

The Body of Shame:
Women's Embodied Shame in the Short Fiction
of Alice Munro and Lorrie Moore

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Abstract

This article addresses the intricate and complex nature of the shame affect as it is employed in a selection of short stories by Alice Munro and Lorrie Moore. Shame is often the central affect behind narrative construction and development. It formulates relationships and shapes women's physical and psychological identities across the individual, familial, and cultural phases of subjective trans/formation. While Munro's narratives scrutinize the wide range of shifting, ambiguous, contradictory, and embodied shame, Moore's stories make of shame an essential and vital element in a comic, postmodern approach to such issues as love, marriage, motherhood, identity, etc. Through their investigation of the complex dynamics and mechanics of shame, Munro and Moore demonstrate that shame and the social construct of femininity are unequivocally "imbricated," evidencing the instrumental role of shame in controlling and structuring female bodies and identities in modern societies.

Keywords: affect, body, female identity, narrative, shame, Alice Munro, Lorrie Moore

Introduction

Shame is a central human emotion explored in various fields mainly psychoanalysis, psychotherapy, psychology, and phenomenology. A “multidimensional, multilayered experience,” shame, according to psychologist Gershen Kaufman, is, first of all, “an individual phenomenon experienced in some form and to some degree by every person” (191). Perceived as the most vital and the most reflexive of affects, shame is both a psychological and a social experience, engaging in J. Brooks Bouson’s words, not only “the individual’s feelings of inferiority and inadequacy” in comparison to others but also the individual’s deep inner sense of “being flawed or defective or of having failed to meet the expectations of the ‘ideal self’” (208). Indeed, considered a “master emotion,” shame is intimately connected with our emotional failure to reach the other. If we experience the feeling of shame, Sara Ahmed contends, “it is because we have failed to approximate ‘an ideal’ that has been given to us through the practices of love” (106).

This article investigates the intricate and complex nature of the shame affect as it is employed in a selection of short fiction by two prominent short story writers: Alice Munro (1931-2024) and Lorrie Moore (b. 1957). In their fiction, both authors make their narratives an imaginative site brimming with a complicated embodied shame that reveals a deep sense of “the distressed apprehension of the self as inadequate or diminished” (Bartky 46). While Munro’s tales scrutinize the wide range of ambiguous, shifting, and contradictory shame – simultaneously “perceived and mysterious, felt and disavowed” – (De Falco and York 29), Moore’s narratives offer the reader vibrant tales of fragile tragedies, portraying female characters forced to acknowledge the absurdity and shamefulness of their own lives in the face of a humiliating, disrupting, and grotesque postmodern world.

My analysis is grounded in the theory of shame articulated by American psychologist Silvan Tomkins (1911-1991), whose work on affect has gained critical prominence since being edited and collected by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank as

Shame and Its Sisters (1995). Indeed, Tomkins's description and investigation of the affect of shame as a "complex and inherently uncomfortable emotional experience . . . of the self by the self" (136) represent a very significant tool for the examination of shame in women's literary productions, especially that his findings highlight the sense of "relationality" inherent to the feeling of shame, which he defines as "the incomplete reduction of interest or joy" (134). For Munro and Moore alike, the equivocal and contradictory perception of the affect of shame – as creative and destructive for the female subjectivities—reflects the intricacy of shame itself, which, according to Léon Würmser, is the sign of a "broken self" forced to acknowledge a discrepancy between its "ideal" and "real self" (169).

The first wave of affect theory, which centered around Tomkins, Brian Massumi, Antonio Damasio, and Kosofsky Sedgwick (among others) has aimed to move away from the "linguistic turn" of the mid-20th century, which insists on the primacy of language to understand the world, to a "new materialism," a "fluidifying" (Massumi) perspective characterized by the predominance of affects. For Massumi, and proponents of "the affect turn," the distinction between affect and emotion is a fundamental argument. In his book *Parables of the Virtual* (2002), Massumi brings about a model that overtly contrasts affect with emotion, claiming that they cannot be used as synonyms because they "follow different logics and pertain to different orders" (26). In his model, affect, contrary to emotion, is a term of indeterminacy. It is a moment of "unfocused, unformed, and unstructured potential" (27). As for emotion, it is intimately related to a "subjective content," which he describes as "the sociolinguistic fixing of a quality of experience which is defined as personal" (28). Correspondingly, Tomkins writes in *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness* that affects, like instincts and drives, are part of the intrinsic and instinctive biological apparatus of human beings and that our "affective complexity" is one of "the most distinctive features" of our "evolution and success as a species" (169).

Recently, however, shame studies have flourished in the field of literary criticism as scholars have started to study, explore, and investigate shame in novels, poetry, and drama. This critical trend highlights the centrality of literature to understanding affects and the great potential of associating psychoanalysis and literary criticism in the study of shame. In *Scenes of Shame: Psychoanalysis, Shame and Writing*, co-editors Joseph Adamson and Hilary Clark analyze the dialectic relationship between the affect of shame and the writing/reading process. They affirm that one of the most distinctive functions of literature is “to provide a privileged place of redress, a sphere of expression where emotional life can be explored and refined in ways that are discouraged elsewhere” (6). This implies that creative writers can stimulate, clarify, and enrich our perception of human emotions since the fictional world of novels, short stories, and poems offers “a wealth of metaphors and images” for investigating and understanding shame and *affective* reality in general (4).

