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## Alterity in Alice Munro's Short Story "Child's Play"

Florian Pichon<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*Alice Munro's "Child's Play" is a narrator's confession about the difficulty of confessing. It is by delaying the information, undertaking a cataphoric articulation of the catastrophe, that the narrator eventually spits out the truth. From the ubiquity of the "Up" orientational metaphor during the sacrificial act to the narrative detours, transfers from the present to the past and line breaks filling the unmentioned, the narrative is a matter of differing and deferring. The oppositions in "Child's Play" weave together: the scapegoating of the sacrificed victim gives her potency for the shaping of the young narrator's friendship with an illusionary twin; and the scapegoat's ghost, the powerful present absent, takes the host of the narrative hostage. The writing becomes both a poison and a remedy: the fabrication of a poisonous narrative riddled with literary circumvolutions and deviations of deviances enables the truth to emerge.*

**Keywords:** Short story; Narrator; Affects; Alterity; Alice Munro

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<sup>1</sup>PhD student at the University of Montreal, Canada

Email: [florian.pichon@umontreal.ca](mailto:florian.pichon@umontreal.ca)

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The short story “Child’s Play,” written by Canadian Nobel Prize winner Alice Munro and published in her collection *Too Much Happiness* in 2009, is a story narrated by Marlene, now an adult. The beginning of the story rather focuses on a particular time of her childhood, a time she would befriend Charlene, a girl with whom she had many things in common, and would despise Verna, a pupil with mental impairments – a “Special” one – who used to live temporarily next door in the same double house. She makes a non-linear recollection of her past ending up with an escalation of hate, mingled with disgust, leading Marlene and Charlene to kill the girl by drowning her during the final day of camp. The crime is officially perceived by the adults as a banal accident. The narrative often shifts from passages happening during Marlene’s childhood to the present. The probable triggering factor catalyzing the narrative is the letter Marlene receives from Charlene’s husband informing her that his wife is dying from cancer. After some reluctance, Marlene comes to the hospital and finds an unrecognizable Charlene who has one last written favor for Marlene to accomplish: to find a certain Father Hofstrader and persuade him to come at her deathbed and give her the last rites.

From the final plot twist to the narrator’s early aphorism about becoming a different person at crucial points of one’s life, the notion of alterity is essential to apprehend the vividness and ingenuity stemming from this short fiction. It is important to recall that the word “alter” comes from the Latin *alter* and means “the other (of the two),” underlining important aspects of the short story under study: duality between past and present, character and narrator, innocence and guilt, friendship, the difference, and otherness, the last two being embodied by Verna. The same Latin root has led to words like “alien” and “alternative” which are blatant key words to grasp the ambivalent aspect of the narrative in “Child’s Play.” In the same way, the idea of alterity in someone implies a transition; how, for instance, the narrator would perceive herself and how she would now consider an event from the past in which she was involved. When the narrator informs us that “[e]very year, when you’re a child, you become a different person” (Munro 188), it is a way for her to anticipate the disclosure of the evil matter but also a means to start her rehabilitation towards a reader who is not yet aware of the murderous act. She implicitly starts informing the reader that the Marlene narrator is a complete alteration of the Marlene criminal before even confessing the crime. The perversity of the situation the reader is involved in lies in the circumvolutions the narrator takes, as an adult, to confess the results of her horrendous affect as a kid. This story is about a murder that was committed by children from the point of view of an adult narrator whose crime is difficult to articulate.

Marlene’s trip to the Cathedral of Guelph is a symbolical pilgrimage towards confession. She won’t state out loud that she is guilty and ashamed of her decision, but she makes the effort to give the reader a patchwork of information, delaying the controversial act until the very end of the story, which seems a crystal-clear acknowledgement of the act as a disgusting crime, blaming the ego, being self-reflective and considering herself shameful. This paper will then examine how the narrator alters the narrative unfolding a past that alters the present. Through orientational metaphors, the ambivalence of certain words like “awful,” the alteration of the guilty party and symbolical deviations, the narrator makes a confession on how hard it is to make a confession, and on how an affect in a temporary past may affect a present time and the rest of someone’s life.

