REDEFINING THE REAL:

Gothic Realism in Alice Munro’s *Friend of My Youth*

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English
in conformity with the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

Queen’s University
Kingston, Ontario, Canada
July 1998

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Abstract

Alice Munro’s 1990 collection of short stories, *Friend of My Youth*, belongs to an emerging sub-genre known as Southern Ontario Gothic. To date, Munro’s critics have concentrated on her epistemological challenges and on the formal qualities of her work; most criticism explores short stories taken from a variety of collections or *Lives of Girls and Women*. Little in the way of a comprehensive study of any one collection is available, and no critic has devoted more than a few pages to her use of Gothic conventions. Munro alludes to the Gothic in her first collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), where the narrator of “The Peace of Utrecht” mentions a “Gothic Mother.” By *Friend of My Youth*, more than just mothers are Gothic. Each of the seven Southern Ontario stories examines dark psychological states, and each features ambiguous villains and an irresolute ending reflecting the protagonist’s obscured sense of reality. Repression, hysteria, paranoia, humiliation, and shame continually return our attention to *fear*: protagonists fear speaking honestly in oppressive intimate relationships, they fear persecution by conformist townspeople, and they often fear themselves. Munro uses recognizably Gothic conventions, but the aspect of the Gothic that is most relevant to these stories is its tendency to put in question whether the terrors and disturbances that it trades in are predominantly objective or subjective, real or imagined. This ambiguity makes Southern Ontario unnerving for readers and characters alike.
Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Professors Tracy Ware and Mark Jones, whose patience ensured the timely completion of this project. Their expertise and insights into both Alice Munro and Gothic fiction immeasurably improved the quality of my analysis, and their meticulous attention to style and form improved its coherence and logic. I would particularly like to thank them for sustaining enthusiasm and energy amidst countless other commitments. I am also grateful to Professor Michael Hurley at the Royal Military College of Canada for providing the seeds from which this project grew. Finally, I must express boundless appreciation for my wife, Janice, for her devotion and understanding throughout the past five years of academic and military studies.
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Introduction

There is a reality that realism can only capture—paradoxically—by means of an impression of ghostliness; as a result of this ghostliness we are led into a more direct and more horrifying knowledge of ourselves. (George Haggerty 168)

. . . we experience the reading of Gothic as a bitter and exhilarating confirmation that the worst we have always suspected is right around us . . . . (David Punter 212)

In a 1973 interview with Graeme Gibson, Alice Munro commented, “I’m very, very excited about what you might call the surface of life . . . things about people, the way they look, the way they sound, the way things smell, the way everything is that you go through everyday” (241). Though few would dispute that Munro’s literary success originates in her ability to capture the essence of everyday people, places, and events, and though critics consider her among the best short-story writers of her generation for her realist writing, using only the term “realism” to describe Munro’s fiction is problematic. Bharati Mukherjee describes Munro’s fiction as having “deepened the channel of realism” (31). John Moss has called Munro’s fiction “hyper-realism or super-realism” (215). Joan Coldwell suggests that Munro “pushes her fiction beyond realism” (778). Ajay Heble observes that “the world which Munro constructs is not as transparent as it may at first appear . . . . Ordinary objects in Munro’s world can, at any moment, become sinister or threatening” (4). Clearly, there is more to Munro’s realist writing than first meets the eye.¹ In claiming to be fascinated with the surfaces of everyday life, she is telling only half the story.

Munro’s themes of dread, repression, madness, and death—combined with her plot devices

¹
like dreams, diaries, and letters—collectively add a dimension that is best described as Gothic. This is particularly true of her 1990 collection of short stories, _Friend of My Youth_, in which Gothic themes and devices occur with a frequency and an intensity not found in her previous work. _Friend of My Youth_ belongs to an emerging sub-genre of literature known as Southern Ontario Gothic. Within the “everyday” life of small Ontario towns like Walley and Logan, Munro discovers and explores terrors; she demonstrates in each of the seven Southern Ontario stories “the evil we can run up against in communities and families” (Munro, “What Is Real?” 226). The Gothic dimension of Munro’s realism is unsettling; it reminds us, to return to Punter, that the worst is truly “right around us” (212).

The strongest support for a Southern Ontario Gothic reading of _Friend of My Youth_ comes from Munro: “the part of the country I come from is absolutely Gothic. You can’t get it all down” (Gibson 248). According to Ildikó de Papp Carrington, Munro observes, in an unpublished story, that “life is very circumscribed and then occasionally something—well, Gothic—will happen . . . something very black, very horrible” (34). Margaret Atwood was among the first critics to identify Gothic strands in Munro’s fiction, commenting in 1972 that Munro was creating “a stylized world of Gothic grotesques” (Survival 193). In “The Peace of Utrecht” in _Dance of the Happy Shades_ (1968), Munro refers to “our Gothic Mother, with the cold appalling mask of the Shaking Palsy laid across her features . . . eyes dead and burning, fixed inward on herself” (_Dance_ 202). Her “Gothic Mother” marks Munro’s entry into chilling territory.

A survey of her earlier fiction demonstrates Munro’s fascination with the dark depths of human nature: Myra and Jimmy in “Day of the Butterfly” are “like children in a medieval painting,
they were like small figures carved of wood, for worship or magic, with faces smooth and aged, and meekly, cryptically uncommunicative” (*Dance* 102). Aunt Lena in “The Ottawa Valley” is “stiff all the time with what I now recognize as terror” and beats her children “for fear they would grow up to be lazy, or liars, or clumsy people who broke things” (*Something* 233). Herb Abbott in “The Turkey Season” deals in carcasses and looks “like pictures of the Devil” (*Moons* 72). Violet in “A Queer Streak” confronts what she believes to be an animated portrait that makes her feel encompassed by “a smooth, dark wave of unbearable sweetness and sorrow” (*Progress* 209). Violet’s ambivalence recalls the paradoxical Gothic formula of “‘dreadful pleasure,’ that pleasure which is felt when meddling with components of life which are outside the pale of ‘civilised discourse’” (Punter 190). Many of Munro’s protagonists experience dreadful pleasure, unnatural silence, shame, and humiliation; in the Southern Ontario stories in *Friend of My Youth*, all of them experience terror. Leslie Fiedler observes that there is a place “where pictures do in fact bleed, ghosts gibber and shriek, maidens run forever through mysterious landscapes from nameless foes; that place is, of course, the world of dreams and of the repressed guilts and fears that motivate them” (139). Whether dreaming or just imagining what might happen in the course of everyday life, Munro’s characters are tormented by guilt and fear. Their attempts at repression have horrifying consequences.

Paradoxes such as Violet’s draw attention to the skill with which Munro blends elements of Gothic and realist literatures. Under the surfaces of her detailed and realistic descriptions of everyday people and places lurk dark forces that penetrate those surfaces at the most inopportune times. Fiedler suggests that Nathaniel Hawthorne’s Gothic fiction offers a “choice of many
readings: magical, mechanical, psychological; and even allows us not to make a choice at all, but like him to endure them all, to emerge from his story not with some assured insight into the causes of human depravity but only with a confirmed sense of the ambiguity of life” (138). One need read only “Young Goodman Brown” or “Ethan Brand” to appreciate that Hawthorne’s horror begins with revelations that everyday things like relationships, work, religion, and the landscape we occupy can, in an instant, assume menacing proportions. Munro shares Hawthorne’s gift of producing multiple meanings and his ability to break through the surfaces of everyday life and unearth its eerie core. “The demonic is no myth, no superstition,” says Francis Russell Hart, “but a reality in human character or relationship, a novelistic reality” (94). Humanity’s demonic nature is central to Munro’s realist portrayal of small-town Southern Ontario.

Though Friend of My Youth does not directly resemble the “Gothic Romance” as invented by Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, and others, Munro does rely on many of its conventions to elicit similar reactions of fear and anxiety from protagonist and reader alike. Jacqueline Howard offers a useful catalogue of Gothic features:

... the setting of a remote castle, monastery, or gloomy house with its confining crypts, vaults, and underground passage-ways ... particular character types such as the persecuted heroine, tyrannical parent, villainous monk, Faustian over-reacher, or vampire-like apparition ... plot devices such as dreams, mysterious portents, animated portraits or statues, magic mirrors, and the like ... narrative techniques such as framed and embedded stories, letters, diaries, or broken-off manuscripts, which allow forgotten information or secrets from the past to resurface disturbingly in the present ... (13)

Of course, as Haggerty notes, “The measure of Gothic success lies not in any objective inventory
of props and devices . . . but in the power of emotion generated” (168). Munro’s fiction satisfies both quantitative and qualitative Gothic criteria. Eugenia DeLamotte argues that “The Gothic place apart, with its ‘oneiric’ atmosphere, may be a remote castle, but it may also be everyday reality as experienced by the mind obsessed” (18). Munro presents ordinary life as an alien world by juxtaposing the familiar with the unfamiliar and the known with the hidden in ways similar to her Gothic predecessors.

Freud’s notion of “the uncanny” can broaden our appreciation of Munro’s use of Gothic conventions by helping to explain how she transforms “everyday” moments into those of terror. Munro’s use of doubles, irony, and paradox so occupy her fiction that W.R. Martin and others have devoted hundreds of pages to exploring them. Martin sees Munro’s work as a “complex counterpointing of opposed truths” in which “she makes the strange familiar” (44). Munro can make the strange familiar but also makes the familiar strange; paradox is uncanny—it provokes uncertainty and threatens order—but it occurs frequently in everyday life. Freud says the uncanny “belongs to all that is terrible—to all that arouses dread and creeping horror . . . . everything is uncanny that ought to have remained hidden and secret, and yet comes to light” (“The Uncanny” 76-77). He also says that an uncanny effect “is often and easily produced by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality, such as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality” (85). In short, we experience the uncanny when we confront something terrible or of uncertain status; in Munro’s Southern Ontario, there is little distinction between the two. Frequently, her characters become unable to determine what is real in their everyday situations, and they are consumed by fearful thoughts and imagine the worst until they can
rationalize or repress what horrifies them. Fragmented relationships and oppressive social conventions encourage the repression. Freud's notion of the uncanny explains the dialectical responses of feeling comfortable and feeling disturbed which haunt Munro's readers as much as her protagonists.

In the most important of his explanations of the uncanny, Freud distinguishes house from home. He remarks that "the unheimlich is what was once heimlich, home-like, familiar; the prefix 'un' is the token of repression" (Freud suggests on p. 76 that 'unheimlich' in German means any or all of the unfamiliar, the unknown, or not belonging to the home). In suggesting that the unheimlich is what was once heimlich, Freud draws attention to a sense of loss associated with crossing the threshold between feeling comfortable, or at home, and feeling alienated. Munro consistently distinguishes between living in a house and feeling at home in Friend of My Youth--Margot, in "Wigtime," for instance, feels strange "to be in a family place yet not part of any family" (266). Like Margot, protagonists elsewhere rarely feel at home, even though they have family connections and appear to live routine lives. Sometimes, the discomfort they experience in what should be familiar surroundings is enhanced by self-deception; they repress truths about how they feel and in so doing further destabilize already splintered relationships. Throughout Friend of My Youth, Punter's observation remains useful: "It is our repressions that kill us, because they conjure up forces which are far stronger than our fragile conventionality can withstand (191). Whether killed literally or metaphorically, Munro's characters fall victim to uncanny conventional forces in their Southern Ontario environment, where the familiar becomes unfamiliar and home becomes a mere dwelling place.
Munro’s repeated emphasis on the guilt associated with deception adds to the uncanny atmosphere of many of the stories, because guilt complicates a protagonist’s ability to confront fears rationally. The overwhelming number of dark secrets, lies, and betrayals in *Friend of My Youth* suggests that no protagonist is satisfied with the quality or direction of her life. For Munro’s characters, deception and guilt cause the mind to become fragmented. Punter reminds us that “the riven and the tortured [mind] has been with Gothic since its beginnings...” (190). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests that the typical Gothic protagonist is haunted by a “barrier of unspeakableness that again and again prevents the revelation of truth... an interpersonal barrier where no barrier ought to be” (17). Munro’s characters often fail to find the voice necessary to alleviate their emotional and psychic separateness, and their betrayals and lies signify the unnatural silences plaguing their everyday domestic lives.

Howard suggests that each culture can have its own Gothic literature based on its own norms—and on its anxieties about breaking them. She remarks that “Gothic fiction, like any other genre, carries much that is culturally specific—ideological, aesthetic, and literary norms which are received and interpreted or ‘rewritten’ by readers on the basis of their own interests, their own cultural and institutional, as well as personal, history” (15). When Rasporich notes that Munro’s “Wawanash County, and its sister places, unfold, like Faulkner’s country of the American south, accruing their own mythic realities” (158), she recognizes the peculiarity of Munro’s Southern Ontario domain. Southern Ontario Gothic has at its core the “fusion of old and new” which, Mark Busby observes, “has been a part of the gothic tradition since its beginning” (85). Munro, in *Friend of My Youth,* makes continual use of contrasts and overlaps between old and new to
reveal the destructive potential of change. Like Munro, Canadians writing from and about Southern Ontario—Susanna Moodie, John Richardson, Graeme Gibson, and Jane Urquhart, to name a few from past to present—have combined traditional European Gothic with Canadian images of rural domesticity and confrontations with harsh and lovely landscapes to help create "our own" Gothic fiction. 1 Timothy Findley argues of the region's literature, including some of his own, "sure it's Southern Gothic: Southern Ontario Gothic. And that exists" (Gibson 138).

