Runaway, the title of Alice Munro’s 2004 collection of short stories, directs the reader to Munro’s recurring and interweaving themes of entrapment and escape more explicitly than any of her other titles. In each of the collected stories, flight or abandonment is either undertaken, with varying success, or anticipated. Ildiko de Papp Carrington notes that: “Clearly recognizable patterns unify almost all of [Munro’s] fiction” (3), and with its repeated description of the figure of the escaper who undertakes or contemplates a necessary journey, Runaway points to its location within the quest romance pattern. Nevertheless, the title story, “Runaway,” opens, not with a departure, but with a return:

Carla heard the car coming before it topped the little rise in the road that around here they called a hill. It’s her, she thought. Mrs. Jamieson – Sylvia – home from her holiday in Greece. (3)

This initial return willfully subverts the expectations constructed by the title and suggests instead that this is to be a story of consequences rather than actions; a story of stasis rather than movement. As the opening lines of a doubly advertised narrative of escape (initiating both Runaway the collection and “Runaway” the opening story), Sylvia’s return carries a particularly ironic weight.

Munro’s stories typically chart life in small-town rural Ontario, insular and often claustrophobic, where “anywhere else is outside and alien” (Howells 2). Many of her predominantly female protagonists feel the compulsion to leave, to envision life
elsewhere. This is perhaps best exemplified by Rose, in *Who Do You Think You Are?*, who experiences a temporary departure with exhilaration:

> She had a window seat, and was soon extraordinarily happy. She felt Flo receding, West Hanratty flying away from her, her own wearying self discarded as easily as everything else. She loved the towns less and less known. (71)

*Runaway* clearly continues this pattern of leaving home with the triptych of stories, “Chance,” “Soon,” and “Silence,” in which Juliet first leaves town and parents behind, only to be abandoned in turn by her own daughter years later. Similarly, in “Runaway,” Carla’s instinctual response to domestic unhappiness is fantasized departure: “I’d give anything to get away,” she declares to Sylvia (23).

Coral Ann Howells points out that Munro’s “stories significantly alter female plots so that they become stories of entrapment and escape” (4), and these two states are frequently inextricable in Munro’s writing. In *Runaway*, despite the recurring theme of departure, there are very few accounts of successful escape (Penelope, Juliet’s daughter, possibly provides one such example). Even in “Passion,” in which Grace unrepentantly chooses a transient moment of freedom over the security of an anticipated marriage, “old confusions or obligations” (161) nevertheless draw her back to the site of her betrayal, pointing to Grace’s continuing entanglement in the past. In the opening lines of “Runaway,” Munro indicates the intertwining of the same two contrary states by juxtaposing the entrapment of the small-town mentality—the lack of a grand perspective that enables the local townspeople to call a small “rise in the road” a hill—with the potential of escape to an exotic elsewhere, represented here by Greece. In “Runaway,” as in many other Munro stories, the forward progression seemingly offered by the formula of movement from enclosure to adventure elsewhere is frequently, perhaps inevitably, frustrated by a return.

This article examines the attempt to inscribe a female journey that occurs in Munro’s text, and moves to place the short story “Runaway” within the context of the traditional quest narrative. Munro’s use of the quest motif has been noted before. In *Mothers and Other Clowns*, Magdalene Redekop touches upon the theme in her discussion of mother figures in Munro’s stories, and specifically notes the manner in which the narratives work to subvert, rather than affirm, the quest pattern. Discussing, for example, the character of Mary McQuade in the story “Images,” Redekop notes that “[h]er stay-at-home power is set up as a counter to the power of the ancient quest pattern” (44–45), while in “The Peace of Utrecht,” “the result of [the mother’s death] is that the ‘quest’ is inverted: we begin with the daughter who is returning to the house” (Redekop 50–51). Others, meanwhile, have noted the “modern quest and resurrection of new mythology” (Rasporich xv), “the quest for authenticity” (Cox 5), or “attempted flight from a land of hunger” (Carscallen 353) that have variously informed Munro’s stories. “Runaway,” with its clear signaling to the quest tradition, takes a prominent position within these narratives, and, as I will demonstrate, in its deliberate and at times ironic recoding of
various emblems and motifs of the quest, it repays close analysis of its exemplification of a defining Munro thematic strategy.

The quest has repeatedly been exposed as an inherently masculine narrative structure. A number of theorists, however, including Carol Christ, Annis Pratt, Heidi Sletedahl Macpherson, and Dana Heller, have attempted—in quite different ways—to identify and locate an alternative, feminine, quest experience. In this article I suggest that the seemingly unavoidable nature of the runaway’s return in Munro’s most recent collection makes it difficult to locate her fiction within either a masculine or a feminine quest pattern. The traditional necessity of the quester’s triumphant return is balanced in Munro’s work by the insidious aspect of failure that accompanies her returning protagonists. In this, “Runaway” seems to accord with Heller’s observation that “[a]n established feature of many of these female quests is a thwarted or impossible journey . . . and a reconciliation to society’s expectations of female passivity and immobility” (14). Munro’s story accepts the established feminist exposition of the patriarchal limits of the quest, but also proves skeptical of proposed “feminine” alternatives, such as a spiritual or communal quest.

