

## A Critique of Stigma Transformation in Alice Munro's “Face” and “Child’s Play”

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### Abstract

Many critics have had difficulties tackling the pervasive sense of horror found in Alice Munro's short story collection *Too Much Happiness* (2009). Isla Duncan maintains that the horror of this collection is achieved by Munro's manipulation of narrative voice, especially exemplified in “Face” and “Child’s Play.” Whereas Duncan emphasizes the horror conveyed by the indifference of both narrators, I argue that what makes these two stories “horrifying” is rather the undercurrent of unacknowledged hate, disgust, shame, and guilt suggested by the narrators' voices of indifference. These repressed emotions intimate the characters' problematic responses to stigma and reveal the limits of stigma transformation. By focusing on “Face” and “Child’s Play,” two stories about the stigma of birthmarks and disability, this essay aims to explore how Munro addresses the limits of stigma transformation by portraying excessive emotions triggered by stigma, thereby revealing the characters' ambivalent responses to stigma. The first section of this essay discusses how disgust and hate are evoked by the interaction between the stigmatizer and the stigmatized. In the second part of this essay, I investigate how the narrator in “Face” tries to overcome his shame by hiding his birthmark, and how Marlene in “Child’s Play” attempts to exonerate her guilt by publishing a book on disability. The essay argues that Munro's stories are “horrifying” because they resist transformative readings of stigma. “Face” and “Child’s Play” remind readers to be more aware of the impact of stigmatization in ordinary life and to recognize the otherness of both others and ourselves.

**Keywords:** Munro, stigma, shame, guilt, disability

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## Introduction

In a 2010 interview, Lisa Dickler Awano asks Alice Munro how her collection *Too Much Happiness* (2009) differs from her previous volumes. Munro mentions that the collection strikes her “with a kind of horror,” given that “there are a lot of rather grim things” in these stories. She singles out “Child’s Play” as a particularly “horrifying story,” as she tries to capture in it “the genuine ruthlessness in children” by depicting two girls who drown a disabled child. In another story, “Face,” Munro writes about how a boy with a purple birthmark “survives” social discrimination.

Many critics have had difficulties tackling this pervasive sense of horror found in *Too Much Happiness*. In the *Toronto Star*, for instance, Geoff Pevere stresses that while Munro still delivers “expected instances of intimate revelation,” *Too Much Happiness* is strikingly “abrim with much more dramatic events” as well as with “spasms of spectacularly pointless violence.” In the *Sunday Times*, Peter Kemp comments on the irony of the title of the collection given its grim subjects: “Too much happiness is the last thing with which people in these pages have to contend ... Darker than anything Munro has previously published, this book can make your skin crawl with its uncovering of the transitoriness and precariousness of comfortable everyday existence.” Nevertheless, the violent elements of *Too Much Happiness* highlighted by Pevere and Kemp do not fully explain why it is “darker” than her previous fiction since the theme of murder or death has already been depicted in her earlier collections.<sup>1</sup>

In her book *Alice Munro’s Narrative Art*, Isla Duncan attributes the “horror” of *Too Much Happiness* to Munro’s manipulations of narrative voice, which are particularly exemplified in “Face” and “Child’s Play” in the collection. As Duncan notes, the “aloofness” (150) of the narrator in “Face” is “delivered in a mannered, self-conscious style, replete with ar-

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, Munro depicted suicide in *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) and murder in *Open Secrets* (1994) and *The Love of a Good Woman* (1998).

resting tropes, instances of artifice, and rhetorical flourishes" (150). In "Child's Play," "many instances of omission, ambiguity, hesitation, and reformulation that permeate her narrative" give rise to the impression of a "cold-hearted" narrator (152). Most readers expect stories of stigma to be morally edifying and spiritually uplifting, whereas Munro's stories, with her use of a "cold-hearted" narrator, refuse to deliver a comforting moral and spiritual lesson. Whereas Duncan emphasizes the horror conveyed by the indifference of both narrators, I argue that what makes these two stories "horrifying" is rather the undercurrent of unacknowledged emotions—hate, disgust, shame and guilt—suggested by the narrators' voices of indifference. These repressed emotions intimate the narrators' cognitive confusion and emotional conundrum when they look back on their past experiences of being stigmatized or stigmatizing others. This also indicates the characters' problematic responses to stigma and reveals the limits of stigma transformation.

The relationship between "the stigmatized" and "stigmatizers" plays a central role in provoking characters' emotional conundrums such as disgust, shame, empathy, and guilt in these two stories.<sup>2</sup> Drawing on Erving Goffman's definition of stigma as "an undesired differentness from what we had anticipated" (5), Lerita M. Coleman conceptualizes stigma as "a social relationship" (146) rather than "a property of individuals" (142) in her essay "Stigma: An Enigma Demystified." Whether a human attribute would be stigmatized or not is "dependent on the social context and to some extent arbitrarily defined" (141) rather than a fixed concept. In other words, the "nonstigmatized" in one aspect could be stigmatized in another (142). Coleman goes on to stress the link between stigma and emotional reaction to differences: "Fear is important to a discussion of how and why stigma persists" (148). Although stigmatization occurs within "a social relationship" where socially normal people "feel superior" to stigmatized people, they are in fact fearful of the socially unacceptable

