodiment of the masquerade of femininity: "Kay is back from the country. She too has a new outfit, a dark-green schoolgirl's tunic worn without a blouse or brassiere. She has dark-green knee socks and saddle oxfords" ("Bardon" 128). At the same time, the narrator's voice grows less urgent and more resigned, as if slowly drifting into silence (Redekop 14). It is interesting to note that in the last numbered paragraph, which contains a conversation between Kay and the narrator, the latter barely speaks, and it is indeed Kay's voice that occupies most of those final sentences. Through Kay's voice we reach the final revelation in the story, as if in a subtle epiphany of sorts.[v] Never fully or explicitly stated but scribbled between the lines for the reader to imagine, this revelation establishes new links between the old and the new love-object—the former just a symbol, a letter; the latter a full name with (probably) new meanings and a brand new love story to offer—even though the story so far already offers a hint of where this new love may lead to, on account of what the narrator has told us about Kay and her ramblings in love. Munro confronts us with the starting point of a new sentimental relationship, another reiteration in a string of "innumerable variations" of love affairs that point towards a rather contingent, provisional and gendered conceptualization of emotions.

4. CONCLUSIONS

As we have seen, Munro dissects, with a deceitfully simple and casual approach, the effects of love on women, as well as the way in which chance is combined with social pressure on the female individual in the configuration of her emotions and in the handling of loss when emotional links are traumatically suppressed. To achieve this goal the author weaves, by means of seemingly disconnected vignettes, a progression from the narrator's reliance on dreams and fantasies, her usage of certain significant key words and expressions, her eroticized/sexualised remembrance of the relationship, to her final acceptance on the casual and accidental nature of reality. Munro is wise enough, nonetheless, to hint at the provisional and unstable quality of each strategy the narrator uses to overcome pain and grief. In this, Munro seems to follow Firestone's ideas about the different conception of love in men and women, as well as the inescapable inequality that applies to women when handling love feelings.

Through my analysis of Munro's story against the concept of romantic love and the impact of emotions on female identity I have tried to clarify the author's conscientious examination of the cultural dimension of love both in males and females. Even though Munro refuses to use the main character/narrator to give a speech on inequality in heterosexual relationships, she does provide sufficient evidence about men having the upper hand in deciding when to stop or start affairs, to the detriment of women, who invariably turn into sufferers/mourners in unequally balanced relationships. Both the narrator's and Kay's attitudes and reactions reveal how women are driven to a masquerade of femininity in order to love and be loved. Through her minute description of the main character's life (past and present), Munro succeeds in exposing the constructed nature of femininity, and the void behind any identity based on such masquerade.

The apparently unstructured sequencing of impressions, memories, fantasies, dreams and observations that make up the story conforms a universe that both accounts for and reinforces grief and pain deriving from lost love. In this respect, Sarah Ahmed's theories on emotions and affect (love and happiness, in particular) throw some

light on the way feelings are handled by the individual. Likewise, a revision of the mechanisms of romantic love (both in men and women) proves to be useful in order to understand the extent to which the love-subject is trapped in the cultural prison of gendered feelings. A complex pattern of heteronormative assumptions seem to constrain and limit women especially, by means of performative masquerades in order to increase their expectations of loving/being loved.

Munro does not provide explicit moral solutions for any of these love-related issues, but she does provide an accurate, sharp and at times ironic description of the evolution the main character goes through in the story. We witness the way the narrator deals with her post-break-up situation by constantly bringing the past into the present, and how she tries to allow the present to get rid of the past. However, it is the past (embodied in X) that seems to come back to haunt the narrator through the possibility of the new affair with Kay. In sum, the story's conclusion only reinforces the idea that love, as a social construct, is a source of both happiness and grief for the female individual who enjoys it or suffers from its absence: beyond the suffering or happiness that such individual might get from those feelings, love has a gendered and provisional quality that no woman seems to be able to avoid. Once she has completed the process of mourning her lost love, the main character remains silent and fades away, as if her role in the story had exhausted her. It is then time for a new female character to start the process of a new love affair, a reiteration of emotion that will most likely consume her as well.

NOTES

[1] This was the case of "Dulse" (1980), "Accident" (1977), "Prue" (1981) or "The Moons of Jupiter" (1978), among others.

[2] All quotations from Munro's short story will be henceforth labelled "Bardon" followed by the corresponding page number.

[3] This is a distinction Oatley uses precisely to highlight the dialogic nature of the narrative text.

[4] Incidentally, this stress in an (unfulfilled) desire for complete commitment in sex/passion echoes an earlier comment by the narrator, precisely in connection with another fantasy: "There I come back again

and again to the centre of my fantasy, to the moment when you give yourself up, give yourself over, to the assault which is guaranteed to finish off everything you've been before" ("Bardon" 111).

[5] The epiphany is that Kay has accidentally met X (whose full name, Alex Walther, is finally mentioned) and will most likely start an affair with him.

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