“Runaway” resists attempts to locate it within either traditional or female/feminine quest patterns, while simultaneously inviting the reader to address it in those terms by declaring its familiarity and coincidence with the thematic vocabulary of the quest. Consequently, I will suggest, the story constructs a number of tensions around the theme of female quest, all of which work against any simple resolutions or analyses. Eventually, a complex, multistep process is traced, whereby Carla attempts but fails a liberal, masculine quest for autonomous self-definition; is offered, but rejects, a feminine alternative of communal support; and ultimately anticipates a further, hybrid quest yet to come.

This final, imagined journey into the woods in search of Flora comes close to the masculine quest in its isolation and trajectory outward, away from the home, but is equally bound to visions of feminine quest structures in being partially motivated by female loyalty and friendship, and thus bound to a significant other. With this, Munro encapsulates two predominant themes that recur in her writing: the need for female characters such as Rose, Juliet, and Grace to undertake a quest for self-definition, and the parallel, seemingly contradictory recognition of the persistent pressures of home and family—something that the female quester cannot shake off as easily as her traditional male counterpart. “Runaway” typifies the pressure toward the quest that occurs in Munro’s work, despite her recognition of the difficulties and obstacles that frequently make the successful quest impossible.

**Munro’s Quest Narrative**

In “Runaway,” there are, more precisely, three runaways: Carla, escaping an unhappy relationship; her older neighbor Sylvia, recently bereaved and gone to stay with friends in Greece; and Flora, a little white goat who has already mysteriously...
disappeared before the story opens. Throughout the course of the story, each of these three runaways returns. While these returns, particularly Carla’s, may be described as frustrated departures, implying a failure of intention, if the text is instead read within the parameters of a traditional quest narrative, in which the hero sets out on an expedition and returns triumphant, it becomes possible to salvage an alternative reading. The return may be better understood not as a failure, but as the point of successful completion of the narrative pattern set in motion by the departure.

Northrop Frye, in *The Anatomy of Criticism*, locates the quest within the romance, and describes its tripartite structure in terms of the perilous journey, the crucial battle, and the exaltation of the returning hero (187). In his influential text, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell describes these same three stages as “Separation – Initiation – Return” (30, emphasis in original). This basic sequence, argues Campbell, provides “the nuclear unit of the monomyth” (30), recurring across cultures and ages. In “Runaway,” Carla’s quest falters and stalls at the preliminary stage of the journey/separation; only three towns away from home, feeling “in peril of her life” (35), she abandons her escape and returns. In attempting her departure, Carla briefly echoes both Rose in *Who Do You Think You Are?* boarding the train for Toronto, and Del in *Lives of Girls and Women*, whose main narrative concludes with “getting on a bus, like girls in movies leaving home, convents, lovers” (238). In comparison, the abrupt curtailment of Carla’s journey suggests a consummate failure of will, a failure heavily emphasized by both the placing of “Runaway” as the title story of a collection of escapes, and by the clear, ironic signaling of the narrative to the heroic quest motif.

Discussing patterns of the romance in *The Secular Scripture*, Frye explains that “most romances exhibit a cyclical movement of descent into a nightworld and a return to the idyllic world” (54). Similarly, Campbell describes how “[t]he hero adventures out of the land we know into darkness . . . and his return is described as a coming back out of that yonder zone” (217). The quest involves a movement outward or downward to the unknown periphery, but also, necessarily, a movement back toward the centre. Although this implies advancement – the quest is after all a journey – the progression of the adventurer is always balanced in the text by the stasis of home. While the cycle begins with a departure, the archetypal quest narrative of *The Odyssey*, for example, is predominantly an attempt to recover the point of commencement. It is, as Frye terms it, “an epic of return” (*Anatomy* 187). As Odysseus journeys inward, he progresses back toward Penelope, who sits at the hub of his radius. Penelope, representing “home,” is the point of departure and return; she must be abandoned, but she must also be reclaimed. In “Runaway,” Clark performs a similar function for Carla. As she attempts to leave her husband, she is suddenly struck by his centrality to her existence. Sitting on the bus, she realizes: “While she was running away from him . . . Clark still kept his place in her life” (34). Carla’s departure proves to be not an autonomous and freely directed journey
outward, but a running away from a fixed point that is her husband, and it is to this same fixed point that she inevitably returns.

The characters in Munro’s story also take up their roles within the quest pattern. Frye notes: “Characters tend to be either for or against the quest” (Anatomy 195), and accordingly, where Sylvia aids Carla’s departure, urging her to “[t]ake charge of her own life” (34, emphasis in original). Clark functions as the primary obstacle; “living with him was driving her crazy” (23). According to Campbell, “the first encounter of the hero-journey is with a protective figure (often a little old crone or old man) who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass” (69). Accordingly, Sylvia supplies Carla with the clothes, money, and connections that she needs to complete her journey successfully. These gifts represent the gold and secret knowledge that “the helpful crone and fairy godmother” of European fairy tale – related, as Campbell demonstrates, to the quest tradition – frequently bestows on the hero or heroine (71). A lecturer and botanist, Sylvia also fulfils the role of “wise old woman,” “surrounded by beneficent plants” (Pratt 132). Following the simple binary structure of the romance quest, Sylvia, with hair “more white now than silver-blonde,” recalling the heat and light of Greece, is associated with a positive brightness, while black-haired Clark, with his “self-conscious air of menace” (37), represents darkness and danger. “[L]ike black and white pieces in a chess game” (Frye, Anatomy 195), they face each other as moral opposites in the text.