Convinced that shame has an imperative effect on the complex psychodynamics of literary works, many scholars, theorists, critics, and psychologists such as Würmser in *The Mask of Shame*, Stephen Ahern in *Affect Theory and Literary Critical Practice: A Feel for the Text*, and Tomkins in *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness* use literary art to support their discoveries in the study of shame. Their works display remarkable eagerness “to turn to the imaginative world of literature for evidence of compelling psychological reality” (Adamson and Clark 1). Thus, in their various writings, Massumi, Robyn Warhol, Tomkins, Sedgwick, Ahern, Ngai, Donald Wehrs and Thomas Blake, Würmser, to name a few, show deep interest in “how texts represent, reflect on, enact, and elicit affect” (Wehrs and Blake 1). In this sense, interpretation becomes, for them, “a question of contagious affects and dynamic encounters between texts and readers” (Wehrs and Blake 2). More significantly, Sedgwick, a founding thinker on affect in the study of literature, proposes the cultivation of “reparative reading that is loving, nurturing, and productive” (2-6). Hence, the “affect/text dynamics” comes to “bear on emotions, cognition, aesthetics, and

culture's relation to ethics and politics" (Wehrs and Blake 2). Ahern has much of the same reflection when he refers to what he calls "a feel for the text," which he identifies as "serious and academic concerns and insights" about literature intended "to integrate lines of theory" not always read together, accounting, in this way, for "the *affective intensities*" that move and interact through texts and readers (1; emphasis added).

The Shame of Being a Woman in Alice Munro's Fiction

Historically speaking, shame has been conventionally associated with femininity. Several feminist critics have argued that shame can be regarded as an affect with specific resonances for women who endure and struggle against the stifling patriarchal politics of shame and submission. For instance, theorizing that women are "more shame-prone than men" to experience shame, feminist philosopher Sandra Bartky interrogates this association between shame and gender: "What patterns of mood and feeling . . . tend to characterize women more than men? Here are some candidates: shame; guilt . . .; the blissful loss of self in the sense of merger with another" (83). Recently, however, many feminist critics have scrutinized contemporary women writers' engagements with shame. They demonstrate how these authors expose and analyze women's feelings of 'embodied shame' while "contesting certain norms or cultural imperatives" (Bouson 4). In literature, particularly in women's fiction, the link between femininity and shame persists across a broad variety of cultural contexts since writing shame unravels "the complex triangulation of shame, gender and writing" (Mitchell 12). Indeed, by representing in narrative what is considered by society to be shameful, many female fiction writers, as Erica L. Johnson and Patricia Moran assert, "raise important questions regarding cultural values, the social reception of their works and the limits of the representation of intimacy" (61). In the same framework, Jennifer C. Manion disregards the entrenched cultural view that considers shame a quintessentially female/feminine psychological trait.

Focusing on shame in her examination of gender and moral agency, Manion argues that “we often regard a tendency to feel shame as indicating vulnerability to and powerlessness in response to negative judgments others make of us” (22-23).

During the past decades, and in a response to the linguistic models of subjectivity in structuralism and post-structuralism, the feminist affect theory placed the body (and not language) at the center-stage of subjectivity. The body becomes, in Marta Figlerowicz’s words, a site for “rethinking theoretical concerns ranging from dualisms of the mind and the body to critiques of identity politics and practices of critical reading” (1). Ahmed and Jackie Tracey summarize this point in the introduction to *Thinking Through the Skin* (2001) when they assert that “the practices of thinking are not separated from the realm of the body but are implicated in the passion, emotions and materiality that are associated with lived embodiment” (3). Marianne Liljestrom and Susanna Paasonen reproduce the same line of thought as they see affects as “physiological processes” or “forces irreducible to the narratives of purpose and intentionality” (4-6). In their view, these affective intensities emphasize “the carnal ways of being in, experiencing, and understanding the world” (1). Like Massumi, Anu Koivunen insists on the significant role the body plays in this “rehabilitation and rediscovery of embodied subjectivity” that also laid the “cross-disciplinary ground for a new interest in emotions” (13). Since it cannot be captured in language, shame, as Massumi explains, is a remarkable human affect “irreducibly bodily and autonomic,” an “*intensity*” that is disconnected from “meaningful sequencing, from narration” (28). This is the central idea of the present section that seeks to explore and elaborate the notion of “embodied shame” in Munro’s short stories, particularly her collection *Runaway*, published in 2004. In this regard, the shame theory, as discussed in the previous section, provides a particularly useful lens through which to read Munro’s short fiction.

Canadian writer Munro (1931-2024) is widely regarded as one of the world’s most distinguished writers of short fiction in English. Because her narratives are “filtered” through the

perception and consciousness of her protagonists, she is often described as a master of the mystery that resides in the human heart and the human imagination. Throughout her fiction, connections between “negative affects” such as shame, disgust, regret, guilt and “negative, cruel, even homicidal actions” are often imparted in “discomforting detail” (De Falco and York 52). From the beginning of her writing career, Munro was deeply interested in female lives (and bodies) that fail to fit the social frame and the societal norms. Trying to come to terms with the world and its perceived difficulties, many of her central characters, as Robert Fulford writes, “cherish and yet strain against family ties, testing the limits of their world, sometimes defying their expectations about love and life” (7). That is why Munro’s fiction makes of the affect of shame an embodied experience, in which the female body often figures as the site of resistance and/or subjugation.

Undoubtedly, the female body “with its history as an object of social control, expectation, and manipulation” (Johnson and Moran 12), is central to understanding the gendered orientation and construction of shame. Indeed, women have long been regarded as embodiments of shame in most cultures, and, as a result, “the female socialization process” can be perceived as “a prolonged immersion in shame” (Bouson 2). From this perspective, the body has gained significance as a focal point for contemplation and reflection in contemporary feminist theory, which is highly concerned with “processes, practices, sensations and affects” that move “through bodies” in manners that are hard “to see, understand, and investigate” (Blackman 18). In our analysis of Munro’s fiction, we are aware that the personal, social, and cultural dynamics surrounding shame represent important implications in our perception and interpretation of the character’s journey through shame. As a matter of fact, many of the tales in *Runaway* (and in other works by Munro) are pervaded by duplications and mysterious affects, most prominently, a seductively unbearable shame.