The plot in “Child’s Play” reaches an apex when the “play” in question gets a criminal tone and leads to the elevation of the affect of hatred. Verna’s death is a symbolical non-access to adulthood for her and access granted for Marlene and Charlene by performing a sacrifice, ontological feature of a grown-up people’s society. The swimming scene could be seen as a rite of passage, the initiatory trip from childhood to adolescence and puberty, innocence lost. Verna may have failed the test as seen earlier in the text when Marlene’s mother thinks she “is young for her age” (Munro 195). She may have been too innocent for this world, recalling Darwin’s theory on the survival of the fittest, the orientational idea of climbing *up* the social ladder or falling *down* in society. Keeping this vertical system in mind, the unveiling of the crime at the very end of the story depicts a surprising ascent of the persecutors:

We did not look at each other and decide to do what we subsequently and consciously did. Consciously, because our eyes did meet as the head of Verna tried to *rise up* to the *surface* of the water. Her head was determined to *rise*, like a dumpling in a stew. The rest of her was making misguided feeble movements *down* in the water, but the

head knew what it should do. . . . 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. 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. (Munro 222, emphasis added)

During the sacrificial act, a sense of elevation is set up in the narrative. To corroborate this statement, certain adjectives, nouns, prepositional or phrasal verbs, and prefixes (*sur-* in “surface” comes from the French prefix meaning “above”) allow an introduction to the concept of ups and downs that supports the idea of a certain loss of homeostasis from a body that seeks enjoyment by the obliteration of someone else. The persecutors, through sacrifice, enact an altered version of the *Übermensch*, inherently superior, now capable of taking another person’s life.

A metaphorical orientational approach to language was widely observed and addressed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By*. The murder scene in “Child’s Play” is consistent with Lakoff and Johnson’s formulas linking life to *Up* and death to *Down* (Lakoff and Johnson 15) but alters the equation “Good is Up, Bad is Down” (Lakoff and Johnson 16) by elevating the crime to the high spheres of child evil. The externalization of impulses through the killing, at the very end of the narrative, goes hand in hand with Marlene’s frustrated need for externalization, her need to tell the event, and Charlene’s need for confession on her deathbed, hoping for redemption. If the murder is the culmination of their lives, the confession of the crime is the culmination of Charlene’s agony and Marlene’s role of narrator. The killing was meant to shake *up* the current situation by disposing of Verna who prevented Marlene from living fully; she found the courage to dismantle what was established, to make true what common sense denies by *upsetting* things. In the same way, the truth comes out only by upsetting the narrator’s present, forcing her to spit out the results of disgust and hatred, and elevating the situation towards a confession of crime that is, unfortunately for her, at odds with her aspirations for disinterestedness and aloofness. It also seems interesting to consider that the act of narrative confession may never have emerged without Charlene’s reappearance in Marlene’s life, Charlene’s cancer putting this event *up* to the surface, altering Marlene’s present life and updating it in her psyche.

Moreover, Verna’s sacrifice is to be linked to a literary climax. The act of killing frightens as well as it draws Marlene and Charlene into a sort of nirvana while the reader experiences a literary submersion. Textually, the narrator goes through deviations, elliptical preliminaries to narrate the act of enjoyment with fury and panache, the crime being told and staged at the very end of the story for the sake of the apotheosis, the supreme level of the *up*. It is the representation of child executioners which, by its extreme anti-conventionalism, recalls the distinction that Barthes makes between the text of pleasure and the text of *jouissance*: the reader will enjoy the radicalness offered by this “Child’s Crime” which breaks with the norms and comfort of reading the reader usually gets acquainted with. Inhibitions like the desire to kill are inhibitions only if the perspective of externalizing them is perceived as a potential act of enjoyment that comes into conflict with the external world in which an individual interacts and develops.