In addition to the characters that either aid or hinder the quester, there exists a third, ambiguous role, awarded in Munro’s text to Flora the goat. Frye explains:

The characters who elude the moral antithesis of heroism and villainy generally are or suggest spirits of nature. They represent partly the moral neutrality of the intermediate world of nature and partly a world of mystery which is glimpsed but never seen, and which retreats when approached. (Anatomy 196)

Correspondingly, Flora exists outside of the clearly coded relations of the other characters, offering a distressed Carla “comradely mockery” rather than assistance or opposition (9). According with Frye’s account of the elusiveness of such creatures, Carla dreams that Flora “had run away when she saw Carla coming,” had “slithered through [a fence] like a white eel and disappeared” (7). Campbell also describes the common appearance of a supernatural guide or guardian, and suggests: “The hero to whom such a helper appears is typically one who has responded to the call. . . . But even to those who apparently have hardened their hearts the supernatural guardian may appear” (73–74). At the time of her dream, Carla is still resistant to the call to adventure, but Flora, “with a red apple in her mouth” (7), tempts her toward departure.

Increasingly, goats come to represent the mythical aspect of the story as Sylvia describes the goats she saw in Greece, “leaping around up on the rocks just like – like the spirits of the place,” looking as if they should have “wreaths on their horns” (21). These faint mythological echoes are later amplified in “Chance,” “Soon,” and

Greece holds a certain ambiguity in the story as the site of Western, patriarchal knowledge, to which Sylvia is nevertheless able to retreat, hosted by lesbian friends. This notably feminine experience of Greece contrasts with Julia’s exclusion from a male-dominated career in Classics in the following story, “Chance.”
“Silence,” in which Juliet, a former Classics scholar, becomes Demeter, seeking her lost daughter. In Munro’s account, however, Persephone – who is destined never to be reunited with her mother – is instead called Penelope, but a Penelope out in the world, rather than a Penelope at home waiting. With these reversals, Munro overturns mythological patterns while again simultaneously laying claim to their potent archetypal aspects. In “Runaway,” the suggestive signals to mythical ancient Greece are later transposed onto contemporary Canada as another character describes the Rocky Mountains goats’ “fantastic horns” (44). This connection with the fantastic is made more explicit toward the end of the story, when Flora returns from her journey, appearing as “an unearthly sort of animal, pure white, hell-bent, something like a giant unicorn.” In her temporary transfiguration, Flora becomes “radiant,” a “vision,” “a ghost,” “an apparition,” “a goat from outer space” (39–40). It is perhaps this element, incorporating the mythical or fantastical within the realist narrative, which most closely draws “Runaway” to the archetypal romance quest outlined by Frye.

Finally, Munro constructs a simple but effective reference to the quest structure in her re-inscription of the wasteland motif. In her authoritative text, From Ritual to Romance, Jessie Weston describes how:

the main object of the Quest is the restoration to health and vigour of a King . . . whose infirmity, for some mysterious and unexplained reason, reacts disastrously upon his kingdom, either depriving it of vegetation, or exposing it to the ravages of war.

The quest’s purpose is “to restore the waters to their channel, and render the land once more fertile” (20–21). In Munro’s story, however, the ritual resolution of the parched earth returned to watery fertility is reversed in a manner that is perhaps a knowing nod to the Canadian climate. As Carla’s journey moves from initiation to conclusion, the local terrain transmutes from a land of waste to a land of plenty, but the initial dark days are not the result of drought but rather of “rain and more rain” (4). Carla and Clark, who provide pony trekking and riding lessons, suffer emotionally and economically from this inclement weather. As soon as Carla leaves, however, the rain begins to ease, and, with her return:

The bright weather . . . continued . . . summer had finally arrived. The pasture grass and even the poor beaten crops lifted up their heads. The puddles dried up, the mud turned to dust. A light warm wind blew and everybody felt like doing things again. (42–43)

This climatic change and the concomitant redirection of the fortunes of the characters once again directs the reader back to the story’s encompassing quest motif.
The Impossibility of a Female Quest

While the quest may be a recognizable and recurrent pattern in Munro’s work, it is also a contested pattern, typically closed to female characters. Adventure and attainment can seem improbable or impossible for Munro’s protagonists, such as Rose in *Who Do You Think You Are?* who fantasizes about transformation and escape: “To dare it; to get away with it, to enter on preposterous adventures in your own, but newly named, skin” (79). Discussing the title of that same short story collection (published in Britain and America as *The Beggar Maid*), Howells suggests that Munro’s preferred, Canadian title better “highlights the narrative theme of a female quest and the general response of social disapproval which is provoked by a woman’s resistance to traditional expectations” (54). Various protagonists in *Runaway* meet this same opprobrium. In the title story, which points so particularly toward the theme of questing, social prohibitions and the implicit gendering of the narrative pattern irresistibly work to preclude the possibility of a female quester.