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<sup>2</sup> In this essay, I borrow the terms "the stigmatized," "stigmatizers," and "nonstigmatized" from Coleman's "Stigma: An Enigma Demystified." According to Coleman, stigma is a "social relationship" in which "the stigmatizers" stigmatize those who bear the social stigma, "the stigmatized." Since "all human differences are potentially stigmatizable," as Coleman notes, any " 'nonstigmatized' person can easily become 'stigmatized' " (141-42).

differences of people who carry a stigma. While Coleman only discusses the fear elicited by stigma in her essay, Munro's stories deal with a variety of emotional registers evoked through the interaction between the stigmatized and stigmatizers. More specifically, what makes Munro's "Face" and "Child's Play" "horrifying" are the characters' problematic attitudes toward the stigma of birthmark and disability, foregrounding the limits of stigma transformation. According to Erdwin H. Pfuhl and Stuart Henry, "stigma transformation" is the effort made by groups or individuals either to "control information about their spoiled identity," "alter the meanings attributed to them in order to reduce the social significance of their deviance," or "transform the public meaning of a deviant category through the politics of deconstruction and reconstruction" (191). In "Face," the information about the narrator's birthmark is controlled by his mother, whose "too much" protectiveness makes him suffer more from his belated knowledge of the undesirability of his birthmark. In "Child's Play," Verna is called a "Special" (200) student in order to respond to her needs arising from her learning difficulties; unfortunately, this euphemistic labelling ironically discriminated against and stigmatized her. In addition, Marlene's attempt to deconstruct the concept of the disabled through her veneration of it in her book does not change her attitude towards the disabled.

By focusing on "Face" and "Child's Play," two stories which show an especially acute engagement with acts of cruelty provoked by the stigma attached to birthmarks or disability, this essay aims to explore how Munro addresses the limits of stigma transformation through her portrayal of excessive emotions triggered by stigma, thereby revealing the characters' ambivalent responses to stigma. The first section of this essay discusses how disgust and hate are evoked by the interaction between the stigmatizer and the stigmatized. Although identifying that the stigmatized's difference hurt the stigmatized in both stories, addressing the sameness of the stigmatized and nonstigmatized proves to be no better a strategy. In the second part of this essay, I first show that empathetic identification, the seemingly positive ability that helps the stigmatized narrator in "Face" survive social isolation, also makes him feel ashamed and shackled. I further investigate how the narrator in "Face" tries to overcome his shame by hiding his birthmark and how Marlene in "Child's Play" attempts to exonerate

her guilt by publishing a book on disability. These are not spiritually uplifting stories in which the characters successfully transform their own or others' stigma. Rather, this essay argues that Munro's stigma stories are "horrifying" because they resist transformative readings of stigma and foreground the limits of stigma transformation. Munro's "Face" and "Child's Play" remind readers to be more aware of the impact of stigmatization on ordinary life and to recognize the otherness of both others and ourselves.

### **Stigma, Disgust, and Hate**

Munro's short fiction "Face" is a first-person narrative told by a retired radio announcer who recalls how he himself grew up facing social rejection and avoidance because of a purple birthmark covering the right side of his face, or what Goffman calls "an undesired differentness" that set him apart from others (5). Whereas Coleman maintains that the form of social exclusion forces the stigmatized "to limit their relationships to other stigmatized people and to those for whom the social bond outweighs the stigma, such as family members" (147), "Face" calls attention to the tension between the stigmatized and his family members. In the first sentence of the story the narrator declares, "I am convinced that my father looked at me, stared at me, saw me, only once" (140). Although "the claim that the father looked only once at his son is exaggerated and unverifiable" (Duncan 150), the exaggeration conveys the father's "hostility" (148) sensed by his son when the stigmatized son looks back at the stigmatizer. His father even tells his mother that his birthmark looks like "a chunk of chopped liver" (140). This chilly metaphor captures how much the stigmatizer looks at the stigmatized with "disgust" (144). A few sentences later we see how the narrator conceals his feeling of being devalued by describing his birthmark with a hint of indifferent self-mockery: "It looks as if someone has dumped grape juice or paint on me, a big serious splash that does not turn to dribble till it reaches my neck" (141). Strangers whom the narrator encounters in the public space may be "shocked" (141) by his birthmark and avoid him temporarily; however, the "climate of ill temper and ferocity and disgust" (144) created by the stigmatization taking place between the father and the narrator who carries the stigma of facial disfigurement is the most difficult to disentangle due to the long temporal duration of

domestic life and the closed space of the domestic setting.

In addition to his own father, the narrator of “Face” is also rejected by other stigmatized people. However, rather than receiving support from another stigmatized person who is supposed to understand what he has been through, the narrator believes that he is particularly disgusted by “a gardener named Pete,” who “dragged one leg after him and carried his head always bent to one side.” He then goes on to analyze the reason behind Pete’s “growling dislike,” or disgust for him, exploring the darker side of human psychology that Coleman fails to address:

Another reason for his growing dislike has just occurred to me, and it’s odd I didn’t think of it before. *We* were both flawed, obvious victims of physical misfortune. *You* would think such people would make common cause, but it could just as often happen that they don’t. Each may be reminded by the other of something sooner forgotten” (147; emphasis added).