Eventually, this up/down duality is correlated to the metaphorical orientational concept of in/out. The grotesque example of the cockroach in Sianne Ngai’s essay on disgust puts into light an “effort to absolve [a] sin by ingesting the intolerable” (Ngai 346) that parallels the intolerable touch of the disgusting in “Child’s Play.” Touching Verna is an act that used to deeply affect Marlene before the crime, but she ends up making the effort to absolve the sin of hatred by eventually succeeding in enjoying touching the intolerable, paradoxically through the sinful act of violence and death. The attempt at beautifying the ugliness and spiritualizing the barbaric is made but falls short in the long run. The act of spitting out the cockroach is visual and instinctive but of course the externalization of the murder, the spitting out of the murderous disgusting occurs in “Child’s Play,” rather in a slow way, after years of neglect and cruel optimism. The externalization comes both for Marlene, the narrator, confessing her criminal act, and for Charlene, asking for a priest to give her the last rites of

a dying sinner. In a sense the disgust can be removed through the act of killing but the permanent absorption of its moral or spiritual values cannot.

Between the slug, the jellyfish, and the snake, the similes are varied and often connect Verna to a parasite that one should get rid of at once. The deviation of the deviance is crucial to tackle the representation of Verna's altered and disgusting specialness. Indeed, the metaphor of the snake (Munro 195) to represent Verna deviates the true evil of the story – the narrator herself – with the combination of zoomorphism and Christian symbolism. The deviation also occurs on the inherent characteristics of rhetorical devices themselves; for instance, the common metaphor of the “snout” (Munro 197) to describe a nose is here used for Verna's fingers, adding a sense of abnormality and body part disorder. The chiasmus “I would have to go so close as to touch her and to risk her touching me” (Munro 197) does not render the sense of symbiosis a chiasmus usually conveys. Here its use is deviated to refer to an instinctive repulsion.

The same repulsion is to be found during the fight scene (Munro 198) when Marlene accidentally touches Verna's clothes with her head, underlining a bodily frustration closely associated with haphophobia: “I was not wearing a cap, so the hairs of my head came in contact with the woolly coat or jacket she had on, and it seemed to me that I had actually touched bristling hairs on the skin of a gross hard belly” (Munro 198). It is not even the violent act of pushing her that affects her psyche, but the simple hair/textile touch itself which falsely turns into a disgusting skin to skin contact. Her disgust about a physical interaction with Verna distorts her perception of the scene, clothes being useless layers when facing the risk of getting contaminated by a walking virus.

As a matter of fact, Marlene's extreme affect gives a certain omnipotence to Verna whose unwelcomed presence lurks and constantly jeopardize her existence. The latter even experiences extreme disgust at the thought that Verna's shadow could touch the front steps of her house whenever she would walk along the street to go to school (Munro 199). When Verna destroys a part of her makeshift house made of leaves, it is a symbolical violation of Marlene's intimacy and private sphere, the walls she easily tears to pieces being comforting protection from the outside and potential intruders. She is therefore seen as a parasite that could contaminate a place or an evil that could deconsecrate the household. Verna stirs up strong feelings and, therefore, Marlene's extreme affect of hatred asks for an exhausting amount of care towards its target: “the disgusting, which is perceived as dangerous and contaminating and thus something to which one cannot possibly remain indifferent” (Ngai 336). Verna's power lies in the absence of contempt she provokes due to the substantial care and meticulousity the process of “monsterizing” her the ersatz twins give<sup>i</sup>. A first reason for the affect of hatred could lie in Marlene's discovery of her unspecialness, an intrinsic feature of human beings: “it is the work of culture to make us feel special; just as parents need to make their children feel special to help them bear and bear with – and hopefully enjoy – their insignificance in the larger scheme of things” (Philips xv). When Verna comes into her life, Marlene is at a pivotal time when children's self-confidence and personality are still in the making and that they seek peculiarities to stand out of the crowd and give their existence a meaning on the scale of microcosms and macrocosms, from school and the family sphere to one's importance in society, the world, and the universe. It comes as no surprise that the special thing Verna has would become her scarlet letter, bearing various meanings, an A for aspiration, alien, or abhorrence.