In her influential study, *Archetypal Patterns in Women’s Fiction*, Annis Pratt points to a tradition of archetypal analysis, typified by Jung, Campbell, and Frye, that lays claim to universality, but is in reality predicated on male subjectivity. Consequently, argues Pratt, the archetypes present in women’s fiction differ markedly from those previously identified in men’s writing (5–6). In the quest motif in particular, the “universal” mythic archetype works to exclude female experience. Discussing *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Pratt notes: “Campbell depicts women as auxiliaries to men, elements to be absorbed in masculine maturation” (8). This also accords with Frye’s assertion that the female “achieves no quest herself, but she is clearly the kind of being who makes a quest possible” (*Anatomy* 322–23). In each of these accounts, the role of the wanderer and hero is exclusively male.

In different versions of the quest narrative, the woman’s exclusion from the questing role is bound up with the implicit gendering of space, particularly the gendering of home as feminine. The American wilderness quest, for example, is characterized by the liberal belief that the hero can escape society and find definition in solitude. Nina Baym describes the tradition as founded in the belief that “in this new land, untrammelled by history and social accident, a person will be able to achieve complete self-definition” (71). Striking out into the wilderness, the hero abandons the socializing and domesticating city. The female, as Macpherson notes, is both the emblem of society, and “the thing from which the need to escape arises” (87). Overcoming feminine entanglements is a crucial aspect of this masculine narrative of self-discovery. It is worth noting, however, that in Munro’s story, it is Clark who lays claim to the restricted capacity of the mobile home in which he and Carla live. As increasingly “Clark’s mood weighted down all their inside space” (9), Carla retreats to incrementally distant peripheries of the claustrophobic domestic center that Clark represents. More typically, however, the implicit feminizing of home results in a paradox for the female adventurer, whereby the abandonment of home equates with an escape from femininity, that is, with an escape from her self.
The impossibility of this task, according to Macpherson, “deprives the female character of desire and negates her potential for flight” (97).

Although gender remains the most crucial factor in the limitations faced by Munro’s questing protagonists, geographical location also asserts its significance. As Robert McGill states: “Munro’s fiction reveals a concern with the implications of space for identity formation and knowledge acquisition” (10). While McGill is specifically concerned with Munro’s translation of her rural Ontario settings, the broader Canadian location of her stories also has a more general impact on her narratives of attempted escape. Although clearly hostile to a female protagonist, the quest narrative can equally be read as alien to the Canadian literary tradition. In his essay, “The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction,” Robert Kroetsch describes the central tension or “energy-line” of prairie fiction as the opposition of “horse” and “house”:

To be on a horse is to move: motion into distance. To be in a house is to be fixed: a centring unto stasis. Horse is masculine. House is feminine.

On: in. Motion: stasis. A woman ain’t supposed to move. (76)

Discussing this same essay, Russell Brown adapts Kroetsch’s terminology so that the organizing principle becomes, in Brown’s analysis, an opposition of “road” and “home,” and he argues that “although Kroetsch makes ‘horse:house’ parallel to masculine:feminine, the hidden binary is American:Canadian.” For Brown, American and English-Canadian narratives are instinctively drawn to these informing thematic poles, which position America as “the land of the open road, opposed to Canada as the country of home” (25).

Kroetsch’s terminology chimes with Munro’s description of her own writing: “I don’t take up a story and follow it as if it were a road, taking me somewhere. . . . I go into it, and move back and forth. . . . It’s more like a house” (“What is Real?” 5). The house and the road are also in tension within Carla’s life in “Runaway.” Although Carla seeks the road or the journey as a solution to her problems, repeatedly in the narrative she is returned to the confinement of the house. While Munro’s narrative metaphor certainly does not preclude stasis and feminine entrapment, it arguably describes a more “real” representation of life than the linear mode of narrative progression. The house, for Munro, is an enclosed space, but one that enables unexpected connections and new perspectives on the familiar.

In their discussions, both Kroetsch and Brown suggest an affinity to the kind of thematic criticism that was popular in Canada in the 1970s, and which did much to entrench notions of an inherently Canadian aesthetic. Margaret Atwood’s 1972 critical analysis of Canadian literature, Survival, remains a prime example of this form of literary analysis. Like Kroetsch’s later essay, Atwood defines Canadian fiction in terms of certain recurring imaginative patterns and images. Like Baym, she identifies the quest as common to American literature, which typically “suggests a place that is new, where the old order can be discarded” (33). In contrast, according to Atwood:
[Canadian] stories are likely to be tales not of those who made it but of those who made it back. . . . The survivor has no triumph or victory but the fact of his survival; he has little after his ordeal that he did not have before, except gratitude for having escaped with his life. (33)

An escape does not immediately equate to a quest (although Macpherson works to imbue the term “escaper” with potency, reading it, in contrast to the more passive “escapee,” as a term suggestive of “active resistance” and frequently associated with the quest for self-identity [4]). The notion of escape retains its primary significance of forced flight rather than connoting a journey of adventure and gain, thereby excluding this literary tendency from the quest tradition.