At the forefront of the investigation of Southern Ontario Gothic is Michael Hurley. Hurley draws chiefly on John Richardson's fiction but also refers to many of the region's writers, including Munro. He observes that Marian Engel depicts small-town Southern Ontario as "strongly puritanical, moralistic and judgmental," that James Reaney describes the region's "'dourness' and the stony 'Calvinist heart'" of many of its inhabitants, and that Robertson Davies sardonically portrays Deptford's Scots Presbyterians as those "who consider themselves the guardians of the town's respectability, exemplars of 'common sense, prudence, and right opinions of virtually everything'" (173-6). Established religion and small-town social conventions provide hostile environments for these writers as for Munro, and Hurley points to "the sense of entrapment in an antiquated, decaying social order" that plagues many Southern Ontario heroes and heroines (160). Like others with roots in the region, Munro's heroines always seem to be fending off "'Souwesto' guilt, denial, repression, and obsession with duty" (179). Chapter Two of this study will explore fully the Southern Ontario settings in Friend of My Youth; for now, it is sufficient to recall Hurley's comment that "in her History of Ontario, Margaret Avison speaks of that 'very eerie feeling' which this region has inspired in its settlers" (157). There is no shortage of Gothic ingredients in
Munro’s use of shifting perspectives contributes to her Gothic Realism in *Friend of My Youth* by impairing our ability to distinguish between real and imagined events and feelings in the narrative. Munro allows her protagonists to influence the narrative describing their lives, and when their point of view dominates, our ability to determine what “really” happens to them becomes limited. John Orange observes that many of Munro’s stories “have a mysterious, cryptic quality to them. The reader experiences a disquieting sense that meaning is hidden, blurred, even obscured because of the way the story is told” (89). Susan Wolstenholme observes that a blurred narrative effect is integral to Gothic: “perspective is diffused through different ‘eyes’—the narrator’s own and those of various characters—and thus offers various vantage points to the narrating voice, diffuse, de-centered, moving” (11). Munro’s narrative technique accomplishes precisely the same effect. Julia Van Gunsteren’s reference to G. Genette’s distinction between narrator and “focalizer”—between who speaks and who sees in narrative (96)—is useful for analysing this stylistic similarity between *Friend of My Youth* and the Gothic:

The narrator often records what is perceived by one of the characters. Following G. Genette, this extra mediation may be called “focalization.” A person is capable of both seeing and speaking at the same time and he is also capable of narrating what another person sees, hears, feels, or has seen, etc. Thus, seeing and speaking, focalization and narration, may, but need not be attributed to the same person. In principle, focalization and narration are two distinct activities. If a narrator records not what he sees himself, but what is perceived by the character (focalizer), the effect is a distancing, a supposed objectivity. (94)

Focalization offers a character’s perception of events and is deceptively objective. In
this collection, seemingly objective narrative accounts are thrown into question by terms like "probably" and "maybe" and phrases including "you’d [sic] think" (49), "so their mother said" (180), "it seemed" (188), or "of course" (272). Such terms and phrases signify that a character’s emotions and attitudes will begin to influence the narrative.

Focalization allows the reader to both read about and feel the “pleasurable fear,” "nameless dread," "unnatural silence," and guilt, repression, and hysteria that Munro’s Gothic protagonists suffer. Since focalization is essentially narration through the eyes of a character—the story told from the “inside out,” so to speak—and since Munro’s characters are perpetually haunted by fear, we are limited to an account of reality that is blurred by intense emotion. Further, Munro’s subtle transitions to focalization make it difficult to determine when the narrative stops being objective. The following selection from “Five Points” illustrates focalization:

There are always a few bad moments after Brenda turns off the highway—where she has some excuse to be driving, should anyone see her—and onto the side road. The van is noticeable, unmistakable. But once she has taken the plunge, driving where she shouldn’t be, she feels stronger. When she turns onto the dead-end swamp road, there’s no excuse possible. Spotted here, she’s finished . . . . There was goldenrod and milkweed, with the pods burst open, and dangling bunches of bright, poisonous fruit, and wild grapevine flung over everything, even creeping onto the road. And finally she was in, she was into the tunnel of trees. Cedar, hemlock, farther back in the wetter ground the wispy-looking tamarack, lots of soft maples with leaves spotty yellow and brown . . . . she can’t see any water, just choking, yellowy cress and nettles, sucking at dry mud. (35)

By using focalization, Munro demands that we pay attention to how narrators tell stories; here, the narration is blurred by Brenda’s guilty perspective. The side road leading to Neil’s trailer seems
ominous—as suggested by the terms “poisonous,” “hemlock,” “creeping,” and “choking”—because Brenda is aware that she about to sexually betray her husband. This passage is the narrator’s, but it is Brenda’s point of view. Focalization adds a deeper level to Munro’s epistemological queries; we do not know if the yellowy cress and nettles are really “sucking at dry mud” or if they are just “there.” By obscuring the line between reality and imagination, Munro places both reader and protagonist on unstable ground.

In *Friend of My Youth*, settings like castles and monasteries and villains like spectres and vampires are not needed to achieve terrifying Gothic ends. Munro’s everyday Southern Ontario world is chilling enough without exotic and supernatural trappings, and her everyday characters have their own twentieth-century sources of anxiety. Intense fear has remained at the core of the Gothic protagonist’s predicament for two centuries, and it persists here with threatened humiliation, paranoia, hysteria, madness, and death. Collectively, these dark forces hover over Munro’s small towns and we—like her protagonists—find ourselves bothered less by ghosts than by confrontations with the more horrifying aspects of domestic life. The “real” world in *Friend of My Youth* is divided into surfaces and depths, and what seems stable on the surface is revealed as illusory. Munro’s Southern Ontario contains a disturbing underworld where homes and houses are not the same, where relationships are fragmented by deceptions and betrayals, and where what “really” happens is impossible to know. Because her use of the Gothic allows Munro to show ordinary lives rooted in dread and terror, she challenges us to question the ordinariness of our own lives.
Notes

1. Beverly Raspovich, George Woodcock, John Moss and others see Munro’s writing as similar to the “magic realist” art movement. See Woodcock 132-46.

2. See also Raspovich, MacKendrick, and Miller.

3. James Reaney regards Richardson as the “father figure” of Canadian Gothic literature and suggests that the novel could “give audiences there [in Southwestern Ontario] a much needed sense of their past, particularly the deep, primitive, heroic, archaic, aboriginal past” (541). Other Southern Ontario Gothic titles include Moodie’s Roughing it in The Bush, Gibson’s Perpetual Motion and Urquhart’s Away. The reference to “harsh and lovely landscapes” is linked to Tom Marshall’s study of Canadian poets, Harsh and Lovely Land.

4. It is no coincidence that Heble uses “deceptive objectivity” repeatedly in his analysis of Friend of My Youth. See Heble Chapter 7.
Chapter I - Southern Ontario Gothic Friends

“Friend of My Youth”

Set in an ordinary house in Washington, D.C., not in a Gothic castle in an exotic land, the narrative is nevertheless pervasively colored by the emotional and metaphorical excesses of a Gothic novel, dominated by the violent emotional forces that seethe beneath ordinary events. It penetrates the surfaces of personal sentiment and social pretense to expose secret cruelties of family life. (Joan Lidoff 111)

Though Lidoff refers not to Friend of My Youth but to Christina Stead’s The Man Who Loved Children, Munro and Stead clearly share an interest in exploring ominous elements of ordinary life. Lidoff argues that Stead develops a “Domestic Gothic” which “operates in the context of nineteenth-century realism” (111). Munro’s Southern Ontario Gothic is likewise an entertaining blend of domesticity, realism, and the Gothic. In the opening story in Friend of My Youth, dark elements of Southern Ontario overlap with Munro’s realist art to set the tempo for the entire collection. Gothic motifs of fear, guilt, repression, and physical and psychological confinement combine with devices like dreams, photographs, and letters to unveil the darkness in Flora’s everyday Southern Ontario world and the darkness residing in the unnamed first-person narrator’s mind.

Munro also uses death and history to frame “Friend of My Youth.” Karen Smythe correctly notes that “Munro’s characters consistently confront the significance of death . . . . death is not merely a thematic strain in Munro; death (whether figurative or literal) is her point of departure” (112). The narrator’s mother’s death and Ellie’s death remind us that death is part of
a reality more comfortably ignored; the mention of death or impending death occurs within the first few paragraphs of every story, suggesting that Munro would have it unite the collection under an umbrella of darkness. History also functions as a subject in this and many other stories in Friend of My Youth: first, in that the typical protagonist has a compelling desire to unearth information about her past in order to try to better understand the present; second, in that towns are often divided between adhering to traditions or breaking from them. What Munro’s protagonist finds while looking into the past and while living in a town plagued by past-present conflicts makes her cringe; her discoveries almost always include a revelation of a part of the self previously denied and that might have been better left hidden. Here, the narrator seems to experience her re-telling of Flora’s life with more anxiety than did the Flora who lived it, suggesting that fear and anxiety can obscure interpretations of reality even when that reality belongs to somebody else. The narrator cannot recount Flora’s story without becoming terrified by intruding memories of her dying mother; her attempts to recount the past prove horrifying.

Ellie’s hallucinations and the narrator’s alternating dreams are but two examples of how Munro prompts us, as readers, to observe terrifying versions of reality as experienced by those suffering angst. Neither Ellie nor the narrator can prevent irrational thoughts (brought on by fear and repression) from governing their minds and from controlling what they perceive as “real.” In watching them endure distress, the reader can also question how he or she creates meaning from everyday events and relationships to construct individual versions of reality. By offering people and places that seem ordinary or “real,” and by obscuring the concepts “ordinary” and “real” by pairing them with the ethereal and ghastly, Munro questions the apparent ordinariness of life.
Multiple stories and missing pieces of stories also contribute to the blurring of the line between reality and imagination. The narrator is telling a story about a story that she was once told, and details of “truth” are sketchy at best. That Munro, like Hawthorne, gives the choice of many readings suggests a meta-fictional dimension to Munro’s Gothic realism. In “Friend of My Youth,” there is the central story of Flora, as once created and passed along by the narrator’s mother to the narrator; this story is, in turn, re-created and relayed to the reader by the narrator. There is no complete story about Ellie and Robert’s sexual relationship, however, other than that supposed by the narrator, and her insights can be questioned because of her inability to tell an objective tale. The story of the narrator’s mother’s role in the Flora-Ellie-Robert triangle is incomplete, Robert’s story remains untold, and this is to say nothing of the incompleteness of Nurse Atkinson’s story. The most intriguing story—and one that also remains unresolved—is the story about the narrator’s relationship with her own mother. “Friend of My Youth” opens with the unnamed narrator’s account of dreams of feeling guilty about her mother’s death, and though her dreams are prompted by her review of her mother’s letters, we never gain access to them. What is real or unreal, true or untrue in any of these fictions remains unknown. Eugenia DeLamotte’s observation of the Gothic applies here: “Clear borderlines of things shift and blur . . . . the physical and metaphorical boundaries that one ordinarily depends upon prove unstable, elusive, ineffective, non-existent” (22). Here, one shadowy border—that dividing reality from imagination—draws attention both to how stories get told and to who is doing the telling.

The first of the two central stories, that of Flora’s betrayal by Ellie and Robert and her reluctance to seek freedom from an emotionally and sexually stifling world, motivates the narrator’s
reflections on her relationship with and the death of her mother, which can be seen as the second
central story. As the narrator recalls the details of Flora’s story, she interprets, assimilates, and
reshapes them to satisfy her own desires. She also uses Flora’s story as a means of trying to
mediate her own anxieties, those which appear to originate not from her mother’s death but from
her recollection of it. In the process of merging Flora’s story with that of her own life, and of
modifying Flora’s story to suit her desires, the narrator creates the potential for newer versions of
Flora’s story. Truth and reality become frighteningly fictional as a result, and when we consider
that “people knew of [Flora’s story] in various versions” (“Friend” 7), what becomes bizarre is that
we, like those telling and re-telling Flora’s strange story, may never know what either truth or
reality is.

Flora and Ellie, with the appropriate last name Grieves, share the same geographic roots
as the narrator’s mother, and their shared geography reflects dark inner states. All live in the
Ottawa Valley, a locale “distinguished from any other place on earth” (4). Magdalene Redekop
describes the Ottawa Valley in this story as “a place with almost supernatural qualities” and
observes that here, “Guilt may be self-indulgent but it is also inescapable . . .” (210-11). In the
Valley, where “houses turn black,” we find a “scrambled, disarranged sort of country with no easy
harmony about it” (“Friend” 4-5). The house that Flora and Ellie occupy is “divided in an
unexpected way” (5) that is symbolic on three levels. The first, that it is divided, “of course, in the
expectation that Robert and Ellie would have a family” (5), suggests that cultural and religious
traditions have been part of the Grieves’ family history; the “of course” also suggests community
norms pressuring individuals to comply. To breach convention by not having children would be
to risk humiliation and psychological persecution, because the small-town atmosphere Munro creates is intolerant and judgmental.

Townspeople in Munro’s Southern Ontario persistently imagine the worst of those they deem different. Here, the Grieves sisters are seen as “very backward” (5) and Flora’s living with Robert out of wedlock as “being scandalous, or looking scandalous” (10). Ironically, it is indeed the breaking of a sexual taboo that leads to the greatest anxieties for Flora and Ellie, but it is not broken by the couple whom the town suspects. David Punter defines taboos as “areas of socio-psychological life which offend, which are suppressed, which are generally swept under the carpet in the interests of social and psychological equilibrium,” and he views the breaking of them as one of the key “aspects of the terrifying to which Gothic constantly, and hauntedly, returns” (184). All of the Southern Ontario stories in *Friend of My Youth* address broken taboos. Here, Ellie and Robert’s premarital sex is one breach of taboo, and Ellie’s having “stolen” Robert from Flora signifies another. Considering the sternness of the Cameronian faith and the town’s fear of deviants, it is not surprising to witness Ellie’s degeneration into horrifying madness and the Divine “punishment” underlying it.

On the second level, the division of the house symbolizes the fragmentation of a sisterly bond. The home—or house, rather—has a sterile “silence and sickroom atmosphere” where the “cleanliness was devastating” (6-7). It is a place where purity abounds on the surface, amidst illusions of piety, but where dark deeds—Ellie and Robert’s betrayal of Flora and Flora’s silent vengeance—creep through from ominous depths to destroy familial stability and subvert any notion of place as home. What is on one hand a pure house—maintained by a Flora described as
"possessed" (7) with the need to clean—is on the other a dirty "black board house with its paralytic Sundays and coal-oil lamps and primitive notions" (5). Dirt may be symbolic of Ellie’s uncleanliness, or it may be extended to include the psychological filth of others, including Robert, Flora, and the whole town. Ambiguous, dysfunctional, divided, and Gothic, the Grieves’ house reflects those who occupy it. Neither it, nor they, are capable of sustaining a “live child” (6), and the only growth that occurs there is Ellie’s tumour. That it is cancerous and eventually kills her speaks volumes about the role of environment in “Friend of My Youth,” for the house ensures imprisonment, decay, and death. (Ellie’s deadly tumour also provides a link to the second of the two stories in “Friend of My Youth”—that of the narrator’s dream relationship with her dead mother).

