

Maren Høgevold Busterud

Running away as a life-changing moment

Explored through a selection of short stories from Runaway by Alice Munro

Bachelor's project in Engelsk
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Norwegian University of Science and Technology
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Department of Language and Literature

Introduction

Alice Munro uses the act of running away as a literary tool to provoke a life-changing moment for her characters in several of the short stories in her collection *Runaway*. The Nobel Prize-winning author tells stories about women of all ages and social backgrounds, living in specific places in Canada during different periods of time. The common feature is that they are running from or towards something, often physically, but the psychological aspects are equally important. However, the prominence of these events differs from story to story.

To run away implies a feeling of either home and belonging, or misplacement. Either way, the feeling is connected to specific places in Munro's stories, and she frequently refers to real towns and travel routes. An identity is connected to a physical place, so when a character's physical surroundings change, the identity seems to be affected. However, physical surroundings also includes social environments, meaning that the people around a character affect the identity and perception of oneself as well. Therefore, physical surroundings are both interpreted in the sense of physical place and social surroundings in this essay.

This essay will take a closer look at the main characters in "Runaway", "Chance", "Soon", "Silence" and "Passion". These stories are chosen because they all have main characters running away, which is significant to their development, as they all experience a dynamic, personal change as a consequence. The essay will evaluate how true it actually is that a running away needs to be life-changing, and also explore how identity is connected to certain places. How main characters' identities are affected and changed will be investigated in "Chance", "Silence" and "Passion", as there are clear changes shown through different means in these. Then, to look more closely into the act of running away and to see how life-changing it really is, "Runaway" and "Passion", and to some extent "Chance", will be analyzed. By using these two approaches, Munro's larger patterns thought about how identity is dynamic will be exposed, and running aways will be revealed as tools to enforce this process.

Sense of self in a given location or situation

Specific geographical settings is a recurring phenomenon in *Runaway*. Real places in Canada are used and travel routes are described in detail in several of the stories. In addition to creating a much more vivid and lively picture for the reader, it provides an extra dimension to the characters having a relationship to the places they encounter. Carol Ann Howells asks “How much might Munro’s explorations of identity be related to her character’s shifting locations within the textual spaces of her story?” (2010, p. 54). In relation to *Runaway*, an interpretation of this question is “when a character is running away from a physical location, how is their personality and identity affected?”. Literary texts often describe a physical *real* place in an enclosed and projected manner (Lefebvre, 2016, p.14-15), and a physical running away is caused by external factors and social environment. This discussion will explore the relationship between these places and some main characters.

“Chance”, “Soon” and “Silence” tell the story of Juliet through three different stages of her adult life, from her age of 21 until retirement age. “Chance” is set in the mid-1960s, and told mostly in retrospect, as Juliet remembers her train ride from Toronto to Vancouver the previous winter. The ride across the country reflects a transition from child- to adulthood. Her motivation is a job as a teacher in Vancouver, which she did not initially wish for. We learn that Juliet is taking a break from her studies in Classics to teach Latin at a Vancouver school because her professors worry about her odd choice of study in combination with her female gender and good looks. If she marries, her education will come to waste. She is comfortable studying, however, contrasting her discomfort at home growing up:

“In the town where she grew up her sort of intelligence was often put in the same category as a limp or an extra thumb, and people had been quick to point out the expected accompanying drawbacks” (53).

She remembers this as she is put out of her comfort zone again when travelling cross-country, following her professors' command.

The journey may, as mentioned, be read as a transition into adulthood. The trauma of feeling guilty for a fellow passenger's suicide brings her close to Eric, an older, married man who she falls in love with. This is a new experience to Juliet, who is still a virgin. However, the transition does not seem to be completed on the train. Juliet may not be fully ready, as a miscommunication between the two puts a sudden stop to their night together:

“She pulled away, she said urgently, ‘I’m a virgin.’ ‘Yes, yes.’ He laughed, and kissed her neck, then released her and pushed the door open in front of her. They walked down the aisle till she located her own berth. She flattened herself against the curtain, turning, and rather expecting him to kiss her again or touch her, but he slid by almost as if they had met by accident.” (79-80)

Juliet clearly wants Eric but is too afraid to clarify that, while Eric seems to either not have meant for the occurrence to end in sex, or he respects her non-willingness and moves on. In addition, Juliet is menstruating and uses this to justify why she stopped him while laying in her bed, contemplating evening's events. Although it is probably not her first time, it shows that she is physically an adult woman. Further, the blood may be linked to the blood from the dead body, which is traumatising for her to even imagine. The menstruation may therefore also be read as a metaphor for how this dramatic journey is making its marks on her body.