Macpherson, in accordance with Atwood, also locates the theme of escape as prominent in the Canadian literary consciousness. She observes:

Canadian pioneer fiction and early travelogues often present a grim picture of a vast wilderness, and these books as often urge caution when approaching the continent as anything else. . . . [T]he harsh winters, unforgiving landscape, and imposing “empty” spaces may act less as a site of escape, and more as a space from which one desires escape itself. (4)

Despite the deterministic and somewhat dated nature of thematic criticism, Atwood’s assessment of the predominating Canadian literary motif remains oddly resonant for Munro’s 2004 text. The “unaccustomed confidence” (31) that precipitates Carla’s escape is soon eroded by fear as she journeys farther and farther from home: “She had managed to stop crying, but she had started to shake. She was in a bad way” (34). Eventually, terrified and lonely, Carla calls Clark: “Come and get me. Please. Come and get me” (35, emphasis in original). With her quest abandoned, she, like Atwood’s Canadian wilderness survivor, can only be grateful to be reabsorbed by the familiar.4

**Imagining a Female Quest**

In “Runaway,” Carla returns home without triumph, and Munro seems to accord with Frye and Campbell’s assertions that the quest structure precludes a female adventurer. Macpherson, Kristina Groover, Heller, and Christ, however, all offer solutions to this impasse, suggesting that female experience requires an alternative, female questing structure.5 Consequently, Christ divides the female quest into a social quest — “women’s struggle to gain respect, equality, and freedom in society” — and a spiritual quest: “a woman’s awakening to the depths of her soul and her position in the universe” (8). These two endeavors, she argues, are not exclusive, but support and promote each other. According to Christ’s argument, women’s quests are transformative and communicative, differentiated from the liberal masculine quest by the attempt to bring about new social systems through shared

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4 Despite frequent identification of the quest as American, Lorna Irvine suggests that “[w]hat makes Canadian fiction particularly significant for anyone interested in studies of female development is . . . the seriousness with which it treats women’s quests” (quoted in Macpherson 107), and Macpherson’s study, focusing on the quest-related escape novels of North American women, includes analyses of several Canadian writers, such as Atwood and Gail Anderson-Dargatz. Like Pratt, Christ argues that societal pressures inevitably shape women’s writing. According to Pratt: “Our quests for being are thwarted on every side by what we are told to be and to do, which is different from what men are told to be and to do” (5). Both Christ and Pratt suggest that, as a consequence of this shared experience, common archetypal patterns and imagery in women’s writing can be identified.

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spiritual enlightenment, rather than focusing solely on the social and spiritual
development of the individual hero.

In the story “Chance,” Munro briefly describes a journey that does seem to
side-step both the traditionally masculine, liberal quest for self-discovery through
isolation, and the alternative, “feminine” quest for identity through community
discussed by Christ. Traveling alone by train across Canada, Juliet thinks:

Personal fate was not the point, anyway. What drew her in — enchanted
her, actually — was the very indifference, the repetition, the carelessness
and contempt for harmony, to be found on the scrambled surface of the
Precambrian shield. (54)

Juliet’s vision is of a solitary journey through the wilderness, but without any
privileging or imposition of the self. It is explicitly not a fantasy of living in harmony
with Mother Nature (which the narrator of Atwood’s 1972 novel, Surfacing, indulges
in, for example), but rather a willing relinquishment of both the self and the
community to a careless and impersonal universe. Juliet’s selfless solitude is short-
lived however, as a lonely man makes claims on her attention, and draws her
inexorably back into gendered social roles.

Various discussions of female quest published after Christ’s influential Diving Deep
and Surfacing typically champion either the social or the spiritual quest. Groover, for
example, suggests that female quest, rather than a journeying out into the world, can
become a fruitful quest inward. This self-reflective form of the quest, she argues, is
frequently articulated in women’s writing through the exploration and celebration of the
recurring themes of domesticity, community (immediate community rather than
wider society), and storytelling. In illustration, Groover points to the representation
of “domestic activity as the enactment of transformative, life-sustaining
relationships” in novels by Toni Morrison, Kaye Gibbons, and Alice Walker (25).
Groover’s female questers “are transformed not by the journey from community,
but by the preserving of community” (76). This internalized, spiritual quest contrasts
significantly with the social quest that Macpherson and Heller envision. Both critics
argue that interiority is a capitulation to patriarchal restrictions on female space.
Heller, for example, refuses to valorize as quests narratives of domesticity and
spiritual struggle, arguing that the frequency with which they traditionally occur in
women’s writing more accurately “reflect[s] the lack of any outward expression of
female aggression” (12).

In “Runaway,” domesticity is, for Carla, a pleasure rather than an oppression: “she
liked the rhythm of her regular chores” (5). Contemplating the handiwork of other
mobile home owners, “She could hardly wait to get at such improvements herself”
(8). Carla’s departure is not prompted by confinement to the domestic routine.
With time, however, Clark’s moods and temper impact on Carla’s contentment, and
her increasingly obsessive contemplation of the ugly carpet that he will not allow her
to replace indicates her growing unhappiness: “Sometimes she could pick out the
arrangement easily and sometimes she had to work to see it” (9). This resonant
image seems to recall quite consciously Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” and conjures allusions to confinement, frustration, and growing hysteria. The increasing claustrophobia of the mobile home eventually necessitates Carla’s departure, but crucially, she is escaping the entanglements of both her husband and her female friend and neighbor. Munro complicates feminist readings of the female quest. Unlike Groover, who advocates a spiritual celebration of female domestic contentment, Munro shows the home to be potentially dangerous to Carla’s mental health. At the same time, reductive feminist readings of an escape from home and husband collapse in the face of Carla’s desire for both of those aspects of her life.