The phrase “I didn’t think of it before” seems to indicate that the story is what Dorrit Cohn calls a “dissonant self-narration,” in which “the temporal distance separates the narrating from the experiencing self” and “the cognitive privilege of the narrating over the experiencing self” (151). This passage reveals that the narrating and older self believes that the stigmatized individual is not only avoided by socially normal people because of his or her “undesired differentness” but is also disgusted by other stigmatized people who are reminded of their own flaws by the stigmatized individual’s undesired *sameness*. However, the narrator does not “illuminate[sic] his earlier self with supreme omniscience” (Cohn 159), as Marcel does in *A la Recherche*.

Rather, his sudden shift from first-person (we) to second-person pronoun (You) “indicate[s] a suppressed subjectivity” and “the mind of a conflicted individual,” as Brian Richardson argues (qtd. in Duncan, 155). Another possibility behind Pete’s negative attitude towards the narrator may be the class difference between a gardener and his boss’ son. The phrase “flawed, obvious victims of physical misfortune,” however, shows the narrator’s suppressed discrimination of people with physical flaws, including himself.

While "Face" is told from the stigmatized narrator's perspective, "Child's Play" is narrated from the stigmatizer's perspective. The strategy of time shifts deployed in "Face" is used again in this first-person narrative that alternates between the retired anthropologist Marlene's adolescent past and her adult present. The setting of the remembered past is a Second World War era summer camp where disabled children are separated from the able-bodied children and categorized into a group called "the Specials," a disability euphemism. The childhood memory part of the narrative focuses on Marlene's self-professed "hate" for her neighbor, Verna, a child with a learning disability who is one of "the Specials." In her account, Marlene describes her first encounter with Verna in their home neighborhood: "From the very beginning I had an aversion to her unlike anything I had felt up to that time for any other person. I said that I hated her" (195). However, Marlene's hate for Verna is intricately bound up with fear, as the adult Marlene explains: "Children use that word 'hate' to mean various things. It may mean that they are frightened" (196). Marlene is frightened by Verna's special way of communication, as she remembers: "she [Verna] was not communicative in the ordinary way" (195). As Coleman suggests, "stigmatization may be linked to the fear of being different" (149). Marlene stigmatizes Verna out of two kinds of fear: the fear of Verna's difference from non-disabled people and the fear of being identified with Verna, who is different from the ordinary. In fact, Verna has done no "physical harm" (196) to Marlene and "there was nothing remarkably unpleasant about her looks" (196), but Marlene characterizes Verna as a frightening snake with "dark intention": "She was skinny, indeed so narrowly built and with such a small head that she made me think of a snake" (196).

The passage describing the reason behind Marlene's hatred for Verna deserves close attention:

What was the problem? Contamination, infection? Verna was decently clean and healthy. And it was hardly likely that she was going to attack me and pummel me or pull out my hair. But only adults would be so stupid as to believe she had no power. A power, moreover, that was specifically directed at me. I was the one she had her

eyes on. Or so I believed. As if we had an understanding between us that could not be described and was not to be disposed of. Something that clings, in the way of love, though on my side it felt absolutely like hate.

I suppose I hated her as some people hate snakes or caterpillars or mice or slugs. For no decent reason. Not for any certain harm she could do but for the way she could disturb your innards and make you sick of your life. (201)

The words “suppose” and “or so I believe” in this passage show a sense of uncertainty about Marlene’s hatred for Verna. “Not for any certain harm she could do but for the way she could disturb your innards and make you sick of your life” reveals the fact that Verna is hated by Marlene because of the stigma attached to learning disability. More specifically, Marlene hates Verna because Verna does not fit her notion of “the ordinary” (195). The words “Contamination, infection?” also show that Marlene’s hate for Verna’s disability is bound up with a fear of contagious disease, which echoes what Coleman states: “For most stigmas stemming from physical or mental problems, including cancer, people experience fear of contagion even though they know that the stigma cannot be developed through contact” (148).

Furthermore, the link between hate and the verb “clings” in the above passage implies that Marlene cannot bear Verna touching her. Marlene’s hate for Verna involves what Munro calls a kind of “fierce division by which you try to avoid contagion.” Munro describes Verna as “the contagion of all the *stupid* things in life that don’t need to be there when a young child is growing up and thinking about making her own life.” Hate evoked by this “fierce division” between the “ordinary” and the “disabled” leads to an appalling act by Marlene and her able-bodied friend Charlene, who forcibly keep Verna’s head under water during a swimming session at the end of the summer camp:

At the moment we tumbled, Verna had pitched towards us. When we came up, with our faces streaming, arms flailing, she was spread out under the surface of water. . . . Verna’s head did not break the surface, though now she was not inert, but turning in a leisurely way, light as a jellyfish in the water. Charlene and I had our hands on her,

on her rubber cap.

This could have been an accident. As if we, in trying to get our balance, grabbed on to this nearby large rubbery object, hardly realizing what it was or what we were doing. I have thought it all out. I think we would have been forgiven. Young children. Terrified.