The transition is completed when Juliet arrives in Whale Bay, and she seems, for a while, to feel at home there. In both “Soon” and “Silence”, she portrays the town as idyllic, and she misses it when visiting her family near Toronto. However, this too changes when her relationship with Eric is strained and when he dies suddenly, Juliet is left with a feeling of unfinished business as she still holds a grudge against him. In order to remove herself and their daughter, Penelope, from the grief, Juliet moves – Whale Bay is no longer a home to her. Later, when Penelope runs away, Juliet moves again to have a fresh new start. This

desire or necessity to move shows Juliet as a restless, highly dynamic character, constantly running away. In the beginning of “Silence”, Juliet is a successful TV-personality looking forward to see her daughter again, seemingly happy and at peace. However, she looks back to the past years – Eric’s infidelity, his death, and her distraction during Penelope’s upbringing. This absent-minded side of her is strengthened as it contrasts Penelope, who initially left for a spiritual balance centre. However, after Penelope’s leaving, Juliet’s life shifts direction.

“She lived now a life as different as possible from the life of the public, vivacious, concerned, endlessly well-informed woman she had been. She lived amongst books, reading through most of her waking hours (...). She often missed the world news for weeks at a time” (151)

Juliet lives a rather isolated life, reconnecting with who she was before Penelope was born. She even considers taking up her Ph.D. again, and chooses not to tell new people in her life about her daughter, possibly to block out her reality.

Another more time-limited example of how physical location and social environment may be linked to a character’s identity is seen in “Passion”. Working at the hotel at Bailey’s Falls, Grace meets Maury Travers, and their relationship quickly develops. The story is told in retrospect by Grace in her old age when she revisits the Ottawa Valley. The mood is similar to a fever dream, showing that she now sees the events as somewhat absurd. As summer is a limited time-span, so is Grace’s relationship with Maury – and his perception of her as well. When she travels back to Little Sabot Lake, she asks herself what exactly she expects to find and imagines *“perfect preservation, the past intact, when nothing of the kind could be said of herself” (161)*. This foreshadows a great personal change in Grace, and shows us that she combines a piece of herself with Little Sabot Lake. Munro shares her view of an identity’s development in an interview quoted by Howell (2010, p. 55) “There is some root in your nature that doesn’t change”. The root is maintained no matter how the circumstances are changing. This philosophy is shown in the story, although Grace is young and experimenting with where her root lays.

Being more or less an orphan, Grace naturally seeks some sort of stability and safety in her life. Her love for the Travers family and Mrs. Travers, Maury's mother in particular, develops deeply, for that reason. "[S]he traded time with Maury for Maury's family" (167) shows how important this family becomes to Grace, and Maury is her entrance ticket, although he is not presented as the most significant person in her memories. Their relationship lacks passion and does not feel real to Grace. Although they talk about getting married, Grace remembers:

"it was a relief (...) to be alone, to get into bed in the dormitory and blot the last couple of hours out of her mind. And she thought it must be a relief to Maury to be driving down the highway by himself, rearranging his impression of his Grace so that he could stay wholeheartedly in love with her" (173-4).

Yet, she does not decline Maury's affections or plans, showing how important his family is to her. On the other hand, she may want to, but not really know how to. This is further supported by the dramatic running away, which will be discussed in the next part of this essay.

Grace's perception of herself does not correspond with the person Maury and the Travers see her as. This becomes clear quite early, when her anger towards an Elizabeth Taylor movie is misinterpreted as jealousy, which Maury finds oddly feminine. Ironically, this is the very perception of women that Grace hates. *"That was what men – people, everybody – thought they should be like. Beautiful, treasured, spoiled, selfish, pea-brained"* (164). Grace is clearly a feminist, and neither spoiled, selfish nor pea-brained. She comes from a relatively simple home, and she went to school for two extra years in order to learn anything she could for free. Yet, Maury diminishes her by not listening to her viewpoint, using her poor background as an explanation for her jealousy. He attempts to protect Grace's innocence and femininity:

"[Pleasurable physical intimacies] was the thing that had not happened. (...) She was willing. And Maury was ready, but not willing. He felt it his responsibility to protect her. And the ease with which she offered herself threw him off balance" (173).

This excerpt illustrates how Grace is not fitting his ideal of a sweet, innocent girl. Her sexuality and curiosity intimidates him, and this makes a passionate relationship impossible.