While shame about the body is a cultural inheritance, Munro’s powerful articulation of women’s shame in her fictional

works, particularly in *Runaway*, is highly significant and symbolic. Her narratives clearly exemplify Ahmed's conception of shame as "an intense and painful sensation . . . , a self-feeling that is felt *by* and *on* the body"(103). Therefore, shame is context-bound since it carries a biography of the body that is specific to the individual and the cultural context from which the individual originates. This multi-dimensionality clearly reflects the nature of the affect of shame, which, according to many writers, plays the role of "a protective layer for bodily experiences to guard physical and psychic boundaries and protect their contours" (Bouson 2).

In a memorable passage in Munro's second book, *Lives of Girls and Women*, shame is depicted and perceived as women's "pervasive affective attunement to the social environment" (Bartky 85). It is portrayed as an all-encompassing affect that "fills up the self—becomes what the self is about" (Ahmed 105). Thus, the female protagonist, Del Jordan, is depicted as profoundly and overwhelmingly shame-driven due to her realization that her body is the source of her anxiety, vulnerability, and ignominy: "To be made of flesh is humiliation," Jordan remarks, "to be made of flesh is to be well-schooled in the abjections and humiliations of embodiment such as anorexia, bulimia, crippled and misshapen bodies, aging, black skin, ugliness, dirt" (*Lives of Girls and Women* 62). Obviously, "the individuation of shame," as Ahmed maintains, can be linked precisely to "the inter-corporeality and sociality of shame experiences" (105). In effect, behind Del's sense of the clean and proper social body is her intense shame, a "horrifying awareness of the obscene humiliations and abjections of embodiment and the utter 'helplessness' of the human flesh" (*Lives of Girls and Women* 65).

Shame seems to be the biggest impediment that Munro's characters must constantly cope with. Indeed, in almost all the stories in *Runaway*, Munro makes of shame a vital element in her exploration of the disillusionment that accompanies women's search for love, intimacy, marriage, motherhood, happiness, and an authentic sense of identity. Margaret Atwood cogently describes Munro as the preeminent writer of shame: "I can think of no other

writer who returns to the emotion of shame so frequently and meticulously as Munro" (99). Markedly, her fictional world is inhabited by women who endure and struggle with shame, humiliation, neglect, disenchantment, or otherwise, they seem to be forced into self-effacement because of their passivity or their ostensibly disorderly natures in the face of the suppressive patriarchal scripts. The reader of Munro's *Runaway* is drawn into a world of jarring hopes, frustrated desires, fantasies as well as inexplicable and ambiguous shame, guilt, regret, and forgiveness. Munro once said in an interview that "[T]he complexity of things – the things within things – just seems to be endless. I mean nothing is easy, nothing is simple" (Quinn).

Even more relevant, Munro sees shame as an inevitable component of this complex life where her dreadfully isolated women lead an anxiously ordinary existence. Mostly they are women facing critical, sometimes unforeseen, and frightful, choices. Yet, as Fiona Tolan asserts in her analysis of Munro's *Runaway*, "clearly recognizable patterns" unify almost all of her fiction: "the repeated description of the figure of the escaper who undertakes or contemplates a necessary journey" (261). Thus, in these stories flight or abandonment is either undertaken, with varying success, or anticipated by women striving to overcome or flee their provincial confinement, always paying a hard price in indignities, humiliation, and defeats. Furthermore, the female characters in Munro's *Runaway*, grapple with the risk of complex emotionality, the burden of "stunning responsibility" (*Runaway* 56), and the irresistible surge of affect that can, at its most extreme, produce cruel and complex indulgences of desire and "ugly feelings" such as disgust, shame, and repulsion (Ngai).

The principal character in "Runaway," the first story, from which the collection takes its title, is a young woman called Carla, trapped in a relationship with an irritable, rather threatening husband named Clark. In this narrative, shame plays a vital role in both the character's life and the story's plot and meaning. Inhabiting a remote and isolated village in Ontario, Carla (like many other female characters in Munro's fiction) is struggling

against the claustrophobia and constrictions of small-town life, where nothing good or interesting happens. "In small towns . . . you have no privacy at all," Munro told Alice Quinn in an interview in 1990. "You have a role, a character, but one that other people have made up for you. Other people have already made your self" (Albertazzi 9). Indeed, as Johnson argues, Carla's shame seems to be "predicated on the Other's estimation of one's self," or the merging of the other into one's self. As such, her sense of shame tends to strike at her "most vulnerable sense of identity" (Johnson 90). Having no job, no children or friends, Carla's feeling of shame is played within the psychological and emotional dimension of space. This experience appears to be projected onto her stubborn and persistent obsession with her miserable domestic space, the "trailer," the barn, the room, and the furniture. She is described in her futile habit of counting and staring at the patterns of the debilitated carpet "which was the same in every room" and which her husband refuses to change. Its patterns of "dark brown and rust and tan squiggles and shapes arranged in the same way, in each square" (*Runaway* 8) are clear reflections of her own life: dull, dark, monotonous, baffling, and shameful.

No wonder that Carla is portrayed as a shame-stricken woman with no free will or personal life. Throughout the narrative, she is depicted in her inability to see herself clearly or control her choices and decisions, or even to voice her desires and longings. However, her neighbor (an educated woman named Sylvia) sees in her a woman "so fresh and full of health" and "a calm, bright spirit" (21). She, therefore, decides to help her run away from her rude husband and depressing milieu. She gives her money, clothes, and the address of one of her friends who lives in Toronto. At the beginning Carla thinks that this decision to escape "is the only self-respecting thing that she could do" (31). In fact, Carla is twice a runaway. When she was eighteen and college-bound, she ran off to marry Clark against her parents' wishes. At that time, she was young, shame free, and thrilled with her romantic adventure that filled her with "giddy delight" in her pursuit of a "more authentic kind of life" (31). At that time, she was impressed by Clark's good looks,

his job, and “everything about him that ignored her.” Ironically enough, she saw him as “the architect of the life ahead of them,” herself as “captive,” her obedience both “proper and exquisite” (32). And now, she runs away a second time—this time from Clark and from her miserable life with him. She is enthusiastic about her escapade and has no sense of fear or shame. On the contrary, she “felt herself capable of an unaccustomed confidence, even a mature sense of humor” (31). Quite unexpectedly and surprisingly, Carla’s “project” to leave her husband and start over again collapses midway. Her dream of self-determination and autonomy is self-aborted. While she is sitting on the bus on her way to Toronto, she startlingly realizes, with a sudden and obscure sense of shame, that she cannot lead a life without her husband as she still defines herself entirely in terms of Clark. She feels suddenly disturbed by his centrality to her existence: “While she was running away from him – now – Clark still kept his place in her life. But when she was finished running away, when she just went on, what would she put in his place? What else – who else – could ever be so vivid a challenge?” (34).