Yes, yes. Hardly knew what they were doing. (222)

"Hardly knew what they were doing" is suspect for it might indicate that Marlene and Charlene seem to take advantage of adults' simplistic stereotyping of childhood as innocent and the narrator assumes that they "would have been forgiven." Munro, however, aims to explore the "genuine ruthlessness in children" by emphasizing their agency of committing violence against a disabled child. As this passage shows, the narrator in "Child's Play" enacts her hatred for Verna through committing a hate crime, which is "defined when the crime is committed *because of* an individual's group identity" explained in terms of "race, religion, color, disability, sexual orientation" (qtd. in Ahmed 55). Marlene and Charlene simply reduce Verna to an object and destroy "it" because this other [Verna] who stands for "the Specials" is brought into the sphere of "the ordinary" as a threat. Propelled by their shared hatred of Verna, Marlene and Charlene consider their drowning of her as a means of solidifying the "fierce division" between the socially normal and the stigmatized group:

Charlene and I kept our eyes on each other, rather than looking down at what our hands were doing. Her eyes were wide and gleeful, as I suppose mine were too. I don't think we felt wicked, triumphing in our wickedness. More as if we were doing just what was—amazingly—demanded of us, as if this was the absolute high point, the culmination, in our lives, of our being ourselves. (223)

The exchange of glances between Charlene and Marlene shows that they achieved a consensus on drowning Verna, thereby confirming that they "knew what they were doing." What is more horrifying than their wickedness is what was "demanded" of them to commit such a hate crime and to consider it as a value fulfillment within a social identity. As Mar-

lene retrospectively admits, “Children are monstrosly conventional, repelled at once by whatever is off-center, out of whack, unmanageable” (207). In this case, their idea of “being ourselves” by eliminating whoever deviates from “the ordinary” is shaped by “an unspoken verdict of the time and place” they “lived in” (197): Stigma allows able-bodied people to feel superior to those who are disabled. Moreover, their dark behavior of drowning a disabled girl with “gleeful” eyes is presumably influenced by “some irrepressible gratification and taken-for-granted superiority” Marlene notices in the way the “grown-ups” “mentioned people who were *simple or a few bricks short of a load*” (197). Ironically, it is these “ordinary” girls, Marlene and Charlene, who did something “monstrous,” not the disabled girl, Verna, who is compared to a frightening “snake” with “her threatening squint” (199). The summer camp’s categorization of the disabled children into the group of “Specials” via euphemism does not help to transform the stigma of disability. The violence of disability labeling is amply exemplified in their act of killing a mentally-disabled child. In this section I have discussed how disgust and hate work in conjunction with the stigmatization of people with physical deformities in “Face” and learning disability in “Child’s Play.” In the following section, I will explore the limits of stigma transformation in both stories.

### **Shame, Guilt, and the Resistance to Transformative Readings of Stigma**

In a 2010 interview, Munro singles out “Face” as a story “about love, and love among children” (Awano). Given the fact that Munro also mentions that the collection *Too Much Happiness* strikes her “with a kind of horror,” too much love could be horrifying as well. In “Face,” love takes the form of the narrator’s playmate Nancy’s gesture of empathy and his mother’s protection of him. Munro attributes the narrator’s survival of social isolation to Nancy’s love. In the first part of this section, however, I aim to discuss how too much love, empathy, and protectiveness also make him feel ashamed and shackled.

Nancy and her mother, Sharon Suttles, are lodgers who rent his family’s cottage. The narrator suspects that Sharon might be his father’s mistress. On a summer Saturday afternoon, Nancy and the narrator go down to the cellar of the cottage, where they discover several tins of paint. Nancy spreads her face with red paint in order to imitate the narrator:

When she turned her face to me it was generously smeared all over with red paint.

"Now I look like you," she said, drawing the brush down on her neck. "Now I look like you." She sounded very excited and I thought she was taunting me, but in fact her voice was bursting with satisfaction, as if this was what she had been aiming for her whole life. (154-55)

According to the old narrator's subjective interpretation of what happened between Nancy and his younger self, Nancy's motivation of imitating him is ambiguous. The phrases "I look like you," "satisfaction" and "this was what she had been aiming for her whole life" indicate that what lies behind Nancy's imitation of the narrator's birthmark is empathy, but her "innocent although misguided" (Duncan 150) gesture is interpreted by him as "an insult" (155): "'Not red,' I shouted with gulps of angry tears. 'I'm not red.'" The narrator actively rejects Nancy's "leering joke" (155) by shouting repeatedly that he is "not red" because he believes his birthmark "to be a soft brown color" (155), rather than red, as reflected in the mirror. In *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick indicates that "shame attaches to and sharpens the sense of what one is" (37). In "Face," shame is generated at the moment when the knowledge of the undesirability of his birthmark is revealed to the narrator for the first time. Sedgwick's insight that shame is "the place where the *question* of identity arises most originally and most relationally" (37) can be applied to this passage. In this conflict between Nancy and the narrator, both Nancy's empathetic identification with the narrator and the narrator's own identification with his "soft brown" birthmark are questioned. Sedgwick also reminds us that "like a stigma, shame is itself a form of communication" (36), and "shame both derives from and aims toward sociability" (37). In light of this, both the narrator and his mother's anger is intricately tied up with shame in their interaction with Nancy and her mother. The narrator's mother is so angered by Nancy's naïve yet offensive gesture that she screams at Sharon, Nancy's mother:

"I am—not—yelling—my—head off. I just want to tell your cruel child she will never be welcome in our house again. She is a cruel spiteful child to mock my little boy for what he cannot help. You have never taught her anything, any manners, she

did not even know enough to thank me when I took her with us to the beach, ...”  
(156)

The reason why the narrator’s mother is so outraged by Nancy’s behavior is her hidden hostility toward the presence of Nancy and Sharon, who may be her husband’s lover. Nancy’s gesture of imitating the narrator provides the narrator’s mother with a convenient excuse to criticize Nancy and her mother’s manners and to make them move out of the cottage.

The word “taught” in the above passage reminds us of the importance of “social justice education” which “has been and continues to be marked by a moral concern with those who have been ‘Othered’ and marginalized through discriminatory relations that are seen as violent” (Todd 1). Drawing on Emmanuel Levinas’s ethics of alterity of the Other, Sharon Todd claims in her *Leaning from the Other* that one way to achieve an ethical and nonviolent relation to the Other is learning *from* the Other instead of learning *about* the Other:

To follow Levinas, when I think I know, when I think I understand the Other, I am exercising my knowledge over the Other, shrouding the Other in my own totality. The Other becomes an object of my comprehension, my world, my narrative, reducing the Other to me. What is at stake is my ego. But if I am exposed to the Other, I can listen, attend, and be surprised; [...] Insofar as I can be receptive and susceptible, I can learn *from* the Other as one who is absolutely different from myself. (15)

In view of Todd’s appeal to learning from the Other, can we consider Nancy’s empathetic identification with the narrator by mimicry as a way to learn *from* the disfigured narrator? According to Todd, empathy provides “an opportunity to learn about ourselves in relation to others, but it is not rooted in a learning from the Other” (62). She goes on to stress that empathy “is an ego activity that involves unconscious elements, but whose ultimate lessons are derived from and serve the interest of the self” (62). In this sense, while Nancy attempts to empathize with the narrator by drawing a birthmark on her face, her gesture of empathy serves only to help her to achieve “what she had been aiming for her whole life” instead of “respecting the singularity and uniqueness of the Other” (Todd 52). This is the reason why the narrator feels shamed by Nancy, who tries to “overcome difference” (Todd

61) between them by imitation and fails to recognize him as the other.

More poignant than being shamed in the communication with a playmate is the fact that the narrator is further shamed by the displays of anger from both mothers. In response to the narrator's mother's criticism of her daughter, Sharon strikes back: "You carry on like this and they're going to take you to the loony bin. Can I help it if your husband hates you and you got a kid with a messed-up face?" Upon hearing the truth disclosed by Sharon's harsh remark, the narrator's mother first cried, feeling ashamed about her disfigured son and her unhappy marriage. However, on the way back to her house, she soon "straightened herself and spoke in an unnaturally cheerful voice that could carry as far as the cottage [where Nancy's mother lives]" (157). What lurks beneath her "cheerful voice" (143) is her shame of her son being teased by Nancy. For the narrator, the phrases "mock my little boy for what he cannot help" uttered by his mother and what Nancy's mother calls "a kid with a messed-up face" (157) both reveal the undesirability of his disfiguring birthmark. Such knowledge, unfortunately, was previously unavailable to him. He believed his "birthmark to be a soft brown color" (155), as reflected in the "dim" mirror in his house. The red paint on Nancy's face and the quarrel between the two mothers provide him with a chance to experience an epiphany, when he first realizes how his disfigured face really looks. As Michael Franz Basch states, shame "can be thought of as an inability to effectively arouse the other person's positive reactions to one's communications" (qtd. in Sedgwick 37). In light of this, the narrator feels shamed by Nancy's imitation of him, but is further shamed by the quarrel between his mother and Nancy's mother for two reasons. First, what they say makes him realize that his "messed-up face" does not fit into the socially acceptable norm of beauty. Second, he feels ashamed because his suffering from taunts is witnessed by his mother, who is ashamed about how her son's disfigured face is stigmatized by others.

Even the narrator's mother fails to respect the alterity of her son, avoiding any reference to his birthmark and lying that she has to teach him at home "because of a bronchial ailment" (148):

She had been devoted to me—not the word either of us would have used, but I think

the right one—till I was nine years old. She taught me herself. Then she sent me away to school. This sounds like a recipe for disaster. The mother-coddled purple-faced lad, thrown suddenly amongst the taunts, the ruthless assaults of young savages. But I didn't have a bad time, and to this day I'm not sure why not. . . . I think, though, that the atmosphere in our house, that climate of ill temper and ferocity and disgust—even coming from an often unseen father—may have made any other place seem reasonable, almost accepting, though in a negative not a positive way. It was not a question of anybody making an effort, being nice to me. There was a name for me—it was Grape-Nuts. But almost everybody had a derogatory nickname. . . . I got along. (144)

Contrary to everybody's expectations, the narrator "didn't have a bad time" at school for two reasons. First, his mother's love for him may explain why he "got along." In fact, he testifies in retrospect: "I think my mother did the right thing. The emphasis on my one notable flaw, the goading and ganging up, would have caught me too young and with nowhere to hide" (148). For this reason, he made his mother "the rescuer and protector," and he believes "this representation to be true" (144).