In her discussion, Heller emphasizes the need to move outward rather than inward, arguing that “[w]oman’s quest must propose strategies for escaping debilitating structures, for discovering authentic selfhood, and for claiming the right to take her journey out into the world” (13). She prefaces her book with a quotation from Hélène Cixous:

> Things are starting to be written, things that will constitute a feminine Imaginary, the site, that is, of identifications of an ego no longer given over to an image defined by the masculine...but rather inventing forms for women on the march, or as I prefer to fantasize, “in flight,” so that instead of lying down, women will go forward by leaps in search of themselves. (1, emphasis in original)

Cixous envisions new female forms of narrative that will overcome the masculine patterns that reject the inscription of female experience. In this extract, she emphasizes the movement and progression involved in this project, employing terms such as “on the march” and “in flight,” envisioning “leaps” forward rather than static journeys inward. Although Cixous also identifies masculine tradition as alien to women, she proposes an alternative “feminine Imaginary,” which involves a new way of thinking/writing, but does not require a retreat from the external world.

In “Runaway,” Munro attempts to envision this new female imaginary, but proves less optimistic than Heller and Cixous about the possibility of escaping known narrative structures. Seeking relief from an intolerable situation, Carla attempts the departure that will initiate her within the quest pattern, but in doing so, she is repeating a familiar code. Carla has run away from home before, humming “She’s leaving home, bye-bye” while “putting the note on the table and slipping out of the house at five o’clock in the morning” (32). Carla leaves with a stable-hand, rather than the “man from the motor trade” of the recalled Beatles song; nevertheless, her actions are not original, but rather replicate earlier narratives. The move from father to husband is, furthermore, repetitive and conservative. The journeys she and Clark initially undertake, “like tourists,” soon give way to stasis — “They were what people did before they understood the realities of their lives” (33) — and conclude with Carla’s reentry into a similarly repressive domestic structure. What Macpherson calls “Munro’s propensity to thwart escape” (104) is clearly evident, as Carla’s call to adventure resolves into “an awakening to limitation” (Rosowski 49).
In “Runaway,” Carla’s note to her mother makes claims for her elopement as a form of quest: “she had used the word authentic. I have always felt the need of a more authentic kind of life” (33), but this notion of “authenticity” is bound up with a liberal and individualistic belief in the authentic self that Carla cannot sustain. Leaving with Clark, she recalls how “[s]he saw him as the architect of the life ahead of them, herself as captive, her submission as both proper and exquisite” (32). Even in this propulsive action of “early morning flight” (33), Carla is peculiarly passive and inert, readily relinquishing her autonomy to a dominant other. When Carla’s later, frustrated departure from Clark is juxtaposed with memories of previously running away to be with him, Munro’s text becomes increasingly claustrophobic. Carla’s journey is cyclical, but without the defining moments of the battle or “the exaltation of the hero” that mark the quest (Frye, Anatomy 187). In “Runaway,” the female adventurer returns without triumph and capitulates to her domestic fate, abandoning the quest, which is destined to remain incomplete.

**Individual Heroes and Communal Journeys**

Carla’s first quest failed because of her lack of autonomy and individuation. With her second attempt, she comes much closer to success and finds herself “riding on this bus in the hope of recovering herself” (34). But for Carla, once again, the binding connection with a significant other undermines the quest. Carla suffers a failure of imagination, unable to envision herself in the role of solitary adventurer:

- She could not picture it. Herself riding on the subway or streetcar, caring for new horses, talking to new people, living among hordes of people every day who were not Clark.
- A life, a place, chosen for that specific reason – that it would not contain Clark. (33)

As she attempts to leave the familiar house and set out on the road to elsewhere, Carla struggles to enact the separation required to catalyze the quest. Macpherson points to the propensity of family ties to prohibit female journeying and suggests that the “recognition of responsibility is the most consistently apparent aspect of female escape that differentiates it from the escape of the male” (90). In “Runaway,” as Carla travels farther and farther away from Clark – representative here of the significant other in the life of the self – her thoughts remain with him and eventually draw her back to him, to the detriment of her hastily abandoned quest.