Additionally, no sense of inferiority is granted to Verna but a sense of danger that makes her significant in Marlene's life. The scene with the house of leaves is essential to acknowledge this meaningfulness, the potency of Verna that Marlene would like to eradicate, a feeling that cannot be built out of contempt<sup>ii</sup>. It is an interesting point in the sense that Verna is a neurodivergent girl and this condition does not affect her status in the plot. She remains on an equal footing and is even given a lot of thoughts which would imply that she is in a superior position, being condemned as a stalker while being the one stalked like an infamous celebrity. Disgust is a very active affect and shows in this short story that Verna is worthy of Marlene and Charlene's preoccupation. The second reason why Marlene and Charlene have been affected in such a strong way probably comes from the inability of the staff to put words on the “specialness,” leading pupils to consider some children as “the Specials,” sort of mysterious category which adds to Verna's ostracism. The introduction of mental

disabilities for a younger generation would have been a way for children like Marlene and Charlene to react with the slighter affect of tolerance instead.

The disgust Marlene experienced as a child is still vividly present at the time of the narration and is connected to details of Verna's existence like her own name and her peppermint candies, becoming a madeleine de Proust of disgust: "I dislike peppermint flavouring to this day. And the name Verna – I dislike that. It doesn't sound like spring to me<sup>iii</sup>, or like green grass or garlands of flowers or girls in flimsy dresses. It sounds more like a trail of obstinate peppermint, green slime" (Munro 196). She denies the intrinsic etymological qualities of Verna, which reinforces her attempt at dispossessing her from a conventionally well-perceived imagery. The green slime that Marlene alludes to is the only derogatory term in the extract, the only one which is not conventionally connected to the imagery of springtime and the only one in compliance with her reaction to the recollection of the subject. Moreover, this trail of slime follows her the same way the idea of guilt has been following her since the day of the crime, first hidden as a child's play, as trivial evidence of brutal innocence, then turned into bitter self-reflexivity. The matter mars her life to the point of confessing the crime in a convoluted and deviated way because the inner shame is too powerful to be totally displayed and unleashed on the altar of the reader's judgmental eye.

The interesting etymological correlation Girard makes between words like *crime*, *criteria*, and *critique*<sup>iv</sup> is compelling to analyze Charlene's condemnation of Verna through the description of her hands, being too big they could probably strangle someone (Munro 204). Verna's deviance is underpinned by arguments on her physique, recalling outdated views in criminology<sup>v</sup> and universal hasty judgement. Physiognomy becomes a useful study to gauge someone's malignity, Verna's disgusting physical appearance revealing her evilness.

I would like to associate Girard's idea with the word "monster" which is etymologically speaking interesting to discuss. Its Latin origin comes from *monere* "to warn" and has led to *mōnstrum*, to name "the fantastic, the monstrous, the prodigious" but also the omen from the Gods, either good or bad news. This ambivalence between good and evil is reminiscent of the word "awe" and which derivation "awful" is present several times in "Child's Play," either to describe Verna, an event or an interaction connected to her<sup>vi</sup>. The intriguing union between wonder and fear, at the source of the differentiation between "awesome" (impressive, great) and "awful" (terrifying, and used archaically to qualify something fascinating), is typically the feeling experienced by the children, Marlene and Charlene included, the day of the murder: "We may have cried out as many others did, first in fear and then in delight as we regained our footing" (Munro 221), recalling the sinusoidal inflections of the homeostasis discussed in *Part I* with the "Up" orientational metaphor. Marlene, as an adult, takes a close look at the concept of "frightening wonder" which is at the core of the murderous act:

The words "deficient," "handicapped," "retarded" . . . push aside a good deal that is remarkable, even awesome – or at any rate peculiarly powerful, in such people. And what was interesting was to discover a certain amount of *reverence* as well as *persecution*, and the ascribing – not entirely inaccurately – of quite a range of abilities, seen as *sacred*, *magical*, *dangerous*, or *valuable*. (Munro 210, emphasis added)

Through her studies as an adult, she finds an anthropological meaning to the beauty in the uncanny, but words in the end are mingled with negative terms, rendering the relation between love and hatred, disgust and wonder complicated and difficult to understand, especially when facing these affects as a child. She recognizes a good side in Verna, but the beauty of that specialness is overshadowed by the assumption that Verna is a threat, a bad rather than a good omen.