The divided house, finally, symbolizes a schism between feeling and speaking that divides Flora from Ellie; it is a place that subdues honesty and promotes unnatural silence. The emotional consequences of the betrayal are never articulated by those directly involved in it—or so we are led to believe by the narrator’s version of her mother’s story. Flora and Ellie Grieves are isolated, peculiar, and “very backward” because they are Cameronians (5). They are “the only people in the school district who were of that religion,” and “that freak religion” (5), like Flora, turns out to be “uncompromising” (26). That it was founded by an outlaw involved in sickening violence and seeking isolation from civilization has much to do with Flora’s treatment of Ellie towards the later stage of Ellie’s life. The horrifying stories Flora tells Ellie to “comfort” her (26) do not suggest sisterly love or kindness but vengeance. The primitive house promotes barbaric emotions that remain shrouded in silence instead of being expressed and resolved.
Naturally, a church that houses such followers has Gothic connections, and it, like the Grieves’ home, is empty, transparent, infertile, and isolated. Both church and home are like the Gothic castle which, Punter observes, “is the retreat of the mind tortured by chaos” and the “location for the persistence of primal fear” (122). The church consists of a “drear building miles on the other side of town, no organ or piano and plain glass in the windows and a doddery old minister with his hours-long sermon, a man hitting a tuning fork for the singing” (“Friend” 9). Munro is able to create the same effect with her Presbyterian Protestantism as Gothic writers like Monk Lewis and Ann Radcliffe did with Catholic monks and monasteries. It is not difficult to imagine the substitution of a pitch-fork for the tuning fork.

Despite her Presbyterian convictions—which, like the country church nourishing them, are recurring features in Southern Ontario Gothic—Flora is not described in positive terms. Flora stays in the house after Ellie’s affair with Robert and throughout Ellie’s illness, so it may seem that she is altruistic. Townspeople regard Flora’s nursing her dying sister as an act approaching saintliness: “Everybody said that Flora had behaved like a saint” (8). Yet both women are described as sinisterly “dark-haired, dark-eyed women” (7), and Flora’s connection seems to be more to the decaying house and to the past than to its inhabitants. She is a flower, as her name suggests, but one with rotten roots and no living stem or petals. Nurse Atkinson describes Flora as “stuck in the olden times” (18). This, and information that after Ellie’s death, “Flora’s side [of the house] remained just as it was” (17), creates an image of Flora as stagnant, enclosed, and frozen. She is both a product and symbol of her home. What attracted Robert to Flora is never made clear; we only know that Ellie, with her “long skinny body and long pale face, was like a copy of Flora” (9).
And so is Flora a copy of Ellie, replete with her own haunting secrets and dark deficiencies. Flora does nothing to ease her sister’s emotional suffering. In keeping with the malevolent God she believes in, she undertakes her own form of vengeance through a silent nurturing of Ellie’s feelings of shame. Ellie degenerates because of an inability to express her remorse and guilt. Immediately after she discovers her first pregnancy and her affair with Robert becomes known, Ellie begins to change from being “a wild tease . . . a childish girl full of lolloping energy” and “like a colt nuzzling its mother” to “deranged . . . wild . . . howling” to, finally, “meek now” and “never wild from that day on” (9-10). Madness sets in because she is unable to speak honestly in a home plagued by unnatural silence.

What never gets answered in the telling of Ellie’s story is whether she sought forgiveness or whether it was granted—or could be—either by Flora or by her God. It seems unlikely on both accounts, given the nature of Flora’s religion. As Ellie becomes a mort-vivant, grieving for her sins within the shadowy confines of her monastical dwelling, her shame grows so strong that she hallucinates about a demonic “horned cow outside, trying to get into the room and kill her” (15) (Horned cows reappear in “Menesetemg”). It is not surprising that Ellie loses her sanity, for she lives in a community where “not just Presbyterians but almost everybody else” believes that God “dealt out punishment for hurry-up marriages” and “rewarded lust with dead babies, idiots, harelips and withered limbs and clubfeet” (11). Flora’s attempts to “comfort” Ellie consist of these reminders, of “stories about urchins,” and of stories from “their monstrous old religion” with its horrifying themes of “doom and slippery redemption” (12). Flora should be able to articulate—but cannot, because of her abnormal silence—feelings of anger, resentment, and loss. She instead
represses them and relies on an Old Testament God to speak on her behalf.

Flora’s decision to remain in the house after the betrayal speaks more of economic circumstance than of genuine love. Remindful of the Gothic, Flora’s limited domestic options and silence connect her to Brenda in “Oh, What Avails” and Murray in “Oranges and Apples.” Her reluctance to tell Ellie how she feels shows that forgiveness is hard to come by in the Grieves’ home, and any idea that Flora is saintly is overshadowed by her strong beliefs in “the torturing, defeating, but for some minds irresistible pileup of interlocking and contradictory notions” constituting the Cameronian faith (12). These “contradictory notions” contribute to the uncanny atmosphere in which Flora thrives—or fails to thrive, rather. She is incapable of adapting to life following Ellie’s betrayal, collapse, and death; she instead remains in the house as though part of the furniture, part of an uneasy history, part of a faith described as a “remnant,” and part of “something that people drove out of their way to see” (17). Flora’s life is like a morbid accident scene; it is remindful of the disturbing human predisposition to confront the grotesque. As long as it is viewed from a distance, the grotesque remains fascinating. Up close, it is a different matter.

Robert Deal deals the sisters a “bad hand,” so to speak, and he thus functions conveniently in his role as Gothic villain—as a tempter to Ellie and as a cause of Flora’s mute unhappiness. But he otherwise remains a minor figure in the story. After the betrayal, he becomes ambiguous and insignificant until Ellie’s death, after which Flora informs the narrator’s mother of Robert’s marriage to Nurse Atkinson and describes the couple as “living in Robert’s part of the house” (17). Robert may be the cause of conflict in the story about Flora and Ellie, but he is spiritless and powerless. Having sinned against the flesh, he
ends up subordinate to Nurse Atkinson and becomes a marginal figure at his own wedding reception, sitting "scrunched into one of the school desks along the wall" (18) like a scolded child--alone, indifferent, and alienated. The narrator deems Robert guilty because "he was the one who started everything, in secret. He did it to Ellie" (22), so it may be that Munro would have Robert appear metaphorically stripped of his manhood--impotent or castrated--as punishment for his part in the affair with Ellie. The narrator also admits that "to me the really mysterious person in the story, as my mother told it, was Robert. He never has a word to say" (22). Robert's speechlessness is yet another unnatural silence in an already deathly silent world. The narrator's inability to feel "any decent revulsion or reasonable indignation" (22) about Robert and Ellie's sexual betrayal, in addition to her confession that she has had her own sexual fantasies about him, leads nicely into the second of the two main stories in "Friend of My Youth."

The narrator suffers ambivalence about her mother's death. On one hand, she considers each of her uncanny dreams as "too transparent in its hopefulness, too easy in its forgiveness" (3). She is horrified by images of her mother as "not entirely untouched by the paralysing disease" and as stricken by "a woeful, impersonal mask" (3-4). That she also admits that "the details in the dream varied" (3) but the surprise of anguish did not suggests that she feels shame for having desired distance from her dying mother. On the other hand, these nightmares of guilt are juxtaposed with day-dreams of relief; she claims to have "recovered in waking life what I had lost," and she imaginatively apologizes to her dead mother for entertaining "a bugbear in my mind, instead of this reality" (3-4). Note, however, that the narrator says "I used to dream about my mother" (3). In claiming to not dream about
her anymore, the narrator shows signs of repression; it is confirmed when she “slips” and mentions “this” reality instead of “that” reality (the reality of the past) to describe her dreams (4). Her anguish originates more in recollections of her mother’s suffering than in those of her death, and the confusion of past and present, of anguish and recovery, and of dreams and waking life remains wholly unresolved: has the narrator stopped dreaming about her mother because she has come to terms with her death? Why is she denying us access to truth? Has she finished dreaming—and grieving—at all? In any case, her dreams—whether nocturnal or in the form of day-dreams or imaginings—strike her as more terrifying than her “real” conscious life.

Our uncertainties about the narrator’s true feelings become important in interpreting her story, because her re-telling of Flora’s story eventually results in her own dream-like reshaping of it just as she reshapes memories of her mother. The narrator “grieves” more deeply and frequently than does Flora for Flora’s confused life, and she alters Flora’s story to satisfy her own desires, allowing her to momentarily subdue anxieties kindled by memories of her mother’s final days. Coral Ann Howells notes, “When we talk about dream landscape in Gothic novels we are talking about a fictive world whose topography is shaped by and is the shape given to emotional responses of uncertainty and threat” (27). Her statement applies perfectly to the narrator. Where the narrator’s mother portrays Flora in a good light, the narrator’s imagined Flora would be “as black as hers was white . . . . A Presbyterian witch, reading out of her poisonous book . . . . She shrinks, caves in, her bones harden and her joints thicken, and—oh, this is it, this is it, I see the bare beauty of the ending I will contrive!—she becomes crippled herself, with arthritis, hardly able to move” (20-21).
Conversely, though, a later version of the narrator's dreams offers a Flora free of sexual repression and free of the anguish that the narrator imagines "the real Flora" (23) to have had. These two instances of imagination, taken together, blur the distinction between the narrator's recollection of her mother and her re-construction of Flora's story; the narrator cannot think of Flora without confronting her mother's menacing image. Where Flora's story begins and her mother's demise begins and ends becomes obfuscated, and the narrator's alternating good and evil images of Flora signify her guilt and remorse for having failed to comfort her dying mother. Further, the narrator's imagined sexually-potent Flora might be self-reflective: it may signify that the narrator is suffering some sexual repression of her own.

At every turn, the narrator tries to repress her grief, but it spontaneously spurts forth and brings shame. She persistently fears a threatening and "incontestable cripple-mother power" and tries to manage it by opposing her mother's image "in silence" (20). She is haunted by guilt: "I was no comfort and poor company to her when she had almost nowhere else to turn" (20). Fear of becoming the mother is a common theme in Munro as in the Gothic works explored by Moers, Fleenor, and others. Here, the narrator has "seen a photograph of her [mother], with her pupils" (4) that symbolizes a mother-daughter connection. The photograph implies relationships frozen in time and student-teacher relations, and Munro's choice of the term "pupils" suggests that the narrator sees the world through her mother's eyes. The photograph also symbolizes the past and produces discomfort for the narrator. Seeing tangible proof of her mother's existence prompts ghostly recollections of her mother's decay. The picture, finally, reminds us of Flora's bizarre maternal relationship with Ellie. Ellie's guilt, Flora's inability to forgive her, and the
madness that results from their silence suggests that the narrator’s future may be frightening should she allow herself to continue to be haunted by guilt.

When the narrator’s wishful version of Flora’s story intersects with that told to her by her mother—during uncanny moments when imagination and reality conflict in the narrator’s psyche—she is swept back into a storm of mixed emotions which further obscure her reality. She joyfully dreams that her mother’s “mask, her fate, and most of her affliction” was “taken away,” but her dream emotions of being “relieved” and “happy” quickly become subverted by those that make her feel “slightly cheated. Yes. Offended, tricked, cheated by this welcome turnaround” (26). Her wish to confront Flora and “tell her that I knew, I knew her story. though we had never met” is shattered when the guilt she has repressed emerges, forcing her to recognize, “Of course it’s my mother I’m thinking of, my mother as she was in those dreams, saying, It’s nothing, just this little tremor; saying with such astonishing lighthearted forgiveness. Oh, I knew you’d come someday” (26). As is the case with the two sisters, we are never exactly sure of the nature of the relationship between the narrator and her mother; her last shared feelings, hopes that her dreams have “changed the bitter lump of love I have carried all this time into a phantom--something useless and uncalled for, like a phantom pregnancy” (26) are less than convincing. Nor do they relieve the empathetic sorrow we experience by assuring us that she will eventually recover from her anguish.

Indeed, one of Munro’s greatest accomplishments in “Friend of My Youth” is her ability to elicit empathy. In neither of the two central stories are we made privy to complete detail, to all the facts necessary to construct understanding or truth; we are only given traces and shadows and are never sure what Flora, Ellie, the narrator, or her mother really
experienced. The phantom truths we confront, and those haunting the narrator, have something in common: as is often the case with things that challenge rationality, Munro’s ghosts frequently reappear in modified versions and at the most inopportune times. But they are never “useless or uncalled for,” because they both entertain and haunt us. And they continue to do so throughout Friend of My Youth.
Chapter II - Funereal Landscapes

[Munro's] ordinary scene is startlingly disrupted by the presence of something strangely out of place in the context. The texture of reality... includes the unexpected, the irrational, the grotesque. Absurdity and horror are never far below the deceptively calm surface of everyday life... The recognition that life is entirely resistant to rationalization is inevitably shocking and frightening. (Linda Lamont-Stewart 114)

Oh well Wuthering Heights was the BIG influence... things in Wuthering Heights delighted me, not the romanticism but the things that she did about the farm, the house, the fields... It was the way I could visualize everything—the way I was really living in that house. (Alice Munro in Horwood interview 124)

Munro's fascination with place in Wuthering Heights is reflected in her own treatment of landscape in Friend of My Youth: as in the title story, however, Munro's everyday surfaces are only "deceptively calm" and quickly become overshadowed by events that are irrational, absurd, and horrifying. Though Munro's "everyday" setting is not as terrifying as the castle in The Castle of Otranto or the laboratory in Frankenstein, her physical and psychological climates inspire similar Gothic reactions of fear and anxiety. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick observes that Gothic fiction is "full of sublime and picturesque scenic descriptions... frequently used as a kind of visual correspondence suggestive of an inner psychological state" (24), and Edmund Burke describes the passion evoked by the sublime as astonishment: "that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror" (33). Munro also uses sublime descriptions of Southern
Ontario to parallel a protagonist’s psychological condition; landscape described as horrifying mirrors a protagonist’s petrifying experiences. There may be no haunted castles, secret corridors, or ghosts wandering the halls in Munro’s small towns, but there are decaying farms and mines, haunting memories, invisible social forces, and secret fears that collectively cultivate an equally uncanny mood.