Incidentally, while Macpherson argues that social responsibility is uniquely persistent and binding for women, Kroetsch regards this same inhibition of individualism as a feature of the Canadian sensibility:

- In Canadian writing, and perhaps in Canadian life, there is an exceptional pressure placed on the individual and the self by the community or society.
The self is not in any way Romantic or privileged. The small town remains the ruling paradigm, with its laws of familiarity and conformity. Self and community almost fight to a draw. There seems to be little literature in Canada that tells of the small-town person going to the city – a tradition that is strong in European and American literature. . . . The pressure of community at its strongest – or worst – is towards erasure. (51)

In “Runaway,” Munro does envision her provincial protagonist attempting the big city, but this escape is quickly relinquished as the pull of home proves irresistible. Carla lacks the individuation that enables the hero to transcend society. Campbell describes the departure of the hero as a process of transference of “his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown” (58), but Carla is not prepared or able to enact this removal. Contemplating her future solitary life in Toronto, she asks herself: “But what would she care about? How would she know that she was alive?” (34). Unlike Grace in the accompanying story, “Passion,” for whom “the rights of those left behind were smoothly cancelled” (182), Carla cannot imagine a life lived independently of others. Without “dialogical relations” (Taylor 34) or a contextualizing community within which to find definition, “She would only walk around, and open her mouth and speak, and do this and do that. She would not really be there” (34).

Without significant others, Carla’s life becomes dislocated and loses meaning, and consequently, the liberal quest narrative holds no real attraction for her. Heller argues that a female quest that seeks resolution in marriage simply retreats to the domestic, familial patterns it had once hoped to transcend (11), and by this understanding, Carla’s quest is a failure. Christ, however, argues that this rejection of liberal individualism is what makes female quest powerfully different:

A woman’s spiritual quest includes moments of solitary contemplation, but it is strengthened by being shared. It involves asking basic questions:

Who am I? Why am I here? What is my place in the universe? (8)

According to Christ’s argument that female quests are not individual journeys, Carla’s recognition of her dependence on another person is not a failure of autonomy but a necessary acceptance of the function and significance of the other within the construction and definition of the self.

This basically communitarian perspective coincides with the arguments put forward by the Canadian political theorist Charles Taylor, who asserts, in contradiction to the informing liberal philosophy of the American wilderness quest, that “my discovering my own identity doesn’t mean that I work it out in isolation, but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internal, with others” (34). Taylor would seem to offer a defense of Carla’s return to Clark when he notes: “If some of the things I value most are accessible to me only in relation to the person I love, then she becomes part of my identity” (34). This would also accord with
Christ’s argument that female quests do not assert an authenticity discoverable only in isolation, but rather, best find expression within “a supportive community” (130).

It could be argued that Munro has always viewed her female questers through the lens of community. In “Chance,” Juliet’s solitary journey across Canada concludes with both the welcome of her lover and anticipation of the friendships and rivalries that her quest prompts. Ailsa Cox observes that, “Like the American writers she admires — Eudora Welty, Katherine Ann Porter, Willa Cather — Munro sees small-town life as the locus of change and continuity” (78). Similarly, Howells’s description of Munro’s stories as “complicated interwoven fragments, full of glimpses of parallel lives” (4) also differentiates Munro’s connective narratives from those of the solitary wonderer. This conjunction of community and self corresponds to the idea of spiritual quest both Christ and Groover outline.

In “Runaway,” the depicted “community” is a limited one, consisting primarily of Clark and secondarily of Sylvia and the clients and students of the horse stables. It consequently better fits Taylor’s description of “the intimate sphere” (rather than the public sphere): “Where we understand the formation of identity and the self as taking place in a continuing dialogue and struggle with significant others” (37), but it is nevertheless the locus of Carla’s self-definition and the means by which she patches together her relatively unstable sense of self. Without this social structure, Carla quickly finds herself without center or direction, and in contrast, Clark and the recognition7 that he represents, prove “irresistible” (43).

Within the quest narrative, leaving home in itself cannot be said to be a triumph; the return must necessarily be achieved in order for the quest to be successfully completed. As Campbell states: “When the hero-quest has been accomplished . . . the adventurer still must return with his life-transmuting trophy” (193). But in Munro’s story, despite the inevitability of the return, there is little vision of triumph. Munro’s protagonist indisputably does return, but she does so without the acquisition of either gold or “wealth in its ideal forms, power and wisdom” (Frye, Anatomy 193). Carla’s acceptance of her need for significant others accords with Christ’s reading of the female quest, and with a communitarian notion of a dialogic authenticity, but the return to Clark is tainted by the aspect of failure. It becomes a relinquishing, rather than a sharing of identity; a reabsorption into the unsatisfactory pre-quest structure. Like the turkey buzzards who seem to benefit from the newly temperate climate after Carla’s return, she too has come “back to rest in the familiar bare tree” (43).

“A Constant Low-lying Temptation”

“Runaway” documents a failed quest. Carla neither achieves authenticity in the wilderness nor returns triumphant from perilous adventures. The traditional quest narrative has — unsurprisingly — failed to sustain a female adventurer. In response to this, and despite her apparent skepticism about escaping known narrative structures,
Munro entertains the possibility of an alternative, female quest. In the briefly glimpsed network of female friendships that enable women’s movement in the text, Munro points to a supportive structure from within which a female quest might conceivably take place. Throughout “Runaway,” a potential alternative feminine narrative underlies the masculine pattern that inhibits female questing. When Sylvia needs to recuperate, she visits friends Maggie and Soraya in Greece; when Carla needs asylum, Ruth offers it; and Carla, acknowledging Sylvia’s help, asserts that escape is possible “if you’ve got a true friend” (26). These enabling female communities function in one way as the traditional aides to the quester – the helpful crones of Campbell’s study – but in the friendship connections that exist between the women, they suggest an inclusive framework that incorporates and embraces the quester, rather than merely functioning as incidental sources of support.