Significantly, “Runaway” offers a pertinent example of what Teresa Brennan calls “affective communication” (14). As many affect scholars agree, “the transmission of affect,” whether it is grief, anxiety, shame, or anger, is social or psychological in origin. Additionally, Carla’s shame illustrates the quintessential features of affects which, according to Massumi, “precede emotional states,” and they are “like forces, prior to intentions, autonomic, pre-subjective, visceral, *intensities* that move us” (81). But the transmission of affect is also responsible for bodily changes. Hence, “in peril of her life,” the female protagonist is seized by a terrible shame that takes hold of both her body and soul. She “pulled her huge body, her iron limbs, forward” (35). She stumbles, she staggers, and she cries out, “Let me off!” (35). She gets off the bus in the middle of the journey and calls her husband from a phone box: “Come and get me. Please come and get me” (35).

Contrary to the common view that considers bodies as closed physiological and biological systems, bodies, in Blackman’s

words, are open entities “participating in the flow or passage of affect.” Bodies, she adds, are characterized more by “mutual connection than boundary and constraint” (2). In this sense, we can recall Elizabeth Grosz’s discussion of the theory of embodied shame, which proves relevant to Carla’s case. Grosz argues that one’s “psychical life history is written on and worn” by the body, just as, in turn, “the psyche bears the history of the lived body, its chance encounters, its punctures, transformations and extensions” (270). Henceforth, as Carla strives to negotiate her own sense of identity and subjectivity with “her seesaw misery with Clark” (16), she begins to cultivate a deep, multilayered, and “somatically marked” shame, which her brain translates into a mysterious psychosomatic experience that gives rise to spontaneous “bodily articulated emotions” (Damasio 127). Quite remarkably, Carla’s abortive attempt to escape her marital life and the ensuing feeling of shame are expressed in purely corporeal and visceral terms: “It was as if she had a murderous needle somewhere in her lungs, and by breathing carefully, she could avoid feeling it. But every once in a while she had to take a deep breath, and it was still there” (46). This “objective correlative” (T. S. Eliot), or the image of “the needle in the lungs” is connotative of the embodied shame, which stands as a central component and motif in this story’s narrative plot, style, theme, and construction.

Unmistakably, this story illustrates the idea that failure reflects the extent of our possibility. It mirrors our inability to grow and develop with no dependence on others. As such, failure becomes a measure of ineptitude, and therefore a central impetus to “embodied female shame,” which Bouson defines as “the shame about the self and body” that arises from the trauma of “flawed or offensive parenting or relationships and various forms of sexual, racial, or social vilification of females in our culture” (2). Through Carla’s narrative, Munro displays before us the “skid” (Munro’s term for the unpredictable twists and distortions of life) and mysterious unexpectedness of life in which failure seems instrumental in creating forceful scenes of shame. In fact, Munro indicates that she wants her stories to give the reader “intense, but

not connected, moments of experience” because that is how she sees life, “as fragments rather than as a continuum” (Schellinger 1072). Therefore, Carla, like so many of Munro’s protagonists, who break out of unhappy marriages or unsuccessful relations in search of love and fulfillment, has failed to achieve that “grandiose ambition” (Atwood 121) of leaving husband and house and all material possessions in the hope of making a life that could be lived without hypocrisy and shame. Instead, Carla feels the “exquisite shame” (*Runaway* 42) that a woman feels in the face of defeat, failure, and unhappiness.

But the idea that shame shapes and transforms female identity applies to many of Munro’s short stories. “Passion,” a disturbing tale in *Runaway*, draws our attention to the inextricable entanglement of bodies, affects, identity and ethics in Munro’s work. It begins with Grace, a woman in her fifties, revisiting a scene of past experience, a remarkable episode of identity crisis from her youth. Grace is looking for the Traverses’ summer house in the Ottawa Valley (she had not been there for over thirty years) a place that reminds her of a drastic turning point in her existence – her life-changing decision when she runs away with her fiancé’s half-brother, Neil – just a few days before her marriage. In this context, we can refer to several shame theorists who argue that shame challenges us to return to the scene of our most shameful moments in the hope that, through the reconfiguration of those “scenes of shame,” we might eventually regain our sense of self. Those “moments of interruption” are often fundamental in structuring our life choices and, consequently, serve as the groundwork for the sense we have of ourselves since “in interrupting identification, shame, too, makes identity” (Sedgwick 36). Thus, though Grace unrepentantly and shamelessly chooses a transient moment of freedom over the security of a projected marriage, she cannot escape from the steps of fate which determine her destiny. “Old confusions or obligations” (*Runaway* 180), together with an equivocal sense of shame, draw her back, after many years, to the site of her betrayal, pointing to her continuing entanglement in the past. Undeniably, Grace’s undeclared feeling

of guilt and shame seems to lie like an extra invisible layer under the story. Her personality, her ambitions, the events of that “fateful day,” her ensuing ambivalent feeling of delight and shame, are all conveyed in flashbacks, suggestions, and allusions, which are Munro’s major tools for evoking her character’s past.