For Munro as for other Southern Ontario Gothic writers, two of the most powerful forces shaping the region’s personality are religion and history. Munro’s characteristic Southern Ontario setting is a small Presbyterian town with a disturbing disposition to silence honesty, repress feeling, and shun outsiders. The impact of Protestantism on the region is best described by Southern Ontario Gothic writers themselves: Graeme Gibson comments on the “Puritan or whatever it was . . . lack of ability to express, the lack of ability to feel, the imposition of rigidity” (167); Dave Godfrey sees “Protestant reticence and neuroticism” as a “chamber of horrors” and a “death force” (Gibson 168-71); Margaret Atwood observes, “the further into the past the Calvinist God recedes, the more his legacy of guilt becomes separated from its objects: Children can feel guilty about everything” (Survival 139); and Marian Engel refers to the “tremendously church-oriented environment” that she grew up in as “bleak” and agrees with Gibson’s account of the region as “a Puritan hurdle course” (Gibson 108). That these writers use terms like “neuroticism,” “guilty,” and “bleak” to describe the small-town culture suggests that some forms of Protestantism foster not optimism but dread and despair. Munro’s settings reflect Protestantism’s darker potential. Michael Hurley comments that many in the small-town Protestant culture who attempt to express their feelings eventually “doubt themselves, feel guilty, and are either ignored, ridiculed, rebuffed,
or punished by the silent majority” (180). Munro's characters do not escape these effects.

Since small towns are regulated by the “silent majority,” the conflict between private and public aspects of a protagonist’s life dominates the Southern Ontario stories in Friend of My Youth. Eugenia DeLamotte argues that this conflict is central to Gothic fiction: “Gothic terror has its primary source in an anxiety about boundaries . . . the expression of psychological, epistemological, religious and social anxieties that resolve themselves most fundamentally into a concern about boundaries of the self” (14). DeLamotte’s “boundaries of the self” are those with which Munro’s typical heroine collides when she seeks freedom from the small-town culture. When what she tries to say or do is rebuffed by a silent majority that sees female independence as an offence against propriety, her sense of individuality collapses. Self-doubt and self-deprecation result, and she becomes terrified to attempt independence again.

Throughout Friend of My Youth, protagonists who appear irrational are punished with humiliation and psychological isolation. Coral Ann Howells notes that Gothic protagonists seeking independence are often perceived as displaying “irrational impulses which threaten to subvert orthodox notions of social and moral propriety” (7). Margot Northey observes the same fear of change in Canadian Gothic: “a persistent feature of the fear or horror in many Canadian gothic works is the sense of threat to or collapse of an entire culture” (109). Logan, Walley, and a young Toronto answer to both of these readings of the Gothic environment, for each has a collective consciousness struggling to maintain tradition and order. Beverly Rasporich notes of Lives of Girls and Women that “The Flats Road, and bush beyond, are symbols of primal energy and sexuality, its chaos and danger. The town, in its intricate design, is representative of order, reason and
control" (138). Towns in *Friend of My Youth* represent the same; obsessions with propriety and prudence mask fears of instability.

Since Munro’s small towns struggle to maintain the old order as a key to survival, they persistently fear agents of change. B. Pfaus remarks that Munro’s characters inhabit a world “having an essential and irreconcilable tension between two sets of values: conventional morality and individual freedom” (83). This “tension” has Protestant roots. Victor Sage suggests that “a religion which has always upheld private judgement as the basis of its faith is more intolerant than one which traditionally allows no latitude at all in matters of belief” (*Horror* 27). This apparently paradoxical statement is appropriate to the climate in which Munro’s typical protagonist lives, for she knows she risks psychological persecution by the moral majority if she even *appears* not to want to acquiesce to a small-town soul that relentlessly maintains socio-religious prohibitions and imperatives. Munro has noted that her own Southern Ontario heritage prevented her from speaking openly: “One doesn’t try because one might fail . . . the personal revelation is also something that isn’t understood at all. It’s a shameful thing” (Gibson 247). Munro’s references to shame and fear of “personal revelation” are telling, for both are staples of the Gothic. Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* illustrates the Puritan small-town moral majority:

‘Goodwives,’ said a hard-featured dame of fifty, ‘I’ll tell ye a piece of my mind. It would be greatly for the public behoof, if we women, being of mature age and churchmembers in good repute, should have the handling of such malefactresses as this Hester Prynne. What think ye, gossips? If the hussy stood up for judgment before us five . . . would she come off with such a sentence as the worshipful magistrates have awarded? Marry, I trow not!’ (Hawthorne 53)
Like Hester Prynne, Munro's protagonists have good reason to fear neighbors and townsfolk. Though her heroines do not face physical brands of punishment, their emotional responses are similar; that they often resort to deception and concealment is not surprising.

History also shapes Munro's Gothic environment by providing metaphoric "ghosts." As David Punter observes...

... the 'borderland' attitude of Gothic to the past is a compound of repulsion and attraction, fear of both the violence of the past and its power over the present, and at the same time longing for many of the qualities that past possessed.... The code of Gothic is thus not a simple one in which past is encoded in present or vice-versa, but dialectical, past and present intertwined, and distorting... each other with the sheer effort of coming to grips. (198)

The relevance of Punter's comments to Friend of My Youth is best illustrated by recalling that the protagonist in the opening story is haunted less by her mother's death than by the guilt she confronts during self-reflection. She fears the past because she feels shame whenever she thinks about her behavior in the days leading to her mother's death; fear of her past has power over her present. Yet she also longs for the time when her mother was alive; she misses the mother-daughter bond that at one time included the intimacy of storytelling. In Friend of My Youth, protagonists continually re-live experiences shared with their mothers ("Friend" and "Goodness and Mercy"), spouses ("Hold Me Fast, Don't Let Me Pass" and "Wigtime") and friends ("Differently," "Wigtime," and "Pictures of the Ice"). Jacqueline Howard's observation about the Gothic past, like Punter's, suggests ambivalence; she notes that it can strike the Gothic hero or heroine as both "fearfully strange" and "comfortingly familiar" (33). Despite fears of taking imaginative journeys into the past, Munro's heroines
cannot avoid them; they long for information that will explain their present personalities. But during their journeys, they encounter the Gothic phenomenon called “nameless dread.” DeLamotte suggests that this phrase “may describe the fear of possibilities no decorous heroine would even name in her mind. But it also implies the dread that is nameless because its object is diffuse, unclear, insusceptible to definition” (16). Many of Munro’s protagonists cringe when discovering things about themselves they wish they had left buried.

History haunts towns in much the same manner as it does protagonists; conflicts between old and new plague almost every small town in this collection. Leslie Fiedler notes that “The gothic felt for the first time the pastness of the past . . . the sense of something lapsed or outlived or irretrievably changed” (136). In Munro’s twentieth-century Southern Ontario, what becomes spooky are the lengths to which some members of a community will go to prevent change. Because change draws Munro’s towns closer to a modernized world that many fear, it is often seen as evil— as what DeLamotte calls “some terrible Other” in Gothic fiction (22). Munro’s typical heroine develops a heightened sense of fear when struggling to find independence from what Raspovich properly identifies as Munro’s “puritan-inspired world of gothic horror” (139). Female independence equals nightmarish change for many in Munro’s patriarchal towns, and they go to great lengths to prevent it.

“Oh, What Avails,” “Five Points,” and “Meneseteung” illustrate that Munro’s fictional Southern Ontario communities are both Gothic and realistic. Emotional and sexual repression, secrets and deceptions, clashes with orthodoxy, broken taboos, and unnatural silences are amongst the Gothic repertoire in these three stories. The role of landscape as symbolic of a protagonist’s dark state of mind grows from the first story to the third, and by
"Meneseteung" descriptions of landscape as terrorizing appear inseparable from Almeda Joynt Roth's horrifying situation. Further, though the first two stories are set in the twentieth century and the latter in the nineteenth, the same socio-religious pressures persist. Things that do change in small-town Southern Ontario, Munro suggests, do so only slightly and painfully. "Logan has grown," Munro tells us in the first story, "but it is still too small to have home delivery" (195). The recurring uncanny differences between house and home in *Friend of My Youth* are enough to keep any mail carrier away.

**"Oh, What Avails"**

Munro's narrators, in telling stories, are fostering a deceptive objectivity. Despite repeatedly concentrating on figures and events from the past, these narrators ultimately cannot let the facts speak for themselves. (Ajay Heble 174)

Gothic landscapes both contribute to and symbolize Joan's dilemma in "Oh, What Avails." Joan denies truths about the environment that shaped her youth, and her selective blindness to similarities between her and her mother constitute a Gothic dread of the terrible Other. At the heart of Joan's predicament is her denial of a "dismissive voice that surprises her, it sounds so much like her mother's" (204). As a child, Joan believed in her mother's "idea of being part of something special" (182). As an adult, however, Joan confronts memories of childhood suggesting that her mother's idea was "not altogether true" (215), memories which force her to suspect that she was part of "nothing special . . . . She feels this because it occurs to her that their mother might be mistaken" (193). But to avoid creating negative images of a mother she admired in childhood, and to avoid admitting that she
inherited many of her mother’s negative traits, Joan selectively represses her doubts. It is no coincidence that “avails” rhymes with “veils,” given that Joan chooses not to see that her dysfunctional adulthood is a product of her mother’s influence.

Joan gossips and views others through the same cynical lenses as her mother did. For instance, “people who talk to her strike her as harsh and stupid and self-satisfied” (201), and she recalls a door knocker banged “in the way no caller with decent manners would bang it” (184). She also claims that Loony Buttler used derisive terms like “fornicator,” “ignoramus,” “cheater,” and “stupid” (190). But Joan’s account of Loony may not be accurate, because it is hard to tell where judgmental voices like Loony’s and Joan’s mother’s end and where Joan’s begins. Joan, like her mother, is guilty of groundless suspicions and “extravagant accusations” (203). She sees Morris’s “way of looking at things” as “old-fashioned and callous and destructive” (198) but ignores the callousness she learned from her mother. Joan recalls that her mother saw luck as one of the most important things in life (183). But Joan’s mother cannot simply let Morris’s accident stand as an instance of bad luck. She is compelled to blame it on somebody. The words, “a tramp left the rake there. So their mother said” (181), demonstrate that Joan’s mother blamed the tramp for Morris’s injury. So their mother said is focalized from Joan’s perspective, and it indicates that she also blames. She indirectly accuses her mother of lying about the tramp’s role in Morris’s accident. Blaming is a connection between her and her mother that Joan denies. That a young Joan failed to question her mother’s behaviour is not surprising; nor are the haunting consequences of denying her mother’s influence.

Joan’s gloomy life mirrors her mother’s, suggesting that Joan absorbed more from
her than just contempt and blaming. She claims to be able to "easily, flawlessly" (206) deceive people just as her mother allows Looney Buttler to believe they are friends. The "Treachery and confusion" (202) Joan feels because of her affair with John Brolier signals repressed shame. Joan's mother's claim to want her children to feel "part of something special" (182) may also signify repressed shame—for her contempt for others and for the illusion of specialness she fosters. Joan wants to believe that she can emotionally manage marital infidelity, but "grief and guilt" (206) torment her. She confesses that she and Brolier—a man with a "medieval face" that is "long and pale and bony"--are, like Morris and Matilda, "terribly perfectly balanced" with "stubbornly preserved" flaws (205). The terms "terribly," "medieval." and "preserved" reflect the funereal environment shaping Joan's youth; both the house and Joan's mother's seeming permanence in it foreshadow Joan's dark, secretive relationship with Brolier. Where Joan once thought that her mother was the friend of her youth, she is terrified as an adult to admit that her mother failed to nurture her properly. This is her "unnamable dread."

Munro's characterization of the Logan of Joan's youth complicates Joan's dilemma; Logan is ominous and its personality is like Joan's mother's: neither nurtures a sense of being part of something. Instead, both breed only "special pride" (195), destructive gossip, and disregard for real civility. Logan is "haphazard" and has a castle-like post office, "cracked sidewalks . . . dusty streets," and "costumed, obsessed" inhabitants (196). That Joan is "used to being identified" as her husband's wife suggests Logan's patriarchal element, stifling a woman's freedom. Logan is "pleased that a girl from this town" married the "famous, or semi-famous" journalist, implying its inferiority complex. Further, that they
“do not care” for his job and see him as cynical and opinionated reflects both their fear of the urban culture and their hypocrisy (194-5). Finally, the comment that Joan’s mother “did not believe that she and her children were poor in the way that people helped by the Lion’s Club were poor” (181-82) indicates Joan’s mother’s pride and the focalizer’s discontent with it, but it also implies that some in Logan make it their business to know who’s poor and who isn’t.

The Fordyce house described in Part I of “Oh, What Avails” is as Gothic as any in Southern Ontario Gothic fiction. Like Flora’s in “Friend of My Youth,” Joan’s house symbolizes the emotional isolation of its inhabitants. The distinction between physical “house” and emotional “home” invites a return to Freud’s notion of the uncanny; once again, an environment that should foster domestic familiarity and warmth instead disturbs and discontents. The Fordyce house has a “smell” emanating from plaster and wallpaper in rooms that are “shut off” from the remainder of the house; the dining room and living room are also closed off from each other, and “a cheap partition shuts off the side hall from the front hall” (183). Whether the smelly, crypt-like rooms and cavernous halls contain more life than the rest of the unsealed house Munro leaves unanswered. The “ailing furnace” and “dead birds in the unused chimneys” (183) indicate stifled freedom and an absence of warmth that contradict the “laxity” (190) Joan claims her mother allowed in the house. “Laxity” implies an absence of strictness and authority; if young Joan’s home was truly lax, it would oppose Logan’s puritanical culture. Yet Joan’s mother derides Loony Buttler in front of the children, fights with Morris over his reluctance to take Matilda to the dance, chastises Joan for eavesdropping, and calls her piano playing “horrible” (191-2). The house is full of tension. Further, the laxity that Joan claims her mother allowed “would surprise most people” (190),
implying that “most people” recognize that Joan’s mother can be rigid and intolerant. The Fordyce house reflects the eerie atmosphere of Joan’s youth and demonstrates that Joan fails to see “Ma” Fordyce’s true character. The “specialness” Joan believes her mother to have fostered was illusory. If it existed at all, it did so only momentarily and superficially.