This extract also serves as an exemplification of the Latin word *Sacer*, the sacred, used here, but also its counterpart, the cursed. It is the sacrament of an epiphanic murder added to the unholy holiness of innocence and unconsciousness albeit the sacrifice of a poor victim. Concerning the narrator's perspective, it is a sacrament because she reaches an empiric knowledge, finally able to envision the word "persecute" as something more weighty than empty talk with "an adult, legal sound" (Munro 203). Nevertheless, it leads to her sacrifice by renouncing the pleasures of communication and attachment for the rest of her life.

The narrator, despite her efforts to speak out and recognize the murder, instinctively tries to find a substitute guilty party, as a justification for the consequences of her exacerbated affects of hate and disgust. The various strategies she uses to alter the guilt and to camouflage her own responsibility starts in the title itself. The descriptive genitive of “child’s play” to refer to a murder is a first ironically deceitful way to apprehend the act as something common, a trivial game put into practice by children, out of innocence and casualness. Not so much to depict the rushed aspect of a police investigation, the nominal sentences of the narrator when she reminisces and hypothesizes about what the adults may have thought after the accident are telling concerning the instinctive inclination to link childhood with guiltlessness: “Young children. Terrified. Yes, yes. Hardly knew what they were doing” (Munro, 222). This sense of innocence taken for granted is to be found several times in the narrative, a first step to affirm that Marlene was too young to understand what she was doing. From not knowing what the great Depression was to the comic remark about being “On Relief” and “Not Their Fault” (Munro 194), children live in a naïve world where financial crises, poverty and great turmoil are not taken into consideration yet. At the beginning of the story, the narrator recalls a time when children would say racist terms because they would not know what it means: “It was possible (...) to say *coolie*, without a thought of offence. Or *darkie*, or to talk about *jewing* a price down” (Munro 189). While the narrator suggests that children had no clue about what they were saying, using words without any idea of their signification and racist connotations, one may assume that children’s tendency to be disgusted by the Other could be justified by social determinism. When reading the short story for a second time, being aware of the crime, one may find children doomed to thing the Other disgusting. Indeed, from the very start, they are sometimes accustomed to a racist habitus, surrounded by counter-model adults who prevent any form of tolerance and respect for differences, leading to a preprogrammed scapegoating.

The scapegoating is two-fold in this story: first Verna is a scapegoat for Marlene and Charlene, secondly, adults are scapegoated by the adult narrator to palliate too heavy a sense of guilt. The first people made responsible for what happened are Marlene’s parents. They did not take the time to understand her disgust towards Verna, Marlene accusing her mother of faking her sympathy for Verna and implying that she was not smart enough – euphemistically considered “underneath” (Munro 196) – to have a real conversation on her affects. The inability of the parents to give Marlene a brother or her sister, making her their only focus of attention, also seems to justify a flaring of evil behavior as a kid: “And being an only child, I had been coddled a good deal (also scolded). I was awkward, precocious, timid, full of my private rituals and aversions” (Munro 195). The parents’ authority is completely overthrown, even syntactically at the beginning (Munro 188). Their words are not introduced in a normal dialogue and their status is put into brackets as if they did not even deserve the right to talk, a talk that would be potentially antagonistic with the narrator’s intention. This stylistic choice is a symbolical decline of parental legitimacy for understanding and usefulness.

The narrator’s guilt subsides due to the meticulousness she takes to portray the “child’s play” as a game she progressively got entrapped in because of Charlene’s need for reciprocity in the fake twinning process they initiated when they met. Indeed, they started with the similarities of their body features, then the surgeries they had gone through, then the disgusting experiences they had faced. Charlene’s disgusting experience is about witnessing her brother having sex, adding an unexpected detail for the anecdote: “his bare white bum had pimples on it” (Munro 193). Marlene needed to find something as sickening and began talking about Verna. This would imply that she felt she had to come out with something, to compete and that Charlene expected something from her. Marlene was doomed to introduce Verna to Charlene – having nothing more disgusting in mind to talk about – because of her leadership, and forcefulness, clinging to a friendship at all costs judging from how hard it was for her to make friends. In the interview “The Proximity of the Other,” Levinas comes back to the idea of forced reciprocity between two individuals:

My interrogation consisted in questioning that initial reciprocity. The other whom I address – is he not initially the one with whom I stand in the relationship one has with one who is weaker? For example, I am generous toward the other without that generosity being immediately claimed as reciprocal. The moment one is generous in

hopes of reciprocity, that relation no longer involves generosity but the commercial relation, the exchange of good behavior. In the relation to the other, the other appears to me as one to whom I owe something, toward whom I have a responsibility. (Levinas 100-101)

Marlene owes this friendship a reciprocity she has to maintain even if she realizes that the affect of disgust she conveys to Charlene has some limits. One day, during supper, Marlene relativizes Verna's disgusting nature by admitting that she was "not so notable a presence" (Munro 203) after all. Yet, she keeps this fraudulent display of disgust going because it is "more exciting that way" (Munro 202). She cherishes Charlene's presence and per se her perception of the situation. Therefore, she must keep her entertained, understanding that disinterestedness and tolerance are underwhelming affects compared to disgust and hatred. Modifying this perception would have been a threat to the friendship because she would have jeopardized her responsibility for reciprocity. Marlene is a cruel optimist in the sense that she stays attached to a simulacrum of disgust, which is problematic since it keeps her in a vicious interdependence of disproportionate hatred.

Years later, her responsibility towards Charlene is still safeguarded. Indeed, Marlene refuses at first to go to the hospital and does not want to go to Guelph to find Father Hofstrader but she tries to find him anyway. This may suggest a sort of guilt towards Charlene, or a responsibility towards her symbolical twin. Indeed, Marlene was the one introducing Verna to her, pushing her towards building disgust and leading her towards a moral downfall in her adulthood. She accepts Charlene's request – reluctantly on the surface – because she is responsible for the evil pairing and because she represents the inactive part in the pair's confession process. Therefore, she bears the burden of reluctant action<sup>vii</sup>.

In a sense, this transfer of guilt allows us to make conjectures about Marlene being a subsequent sacrifice figure to the initial one. It is important to remember that a sacrifice is a two-fold term: it can either mean the offering (on the altar) or the renunciation of something. While Verna was offered as a sacrifice, Marlene seems to sacrifice a part of herself, to renounce the basic pleasures of life because of a yawning past that cannot be forgotten nor remedied: "And then there's a switchback, what's been all over and done with sprouting up fresh, wanting attention, wanting you to do something about it, though, it's plain there is not on this earth a thing to be done" (Munro 189). This sense of recognition of uselessness could echo a form of latent unlovability, lest someone might "split [her] open" (Munro 211), which would then explain her lack of empathy and apparent disdain for such matters as marriage, family, and friendship. She only shares her secret to the readership, a vague and immaterialized shape. The easiest way to keep her past a secret is to remain independent for the rest of her life so that the authority of her face is not eventually trespassed, the secret buried in her consciousness taking the attributes of a tomb. Concerning her occupation as an anthropologist, the subjects she studies and that she is interested in are totally connected to her past, implying that she does care about her transgression and tries to find explanation to her specific case through research and empiricism. The sacrifice comes from the dependence of a living narrator upon the authority of a dead character, the ghost of the character haunting the host of the narrative. Verna is the present absent and dictates Marlene's choices of life. It goes without saying that both Marlene and Charlene "are always haunted by the myth of [their] potential" (Philips xii) because Verna's present absence mythologizes the potential great lives that they could have led, without, from a very young age, "a secret life of grudges" (Philips xiii), a burden to carry.