Grace’s story exemplifies what Sedgwick calls the “double movement” that shame often makes “toward painful individuation,” such as isolation, reclusion, paranoia, on the one hand, and “toward uncontrollable relationality” (37), on the other hand. This implies that the character’s sense of shame and her instinctual desire to get related to the others create a fundamental tension that represents one of the persistent features of shame in Munro’s fiction. In this story, Munro has a firm grasp on what Michael Cunningham describes as “the complicated interplay between our will, our desires, and the outside forces over which we have almost no control” (39). In such a narrative, Munro’s interest seems to lie beyond the here and now as she delves into the inexplicable, the invisible, and the unknown, achieving, in this way, a “fourth dimension through which she reveals the past and present and future” (Simonds 35). Thus, reflecting on the “fortuitous meeting,” the “muted but powerful signals,” the nearly “silent flight,” Grace surrenders, seeing herself “more or less as a captive. . . . flesh nothing now but a stream of desire” (183). At that age and time, she was oblivious of any sense of responsibility towards the others: “Describing this passage, this change in her life, later on, Grace might say—she did say—that it was as if a gate had clanged shut behind her. But at the time there was no clang—acquiescence simply ripped through her, the rights of those left behind were smoothly cancelled” (*Runaway* 182).

Grace’s escapade for one wild night with the reckless, alcoholic, but glamorous half-brother of the man she was expected to marry represents for her, as a young woman, a romantic, exhilarating adventure free of fear or shame. At that time, she was only twenty-three, dreaming of a glowing love story, and believing that romance should necessarily and absolutely involve powerful passion. Now, Grace remembers her erotic and illicit adventure and

reveals the bewildering and intricately paradoxical nature of her feelings. And what she remembers now “is hardly distinguishable from her fantasies” at that time of “what sexual life should be like” (183).

Other terms that incorporate shame include disappointment, dashed expectations, being diminished, rejected, and/ or insulted. Unsurprisingly, Munro’s fictional world is replete with graphic images of crashed dreams, of shameful exposure and helplessness in which the narrators and protagonists watch and survey their own shame. Again, “Passion” offers a pertinent example since Munro, as Atwood contends, “has staked a major claim to shame – especially to female shame, very often connected with bodies and sex, but also with grandiose ambitions considered unsuitable for girls” (112). Although readers cannot observe Grace’s manifestations of shame, they can nevertheless sense shame’s ambivalent presence, its rewards and demands, a shame that challenges principles of completeness and authenticity. In fact, considered by Manion as “a wound to one’s self-esteem,” and “a self-reflective emotion” of negative global assessment, shame involves “a painful, sudden awareness of the self as less good than hoped for and expected” (21). Thus, although Grace’s adventure with the man is ostensibly described as an exhilarating venture that gives her “the illusion of constant speed, perfect flight – not frantic but miraculous, serene” (*Runaway* 183), we can feel that, underlying its wildly romantic rhythm, Grace’s story is, essentially, a representation of her disturbed identity and the devastating sense of physical humiliation, emotional disorder, and social inadequacy.

The story’s closure is a disturbing manifestation of the perplexing and paradoxical nature of Grace’s feeling of shame. The narrative concludes as Grace stands alone, in the middle of nowhere, immersed in darkness, shame, and “terrific isolation” (*Runaway* 190). She is confronted with the stubborn, stark truth: “This rock-bottom truth. This lack of hope – genuine, reasonable, and everlasting” (*Runaway* 192). Interestingly, this poignant scene of shame is further imparted in a highly suggestive style and allusive language pervaded with insistent, repetitive, short, and

monosyllabic terms that evoke a sense of urgency, distress, and premonition: "What she had seen was final. As if she was at the edge of a *flat dark* body of *water* that stretched on and on. *Cold, level water*. Looking out at such *dark, cold, level water* and knowing it was all there was" (*Runaway* 193; emphasis added). Adjectives such as "dark," "cold," and "flat," as they correlate with the word "water," echo a sense of liquefied and obscure emptiness, unfathomable emotional void, stasis, and death.

Although the battle fought in this story seems idiosyncratic, ambiguous, and subtle, it lucidly pinpoints that Grace's shame and self-revelation are imparted in a purely psychological sequence, an imaginative subjective epiphany that happens wholly inside her head, as part of this double narrative layer. Like Carla in "Runaway," Grace's emotional trauma is played out in this "psychic scape" which offers insight into the complexities and the paradoxes of female consciousness, affects, and relationships. By the end of that long disturbing night, Neil drives Grace home, walks her to the door, and thanks her for the adventure and company. In the morning, she hears about the accident. Neil commits suicide by driving into a bridge. On the same day, Grace receives a letter from her fiancé. Shocked by his brother's and fiancé's daring adventure, he craves an explanation: "*Just say he made you do it. Just say you didn't want to.*" He wants to know the truth. She does not have to deal with her fiancé "face-to-face." She writes back just five words. "*I did want to go.*" She was going "to add *I'm sorry* but stopped herself" (194; emphasis added).

Finally, we may assume that all the scenes of shame that Grace experiences, lives, remembers and revisits, prove to be constructive and formative. In the last page of the story, the narrator brings up the past and we are presented with Grace (after that incident) making new decisions and choices about her future. She is going to change her life; to study, to find a job, to start a new life by herself. Thus, contrary to Clara's experience of unconstructive shame, Grace's journey to a subjective reawakening, personal freedom, and self-knowledge is, in many respects, a journey through shame.

We cannot conclude this section about Munro without referring to a posthumous incident that casts a stark light on the author's personal life. In July 2024, almost two months after Munro's death, her estranged daughter Andrea Skinner disclosed in an essay in the *Toronto Star*, that in 1976, at the age of nine, she was sexually abused by her stepfather, Gerald Fremlin, Munro's second husband. When informed of the abuse over a decade later, Munro "chose to stay with, and protect, my abuser." This revelation, as Megan Nolan observes in her article "Alice Munro and the Shame of Silence" complicates the legacy of a Nobel Prize-winning author celebrated as a "source of national pride" in Canada. Munro's own words in her 2012 collection *Dear Life* resonate hauntingly: "We say of some things that they can't be forgiven, or that we will never forgive ourselves. But we do – we do it all the time" (171). These revelations invite a reconsideration of Munro's constant focus on raw emotional depths, suggesting that her nuanced portrayals of shame and silence may stem from a profoundly personal engagement with these themes.