Grace comes to the hotel to “*taste a bit of life*” (166), an advice from her uncle and principal, before taking over her family’s chair-caning business, but is actually attempting to find her own path in life. She thinks a future of caning chair does not seem real, but neither does a future with Maury. Her status quo is fine: “*Grace didn’t want to think ahead at all. She wanted life to continue just as it was now*” (167). By promising Maury to introduce him to her family, but not telling her family about Maury, she manages to avoid taking a firm stand, and keeping every option open. She seems to value some of her own features, especially her intelligence, independence and ability to live in the moment. Yet, other people’s perception and expectations of her does not correspond, and this confuses her. Both her uncle’s expectations of her chair-caning and Maury’s expectations of their relationship becomes difficult to meet wholeheartedly. This is what drives her to eventually step out of her comfort zone and leave the Travers family – a quick escape from her situation to gain perspective. Although finding her path is not finished by that running away alone, she gains distance from Maury and more control over her own situation.

A life-changing move

The short stories in this collection are marked by moments of no return that are often triggered by external events that leads to an internal change in a character’s world view or sense of self. Munro often writes about characters at a crossroad, on the verge of making a life-changing decision (Ekle et.al, 2013). In *Runaway*, a physical or psychological running away is the most used tool to show this. Whereas Carla, the main character in “Runaway”, is running away mainly motivated by external factors, Grace is running from a perception of herself. In both these stories, “Runaway” and “Passion”, the running away is only temporary, as both characters decide to return. However, they are not returning to exactly what they left,

and therefore, the truly life-changing decision might be to come back. This paragraph will explore how fateful both these actions are, and see how much the main characters really have changed between before and after the moment of no return.

It is not the running away as much as the coming back that marks the life-changing moment for Carla in “Runaway”. This is shown as her journey parallels Flora the pet goat’s running away throughout the story, and Flora is already gone when the story begins. Carla leaves her husband in order to start a better life, but soon regrets this and comes back home. This is the second time she runs away from home, indicating that it might not be as big of a decision as coming back to restore her and Clark’s marriage. The parallel to Flora is evident. She is a goat among horses, mirroring Carla’s feeling of misplacement. Carla’s running away is foreshadowed in her fantasy about Flora having run away towards freedom and searching for a mate, and in her subconscious dream of Flora:

“[Flora] led Carla to a barbed-wire barricade of the kind that might belong on some battlefield, and then she – Flora – slipped through it, hurt leg and all, just slithered through like a white eel and disappeared” (7).

Carla compares her bad marriage and poor economy to a battlefield impossible to escape. Although Flora manages to leave easily, even with a hurt leg, Carla’s emotional pain is more difficult to handle. Later in the story, Sylvia sees Flora either as Clara’s freedom or happiness, when she apologises for thinking they were the same. This too shows Flora as part of Carla’s personality, and that she mirrors Carla’s state of mind.

When Flora comes back right after Carla’s return, Clark and Sylvia are the only witnesses:

“Then the vision exploded. Out of the fog, and out of the magnifying light – now seen to be that of a car travelling along this back road, probably in search of a place to park – out of this appeared a white goat. A little dancing white goat, hardly bigger than a sheepdog” (39).

This image seems dream-like, almost unreal. It suggests that the circumstances Carla return to – a husband in a good mood that appreciates her – might be too good to be real as well. Clark chooses to lie to Carla about his meeting with Sylvia, although she asks him directly, and he never mentions Flora's return. Carla learns about it in a letter from Sylvia where she elaborates on the magical experience. Carla realises, now more than ever, that her marriage is based on lies, and wonders where Flora has ended up. Yet she never brings the subject up, and never goes out to look for Clark, showing that she wants to give the marriage a new beginning. although it is based on a lie that will haunt her.

The weather is an indicator of Carla's life changing for the better. Her frustration over the rain preventing her and Clark from making money on their horseback riding lessons is clear in the beginning. The economy is poor, both are under a lot of stress, and the bad weather reflects both their mood and relationship. When the sun comes out in the end, Clark's mood lightens. He settles arguments with people in their community, and their business' cash flow improves. Weather is a commonly used metaphor in this way, but it may also only indicate that the situation is improved only on the surface, because after summer, fall comes, and new problems may arise. The end foreshadows this:

“Carla found that she got used to the sharp thought that had lodged in her her. It wasn't so sharp anymore – in fact, it no longer surprised her. And she was inhabited now by an almost seductive notion, a constant low-lying temptation.” (46-7).

Carla is in fact not happy, yet the final paragraph about looking into Flora's destiny or not, *“the days passed and Carla didn't go near that place. She held out against the temptation”* (47), shows that she is not yet willing to confront Clark, or herself, to find out. There are several hints that Clark kills Flora – that is why he keeps quiet about her return. If Flora is in fact Carla's happiness or freedom, Clark kills that too then when she comes back to him.