The narrator's mother attempts to transform the stigma of his birthmark by hiding information about it from him. The narrator's rendering of "the right thing" done by his mother is unreliable, however, for he also mentions that "too much fuss and showy kindness" would cause more harm to children with physical flaws than "taunts and isolation" do. In other words, too much love and protectiveness make him suffer more from his belated knowledge of the undesirability of his birthmark. Therefore, the reference to his mother as "the rescuer and protector" has to be taken as a cynical gesture reflecting his awareness that he and his mother are intricately bonded by his stigmatized birthmark. This awareness is signified by his reference made a few pages later to his birthmark as "the shackle I could not loosen, that I had to admit to, that bound me to her from the womb" (159). Second is the "climate of ill temper and ferocity and disgust" caused by his father in his house that even makes the experience of being derogatorily nicknamed by classmates more "accepting." This is not to say that I hereby tolerate the domestic violence inflicted on the narrator by his

father. Rather, I suggest that his father's "disgust" for his birthmark had unwittingly, contrary to his father's intention, toughened him up and thereby prepared him to face other people's baleful reactions to his difference in the public domain. Gaining greater mental strength to cope with social avoidance is the unexpected positive consequence that arises from the negative experiences of being stigmatized.

Another positive consequence arising out of social exclusion is emphasized by Edmund Wilson in his *The Wound and the Bow* (1941), which is about stigma and creativity. Using the mythic prototype of the stigmatized artist figure Philoctetes whose creativity blossoms because of the "misfortune" of his "exile," "an incurable wound," "isolation and outlawry" (236-37), Wilson develops the idea of artistic creativity as reaction to personal weakness and disability. A more recent discussion of the connection between stigma and creativity can be seen in Hélène Cixous' *Stigmata: Escaping Texts*, where she views stigma as the motor to provoke or stimulate creative responses: "Stigma stings, pierces, makes holes, separates with pinched marks and in the same movement distinguishes—re-marks—inscribes, writes. Stigma wounds and spurs, stimulates" (xiii). The stigmatized people are not only wounded but also stimulated by the negative experiences associated with their stigma. Stigma may have a negative influence on one's personal development, and it is also what Cixous describes as "a sign of fertilization" which stimulates creativity in writing and lives: "All literature is scary. It celebrates the wound and repeats the lesion" (xii). Cixous defines the idea of artistic creativity as reaction to the wound caused by stigmatization.

In keeping with Wilson and Cixous' hypotheses, the unpleasant childhood memories and feelings such as shame caused by his stigmatized birthmark on the right side of his face stimulate rather than destroy his creativity. Exceeding Coleman's anticipation that "stigma often results in a special kind of downward mobility," the narrator in "Face" learns how to disregard the bias towards physical flaws that is beyond his control and attempts to reverse stigma into the drive for upward mobility. He successfully averts people's attention from his disfigured face to his voice by cultivating his voice which "was naturally adaptable and with a bit of training it improved" (145). As Duncan suggests, "A career in radio suited someone who had grown up conscious of a disfiguring facial birthmark" (150). With his voice mim-

icry skill, he gets a job as a voice actor on national radio. According to Margaret A. Boden, creativity “is the ability to come up with ideas or artefacts that are *new*, *surprising* and *valuable*” (1). In light of this, we sense the limits of the narrator’s creativity as well. Becoming a voice actor is “*valuable*,” but he can neither challenge the social norm of beauty nor destigmatize a birthmark. To put it more clearly, shifting people’s attention from his face to his voice is more akin to a clever evasion rather than an ability to create something “*new*” and “*surprising*.” His performance would have been more creative if he could have transformed the stigma of his birthmark by building a successful career without hiding it.

The achievement of the narrator in “Face” invites us to rethink how stigma becomes an interpretive problem. The stigmatized may become mentally stronger than normal people, while stigmatizers may become mentally more disabled than the stigmatized. Take Marlene, the narrator in “Child’s Play” as an example. Duncan describes Marlene as a “cold-hearted” and “unrepentant” (152) narrator as Marlene “describes Verna as nonhuman before she loses her life—she is a ‘jellyfish in the water,’ a rubber object, a pattern on a bathing cap” (157). Moreover, “there is little sign of remorse” (152) in Marlene’s account of their drowning of Verna. Marlene seems to elude her responsibility by suggesting that the drowning “could have been an accident” (222). Rather than seeing Marlene as “unrepentant,” however, I agree with Dilia Narduzzi’s view that “Child’s Play” is “an account of adults seeking personal atonement for past action” (71). The adult Marlene secretly seeks “personal atonement” for bullying and murdering Verna by publishing an academic book entitled *Idiots and Idols*, in which she attempts to deconstruct the concept of being mentally and physically disabled by reconstructing its meaning through its veneration:

What I was trying to explore was the attitude of people in various cultures—one does not dare say the word “primitive” to describe such cultures—the attitude toward people who are mentally or physically unique. The words “deficient,” “handicapped,” “retarded” being of course also consigned to the dustbin and probably for good reason—not simply because such words may indicate a superior attitude and habitual unkindness but because they are not truly descriptive. Those words push aside a good deal that is remarkable, even awesome—or at any rate peculiarly pow-

erful—in such people. And what was interesting was to discover a certain amount of *veneration* as well as *persecution*, and the ascribing—not entirely inaccurately—of quite a range of ability, seen as sacred, magical, dangerous, or valuable. (211; emphasis added)

In this passage, the intriguing co-existence of seemingly opposite treatments of “a range of ability” possessed by the stigmatized, “veneration” and “persecution,” harks back to what Cixous argues, “the stigmatized person is signaled out for *exclusion* and *election*” (xiii). Take the narrator in “Face” as an example. The boy who was once socially excluded because of his stigmatized facial disfigurement eventually stands out as a radio announcer whose “agreeable, slightly quirky, durable radio personality” wins him many admirers.

In “Child’s Play,” dark feelings such as shame and guilt play a central role in motivating Marlene to write an academic book on disability. According to Donald L. Nathanson, “Guilt implies action, while shame implies that some quality of the self has been brought into question” (qtd. in Ahmed 105). This can be applied to Marlene, who suffers from the guilt of having persecuted and murdered Verna. While the narrator in “Face” feels ashamed about his “affliction” (159) being witnessed by others, Marlene is ashamed when she imagines how the hate crime she commits will be viewed by others. To improve “the quality of the self,” Marlene resorts to critical writing, such as academic papers or the use of literary and medical terms to cover up her shame of having once stigmatized a child who is disabled. Marlene transforms her guilt and shame into “a starting point” as she embarks on a journey of becoming a scholar of disability studies, “the achievement of adulthood” (211).

In this section, I have investigated how the narrator in “Face” translates shame generated by his attribute of facial disfigurement into a motivating factor to develop his career as a radio announcer and how Marlene in “Child’s Play” works through the guilt and shame associated with her drowning of a disabled child by engaging in academic projects on disability study. Both cases remind us of the possibility of reversing negative experiences of being stigmatized or stigmatizing others into creativity. However, the seeming successes of the narrators in both stories are undermined by time shifts and the shadowy doubles set up by

Munro in each story. In “Face,” Nancy is shown as a double of the narrator as she imitates his birthmark by smearing her face with red paint. After the quarrel between the narrator and Nancy’s mother over Nancy’s offensive behavior, Nancy and her mother have moved out of the cottage and lost contact with the narrator, who has been sent away to a boy’s school. Many years later, after the narrator’s father’s funeral, the narrator is told by his mother that Nancy used “a razor blade to slice into her cheek” (159) shortly before the narrator was sent off to school. Out of what the narrator’s mother refers to as “[s]uch deep feelings,” Nancy has “cut open just that one cheek, trying the best she could to make herself look like” the narrator (160). Towards the end of the story, the narrator describes that he recently encountered an enigmatic reader who reads him poetry in his dream. The narrator cannot recognize the lines of Walter de la Mare read to him by the reader, but later he comes across the poem while sorting old books. The lines of the poem bring him back to the afflictive past: “*Friends long forgotten/ May wait you where/ Life with death . . .*” (164). At the conclusion of the story, the narrator surmises what might have happened if he had met Nancy in later life:

Of course I know that if I had spotted Nancy—on the subway, for instance, in Toronto—both of us bearing our recognizable marks, we would in all probability have managed only one of those embarrassed and meaningless conversations, hurriedly listing useless autobiographical facts. I would have noted the mended nearly normal cheek or the still obvious wound, but it would probably not have come into the conversation. . . .

You think that would have changed things?

The answer is of course, and for a while, and never. (164)

The ended friendship between Nancy and the narrator can “never” be rekindled by Nancy’s act of self-mutilation, however, since Nancy’s “deep feelings” contain not only her empathy for the defaced narrator but also her envy of the narrator, who grew up in a richer family and received attention and protection from his mother. Disfiguring her own face may show that she longs for attention rather than that she sincerely empathizes with the narrator.

Therefore, bearing "recognizable marks" does not mean they will understand each other better through engaging in deep conversations, and the stigma of the birthmark will "never" disappear. In other words, pursuing the sameness of the narrator and herself through empathetic identification does not transform the stigma of a birthmark.