Lorrie Moore or the Shame of "misspent life"

Shame about the self and body remains an important thematic and artistic preoccupation for many contemporary women writers with whom affective literary investment in the study of shame has acquired quite a remarkable critical ground. Because gender, as Nancy J. Chodorow assumes, is conceived as "a personal and cultural construction" and because it can be "intertwined with other issues of selfhood and feeling," emotions, such as envy, rage, anger, shame, or disgust contribute to personal gender (530). Furthermore, Chodorow's observation that shame seems "central to many women's feelings and fantasies" about motherhood, self, identity, and gender, is quite evident in Munro's and Moore's fiction. In other words, this gender-specific perception of identity can be expanded to the consideration that "shame and disgust" often impregnate "women's sense of bodily self" (Chodorow 521). Accordingly, much of what women write is a testimony of "how

idiosyncratically constructed and emotionally shaped a sense of gendered self is” (Chodorow 529). However, whereas Munro shows a kind of ambivalence, even revulsion, about the flesh of the female body caused by an internalized cultural and social misogyny, and stimulated by women’s feelings of self-loathing and humiliation, Moore seems to demonstrate that such feelings are inflicted upon women by other external and global forces that are often beyond women’s ability to understand or control.

Tomkins’s idea that shame originates from the profound experience of being not wanted has taken root in psychology. In fact, this feeling of being both cast out and unaccepted “undermines one’s ability to fit into one’s own community” (Adamson and Clark 12). American short story writer Moore confirms this idea. Renowned for her incisive narratives imbued with dark humor and linguistic deftness, contemporary American novelist Moore primarily portrays educated, middle-class white women navigating existential crises, professional stagnation, health challenges, deteriorating relationships, or physical and/or intellectual isolation. In her collection *Birds of America* (1998), the focus of the present analysis, Moore’s stories make of shame a central element in her acerbic examination of postmodern female issues related to love, marriage, motherhood, subjectivity, and a full array of female/feminine experiences. Her narratives are often saturated with tones of cynicism and witticism, which suggest an underlying theme of sadness. The lack of conclusion in most of her fiction is connected to a lack of exciting intrigues, a refusal to write of the great themes of man’s destiny. Moreover, shamed and grotesque bodies, as well as the strained identities of female subjects who feel physically unattractive, sick, flawed, or undesirable are recurrent concerns in her narratives. Indeed, telling the story of the female body-or-self-in-shame is not an easy task, especially in the context of a late 20th-century American culture. In this sense, shame, as Kaufman argues, “is important because no other affect is more disturbing to the self, none more central for the sense of identity” (viii).

Moore foregrounds in her short story cycle a complex process of women's constant and persistent struggle to explore and resist social and psychological boundaries that they and others have established. Throughout her works, women are often at odds with the roles they are assigned and the rules they have to comply with in everyday life. They are also uncomfortable with the expectations of families, partners, and friends, and even with their names, the most obvious indicator of their identities. "Willing," the first story in *Birds of America*, opens with a second-rate actress (Sidra) retreating into severe depression. "Pushing forty," Sidra finds that she has lost her place in Hollywood and that she has never been "taken seriously" (3). The fake and unauthentic life of this actress is revealed in a particular filming scene in the studio when she realizes, with both shock and shame that her life "had taken on the shape of a terrible mistake" (6). The scene is construed in a highly ironical and grotesque language as the camera films "a naked hip not her own," and Sidra "looked away" with shame. "At times," we are told, "she felt bad that it *wasn't* her hip" (5). Through this grotesque bodily image, Moore displays her character's bitter disillusionment about her professional life as she recognizes the emptiness and fakeness of a world into which she no longer fits. It is a highly sophisticated cinematic world built upon the ephemeral glory of the body and a precarious fame. Significantly, a firm connection is established between Sidra's experiences of her body as commercialized, fragmented, exposed—and ultimately valueless in the film industry—and her sense of the "failure and flaws" that culminate in her acerbic realization by the end that she "had made too little of her life," and that "its loneliness shamed her like a crime" (*Birds* 17).

After this scene, Sidra's life takes a new dramatic turn as the narrative proceeds hastily: "And so she left Hollywood. Phoned her agent and apologized. Went home to Chicago, rented a room by the week . . . , drank sherry, and grew a little plump" (5). Sidra's new chosen life brims with passivity, stagnation and meaninglessness: "She let her life get dull – dull" (5). Later, when she gets involved with a mechanic, her shame acquires ontological

dimensions. She reflects on her choices with repulsion and indignation: "She hated, hated, hated her life. Perhaps she had always hated it" (*Birds* 24). Moore gives much attention to this woman's emotional and psychic vulnerability and to the small and large devastations of life. Her writing strikes the reader with acute metaphors that capture the essence of the woman's shame and self-destructive tendencies: "There were small dark pits of annihilation she discovered in her heart, in the loosening fist of it, and she threw herself into them, falling" (*Birds* 13). This echoes Donald Nathanson's view that failure, at any age "tells us something about our size, our skill, and our dependence on others. It is a measure of incompetence, and therefore a major stimulus to shame" (180).

Like Munro, Moore is concerned with the fractured identities of her female protagonists who try to balance an increasing number of demanding responsibilities while attempting to avoid being overcome by shame, guilt, and failure. While Munro's women are consumed by "grandiose ambitions" (Atwood 111) that fail to materialize, Moore's women are haunted by an incessant dread of failure, or worse, a sense of guilt. Essentially, this "fear of misspent life" (*Birds* 89) causes a perpetual pain for Moore's main characters who strive to achieve a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment with their spouses, colleagues, and family that would, hopefully, make life better through harmonious relationships. However, they all undergo very hard moments of self-judgment, self-esteem, or self-evaluation, which all lead to an obscure feeling of despondency and shame. "It is like having a degree in failure" (*Birds* 149) one character says. In fact, part of the effectiveness of Moore's writing style lies with her detailed, nuanced, and witty observation of the human condition through her characters and descriptions. A pervasive irony runs through most of her stories, which manage to be both heartfelt and humorous at the same time. The techniques of colloquial dialogue, repetition, wordplay, and attention to tiny details are used in her stories to cover the same themes: the constant search for love and the impossibility of communication and hope.