The coloured glass through which Joan’s mother taught her to see the outside world is symbolic of Joan’s tainted outlook on life in adulthood. Joan’s mother doubtlessly taught her to look through the glass and to watch, judge, and nick-name the outside world and its inhabitants, including Loony Buttler. But whether Joan’s mother or Loony is the loonier is indiscernible. Joan’s mother mocks Loony by calling her “Mrs. Buttler. Mrs. Buncle. and finally Mrs. Carbuncle,” and she taunts her by going “yap, yap, yap... like an angry little dog shut up alone in the house” as Loony stands outside (184-5). She also deems Loony “camphorated” and “stuffy” (189). But despite Loony’s death in a madhouse, Joan’s mother is not much better off: she lives an embalmed life within the walls of her funereal home, spreading her contempt for others like an infection and giving her children the illusion that they belong to something special. As a child, Joan would have joyfully participated in the seemingly harmless game of watching others. Yet the adult Joan must now confront the reality that the glass contained “more red than any other colour” (192) and that, in her youth, pretty lilac bushes could be turned “a dark red, like blood” (193). Now, through her mother’s angry and dissatisfied eyes, Joan sees only darkness and ugliness in the world around her. No one escapes Joan’s eye: on the page describing Joan’s return to Logan in 1972, “look,” “looks,” and “looked” occur six times, with other language of vision: “seeing,” “she made up her eyes.” and “sharp-eyed” (194). That Joan’s mother’s death is mentioned in passing
is a gross understatement of the longevity of her influence: "Their mother is dead" (194), the
narrator mentions at the beginning of Frazil Ice, and yet, like a mummy, she haunts.

The Fordyce house, as the source of Joan’s figuratively tainted vision and Morris’s literal blindness, is but one example of dark forces in the Logan landscape. Another is that in Logan, beauty like Matilda’s is seen as a “mild deformity” (188). Joan is not taught to see Matilda as a beautiful princess but as shrouded in a “veil of stupidity” (186) and “a reproach” (188). Through the name game, Joan invents other names for Matilda until Matilda’s real identity becomes lost. But as “the name Matilda became transformed” (187), Joan’s innocence disappeared. Loony Buttler’s calling Morris “Deadeye Dick” further illustrates Munro’s dark characterization of Logan (193). Munro’s use of the expression as the story’s opening subtitle alerts us to connections between Logan and death, superficiality, and malevolence; although Loony says the words, it is not hard to imagine others in Logan thinking them.

Fortune and misfortune also influence Joan’s perspective in “Oh, What Avails.” Ironically, Morris’s bad luck—an accident occurring, notably, in the yard of the Fordyce house—leaves him with maimed vision but a clarity of perspective that Joan lacks. Lorraine McMullen astutely observes that “the difference between grotesque and ‘ordinary people’ is a quantitative one. While distorting reality, they nevertheless mirror it; by exaggerating certain aspects of humanity, they make us more aware of our own frailties and eccentricities” (154). Morris may look grotesque because of his misfortune, but Joan’s attitudes and denials are more frightening and demonstrate that she is more scarred than he. The language of “seeing” persistently reminds us of Joan’s figurative blindness. She has difficulty seeing that her troubled “real and apparent” (205) adulthood is the
result of a grotesque youthful environment. Anxiety and confusion distinguish Joan's adult life from Morris's when she confesses that "nothing that works for Morris and Matilda is going to work for her. Not self-denial, the exaltation of balked desires, no kind of high-flown helplessness. She is not to be so satisfied" (205). Morris, who "always seemed settled" (194), still is settled; he has a comfortable, functional life despite Joan's suggestions to the contrary. Morris was never obsessed with his disfiguration and there is nothing to suggest that he wants, as Joan desires him to have, "one of those new, realistic artificial eyes, whose magic sensitivity enables them to move in unison with the other, real eye" (182). That Morris's blind eye is covered with a "smoky lens" (181) suggests a clouded perspective that is not his; the lens symbolizes Joan's insensitivity and imperceptibility. Morris both mystifies and annoys Joan, and she persists in trying to fill the space in Morris's face with something she will be able to tolerate because she, and not Morris, is frightened and repulsed by it.

*Deadeye Dick* places the house—and the story as a whole—within the framework of the death theme in *Friend of My Youth*. Morris lost an eye in an accident and Joan's father was killed in one. Further, Joan's physical world in the first section is limited to the death-like and encapsulated "large, cold, unmanageable" (183) Fordyce house. In her adult life, Joan is enclosed in her mind. She is haunted by fears that an honest account of her childhood must recognize her mother's shadowy side. She is afraid of admitting that Morris came to terms with his maimed eye and their maimed mother long ago. Despite his potential love of the "history of machinery," Morris abandoned family history; he discarded "anything that looked like an antique" (197) following their mother's death. Indeed, he may have begun to dispose of it the night he acquiesced to his mother's
demand that he ask Matilda to the dance; the humiliation of being labelled “Deadeye Dick” may bear directly on the distance he places between himself and his horrifying history.

Joan claims that the difficult events of her youth have had no influence on her adulthood, but she is repressing the truth. She still believes that “None of this is important, none of their privations and difficulties and economies are important. What is important? Jokes and luck” (183). While hiding behind her mother’s philosophy, Joan recalls a youth that is emotionally more tolerable, but her adult life—replete with its continuing judgments, anxieties, broken marriage, and deceptions—is anything but a joke. Educated to be pretentious and sly-faced and not to show genuine warmth and love, the “specialness” she believes in is shown to be nothing more than “the way they talk about people” (183). Slowly and subtly, parallels between the house and its resident Gothic Mother emerge: both foster isolation from the outside world, and there is more to both than Joan is willing to reveal. Like Flora and Ellie at the hands of the Cameronians, the young Morris and Joan learn to conceal dark and special secrets; though Morris escapes a life filled with haunting memories, Joan does not. By the end of Rose Matilda, with her mother long dead and the Fordyce house sold, she is still running from ghosts.
“Five Points”

Gothic writers work—consciously or unconsciously—on the fringe of the acceptable, for it is on this borderland that fear resides. In the best works, the two sides of the border are grafted onto each other . . . displaying on one side the contours of reality, the detail and structure of everyday life, on the other the shadowy realm of myth, the lineaments of the unacceptable. (Punter 189)

To put Brenda’s inner state into context and to illustrate that the past haunts the present in “Five Points,” Munro again employs landscape. There are three Gothic settings in “Five Points,” and they develop a more intensified funereal atmosphere than that in “Oh, What Avails.” The three settings symbolize aspects of Brenda’s sexuality and intimacy with the men in her life. The first two of these are Brenda’s “worn-out” farm and the “salt mine at Walley, on the lake” (29); both are symbolic of Brenda’s sterile marriage to Cornelius. The third is the secret sexual rendezvous point; as the source of Brenda’s sexual rejuvenation and moral corruption, its description reflects anxieties and shame lurking in Brenda’s mind as a result of her affair. The degree of her confusion is further clarified when compared to Maria’s sexual exploits, and Victoria as a fourth setting illustrates chilling connections between the two women.

Brenda’s deception in “Five Points” is but one in an environment where nearly every character has something to hide: Brenda lies to Cornelius, Neil lies to Brenda, Maria lies to her parents, and the boys lie about their use of Maria. Repressed emotion and fear of honesty so permeate this story that nobody feels comfortable thinking about—let alone speaking—the truth. Freud’s insights that fantasy “is the fulfilment of a wish, a correction of an unsatisfying reality” and that “a happy person never fantasizes, only an unsatisfied one” (Works, IX,
apply to Munro’s Gothic characterization of Brenda. She perpetually fantasizes about encounters with Neil because she feels isolated in a marriage devoid of intimacy and fragmented by unnatural silence. She tries to find happiness with Neil but cannot, for despite her dissatisfaction with Cornelius, she nevertheless feels shame for betraying him. Deep in the heart of Southern Ontario, in a place “just south of Logan” (29), distinctions between fantasy and reality become blurred and contentment is elusive.

The first setting, Cornelius’ and Brenda’s farmhouse, symbolizes Brenda’s view of Cornelius as emotionally sterile. To Brenda, Cornelius is as worn out as the secluded farm they manage, with its “secondhand furniture,” its “used appliances,” and its weedy rock garden (29-31). Once again, there is a noteworthy absence of “home” in Brenda’s house, despite her having a husband, daughters, and a dog. Cornelius’ reclusiveness, resulting from the loss of his job, causes the desolation Brenda feels being married to him; in a moment of Gothic irony that reflects his own dark state, he admits that “he just can’t look at the surface of the water without seeing all that underneath, which nobody who hasn’t seen it could imagine” (48). Cornelius is trapped in his mind and lost in the past just as Joan’s mother may have been following her husband’s death in “Oh, What Avails.” He has nothing left to stimulate Brenda and instead leaves her to the “secret preparations” (32) she requires to meet Neil.

The salt mine is where Cornelius used to work and where Neil now works, symbolically distinguishing Brenda’s dying relationship with her husband from her present affair with Neil. Though Munro never offers a full account of Cornelius—which makes him an ambiguous villain—Brenda feels that he is oppressive and withdrawn. He once “slapped her for smoking marijuana”
and mocked her sympathy for a retarded child that he viewed as “just a vegetable” (47). Though Cornelius worked in the mine for seven years before his accident, he “hardly ever spoke to Brenda about what it was like” (47). This, and Brenda’s confession that even now she “doesn’t know if he misses being down there” (47), reflect their persisting unnatural silence. Cornelius’ characterization raises questions as to why Brenda doesn’t leave—here, as in the Gothic, the heroine may have no alternative but to tolerate a horrifying domestic situation. With little hope of emotional or economic support from a small town like Logan, Brenda may have no choice but to stay.

The salt mine symbolizes Cornelius’ hellish psychological condition. It is “a world of its own” with “caverns and pillars, miles out under the lake” (47), and it physically hurt and emotionally mutilated Cornelius to a point where he is trapped in his own world. The mine—like his mind—is where “you can find out what real darkness is like” (47). Here, ransacked machines are “piled into a dead-end passage that is sealed up—a tomb,” and the “ferocious noise” of the machines “cuts out any human voice” (47). Cornelius has learned his silence in this funereal atmosphere. When the narrator remarks that the mine changed after Cornelius’ accident, and that now “there’s a new machine that can do what Cornelius went up in the cage to do” (47), Cornelius appears replaceable. That Neil now works at the mine ironically aligns him with the replacement machine: he is doing what Cornelius used to do. He is doing Brenda.

An even more haunting version of the mine lingers in Cornelius’ head; it signifies that he is trapped in the past in a state of permanent anguish, making Brenda’s life as dreadful as his own. Like the retarded child he would “get rid of” (49), Cornelius is a mort-vivant figure. Punter argues
that in modern Gothic, "the dead do not need to rise up against the living, for the living already inhabit the world of the dead, like sleep-walkers" (123). Like the child, Cornelius exists in a death-like state: "There are hours in the day and sometimes whole days when he has to lie down and watch television, or just lie on the living room floor, coping with the pain" (29). His unnatural silence prevents him from conveying his remorse for a lost past, a stagnant present, and an uncertain future. When Cornelius does leave the house, he desires a return to the "choppy and cold-looking" lake (30) beside the mine that damned him. Once there, he enjoys hauntings by "pyramids of coarse grey salt" and the "tame and useless monsters" that reflect his bleak, docile self (30). Trucks, earthmovers, and bulldozers create and develop the new at the mine, but Cornelius' life stands in contrast as one of lassitude and passion only for the old. Brenda, in the meantime, feels neglected and alone. She "listens to Cornelius and thinks about Neil" (31), and she fantasizes about the stimulating raw and earthy "smell of work on their [the workers'] bodies" (31). Her desire for "their disregard of her" (31) is ironic, given that Cornelius disregards her to the point where she seeks Neil. Though Brenda resents having to "quit her job, because there was too much for Cornelius to handle by himself" (29), she is more enraged by his emotional isolation and silence.

The most Gothic landscape in "Five Points" is the secret rendezvous point where Brenda meets Neil; it parallels Brenda’s violation of trust and foreshadows her failure to replace her old lover. Brenda’s perceptions of landscape show the darkness in her mind; things seem ominous because of her hidden shame. Turning off of the main highway, Brenda realizes that she has "taken the plunge" and is "driving where she shouldn’t be" (35), because she and Neil are "driving" and "plunging" into each other when they know they shouldn’t
be. She turns onto a “dead-end swamp road” (35), denoting the uncleanliness of her exploits and foreshadowing her failed affair. Lining the route to Neil’s trailer is a group of foreboding items that likewise serve as sexual metaphors for Brenda’s illicit deeds: “bright, poisonous fruit,” suggesting a biblical fall from grace; “wild grapevine flung over everything, even creeping onto the road,” implying Brenda’s sexual liberty and the creeping guilt it entails; “slick mud” and a “soggy sinkhole,” connoting Brenda’s sexual easiness; and “choking, yellowy cress” and “sucking nettles,” suggesting both globus hystericus and oral copulation and foretelling that Brenda will soon perceive Neil as suffocating her as Cornelius does (35).

Brenda so desperately wants sex that she is blind to danger. She parks the car “in a spot of swampy darkness under the trees” and enters a world where “the absence of Neil” becomes her biggest fear (35). That she fears “his sudden denial of her” and that her thoughts of it “can turn any place, any thing, ugly and menacing and stupid” illustrate the extent of her sexual repression at home (35-6). But though Brenda claims to want to be Neil’s “territory” (41) and seems obsessed with him, her relationship has only a “history of passion . . . they don’t have much else” (37). She wants “not a marriage bed or a bed of illness, comfort, complication” but a “bed of lust and sleep” (41), and this makes their relationship conditional. It is destined to fail, which it does when Neil provides the condition for it to do so with a lie. Every encounter between them is prefaced by Brenda’s feelings of “caution and anxiety”; her “good deeds” (31) signify her awareness of the immorality of her actions. Her affair with Neil is dreadful pleasure at best.