In "Child's Play," there is also a parallel between Marlene and Charlene, who have never met each other since their drowning of Verna in childhood, although Marlene sees Charlene's wedding picture in a paper and Charlene learns about Marlene's book publication from a magazine. Many decades later, Charlene's husband sends a letter to Marlene, informing her that Charlene is in Princess Margarete Hospital in Toronto, where she is dying of lung cancer. When Marlene discovers that Charlene is still alive at the main desk in the hospital, she almost wants to "turn away" before finding out the number of Charlene's room: "I would have been ashamed, I suppose. Not ashamed at my lack of feeling so much as my lack of fortitude" (213). She feels ashamed about her fear of seeing Charlene, who was involved in a conspiracy to kill Verna with her. Although she does not have a chance to talk to Charlene, who is sleeping, she is given a letter by the nurse. In the letter Charlene asks Marlene to "go to Guelph and go to the cathedral and ask for Father Hofstrader" (215), who has promised to arrange a deathbed confession for Charlene. Charlene's letter and Marlene's anthropological book on disability show the different ways in which they pursue atonement for what they did to Verna. While Marlene attempts to redeem her guilt and shame of murdering a disabled child by reconstructing the meaning of disability in her book, her academic success is shadowed by Charlene's request for a deathbed confession, which is a reminder that their guilt and shame remain. After she has arranged the confession for Charlene at the cathedral, Marlene's true attitude towards the crime she committed is exposed in the following passage:

Was I not tempted, during all this palaver? Not once? You'd think that I might break open, be wise to break open, glimpsing that vast though tricky forgiveness. But no. It's not for me. What's done is done. (221)

Her rejection of "tricky forgiveness" shows that what is transformed by her book's

“veneration” of the disabled is not so much her attitude towards the disabled as her guilty conscience. Publishing a book on disability as an atonement for her past crime proves to be an inadequate attempt. The shift from first- to second-person pronoun also indicates a “suppressed subjectivity” and “the mind of a conflicted individual” (qtd. in Duncan 155). Like the narrator in “Face,” the older self of Marlene has not changed her younger self’s negative attitude towards stigma, which is suppressed and censored in her morally dubious confession.

### Conclusion

To conclude, I again confirm my argument that what makes Munro’s late style, as shown in “Face” and “Child’s Play” from *Too Much Happiness*, “horrifying,” is her emphasis on the limits of stigma transformation. This is achieved through her depiction of the characters’ ambivalent responses to stigma and the complexity of the relationship between the stigmatized and the stigmatizer.

Both the narrators in “Face” and “Child’s Play” attempt to reverse the negative emotions generated by stigma such as shame and guilt into creativity for the performing arts or academic writing. The time shifts and shadowy doubles set up by Munro in each story, however, suggest that these stories are not simply success stories of stigma transformation. In both stories, Munro shifts across time, as both her narrators are old retired people, reflecting back on their unspoken past, and their shadowy doubles function to indicate that “what happened long ago has resurfaced, and will not go away” (Duncan 159). Munro explores the darker side of success stories of both the stigmatized and stigmatizer and complicates Wilson and Cixous’ discussion of stigma and creativity by showing that becoming a successful announcer or a scholar does not prevent them from being afflicted by childhood memories. Munro’s writing about stigma resists transformative reading of stigma and foregrounds the limits of transforming one’s own and others’ stigma. She adopts retrospective accounts to show the horrifying fact that neither of the retired narrators have changed their ambivalent attitudes towards the stigma attached to birthmarks or disability despite the passage of time.

Critiquing the ambivalence of stigma transformation, Munro's stigma stories consider the possibility to "learn *from* the Other" and recognize our own otherness. We are all disabled in different ways. "Face" and "Child's Play" demonstrate the impact of stigmatization on ordinary life, raising significant questions: How do we learn from our own otherness and transform that otherness into a creative force (no matter how limited it is) as the narrator does in "Face"? If stigma cannot disappear, as Nancy's scar and his mother's angry response remind the narrator, how do we relate to the stigmatized without unwittingly hurting them? If guilt and shame will not go away, as Charlene's request for confession reminds Marlene, how do we learn from their painful lessons and respect the alterity of the Other?

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## 艾莉絲·孟若〈臉〉與〈童戲〉對汙名轉化的批判

謝文珊\*

## 摘要

艾莉絲·孟若晚期的短篇小說集《太多快樂》(2009)中瀰漫的恐怖感，困惑了不少評論者。艾拉·鄧肯指出該小說集的恐怖感，來自艾莉絲·孟若對敘事聲音的運用，尤其呈現在〈臉〉與〈童戲〉兩篇小說中。雖然鄧肯強調兩篇小說敘事者的冷漠所傳達的恐怖，我主張使這兩篇小說「令人恐懼」的，與其說是敘事者的冷漠，不如說是敘事者的冷漠語氣所暗示的情感潛流——未被承認的恨、厭惡、羞愧和罪惡感。這些被壓抑的情感暗指小說人物對汙名具爭議性的反應，亦揭露了汙名轉化的侷限。透過分析〈臉〉與〈童戲〉兩篇分別描寫胎記和與失能汙名的小說，本文探索孟若如何經由書寫人物被汙名所引發的過多情感探討汙名轉化的侷限，凸顯人物對汙名的矛盾回應。本文第一部分討論蒙受汙名者與施加汙名者的互動如何引起厭惡與恨。本文第二部分探究〈臉〉的敘事者如何嘗試透過隱藏他的胎記以克服其羞愧感，以及〈童戲〉的敘事者如何試圖經由出版失能研究的著作來除罪。本文主張孟若晚期小說風格的恐怖在於，她的書寫拒絕呈現對汙名的改觀閱讀。孟若的〈臉〉與〈童戲〉提醒讀者更加意識到汙名化對日常生活的影響，並認識自己與他人的異質性。

**關鍵詞：**孟若、汙名、羞愧感、罪惡感、失能

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