Marlene desires concealment and oblivion but it is at odds with the nobility and spiritual height the acknowledgement of her guilt represents. This suppressed impulse unremittingly targets an appeasement of the self she is afraid of. That is a relation of cruel optimism: it is cruel because she thinks she can avoid it all her life, but she cannot. Cruel optimism lies in her cruelly optimistic belief that "[every] year, when you're a child, you become a different person" (Munro 188), that she has become so many other people since the incident that she has no need to remember this event, although it resurfaces. In the same way, Charlene's reappearance in Marlene's life is the obstacle to the concealment of the truth she had yearned to preserve. While the twinship appears as flawed from the very beginning with an enumeration of differences including self-confidence, freckles, and the length

of their second toes (Munro 190), the post-murder period that turned the friendship into a clause of undisclosed confession follows the same pattern. Indeed, both protagonists act differently with regards to their guilt: Marlene voluntarily tries to forget the crime and secludes herself into singlehood and anthropological studies whereas Charlene gets married and actively seeks redemption by admitting to the crime in her final days.

The reader could perceive Marlene's guilt as impactful because it is latent, deviated, and implicit, while Charlene's attempted confession to a priest seems louder. The unsaid or poorly articulated implies the existence of an element buried in the subconscious and which silent repression matters. For instance, when Marlene is at the hospital and says that she has already seen dying people before when she sees Charlene, she talks about her parents but not Verna, whose death she directed. The very last sentence of the short story goes against the narrator's numerous details which would rather suggest a strong recollection and the resilience of her memories about the crime: "But I believe we were gone by then" (Munro 223). Clearly put aside from the preceding dialogue with several line breaks, it echoes a previous statement from the same passage when she states that "[her] memory fails when it comes to parting from Charlene" (Munro 223).

Both sentences give a floating aspect to the scene; half-conscious murderous kids led towards the ultimate sin by Fate, hovering over their shoulders in a sky that seems to brighten up as soon as the performance of killing has been accomplished. She gives the reader a sense that she was barely aware of what she was doing, trying to portray herself as being directed by a force she could not master, enacting something she could not prevent from happening. On a Gestalt perspective, it is crucial to emphasize the line breaks, the unmentioned, to give prominence to what is kept enclosed. How can we not perceive the analogy between a friendship which leads to "go ahead to fill in all the blanks between" (Munro 192) and the relationship narrator/reader and the reader's prerogative to fill the blanks of the narrative? Munro's "author's play" includes interspaces, shifts and flashbacks to unravel the bad behavior. The "no" (Munro 199), ending the awkward conversation with a girl who thought Verna and Marlene were sisters because they, at some point, were sharing the same house building is telling. Time elapses and the blank gets prominent: Marlene is disgusted by the content of this conversation and ashamed by the very idea of being affiliated to Verna. The blank reveals disgust and the horror of rumors, slander, and affiliation with the abnormal subtly put on paper by writing on something else.

As a conclusion, "Child's Play" is a story about the otherness, the altered, and the difficult but necessary confession of extremely bad behavior through metaphorical, symbolical, and narrative alterations. The act of narration is a pharmakon, both a poison for the narrator because the truth is first undisclosed and shameful, and a remedy for the appeasement of the soul. The symbolical exodus of Marlene to Guelph is the path to confession, the act of writing enabling the shift in behavior and the escape from a poisonous attitude<sup>viii</sup>. The writing is a poison because it is a simulacrum of reality (and this narrator perfectly exemplifies the illusion with the deceitfulness of her narrative) but also a remedy because the paraphernalia of narrative deceit that has been put on paper by the narrator eventually enables her to confess. It is with the fabrication of a sham that truth surfaces, oppositions being in a symbiotic relationship with each other. While Verna's murder can be seen as a transitional event that bears a significant weight in the process of sealing Charlene and Marlene's friendship, the narrator progressively tries to detach herself from it, lest she completely depends upon it in the long run. The writing is also a poison for the relationship reader/narrator; the time that has passed between the time of the events narrated and the time of narration is relatively important. Although she is careful to give very precise details throughout the narrative, the reader faces the unavoidable subjects of inaccuracy and narrator's reliability. Time has gone by and the question whether the recollection of the past has eventually merged with fiction lingers.