Moore's proficiency in delineating and amplifying gaps—highlighting the estrangement not only among individuals but also between a character and her own affective states—renders her protagonists “orphaned observers of their own shame, and their painful experiences” (Boudidah 299). This is exemplified in one of Moore's darker narratives, “Community Life,” which explores the psychological disintegration of Olena, a young Transylvanian immigrant relocated to a U.S. college town. The protagonist's name, Olena – a linguistic nod to “alone” – resists her Romanian parents' attempts to assimilation by renaming her “Nell,” while she futilely endeavors to forge an autonomous selfhood. The narrative portrays an alienated woman, profoundly uncomfortable within her milieu, “searching for a place in a ‘community’ from which she feels physically, emotionally, or creatively exiled” (Weekes 118). Subsequently, the narrative unveils a clear source of Olena's profound alienation and shame: her discovery of her partner's infidelity. This betrayal intensifies the unbridgeable chasm between Olena and her boyfriend, culminating in a confrontation after which he abandons her. In that moment, “the look that passed quickly over his face told her this: she wasn't pretty enough” (*Birds* 74). Despite her efforts, Olena fails to adapt to the American communal norms or attain a sense of psychic cohesion. Her plight transcends mere romantic disappointment or solitude, encompassing the harrowing emotional weight of fragmentation and existential void, perpetually cognizant that “there was something missing. Something wasn't happening to her” (*Birds* 65). Ultimately, positioned as an outsider within the hegemonic and exclusionary American paradigm of “community life,” Olena experiences a sense of annihilation and radical uprootedness in a hostile environment where “everything seemed tragic and ridiculous and unable to stop” (*Birds* 60). Her shame escalates to absurd and parodic dimensions as she descends into paranoia and reclusion, “afraid of going out . . . the fear gripping her face, as if people knew she was a foreigner and a fool” (*Birds* 69).

The shame of the body has also taken a toll upon Olena's deteriorating life. During a harrowing scene that occurs in the

hospital when she has a visit for a pelvic examination, the doctor asks Olena to allow a class of seven medical students to be with him during the examination. This experience causes her dreadful psychological and physical anguish. As the doctor inserts the plastic speculum and the students start to touch her, Olena “went a little blind” (*Birds* 76). She has suddenly been swept by an outrageous feeling of shame that turns into a traumatic experience of psychic and physical suffering: “One by one, the hands of the students, with rubber gloves, entered her, or pressed on her abdomen, felt hungrily, innocently, for something to learn from her, in her” (76). Once at home, her feeling of embodied shame, void, and humiliation grows stronger and heavier as it is translated in and through a frightening sense of shame about/of her body. This is especially noticeable in a particularly gloomy scene rendered in obscure, grotesque, but accurate visceral metaphor, which heightens the woman’s throbbing experience of physical estrangement and psychic collapse: Olena “felt separate from her body, felt herself dragging it up the stairs like a big handbag, its leathery hollowness something you could cut up and give away or stick things in” (77).

In a related framework, women characters in other stories of *Birds of America* are depicted as victims of physical and mental diseases, mainly cancer and depression. In such narratives, the woman’s sick, decayed, and dying body plays a crucial role in the generation and manifestation of shame. An outstanding story, titled “Real Estate,” is a terrifying treatment of the disruptive consequences of cancer on the female body. Ruth, the central character, suffers from lung cancer. As a result, she feels locked in the prison house of the body, cut off from healthy and normal interactions. This feeling of corporeal inadequacy and physical impotence is imparted as an experience of intense embodied shame. Indeed, as she looks at the other people in the street, the terminally ill woman secretly and bitterly envies their healthiness and liberty. With an ambiguous sense of shame, Ruth compares the healthy and sound bodies of the passersby with her own crumbling body: “The healthy, the feeling well . . . were niftily in their bodies. They were

not only out of the range of sympathy; they were out of the range of mere imagining. . . . But the sick were sick. They were not in charge. They had lost their place at the top of the food chain" (202). In such moments of psychological trauma, Ruth remembers her body's previous state of health and fertility and ponders the alarming process of her lethal disease: "It seemed her body, so mysterious and apart from her, could only produce illness. Though once, of course, it had produced Mitzy. How had it done that? Mitzy was the only good thing her body had ever been able to grow" (*Birds* 203).

Moore's emphasis on remembering, on recreating the past through memories, reminds us of Munro's storytelling techniques. In fact, what Moore suggests in her article about Munro's work is applicable to her own stories: "Memory and passion," Moore states, "seem to re-order life and to cause events to fall meaningfully out of sequence in the mind" ("Leave Them" 19). Hence, in many stories in *Birds of America*, time does not progress in linear fashion but rather circles continually and repetitively. It spirals around a series of themes and seminal events that cannot be recaptured. For example, in "The Jewish Hunter," a dark romance by turns cynical and guileless, Moore treats the notion of time – along with forgetting and remembering – and its contribution to the intensification of the protagonist's sense of abjection, shame, and anxiety: "And her restlessness would ripple, double, a flavor of something cold. . . . She would sigh a little for the passage of time, the endless corridor of it, how its walls washed by you on either side – darkly, fast, and ever, ever" (139).