Brenda’s repression of guilt succeeds only temporarily, for despite efforts to hide her guilt by remaining detached, she cannot. When she senses that her relationship with Neil is threatening
to become more than sexual, Brenda instigates another transition from old to new. Suspecting that he is lying about having slept with Maria, Brenda experiences a throbbing "pain between her legs" (42) that is important in four overlapping contexts: first, given that it originates where it does and not in her heart or head, the pain is a reminder that Brenda’s focus is on physical and not emotional love. Next, it implies that the end of her illicit sex is like a quick and painful sexual withdrawal. Third, it suggests that Brenda can be hurt by Neil; Brenda knows that she has become a victim of Neil’s lie just as Cornelius is a victim of hers. Her guilt multiplies in an instant. Finally, the pain—in addition to her immediate reaction of silence—suggests that Brenda is bordering on hysteria. In her revealing account of madness and hysteria, Elaine Showalter states that

The hysterical attack generally began with pain in the uterine region, and with a sense of obstruction in the chest and throat. At its height, the victim alternately sobbed and laughed; she might have convulsive movements of the body, heart palpitations, impaired hearing and vision, or unconsciousness. The fits were followed by exhaustion, and usually by rapid recovery, although occasionally the effects lasted for days. A striking aspect of the seizure was the globus hystericus, the sensation that a ball was rising in the esophagus, producing a feeling of choking or suffocation. Indeed, the ancients had believed that this feeling was caused by the rising of the womb within the body. (130)

Showalter dismantles arguments (made by patriarchal and often misogynist forces) that hysteria was exclusively “the quintessential female malady” (129), but she never denies that women experienced the illness. Here, Brenda’s vaginal pain represents her body speaking on behalf of her mind. When she realizes that a purely sexual relationship with Neil is impossible, she is reminded that a return to Cornelius will bring sexual decay.
Kelly Hurley’s Freudian argument reveals that physical signs of hysteria are but secondary reactions to psychological conflict:

To assert that something is too horrible to be spoken of is the privileged utterance of the Gothic, but it is also the privileged utterance of the hysterical. Freud argues that the precondition of hysteria is a ‘disturbance in the sphere of sexuality’ (Dora, p. 39) so intolerable that it must be repressed. The memory escapes to the unconscious, and thus is henceforth incapable of expression in conventional discourse; the forces of repression at work ensure its unspeakability. But that which the conscious mind cannot acknowledge, and the subject cannot speak, the body tells instead. (48)

Here, Brenda cannot express herself to Neil because she is unwilling to commit herself to an emotional relationship and because she is horrified by her moral corruption. She realizes Neil is lying, and her shame for lying to Cornelius grows. She tries to repress it but cannot, because she feels used by Neil just as he used Maria. Ironically, even though Brenda wants their affair to be strictly sexual, she cannot manage the idea of being sexually used. She reacts with silence instead of fighting with Neil because she is afraid to speak to him of emotion; she has learned an unnatural silence from Cornelius that remains even when she is distanced from him. Though Brenda claims to feel free as she flees Neil’s trailer, her freedom will be short-lived. A return to Cornelius promises a return to isolation.

Brenda’s desire to be dominated by Neil suggests masochism. DeLamotte argues that masochism is one the taboos “lying at the heart of most Gothic plots” (21). Others include incest, sexual violence, and rape (Punter 190). Claire Kahane defines masochism as an “eroticized submission” in which “the subject seeks pleasure in a return to nonbeing, to non-differentiation, to
silence” (34). Brenda’s betrayal of Cornelius results from her desire for sex; her submission to the “impudent, swaggering, conceited” (“Five” 45) Neil and the implied humiliation it involves may reflect Brenda’s attempt to displace guilt by channelling all of her energy into her body. By allowing herself to be conquered physically, she can forget the torment of guilt. In Neil’s trailer, she can silence the part of her mind that speaks to her of shame, but only temporarily. Punter observes that the fundamental structure of taboo “is emotional ambivalence . . . we summon up not a simple emotional reaction but a dialectical one in which the mind oscillates between attraction and repulsion, worship and condemnation” (190). That Brenda’s worship for Neil becomes displaced by repulsion shows that she knows—consciously or unconsciously—that her affair constitutes a breach of loyalty and that she should feel guilt. Resenting Cornelius does not negate her shame for betraying him.

Brenda’s guilt and anxiety are elucidated by juxtaposing her story with Maria’s, for Brenda and Maria are warped images of each other. Victoria first appears in contrast to Joan’s sexually-stifling Southern Ontario, but a closer look reveals similarities suggesting Maria’s life may have turned out horrifying, like Brenda’s. Rasporich suggests that Munro’s British Columbia is often characterized as “bizarre and artificial, a Hollywood set, a circus” (145). Maria’s world seems a circus. In Victoria, fluidity and change are not feared but welcome. Victoria’s “big burst of paper flowers and marijuana fumes and music” (32) symbolizes individual freedom. It is ethereal, bright, and active, a place with “flower beds,” happy beaches,” and “magic peaks” that contrast sharply with Brenda’s three dark settings (32). Victoria also resembles Neil’s trailer in that both are places where sex is plentiful and where it seems—on the surface—to bear no destructive consequences.
But sex does have dark consequences for both Maria and Brenda. Despite the surface characterization of Victoria as a free-wheeling sexual circus, the dark underside of Maria's sexual exploits cannot be overlooked. Maria is breaking taboos and is being psychologically maimed by those taking advantage of her; she is, in fact, a party to prostitution at thirteen years old, and her sex with the boys leads to a ruined family business and the destruction of her parents' trust. Because Neil's story describes Maria at thirteen, what happens to her later remains mysterious, but it is not hard to conceive that Maria's adult life is as frightening as Brenda's. As a girl, Maria's "powers were being chipped, then hammered, away" (39) by boys demanding more money from her; so too was her self-image suffering the same fate. Similarly, just as the store was "bleeding money" (40), so too was her self-respect bleeding from her. Neil's reflections on his past in Victoria suggest that he also has some demons of guilt to confront. He wants to believe that Maria may have married and may "be good looking even," but he must also admit that "she might still be just sitting in one of those places. One of those places where they put people" (42). That "nothing could be done about the boys" (40) who robbed Maria of her innocence is a Gothic reminder that two sets of standards define a patriarchal twentieth century just as they defined the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In both Victoria and Neil's trailer, drugs and alcohol make the sex that transpires seem imaginary instead of real and make the consequences of illegitimate sex seem less significant than they really are. Edmund Burke notes that "To make anything very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, we can accustom our eyes to it" (34). The "flowers, towers, birds, and monsters" ("Five" 33) that Neil experiences in
Victoria disappear when the effects of his drugs wear off. The monster of shame that Brenda experiences because of her affair with him in Logan, however, remains to haunt her. Reality shatters dreams for Brenda and will likely have done the same for Maria. Brenda’s anxieties, while obscured by alcohol in Neil’s trailer, are re-experienced with terrifying sobriety when she returns to the farm.

Other incidents reveal that Maria is a warped reflection of Brenda. Where Maria seems to be assertive and dominating in the storefront, she is eventually victimized by boys who blackmail her by threatening to expose the truth; similarly, Brenda’s attempt to assert her independence fails when Neil forces her to see the truth that she cannot have an affair without tormenting herself. Brenda’s sexual freedom is illusory, and so is Maria’s; Brenda’s illicit sex ends when it threatens to become personal, and Maria’s illicit sex ends when her money runs out. The “sharp, releasing pleasure” Brenda feels in delivering the “first blow” of words that end her affair with Neil is a short-lived pleasure—indeed, it is another dreadful pleasure (43). Maria’s pleasures are similarly dreadful: when her “increased needs” are not satisfied, she experiences a “silent rage” and becomes “wild and sullen and mean” (39).

Finally, thirteen-year old Maria is described as having “big, saggy breasts” and a fifty-year old face” that indicate she has become worn out before her time; she not only looks old, but “she acted it” (29). Brenda has prematurely decayed, but psychologically.

Maria’s apparent lack of guilt over her sexual exploits appears to contrast with Brenda’s obvious shame over her lone affair with Neil, but Maria is not shown years after the fact. The “whole underground system of dreams” (37) that Brenda hoped would provide her with pleasure becomes withered by painful realities, and it is easy to believe that Maria’s
adult life is also withered. "Squashed and bruised," and "throb­bing like a big swollen blister"(42), Brenda will leave Neil, limp back to the farm, and resume what little semblance of a life she has there. Whether she waits for the next Neil to come along or resigns herself to continued emotional and sexual repression with Cornelius remains unanswered. Maria’s adult life may also be full of haunting repressions and emotional torture.

The blurred distinction between fantasy and reality in “Five Points,” in addition to its focus on guilt, despair, hysteria, repression, and broken sexual taboos, suggests that Brenda’s “everyday” surface reality is rich with Gothic undercurrents. Here as in “Friend of My Youth” and “Oh, What Avails,” Munro’s settings expose the psychological condition of her protagonist and other characters. Brenda’s inability to escape an unhappy marriage signifies that she feels alone in a world unwilling to listen to her voice, and like her Gothic predecessors, she fantasizes about happiness because it evades her in reality. Attempts to make fantasies real inevitably fail in small-town Southern Ontario.
"Meneseteung"

The original gothic mode of fiction, with its primary emotions of fear and terror, its crude villains pursuing palpitating heroines, was primarily a sexual fantasy fiction which tellingly projected the repressed feeling of a society which placed woman on a pedestal, denied her sexuality, and romantically idealized her as morally superior to and more sensitive than the male . . . Unconsciously projected into the heroine’s dangerous situations were the primitive passions the eighteenth century denied her. Obviously, the gothic heroine is not in her eighteenth century dress in Munro’s fiction but she and her fiction of psychological projection are very much alive . . . (Rasporich 135)

The overwhelming concentration of terror, persecution, and brutality in “Meneseteung” make it the most Gothic story in *Friend of My Youth*. The repressive small-town culture that stifles protagonists in other stories is here enormously intensified; it drives Almeda Joynt Roth into hysteria and death. In her study of Ann Radcliffe’s Gothic, Cynthia Griffin Wolff notes that “modern Goths follow in the tradition of Radcliffe’s work: sometimes they involve the murky atmosphere of a world that is vaguely called ‘Victorian England’” (211). In “Meneseteung,” Toronto is obsessed with trying to maintain the propriety and sexual puritanism that typify the Victorian era, and those obsessions are inherently Gothic. As Margaret Atwood notes of Toronto in this story, “Our sweet picture of bygone days is destroyed . . . the poet herself disintegrates in the harsh and multiple presence of the vivid life that surrounds her and that finally proves too huge and real for her . . .” (*Best* xxii). Forces of darkness and disorder lurk under Toronto’s genteel surfaces of order and reason; its casting off of those whom it deems morally perverse reflects its fears of cultural instability. Munro’s landscapes, her characterization of Jarvis Poulter, and genteel
Toronto’s attitudes towards outsiders exemplify the funereal aura looming over the town.

“Toronto” becomes synonymous with “hell,” with Jarvis Poulter and The Vidette reigning over genteel minions whose goal is to forestall change. The narrator refers to Toronto as an “encampment” (54), as a place where “tall elms overshadowed the town” (53) and where “There are quite a few people in the cemetery already . . . most of them died young” (54). In this place of early death, roads are “hot as ashes” (69) and hot weather brings chaos and madness:

More horses run wild then, upsetting buggies. Hands caught in the ringer while doing the washing, a man lopped in two at the sawmill, a leaping boy killed in a fall of lumber at the lumberyard. Nobody sleeps well. Babies wither . . . . Bodies must be buried in a hurry. One day a man goes through the streets ringing a cowbell and calling, ‘Repent! Repent!’ It’s not a stranger this time, it’s a young man who works at the butcher shop. Take him home, wrap him in cold wet cloths, give him some nerve medicine, keep him in bed, pray for his wits. If he doesn’t recover, he must go to the asylum. (55)

References to sleeplessness, nerve medicine, and the asylum show that Toronto is ripe with fear and hysteria and suggest that Almeda is not its only victim. The whole town is like an asylum. The “mean-looking” and “weedy-looking” log homes and farms and the “ragged little settlements” and “herds of horned cows” round out Munro’s characterization of the region (61). It is not surprising that Almeda imagines “a ball of fire rolling up Pearl Street”(63); manifestations of hell are both imaginable and real.

Toronto’s treatment of those it deems “outsiders”—strangers, Queen Aggie, and other residents of Pearl Street Swamp—signifies its fears of cultural instability. Toronto is afraid of “new” ideas that strangers might bring: “new business,” schemers selling “cures and
gimmicks,” or preachers preaching “on the street corners” (55), for example. The Vidette, the patriarchal and judgmental voice of the collective consciousness, warns residents to “be on your guard” because “these are times of opportunity and danger. Tramps, confidence men, hucksters, shysters, plain thieves are travelling the roads . . .” (55). Toronto approaches paranoia in fearing change, and The Vidette, with its “shy jokes, innuendo, [and] plain accusation” (57), is reminiscent of Joan’s mother and Loony. Like them, and like the narrator constructing Almeda’s story, The Vidette bases its stories about others only on partial evidence: “There is no grounds for this, but it adds interest” (57). Strangers who “don’t look so prosperous are taunted and tormented” (55) because Toronto fears adding to the ranks of the impoverished. Showalter reminds us of the common nineteenth-century view that poverty was “one of the moral causes of insanity” (54). By equating poverty with morality and madness, Toronto’s genteel find an excuse to suppress the segment of their population they would rather hide than help. Fears of groundless accusation, taunting, and torment also prevent Almeda from expressing her artistic and sexual desires.

Its treatment of Queen Aggie illustrates Toronto’s fear of the unknown Other. Munro has admitted that she was raised in “a community of outcasts where bootleggers and prostitutes and hangers-on’ lived; this comment, in addition to her striking confession that ‘I had that feeling about myself,” may help explain why polite Toronto is painted so darkly in “Meneseteung” (Catherine Sheldrick Ross 23). It does not include its “unrespectable and undeserving poor” (“Meneseteung” 55) but rather rejects them as its monsters. Queen Aggie and other Pearl Street Swamp residents symbolize the instinctive parts of the self that Toronto wants to deny. Its greatest fears are “instant fornication, an attack of passion. Brute
instinct, triumph of the senses” (59-60). Those who represent lawlessness and instinct are relegated to the Swamp, with its “luxuriant weeds” and “makeshift shacks” (55). When they wander from their “piles of refuse and debris and crowds of runty children” (55-6), they are abused. Queen Aggie is wheeled about town in a wheelbarrow and dumped into a ditch by a street gang “looking for adventures” (54). That the beaten woman whom Almeda confronts later in the story is not identified as Queen Aggie—and is not identified at all—is telling. Queen Aggie is clearly not alone in her torment; Toronto denies all Pearl Street residents a human identity.

Jarvis Poulter’s patriarchal values enhance the story’s funereal atmosphere. He represents Almeda’s only means of attaining “considerable respectability” (55), and her rejection of him seals her fate. Jarvis is posthumously described by The Vidette as “one of the founders of our community” (72), despite his having arrived in Toronto only “a few years ago” (56). This signifies the immediate impact he has on a small town that normally fears strangers; his potential to bring “the benefits of industry, productivity, and employment to our town” (72) prevents his receiving the torment normally reserved for strangers. On the surface, he appears “a decent citizen” (57), but descriptions of him “in a dark suit” with “black hair” and a “severe and self-possessed air, and a large pale wart” (57) align him with the Gothic villain. He collects loose coal and is “an operator of salt wells” (55), both of which link him to the underworld, and his house has “no fruit trees or flowers” (57), suggesting sterility and decay. That “he does not go to church at night” (59) raises questions about what and whom he might be worshipping instead.