Alice Munro plans a late articulation of the evil matter. The murder is irrational; therefore, its narration is difficult to process for the adult culprit. She has delayed the fall of the house of leaves the story undoubtedly is about, processing to a difference through the ambivalence of speech and writing, narrator and character, aggressor and victim, adult, and child. As seen in *Part 2*, Verna is meticulously dehumanized and depicted as a social and literal parasite. Putting aside the excesses and innocence of childhood, the reader is misguided towards thinking that the "dark intention" Marlene



feels comes out from Verna. The story ends up being the building of a dark intention of concealment from the narrator, which renders the deviations of the narrative more striking.

There is a confession, but it is made by narrative detours, transfers from the present to the past and vice versa, but also through blanks and silences left by the precious unmentioned and delayed. Either for the reader or the young characters, “Child’s Play” is the story/narrative leading people astray. The alteration of the linearity in the narrative goes hand in hand with the alteration of the narrator’s self and her perception of the act of killing Verna. During the murder, the orientational metaphor of the “up” highlights the act as an epiphany for the self; however, the narrator, older and having experienced several alterations of the self throughout her development, now acknowledges this past event as a burden that bears resulting damages to her present and probably for her future. It is not surprising that the catastrophe Marlene and Charlene have catalyzed triggers a cataphoric articulation of the deed. The etymology of the Greek *κατά* for these three aforementioned words and the downward movement it conveys is not as compelling as the sense of going rightward a linguistic approach of the cataphora would do. The reluctance with which Marlene goes to the hospital and the basilica is symbolical of a journey in the past, a past that she would rather forget and that does not follow the same future-oriented direction of the catastrophe and the cataphoric confession. The impact of the catastrophe is postponed and differs in the Derridean sense of the word, the confession of the narrator is delayed and the reference to the murder is cataphorically alluded to through ellipsis and hindrances to referentiality. Munro’s “Child’s Play” is a matter of difference and differance.

Furthermore, the beginning of Sianne Ngai’s afterword for *Ugly Feelings* comes back to the idea that there cannot be any disgust without *jouissance*, the summit of desire, because both disgust and desire have a power for drawing bodies: one attracts, the other repulses. This means that both affects destroy any sense of disinterestedness, an aspect the narrator pretends to cherish and exert, unfolding the deceit, her repressed weakness, and the complexity of a confession about a past event that sounds trifling: “how distant and unimportant that seemed, only a starting point” (Munro 210). As a matter of fact, it only “seemed” unimportant: the absence of the present tense reinforces the idea that its importance as a starting point that has grown into a fundamental point of her life and a sensitive topic for her as a narrator involved in a vulnerable reader/narrator relationship. The confession is hard to deliver: the zoomorphic metaphors and overall dehumanization of a sacrificed Verna has led to the reversal of the aggressor/victim initial situation. The plot twist of “mak[ing] the one who is disgusted disgusting” (Ngai 353) progressively unfolds.

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<sup>i</sup> Adams Philips, 29-30.

<sup>ii</sup> Sianne Ngai, 336.

<sup>iii</sup> Verna comes from the Latin *vēr* “spring” and by extension *vernus* “springlike.”

<sup>iv</sup> René Girard, 22.

<sup>v</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a relative progress was made in criminology and a shift from the established classical school to the Italian school occurred. The theories stating that human nature was imbued by crime from the start was debunked by the *crème de la crème* in terms of physiognomy and phrenology. Criminology was studied alongside biological anthropology; criminals were to be diagnosed in accordance with their skeletal structure and overall appearance. The most famous theorist of this school of thought, Cesare Lombroso, identified in his book *The Female Offender* the physiological characteristics of the female criminal.

<sup>vi</sup> Marlene’s mother exclaims “How sad, how awful” (Munro 188) when she hears about the news of Verna’s death, officially reported as an accident; Verna “was awful in a way that I could not describe” when Marlene tries to live up to Charlene’s expectations of disgust; and she is “that awful girl” (Munro 200) when Charlene recognizes Verna at school.

<sup>vii</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, 105.

<sup>viii</sup> In his essay “Plato’s Pharmacy,” Derrida argues that binary concepts like the Platonic oppositions of good and evil tend to weave together. Moreover, he makes an analogy between the act of writing and the exodus, the very sense of motion that echoes the cataphoric inclination of the confession I have previously talked about (Derrida 429-430).