Like Munro, Moore employs memory both "as a strategy and as a subject" ("Leave Them" 21). The concept of temporality, as Moore articulates it, resides "always at the heart of any writing" ("Leave Them" 21). Temporal dislocations, manifested through flashbacks, are a recurrent feature in nearly all of Moore's narratives. These shifts in time and space serve to illuminate specific episodes or fragmented "shots" from a character's past, facilitating a deeper understanding of their psychological and emotional trajectories. Through the lens of memory, Moore's

protagonists reconcile their past and present selves, critically reassess their life decisions with a blend of irony and humor, and occasionally engage in acts of rebellion. Such rebellion often evokes a sense of the absurd and the grotesque, as characters reflect on the incongruities of their past and present choices. Moore's short story "Places to Look for Your Mind" resonates thematically with Munro's "Runaway." It centers on Millie, a middle-aged woman ensnared in a monotonous and isolated existence alongside her theology teacher husband. Once driven by ambition, Millie aspired to establish a garbage-recycling enterprise, a venture that ultimately failed. Now, she roams her home aimlessly, consumed by an existential quest for purpose. In a poignant and dramatic moment, overwhelmed by shame and regret, Millie cynically reevaluates her life choices, fixating once more on the unrealized recycling project that symbolizes her unfulfilled potential: "How she had hoped to run it out of this very room, how it seemed now to have crawled back in here – her poor little business! – looking a lot like laundry. What she had wanted was garbage, and instead she got laundry. 'Ha'! She laughed out loud" (107).

Indubitably, Moore's characters are perpetually haunted by an enduring sense of unfulfilled potential that profoundly affects her protagonists. In the short story "Agnes of Iowa," the eponymous heroine, a middle-aged married woman, experiences a sudden and jarring realization that her life lacks, and will likely continue to lack, vibrancy and significance. Her yearning for motherhood deteriorates into abject despair as she realized with shock that her marital existence has become devoid of meaning. The narrative underscores the couple's mutual disaffection, which Agnes describes as "the functional disenchantment" (*Birds* 80), a pivotal factor exacerbating her psychological turmoil. The stark contrast between the past and the present lays bare the painful reality of their fading relationship. Agnes is struck by the recognition that she and her husband Joe "looked like idiots. She and Joe looked dead" (82). Overwhelmed by shame, her "days grew messy with contradictions" (83) prompting her relocation from New York to Iowa in pursuit of a quieter, more tranquil life.

This complex search for identity and security, and the tension between individual achievement and the need for love are, to a large degree, behind the deep feeling of shame that Moore's protagonists endure, confront, resist, cope with, and even joke about. But there is something sadder and wearier about these characters, a strange sense of defeat and shame as they drift toward middle age, realizing that "every arrangement in life carried with it the sadness, the sentimental shadow, of its not being something else, but only itself" (*Birds* 94). Eventually, these women's ghastly relations often exemplify the unalterable private grief of ruined hopes, dashed expectations, and misplaced, unreciprocated love.

Conclusion

Through their investigation of the dynamics and mechanics of the shame affect in their short fiction, Munro and Moore consider shame's complex and vital roles in regulating women's lives and writings. Despite their distinct tones and styles, the short stories studied in this article detail the social and psychological ramifications behind the characters' dominant sense of inadequacy and shame. These narratives also reveal the complex and often unnoticed diminutions of agency that frequently push individuals (mainly women) into states of social and personal disadvantage. Given its centrality to character development, movement, and plot, shame can be seen as an integral element of a character's subjectivity and an essential aspect of the author's narrative imagination and literary choices. Effectively, the principal argument behind this article is that to conceive of shame only as a cyclical process, with a cause-effect relationship, is to miss the point that shame can be viewed as a complex and productive affect that can function, in Sedgwick's words, "as a potential ground of progressive identity politics" (62). In fact, in most stories, female protagonists seem to be trapped in intricate power dynamics that encompass control and subterfuge, appropriation and resistance, as well as negotiation and learning, all of which contributing to the psycho-political lessons of becoming.

As my analysis of Munro's and Moore's works has shown, shame is a multifaceted and contradictory affect since "the capacity to feel shame," to quote Manion, "functions positively, warning us when we are on shaky ground, when we transgress or are in danger of transgressing our own or our culture's moral expectations" (22). Besides taking up shame as a literary theme or character-based preoccupation, Munro and Moore also show that shame, even when dismissed, disavowed or unacknowledged, plays an instrumental role in shaping and reshaping the female identity, revealing in the process such themes as women's agency, empowerment, alienation, and resilience. Thus, throughout their narratives, the negation of affects – such as shame, fear, anxiety – as frivolous and feminine, and, therefore, irrelevant to the masculine domains of politics and rationality, has been questioned, resisted, subverted, and rejected.

Munro's and Moore's women are particularly confronted with the moral dilemmas of circumstances in which their values clash, their hopes collapse, and their life choices bring unwarranted and irrevocable feelings of shame. Such moments, in their making and shaping, create and define the singular power of their works. Indeed, in both Munro's and Moore's fiction, shame emerges as a pervasive emotional undercurrent, subtly woven into the fabric of the characters' lives. Additionally, their stories frequently explore intrafamilial conflicts, not merely as sites of struggle and control, but as complex negotiations of memory, interpretation, representation, and suppressed truths.

These authors deploy accurate artistic storytelling techniques and distinctive stylistic devices replete with the affect-saturated bonds between language, thought, actions, bodies, and imaginative worlds. In their depiction of the pitfalls of modern existence, both Munro and Moore use artful short fiction that revolves around hauntingly familiar life incidents in which shame – as a state of the mind and the body – plays an important factor in determining and transforming female identity with "powerfully productive and powerfully social metamorphic possibilities" (Sedgwick 64-65). Hence, their narratives offer a wealth of bodily metaphors and visceral images, which serve as evidence of a

profound and compelling psychological and affective reality. Finally, these authors write about the center of women's loneliness in a postmodern world imbued with shameful and shaming experiences, where love is never truthful or reciprocal, where family relationships hide a subterranean emotional landscape marked by family secrets that remain buried, and where the imagination creates its own silent chamber of horrors.

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