

The Subjectivity of the Stream of Consciousness in Munro's *To Reach Japan*

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Abstract. The story *To Reach Japan* presents a magnificent picture of a female Greta's hard struggle between her daily life and her broken thoughts. For the vivid depiction of her underneath longing, techniques of stream of consciousness are put into use. This paper attempts to illustrate the inner world of the main female character Greta by analyzing her state in the imaginary and symbolic stage, in which she surrenders to her desire.

Introduction

Alice Munro wrote the book *Dear Life* in 2012, which is supposed to be her last works as she said and proves to be another masterpiece. *To Reach Japan* is the first short story among the fourteen ones. It is composed of ten sections, which is a typical style of Munro – a short story usually consists of a few sections. They may be arranged in the order of physical time or not and may be confined to a certain physical space or not. Some of the sections are not limited to physical time or space. They just follow the narrator's mind. Munro is skillfully good at telling the stories without being limited by the chronological sequence. Like Munro's other stories, the main character of *To Reach Japan* is a female. Munro, herself, is a female writer. The main characters are usually housewives or semi-housewives rather than professional ones. They tend to be marginalized without being involved too much in the social life. But we cannot neglect their thoughts, feelings and desires that are the themes Munro centers on in her works. Liu Hongyu [1] finds out that the first ten stories in *Dear Life* are a good example of Lacan's psychoanalysis. Throughout the whole story *To Reach Japan*, there are two voices all the time. One looks at what was going on in the outside world and the other, always trying to make comments, is the desire hidden inside Greta, like the serpent in the Eden Garden. Munro saves much on the description of the characters' appearances and the surrounding scenery. Characters move, act and think. Creative techniques of the stream of consciousness are adopted to present Greta's longing in her mind. In this way we can hear the voices deep in the female characters' hearts. This paper attempts to investigate the path on which Greta sometime leads herself and sometimes is led by her desire – the subjectivity of human beings.

Interpretation Section by Section

At the beginning of the story, a family was saying good-bye to each other at a railway station. The mother Greta was getting on a train with her daughter and the father Peter was helping with the luggage. No surname, no appearance, no immediate explanation of why they were on the train. Peter came to see Greta and Katy off. Everything about Peter revealed he was an innocent and ordinary man – he was satisfied with life and had no other peculiar thoughts. Then it was followed by a flashback about Peter's past life and also his great mother. Then we get to know Greta wrote poems that people neither care nor understood. Greta wanted more beyond the then situation. Life was a routine. "And she would have agreed with him, thinking that it was unnatural for people who saw each other daily, constantly, to have to go through explanations of any kind." [2](p.3) Even their thoughts can be mirrored on each other. Peter's mother never interfered in their life. Concerning poems, Peter was tolerant. What to complain about life? Greta had a perfect husband, a perfect

mother-in-law and a lovely daughter. Or we wonder what else Greta wanted. Women, as wives, were denied the right to read serious books, to make political comments. It seems that women were not allowed to think. But Greta was different. She even wrote poems, whether good or not. When she went to a party in the third section, Greta received no attention. She began to think of Peter. “She thought that when she went with Peter to an engineers’ party, the atmosphere was pleasant though the talk was boring. That was because everybody had their importance fixed and settled at least for the time being.” [2](p.10) It reveals that Greta was bored with the “perfect” life and she also wanted to be valued.

The second section brings us back to the station and explains that Greta was going to Toronto with Katy while Peter was going to work for at least one month on the far north. Behind the reason, there were other stories to tell.

The third, fourth and fifth sections expose Greta’s longing for being valued, cared and loved by the so-called important writer or by the journalist Harris. Since the important writer did not talk to her, Harris’ care and desire for her lighted her passion to be held by him. All these secret feelings are exposed by Greta’s bold self-expression with no other people around. Monologue is another technique Munro often uses in her writing. It is a direct way to show the character’s thoughts and feelings. The section four and five are mostly Greta’s monologue of her longing for Harris. She posted him an obscure letter. Even his sick wife opened the letter would cast it away as strange phrases. It is interesting that she didn’t know Harris at all before he escorted her home. Greta, as a writer, was invited to a party by the editor of a magazine. She was excited about the invitation and dressed herself in a sexual way. “She was wearing high heels which slowed her down considerably. Also her most sophisticated black dress, zipped up at the back and skimming the waist and always a little too tight at the hips.” [2](p.7) It is the single description about Greta’s appearance. In fact, the appearance was not useless in exposing her eagerness. It conveyed the message that Greta liked to be dressed this way and liked to be present at the party. She longed to. It is interesting that Greta was hoping to see the important writer at first but then she was disappointed that there was no possibility. At that time, Peter came to her mind. When she went to parties with him, each one claimed their certain importance. Relieved and relaxed, she sat on the ground after drinking alcohol. A man came to help her up and even to drive her home. The man was the one she later tried to phone, to look for and located him on a newspaper. Then she wrote a so-called letter consisting of several peculiar phrases. On the way home that night, Harris implicated Greta his wish and he cleverly left room for Greta to consider. As a result, Greta couldn’t help thinking of him ever since. Her love for man shifted from the important writer onto the journalist.