Jarvis is male, wealthy, powerful, and thus a key member of high society; Toronto’s
views on marriage further exemplify the patriarchal values of the small-town culture he represents: "A man will keep his house decent, but he will never—if he is a proper man—do much to decorate it. Marriage forces him to live with more ornament as well as sentiment, and it protects him, also, from the extremities of his own nature—from a frigid parsimony or a luxurious sloth, from squalor, and from excessive sleeping or reading, drinking, smoking, or freethinking" (57). How a woman might benefit from marriage is not a concern for Toronto. Woman is aligned with "ornament," "sentiment," and the prevention of excess, and as long as she has the promise of utility—and is "not too old," is a "good enough housekeeper," and has "nothing wrong with her looks" (58-9)—she will serve the purpose. Almeda "cannot imagine herself doing that" (60) because she knows it will destroy her individuality; that she is "too clumsy" (51) to crochet and embroider and that "she wants a man who doesn’t have to be made" (60) illustrate her desire for freedom from domesticity. DeLamotte comments that women in Gothic fiction do not fear being confined to dungeons but to a life of "‘making puddings and knitting stockings’. . . they are victims of repetition—not because specters haunt them night after night but because they do the same things day after day" (201). Almeda fits this description of the Gothic heroine. Showalter observes that unmarried middle-class women, women having "‘unnatural’ desires for privacy and independence” (134), and "unconventional women—artists and writers” (145) were often deemed "subject to mental problems” (61) in Victorian times. Toronto sees Almeda as unnatural, unconventional, and a problem.

Almeda’s denial of Jarvis is a rejection of Toronto’s view of women; she desires to be neither dependent on nor a mother to Jarvis, whose true self is revealed the night of her
confrontation with the mysterious drunk. Where she once fantasized about him "coming into her" room and being "driven by" him in the countryside (60-61), the "harsh joviality" (67) he displays after "rescuing" Almeda changes her mind about marrying him. DeLamotte explains why: "the rescue men seem to offer women is often one with the Gothic perils those women hope to escape . . . the Gothic imprisonment by the villain and the Gothic rescue by the hero may be identical in the end" (226). Jarvis's harshness has a tone that Almeda "has never before heard from him" (67) because, until this incident, Jarvis has had no opportunity to assert his dominance over her in order to try and draw her into the sphere of domestic and masculine dependency. He attempts to do so by casually disposing of the threat—the drunken woman—which he hopes will certify that his male reason is superior to Almeda's female fragility.

By subtly humiliating Almeda, Jarvis hopes to make her recognize that her weak nature needs to be complemented by his strength. Previously, despite his "solitary calculations of her probable worth, undoubted respectability, [and] adequate comeliness . . . he has not been able to imagine her as a wife" (67). Now, however, he becomes "sufficiently stirred" (67). Arguably, he is not stimulated by Almeda but by his show of power. He can see her as a wife because he presumes she accepts his dominance. But her refusal of the invitation that comes across as a command—"I will walk with you to church" (67)—is a refusal of all that Jarvis represents. Almeda's fear of being dominated is typical of the Gothic hero or heroine; Howard observes that "the obsessive anxiety and terror apparent in so much Gothic fiction is supplied by the threat of one being (or institution) exerting total power over another" (67). When Jarvis later arrives to escort Almeda to church, "An image
comes to her of tombstones” (69). It signifies a complete unravelling of her fantasies. As was the case for Brenda, Almeda’s fantasies are thwarted by horrifying realities.

Almeda’s house symbolizes her dilemma. Facing Dufferin Street and “decent” Toronto from the front, and Pearl Street—where “no decent woman ever would” go (56)—and the Swamp from the rear, it represents a psychological duality that Fleenor argues “is appropriate when discussing the Gothic” (4). Almeda is torn between a desire to fit into her everyday world and desires for artistic and sexual freedom. Writing associates her with creativity, independence, and having a voice—three things patriarchal Toronto fears from its women. It sees her artistic creation as a “drawback” and a “barrier” (59) that has prevented her from becoming married; since Toronto uses the institution of marriage to sustain its patriarchal culture, it resents Almeda and deems her an “old maid” (58). Her madness is attributable to her necessarily concealed drives for independence, work, and power. Toronto fails to recognize that it provides the barriers inhibiting female independence, making them old maids before their time. That Almeda’s poems speak of “ghostly voices,” cemeteries, crippled angels, gypsies, and the destruction of forests says much about Toronto’s influence on her (52). That her mother “lost her reason” (59) suggests Toronto had the same effect on mother as daughter and foreshadows Almeda’s hysteria.

The psychological duality Fleenor observes in the Gothic is also helpful for describing Almeda’s sexual predicament. Almeda’s sexual desire for Jarvis is, on one hand, “normal” in the conventional sense: it represents the Almeda who wants to fit into society and have access to marital sexuality and intimacy. But, as Punter notes, “Gothic fiction is erotic at root: it knows that to channel sexual activity into the narrow confines of
conventionality is repressive and, in the end, highly dangerous” (191). Almeda’s other self has unconventional sexual fantasies that stem from repression. Fantasies of Jarvis’s “dark, kind authority” give her “meek shivers” and desirous fits of “submission” suggesting masochism (60). That his “correct, orderly, heavy clothes” remind her of her father, and that “men—except for her father—seem to her deprived in some way” suggests incest (60). She fantasizes about taboo-breaking sex because she is deprived of sex of any kind. As Howells observes, “The dread of sex runs right through Gothic fiction and is basic to many of its conventions of anxiety and terror. Gothic heroines suffer incessantly from persecution mania, and there is a high incidence of hysteria and madness among them which goes with much threatened brutality on the part of the villains” (13). What Almeda dreads more than no sex is the terror of marital sex with Jarvis and its accompanying social demands and restrictions. That Almeda sleeps in the room nearest Pearl Street and that she employs a Pearl Street woman foretell her rejection of Jarvis and genteel Toronto in favour of the freedoms symbolic in the primordial Swamp.

The most powerful Gothic moments in Friend of My Youth occur in Parts IV and V of “Meneseteung,” where Almeda collapses into hysteria and madness. Showalter observes that madness is the “desperate communication of the powerless,” and she quotes Shoshana Felman saying that it is also “the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived the very means of protest or self-affirmation” (5). Almeda’s madness results from her powerlessness in the face of the same cultural forces that deem hysteria a women’s disease. Her hysteria is reflected in the surrounding landscape; images of sexuality, brutality, and blood abound in Parts IV and V. When Almeda awakes from her “viv
dreams” on a night that is “fiery hot and full of threats” (62), she collides with a reality much worse than anything she has dreamt of. The uncanny effects produced by “effacing the distinction between imagination and reality” (Freud, “The Uncanny” 85) are here at their most pronounced.

Almeda’s confrontation with the beaten woman leads to a discovery of her carnal self. Ildikó de Papp Carrington observes that Munro’s characters are often “voyeurs, watchers of various forbidden sights, usually, although not always, somehow sexual in nature” (8). Almeda’s discovery of what strikes her as an animal-woman leads to a conflict between mind and body, between her external conventional attitudes and her internal primal desires. Unable to reconcile the two, she goes mad. The seemingly supernatural “yells and laughter and shrieks and curses” she hears, in addition to the “vomiting, grunting, pounding,” are signs of the chaos her genteel self fears (63–4). She is repulsed by a “stream of abuse that contains all those words which Almeda associates with danger and depravity and foul smells and disgusting sights” (63) and, when faced with the possibility that the woman may have been murdered, she does not help but “falls asleep” (64). When she awakens, she hallucinates about the crow and leaves her “shadowy” house—with its spiders, webs, and drooping hollyhocks—and confronts instinct, sexuality, and death. Evelyne Ender notes that hallucinations are common to hysterical fits and that hysteria “shows the struggle of the proper lady against the monster” (40) trying to escape from within. The “bare breast let loose” and the “bare haunch and leg” Almeda sees represent her monster. It so disgusts her that she is silenced by fear and “runs away” to Jarvis (“Meneseteung” 65).

But part of Almeda is stirred by the monstrous smells and disgusting sights; her initial
response is a product of her conditioned femininity and not her independent, artistic, and natural being. She has been forced to repress her natural desires so long that she forgets she wants reality to reflect her "vivid and disturbing" dreams. As the animalistic woman "heaves itself onto all fours" (66) and runs away at Jarvis's command, Almeda recognizes that her inability to make contact—to establish a tactile connection with a reflection of her animal self—has exposed a deficiency. She also sees that it has exposed a vulnerability Jarvis will try to exploit. She cannot object to him verbally because of the unnatural silence demanded of women. Unlike the animal-woman, who could "yowl" with "anguished pleasure" despite having a mouth "that seemed choked with blood" (63), Almeda "can't open her mouth to speak to him, to say thank you. If she opened her mouth, she would retch (67). Almeda's body responds with nausea to her growing instability: "Almeda feels sick. Her abdomen is bloated; she is hot and dizzy" (67). Kelly Hurley observes that nausea in the Gothic "throws the subject back into the immediate and unmistakable experience of his own body, affording the subject concrete proof of his own reality, his own undeniable, material Thing-ness, if not of his meaningfulness" (50). Almeda's nausea reflects her disgust with the animal-woman's "Thing-ness," but more importantly it signifies Almeda's disgust in recognizing that part of herself is primal. Yowling, vomiting, globus hystericus, unnatural silence, and anguished pleasure harmonize to create a wild scene of confusion reflecting Almeda's mind. Though Almeda cannot touch her, she and the brilliantly described woman become inseparable. Almeda is forced to realize that Toronto has denied her the freedom to go out of her mind and come to her senses. She slips further into hysteria as she is stricken by ambivalence. Part of her wants to escape Toronto's oppression, but she is still frightened and confused by her
experience with the uncultivated. As Sedgwick observes, “no nightmare is ever as terrifying as is waking up from even some innocuous dream to find it true” (13). Almeda has been taught to fear her body, and her habits and instincts battle for dominance within her nightmarish reality.

Almeda’s house reflects her struggle for freedom from conventional thought. Showalter notes that the nineteenth-century asylum’s “most important feature . . . was its ‘homishness’” (28). Almeda’s house is not a place of comfort but of refuge; it is like an asylum that has figuratively been consumed by the larger asylum that is Toronto. Though Almeda locks the doors and closes the blinds in an effort to maintain conventional thought and escape her attraction to wildness, it is too late. Primal energies have permeated her mind, and she experiences an intense sensory awareness: her “hearing is so sharp she seems to hear the paper taken out of the frame and unfolded”; she has the sensation that “tombstones are marching down the street”; and decorations seem “charged with life, ready to move and flow and alter. Or possibly to explode” (69). Almeda’s instincts verge on exploding her mind.

Almeda’s menstruation is the most powerful and graphic sign of her hysteria; it starts as the last of her sanity disappears. As Showalter remarks,

. . . the prevailing view among Victorian psychiatrists was that the statistics proved what they had suspected all along: that women were more vulnerable to insanity than men because the instability of their reproductive systems interfered with their sexual, emotional, and rational control . . . . theories of female insanity were specifically and confidently linked to the biological crises of the female life-cycle . . . . Doctors argued that the menstrual discharge in itself predisposed women to insanity. (55-6)
The "flow of words" (71) entering Almeda's mind parallels the arrival of her menstrual flow which, as Showalter suggests, signifies insanity (for those in Victorian times whose agendas, she rightly argues, benefited by such a diagnosis). Almeda's menstruation is immensely symbolic. First, it represents the messiness of her psychological condition, but not without implying that her condition results from restrictions placed on her by a patriarchal culture. To borrow from Carrington, Almeda's menstruation parallels her slow drowning "in the river of her mind" (215). Carrington is right: Almeda drowns there long before she drowns in the Pearl Street Swamp, and Toronto causes both. Second, her menstruation represents a physical response to the Pearl Street woman: though "she walks upstairs leaving purple footprints and smelling her escaping blood and the sweat of her body that has sat all day in the closed hot room," Almeda feels "no anxiety" (71). She overcomes conventional fears about the body, womanhood, and sexuality, but at the expense of her sanity.

Finally and most significantly, Almeda's menstruation signals barrenness. Carrington refers to Almeda's sudden period as symbolic of "the absence of conception—the lack of new creation" and suggests that the forgotten grape juice and sanitary towel "symbolize waste" (215). Almeda's talents—and her life—are indeed "wasted" by polite society. Creation is fundamental to Almeda as both artist and woman, and by restricting her artistic and feminine freedoms Jarvis and Toronto turn her creative potential into "mere rags" ("Meneseteung" 70). Almeda becomes "a long way now from human," but only as polite Toronto defines it; she "doesn't see what could be done for that woman" who once considered marrying Jarvis because she is no longer that woman (70). Given her state of mind, the grape juice Almeda notices on the kitchen floor may or may not be grape juice; it may be blood. In either case,
the stain is significant: Almeda, too, is stained, and the woman she desires to be “will never come out” (70). Carrington argues that Almeda’s “certainty that her imagination does not compromise her rationality is a delusion” (215), and Almeda’s madness is indeed confirmed in her claim “not to mistake anything else for reality” (“Meneseteung” 71). Her only reality is the one inside her head. She has lost contact with the outside world because it will not accept her on her terms, and her death in the Swamp—whether suicide or accident—comes as little surprise. DeLamotte suggests that Jane Eyre’s “journey across the moors suggests the essential homelessness—the nameless, placeless, and contingent status—of women in a patriarchal society” (242). Almeda’s death in the Pearl Street Swamp suggests the same.