While offering an alternative potential structure for the female quest, Munro’s story, however, also resists this neat resolution, as Carla ultimately rejects the assistance and support Sylvia proffers. Indeed, throughout the story, the various elements that correspond so clearly with the quest narrative also work to undermine its structure. Carla’s quest, for example, was never simply the search for independence from a bullying husband that Sylvia had imagined, but was instead a rather childlike running away from a tangle of embarrassment and lies. Equally, the simplistic moral oppositions of the romance quest are manifest as significantly more complex and ambiguous crosscurrents in Munro’s story. Class, money, power, and desire all haunt the text. Sylvia’s inarticulate attraction to Carla, for example, redefines her role as aide and support, while Carla’s departure is partially fuelled by her wish to “live up to what, as far as she could see, were Mrs Jamieson’s – Sylvia’s – expectations” (31). Compelled to assert a liberty she does not particularly want, Carla’s departure crucially lacks the purpose and direction of any quest, whether traditional or feminist.

Although Carla’s quest inarguably fails in “Runaway,” the story does however contain the figure of a triumphant quester in Flora and her near-mystical return, which successfully defuses the potentially violent confrontation between Clark and Sylvia. Shared fear prompts the two characters to feel, in Sylvia’s words, “united in their humanity” (45), and for a brief moment, there exists the possibility that Sylvia and Clark, helper and hinderer of the female quest, could be united in a common goal. Macpherson argues that, in contrast to the texts of the 1970s and 1980s, male and female cooperation is increasingly an element of recent female quest narratives, with shared journeys becoming more common. However, she also notes that “there is an increasing emphasis on the pessimistic future, with the result that fewer escape options seem available” (150). Accordingly, Flora’s return offers the fleeting promise of connection, but her later probable slaughter at the hands of a vengeful Clark proves an ill omen for the female quester. As the only female who manages to achieve both a successful departure and a celebrated return, Flora, it seems, is thoroughly punished at the hands of patriarchal authority.
Nevertheless, the potent image of the triumphant female quester that Flora represents persists, and Munro’s text concludes on the possibility that the violence done to her will finally be enough to awaken Carla. Like the shadow of female community that exists obliquely in the text, “Runaway” also contains a foreshadowing of the journey or quest that is still to come. Thinking of the walk into the woods that might finally corroborate Flora’s murder, the story ends with the words: “The days passed and Carla didn’t go near that place. She held out against the temptation” (47). Flora, originally envisioned with a red apple in her mouth, signifies Carla’s resisted but heightening temptation, experienced as “a murderous needle somewhere in her lungs” (46), to undertake this exploratory expedition into the woods, representative of the quester’s necessary journey out into the unknown wilderness. This potential departure is anticipated as a solitary rather than a communal journey, but it is motivated and precipitated by a significant other, pointing to connections and relationships more than to individualism and separation. Flora’s return offers hope for the female quest, but significantly, her adventures remain undocumented, taking place on the periphery of the text as though unimaginable. Furthermore, coded as it is in terms of murder and retribution, the female journey — already proven difficult — is now revealed to be almost unbearably treacherous, requiring still further leaps of courage and will.

Finally, Heller notes that, at times, “woman’s quest may seem to be taking her in circles rather than in a linear direction. She may appear to be moving backward rather than forward, regressing instead of progressing” (33). This sense of fragmentation, discontinuity, and digression is, she argues, characteristic of female experience. By this understanding, the cycles of departure and return that Carla undergoes in “Runaway” are not necessarily narratives of failure, but can be read as the inevitable moves forward and back that plague a female journey, differentiating it from the direct trajectory outward into the unknown that characterizes the male quest. However, these often tortuous meanderings, typical of what Redekop describes as “the circling and apparently repetitive movement of Alice Munro’s fiction” (x), need not be understood as closed circuits, doomed to fruitless repetition, but can instead be read as spiralling paths, advancing slowly and circuitously, but advancing nonetheless.

Heller states that, even in the appearance of failure, a female protagonist may yet “become heroic,” that “[h]er awakening to heroic destiny may take the form of a recognition that she needs to leave . . . (31, emphasis in original). In “Runaway,” Carla has made two false starts and has not yet had the courage to, in Campbell’s terms, “answer the call”; she has not yet “become heroic.” But she has, nevertheless, made a move toward beginning the quest journey. In conceiving of its possibility, or even of the temptation of its possibility, she acknowledges that the questing role does exist for her, despite the many recognized obstacles to female quest. Eventually, some hybrid of the traditional masculine quest (solitary, moving outward) and the feminine quest (retaining connections to home and significant others) is anticipated. Munro continues to assert the necessity of attempting the quest, even when it
appears dangerous or impossible. It is, as Atwood might say, a peculiarly Canadian conclusion to the quest narrative. In “Runaway,” the quest, even the frustrated quest, has imbued its power, which is the limited but significant ability to imagine the journey still to come.

Liverpool John Moores University, UK
tolan@ljmu.ac.uk

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