On the train to Toronto, Greta was confronted with a young man and a young woman. The young man Greg was enthusiastic with child stories. He was good at dealing with children. He showed his talent with Katy. Greta felt happy with it and was not so occupied with Katy’s demands. After the young woman got off the train and Katy fell asleep, Greg took the initiative to talk with Greta. The atmosphere was happy and relaxing. Greta totally forgot Peter and also Harris, in fact. When they were enjoying themselves, Greta was worried about Katy who was sleeping alone in another car. Greta left Greg, decent. “Actually she didn’t much care who met her. She was weak, shocked, but buoyant, like some gladiator – she actually thought this out and smiled at it – after a session in the arena.” [2](p.23) The new and bold experience was worth celebrating. Then she returned to accompany Katy, only to find the child was missing. Fear drove the woman crazy.

In the ninth section, Greta devoted her full attention to Katy after being scared by the loss on the train. She felt it was wrong for her to be preoccupied with her poems, her thoughts and her desire for the man in Toronto. She neglected her husband, her child and her real life. As she called it, it was “a sin.” According to the explanation of the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, the word “sin” means “an action that is against religious rules and is considered to be an offence against God.” [3](p.2359) It seems that this part can be taken as an ending to the story. That is, Greta, the heroin of the story, returned to her real life and began to live as people around her without wasting time on her “useless” thoughts. She eventually abandoned her passion for them and regained herself again. But

Munro who does not stop here proves to be a great writer. Greta had nowhere to escape. Munro – or life – is weaving another web for her.

In the last section, Greta and Katy, her daughter, arrived in Toronto after a trip on the train and would stay in a new house for a while. Off the train, Greta had to take care of Katy and their suitcase, which was not an easy thing. “Then Greta picked Katy up and set her on her hip, and managed the suitcase with the other arm, stooping and bumping it on the moving steps.” [2](p.29) Then Harris turned up and helped Greta take the suitcase. With Harris’ appearance, Greta was taken hold of. She experienced love full of tenderness, “shock”, “tumbling”, “an immense settling” in her heart. “As someone now took hold of theirs. Took hold of it, took hold of Greta, and kissed her for the first time, in a determined and celebratory way.” [2](p.29) “Harris.” [2](p.30) “First a shock, then a tumbling in Greta’s insides, an immense settling.” [2](p.30) “She was trying to hang on to Katy but at this moment the child pulled away and got her hand free.” [2](p.30) “She didn’t try to escape. She just stood waiting for whatever had to come next.” [2](p.30) The above sentences form independent paragraphs. The question being posed here is: why not combine these sentences into one paragraph? These paragraphs or pieces reveal the different stages Greta’s consciousness went through. The first piece has no subject in the sentences. “Someone” took hold of their luggage but who did? Why does the obvious subject “Harris” not appear just as he came to pick them up? As Liu Hongyu [1] puts it, “When man goes to the imaginary and symbolic stage, leaving the real stage behind, he also abandons his preliminary oneness.” (p.158) That is to say, Greta lost herself, with no ability to control her consciousness. Or in other words, Greta disappeared but her consciousness stayed. So the kiss and the determined and celebratory manner were felt. Then “Harris” came into her mind. She came back. However, some inner feelings overwhelmed Greta again: “shock”, “tumbling”, and “settling”. It seems that Greta managed to be the owner of herself, although she experienced complicated feelings in her insides. In front of another man, Greta tried to hang on to Katy because she once lost Katy due to her desire for a man. She was afraid of making the same mistake or as she thought of it as “a sin”. But there is no place to escape to. Therefore, she didn’t try to escape. As Liu Hongyu [1] puts it, “the author uses stream of consciousness to insert herself as an obvious other, hence, the subject becomes a complete nothingness.” (p.158) Greta was caught by her desire and did not know how to go beyond. Greta does not exist any longer as a subject of herself. The “other” becomes the subject. So the enveloping sense of “nothingness” inundates Greta as a sane being. Munro shared her concern for women’s fate in love in a video interview that she wanted to revise the sorrowful ending of Andersen’s *Mermaid* by engaging in writing herself. [4] So Harris appeared in the end, which carries the author’s compassion as a female herself.

The Inside Struggle

The above has shown the path on which Greta’s desire rose and ebbed away. Her desire was neither continuous nor certain. The target was kept changing. The desire vanished when it met with disappointment, fear, scare or doubt. We haven’t seen where the desire was originated in. According to Yan Zesheng[5], Lacan attributes this kind of mental activity to unconscious desires. That is the loss of subjectivity. Nevertheless, fear, scare, sin or disappointment keep bringing human beings back to consciousness from time to time – back to life again.

“She found herself writing a letter. It didn’t begin in any conventional way. No Dear Harris. No remember me.

Writing this letter is like putting a note in a bottle –

And hoping

It will reach Japan.” [2](p.14)

These few lines explained the meaning of the title of the story. It is in the future tense and is Greta’s hope and strong expectation. But why Japan? As we know, if a bottle floats in the sea, it is impossible where it will reach. Japan is the substitute of the seashore. It is a metaphor. Greta hopes she could make an adventure, not the adventure, and she could anchor at a shore, not the shore. The unexplainable desire put Greta in agony, as a matter of fact.

Conclusions

Munro's *To Reach Japan* is easy to read and understand in terms of language. There are practically no long sentences. Although the techniques of the stream of consciousness are used here and there, Munro divided the whole story into several sections. Therefore, it is obvious that which parts are telling what is happening and which parts are unfolding the character's thoughts. By analyzing Greta's inner feelings and thoughts, we find out that she didn't adhere to one man and that she was not determined to carry out her thoughts. But at the same time, she could not stop thinking and dreaming. Human beings, like the main female character Greta, are destined to be trapped in the pains caused by their unconscious desires – the otherness.

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