There is a more distinct point of no return in “Passion” when Grace runs away with Neil. It seems to be a selfish act to follow her curiousness. Told in retrospect, she remembers:

“[I]t was as if a gate had clanged shut behind her. But at the time, there was no clang – acquiescence simply rippled through her, the rights of those left behind were smoothly cancelled” (182).

She is attracted to the idea of adventure and sees Neil as “worldly” and connects running away with him to “*what sex should be like*” (183), although she has not met him before. Neil is older, a married man and father of two, and an alcoholic who has proved to be unpredictable at times. Soon after leaving, Grace sees her engagement to Maury as a “*treachery to herself*” (190), but running away with Neil is not because he can teach her things she does not know. This hunger for knowledge is recognizable, but not a quality of Grace that Maury has given much appreciation. In addition, Grace expresses a wish to learn about passion, another thing lacking from her relationship with Maury. Although Grace dreams of a spark between her and Neil, she is conscious of the unlikelihood of that at the same time: “*Mouths, tongues, skin, bodies, banging bone to bone. Inflammation. Passion. But that wasn’t what had been meant for them at all*” (193) shows this.

Grace’s running away is a short affair that begins suddenly and ends with a clear moment of realisation, which is similar to waking up from a fever dream:

“Now with the cold of night settled in some other facts became clear to her. That they could not remain here, that they were still in the world after all. That they had to go back to Bailey’s Falls” (193)

However, this does not mean that she is left unchanged. Firstly, and most prominently, it is an exit from her relationship with Maury. She never sees him again, but hears from him in a letter where he urges her to say that Neil forced her to go. Instead, she replies that she wanted to go, showing a desire to be honest and cut all ties, although this cuts her ties with the Travers family as well. However, before this happens, Grace receives a cheque with “*enough*

money to ensure her a start in life” (196) from Mr and Mrs Travers. Grace’s relationship with Maury taught her about the safety of family, but Neil taught her about passion and adventure – concepts she expresses more desire for. This is also why she is at Bailey’s Falls in the first place – her aunt and uncle “*believed she needed a taste of life before she settled down*” (166). Therefore, when the story ends with Grace being ensured a start in life, she can undertake new adventures. It is noteworthy that Munro writes “*a start in life*” rather than a *new* start, indicating there will be more experiences coming for Grace.

It is noteworthy that some of the short stories are based on the main character’s travel from home to an unfamiliar place because an older male figure of authority has told them to gain more life experience. This happens to both Juliet and Grace, who feel resistance to obey at first, but end up going, and later takes control of their situations and steers their paths in another direction than originally intended. This shows a underlying feminist tone, as the women realise that their lives should not be ruled by the patriarchy, and they find strength and motivation to turn around. This is shown close to literally in “Passion” when Neil teaches Grace to drive before she takes the steering wheel herself and drives back home when Neil is unable to stop her. In addition, her running away is sparked by her curiosity and desire for passion and sex, which Maury has undermined. She fights the idealised expectations she believes all men have of women. Juliet too desires to be the narrator of her own life, as she constantly corrects people who call Eric her husband, reminding society that a couple does not need to be married. This becomes a point in “Soon” in particular, as she struggles to defend her modern ideas of child-rearing and partnership. Munro discuss the problematic consequences of a woman running away from expectations of her, and the control she needs to take over her own life.

Conclusion

Running away is used as a literary tool to provoke a life-changing moment in several of the short stories in *Runaway*. It is used differently in different short stories: In “Passion”, Munro

uses it as a definite moment of no return. In “Silence”, it is a slow and continuous process spanning over several years. In “Runaway”, it is arguably not the running away that works as a life changing moment, but it is still crucial as it makes the coming back possible.

Each main character is closely tied to a physical place and/or social environment. When this changes, either because of the main character’s own desire or external factors out of their control, it seems their personality changes to different extents. However, the root in a person’s identity is maintained. We see this clearly in Grace’s strength and independence as it comes to the surface after having been undermined for a while, but is no surprise to the reader. Juliet revisits sides of her the reader recognizes as well, only years after she last saw them herself. Her change is continuous and long-lasting, but somewhat circular.

Running away is an extreme action that results in the women gaining or regaining control over their situation in this collection. Some of the main characters have been given advice to change their external environment against their own desire, and some are running away purely out of own will. However, they all end up trying to take control of their lives, and succeeds to different extents. Munro shows that the patriarchy often tries to control women by imposing society’s expectations and perceptions onto them, and each woman may need to do something drastic in order to retake control. We have seen that the lives in *Runaway* may not always be changed for the better, but at least the women are fighting to hold on to the steering wheel. Running away is a strategy to get out of one’s comfort zone or gain room for reflection – something they need in order to redefine themselves and their life situation.

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