“Meneseteung” reads like Florence Nightingale’s autobiographical essay, Cassandra. Showalter notes that Cassandra is a “scathing analysis of the stresses and conventions that drove Victorian middle-class women to silence, depression, illness, even lunatic asylums and death . . . . Cassandra realizes that her passion, intellect, and moral energy have been destroyed by the petty obligations, genteel rituals, and religious cant of a mindless social code . . . . society calls her mad . . . and she dies unregarded” (63). Munro has clearly spent a great deal of time researching hysteria and madness from historical, medical, and literary perspectives. In presenting a woman driven crazy by a society that restricts her freedoms to the point of hysteria and death, Munro links Victorian realities to Gothic fiction. Both deal in repression, madness, and monsters. Both are horrifying. That Munro’s investigative narrator admits that she doesn’t know if Almeda “ever made grape jelly” (72) becomes irrelevant, because if Almeda didn’t, someone in reality surely did.
Chapter III - Dark Double Vision

... the most successful aspect of the Gothic romance may well have been its insistence on the reality of the irrational. (Eugenia DeLamotte 204)

... almost every sentence and paragraph Alice Munro has written is part of paradox, or conveys a double vision, an ambiguity, or an irony. (W.R. Martin 93)

Like Gothic writers, Munro insists on a reality that is dominated by the irrational. Her protagonists are so deeply bewildered by fear that they have difficulty distinguishing what seems real from what is real; unable to rationalize what terrifies them, they do what Gothic protagonists for centuries have done: repress their fears. Yet repressed fear often surfaces without warning, and the consequence—as Almeda proves—can be deadly. Martin’s use of the phrase “double vision” reflects that confrontation with the self is a dominant theme in Munro’s writing, and Ildiko de Papp Carrington notes that Munro’s typical protagonist “not only watches the humiliation or the threatened humiliation of others but also often splits into two selves to watch her own humiliation” (6). Failure to confront fear and anxiety leads Munro’s characters to become more deeply entangled in trying to reconcile, to quote Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “what’s inside, what’s outside, and what separates them” (12). Tormented by an inability to balance an “inside life” with the “outside life,” Sedgwick argues, Gothic characters suffer a “doubleness where singleness should be” that is never restored to its “original oneness” (13). Patricia L. Skarda and Nora Crow Jaffe observe that “the double or the complementary personality, which makes psychological truth a part
of reality, can and does terrify because it awakens fear of real and horrid possibilities” (xx). More than anything they imagine, Munro’s protagonists in *Friend of My Youth* are afraid of the “real and horrid possibilities” they see in themselves and in those around them. A fragmented self drives Almeda mad, and fragmentation also terrorizes protagonists in “Pictures of the Ice,” “Oranges and Apples,” and “Wigtime.”

In these stories, Munro’s “double vision” involves more than the split selves of her protagonists; it also involves ambiguous characterizations of other characters, divided towns, and irresolute endings. Collectively, these doubles complicate the “everyday” lives Munro presents and show them to be founded in fear. Sedgwick observes that Gothic writers aim to do more than merely frighten by writing about the irrational: they also seek to “open horizons beyond social patterns, rational decisions, and institutionally-approved emotions . . . to *enlarge the sense of reality* [my italics] and its impact on the human being” (3). Joseph Gold and Bharati Mukherjee suggest that Munro also tries to “enlarge” reality in her fiction: Gold observes that she “tries to generate and create new levels of possibility” (13), and Mukherjee proposes that Munro “deepens the channel of realism” (31). Although neither critic speaks of Munro in terms of the Gothic, both draw attention to her fascination with surfaces and depths in fictionalizing everyday life. In Gothic writing as in hers, reality seems “enlarged” when scenes from everyday life are suddenly exposed in their most irrational and horrifying terms; the inability to tell between “seems real” and “is real” constitutes a large part of Munro’s protagonists’ horrors. M.H. Abrams reminds us that realist fiction tries to imitate real life experiences (152), and Munro’s critics praise her realist writing, but her Southern Ontario is shown chiefly in terrifying terms. Life consists of both
fear and happiness, and Munro here only glances at life’s happy surfaces while gaping into its chilling depths. She is clearly more interested in things dreadful than tranquil in this collection, and her surface images of domestic normality and comfort continually collapse into episodes of terror.

“Pictures of the Ice,” “Oranges and Apples,” and “Wigtirne” are the only Southern Ontario stories that seem to have “happy” endings: Karin is inspired to leave an oppressive Logan, Murray and Barbara remain married despite their conflict, and Anita and Margot seem poised to recover a lost friendship. However, a closer look reveals that Munro’s everyday characters continue to be plagued by terror, repression, silence, and paranoia; their happiness is superficial and short-lived. Munro, like Gothic writers, offers flashes of love, friendship, and reconciliation only to heighten awareness of the darkness in human behavior. In so doing, she further distances what could be from what is and makes the terrifying more terrifying; her happy endings are entirely provisional. DeLamotte observes a similarly limited (and limiting) use of provisional endings in Gothic fiction: “the hero who rescues the young woman and takes her away to live happily ever after may really be the villain who captures her and takes her away to live unhappily in a situation of confinement, sexual domination, and economic exploitation” (159). Both Munro and Gothic writers show that internal struggles frequently result from social pressures, and they both address the disturbing differences between “human” and “humane.”

Munro’s small towns thwart happiness in these stories, but unlike those unified by a Puritan consciousness in previous stories, towns are here divided by chaotic forces of change. This division is another instance of Munro’s double vision. Walley and Logan appear as though twenty or thirty years older, but their “psychology of cruelty” persists (Lawrence Mathews 185).
Protagonists cannot feel at home in what should feel like familiar and comfortable surroundings because they are trapped in cruel conflicts between old and new. Jacqueline Howard's suggestion that the past in Gothic fiction comprises both the "fearfully strange" and the "comfortingly familiar" (33) offers another paradox (and double) that applies here. Some in Munro's towns see change as an undesirable departure from the "comfortingly familiar." For them, it evokes feelings of insecurity and instability. They want a simpler way of life and see anything new as "fearfully strange." However, others welcome change. For them, traditional ways are odd; they fear being left behind as technology and other signs of progress define a twentieth-century world to which they would rather belong, and they seek anything that promises a departure from the past and its antiquated customs.

Trapped between these opposing factions, and unable to fit in, Munro's protagonist finds no peace. Friendships or love relationships are successful only temporarily and partially. Values like compassion, loyalty, and trust are those for which the typical protagonist yearns, but she is prevented from attaining them by ideas, institutions, and characters that represent the "new." "New" means evil in a way that is reversed from the stories discussed in the last chapter; there, the small town oppressed characters seeking the new. Here, protagonists are terrorized for not adapting to or embracing it. Each story also has at least one ambiguous hero, and his double role compounds the story's indeterminacy. For instance, Austin, in "Pictures of the Ice," is both the story's biggest liar and its biggest saint, and his death may or may not be suicide; Victor is a "splendid and disturbing" newcomer in "Oranges and Apples" who may or may not be a liar; Reuel drives senior citizens to Niagara Falls in "Wigtime," but he may have a hankering for underage girls.
We are also offered a rare male protagonist in “Oranges and Apples,” and Munro proves in Murray that women are not the only ones to suffer Gothic paranoia and hysteria. Anita and Margot demonstrate in “Wigtime” that friends of youth can also be foes. That the best that Munro’s protagonist can hope for is provisional happiness suggests that the real world in *Friend of My Youth* is a frightening place to live.

**“Pictures of the Ice”**

‘But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well’ (Matt. 5: 38-40)

Karin and Austin share feelings of being misfits in their own community; neither feels at home in a town divided by conflicts between old and new, and both are victims of destructive change. In Logan, what seems stable on the surface is illusory, for underneath “it’s the same thing. The old order changeth, yielding place to the new” (149). Austin has “turned the other cheek” to Brent, and Karin, though unable to do the same, still finds in Austin her only friend; she respects Austin’s selflessness so much that she is willing to lie to protect her image of him after his death. Yet while Austin’s altruism and the silent friendship between him and Karin constitute two of Munro’s more positive moments in *Friend of My Youth*, they are entirely overshadowed by Karin’s isolation and Austin’s death. Brent Duprey’s changes to Logan have disturbing consequences.

Austin’s Christ-like altruism is seen in his concern for Brent Duprey, in his treatment of
Karin, in his willingness to donate his possessions to Lazarus House, and in his daughter's comments. Although Austin’s “apologetic, ministerial smile” strikes Karin as “shifty” (140), Austin does save Brent from a life of self-abuse and the abuse of others, and even from suicide. The latter is ironic, if we assume that Austin himself commits suicide. But Austin’s planned move to Shaft Lake may imply that suicide was not his aim; his death may be, as suggested on the first page, the result of “a boating accident in a lake nobody had heard him mention” (137). Munro’s double vision ensures that the truth about Austin’s death is as elusive as the truth about his feelings. The water imagery that opens the story prompts attentiveness to the contrast between surfaces and depths—between “what seems to be” and “what is.” It also suggests Austin’s altruism drowning under the weight of irreversible change.

Helping Brent signifies Austin’s commitment to the principles of Christianity that make the general welfare of the community a moral responsibility. Austin demonstrates selflessness when he stays with Brent “on a bender” and then spends “the next week nursing him out of it, and the next month talking to him or sitting with him until Brent had decided he would not drink anymore” (145). He also shows compassion when he takes Karin into his home to care for his ill wife; without saying anything to disgrace Karin, Austin lets her know that he is conscious of her abusive marriage and offers her a way out. He is sensitive to the needs of those whom he deems members of his community. Austin’s brand of religion is quiet because he lets his altruistic actions speak for his faith, and thus Karin observes that “Austin rarely mentions God” (143). Even knowing that he has been usurped by Brent, he chooses not just to give Lazarus House his possessions but instead to sell them and donate cash: he thought “it would be showing more respect” (141). Austin might
feel contempt for Brent, but he sets it aside because of his concern for others. He realizes that those in need remain in need, despite the change in their religious leadership. Finally, Megan's comments prove Austin's altruism. She tells Karin that he is "always doing good" and that "He's never done anything before for a personal kind of reason. He always did things for somebody. He always liked to find people who needed things done for them, a lot" (147). Austin seems truly devoted to others.

That the central figure in "Pictures of the Ice" is characterized as being both a saint and a liar best exemplifies how Munro creates a reality that includes the irrational; her doubles foster an ambiguity that perpetuates uncertainties. Do Austin's lies make him a hero or a villain? Or both? Is his departure rational or irrational? He comments to his daughter that "guilt is a sin and a seduction. I've said that to many a poor soul who liked to wallow in it. Regret's another matter. How could you go through a long life and regret it?" (146). Is this an ironic reflection of his own feelings? Does he feel guilty for losing the church, or is he more dismayed that religion is changing? Munro's double vision so imbues this story that answers are elusive; we never know what Austin really feels. But one thing is certain: his good deeds lead to his own demise. He is "shafted" by those who want him and his tranquil faith banished to a desolate place like Shaft lake.

Though Austin feels duped by Brent Duprey and his followers, he contains his grief; if he does commit suicide in Shaft Lake, it may be that his repressions kill him just as Almeda's did her. Austin's plan to teach elsewhere, Karin suspects, signifies that he "means to wear himself out, quick, quick, on people as thankless as possible, thankless as Brent," and she notes that if Loganites were to discover Austin's plan, "somebody might stop him going. Slipping out from
under, fooling them, enjoying it” (154). Austin, like Almeda, is an unlucky victim of a pitiless world that does not want him. His isolation and death are byproducts of change without compassion, and he realizes that to scream out in opposition would be pointless. Much of what Austin actually says in the story—and he rarely speaks—constitutes white lies about his future. He says little about his present because he knows he cannot undo Brent’s changes; here, as elsewhere in the collection, unnatural silence results from fear of gossip, interference, and humiliation.

Karin and Austin share a secret and silent friendship, but it, too, is thwarted by Logan’s destructive changes. Brent and his followers force Austin to leave, and Karin is equally isolated: “nobody came up to her place” (149). She has quit going to church after Brent’s conversion and has little other social contact. Karin is highly alert to changes in Austin in the weeks prior to his departure. Karin observes that he “seems shaky” (151) and that “he’s changed. I see him everyday and I could have told you” (138). She also observes a “downward slide” on Austin’s mouth when he smiles; ironically, it reflects both his emotional state and hers (146). Only Austin and Karin go to take pictures of the ice on the day they go: “nobody else is down there” (151). Their friendship is based on shared isolation; like the ice shapes, it is both an “unlikely formation” and “left unfinished” by the story’s end (151). Karin’s belief that Austin “knew that she caught on to him, she understood what he was up to” creates, in Karin’s eyes, “a link beyond the usual” between them that is prevented from flourishing (155). In seeing that Austin found a way to escape Logan, Karin is inspired to do the same after she learns of his death, but her happiness will be limited at best.

Austin and Brent Duprey represent a fundamental distinction between “being Christian” and
“acting religious.” Brent and his followers are characterized as only superficially religious and as destructive. Not just Brent but “people in his own [Austin’s] church” wanted “a stricter, more ferocious kind of Christianity” (142). This suggests that loyalties to tradition are weak and that Austin’s brand of religion is ineffective. Change here is severe: they “cut Austin out” (142) and replace him with “more noise and praying and singing and not so much quiet, persuading talk” (145). Lazarus House is the most powerful symbol of the contrast between “Christian” and “religious.” It was re-named by Brent, who decided “it would be better to have a name that is more religious, more Christian” (141). It is clear from Munro’s characterization of Brent that the pairing (and order) of the two terms in this sentence is ironic and is meant to draw attention to the difference between appearance and reality. That Brent “got a hold” of Turnaround House “by becoming more religious than Austin” (141) suggests that Brent’s true belief is in political and not spiritual powers. Unlike Austin’s Turnaround House, which was “a place for people to stay who wanted to stop drinking or some other way of life they were in,” Lazarus House is “now a born-again sort of place, with nightlong sessions of praying and singing and groaning and confessing” (141). It is reminiscent of the church whose Cameronian religion contributed to Ellie’s madness and death. Munro does not just show the new replacing the old in Logan but emphasizes the loss of the old; what Brent presents as a step forward is actually deterioration. Austin and his “old parsonage” (139) are supplanted by a “born-again” (141) religion dependent on power politics; Brent knows how to “make the right impression” and “get government money” (145), and everything that Munro attributes to Brent is somehow “new” but superficial—his job, his house, his make-over of the church, and his religion, for instance.
There are two biblical Lazareses—one raised from the dead (John 11:38) and the other in heaven with Abraham (Luke 16:19)—and it is possible that Munro’s “Lazarus House” refers to both. In the first context, “Lazarus House” symbolizes Austin’s having saved Brent Duprey from a lifestyle destined to end in death; Austin “pulled and pulled on Brent until he pulled him right out of the life he was leading” (142) as if pulling him from a grave. Ironically, Austin has the favour returned: Brent’s spiritual rebirth pulls Austin out of his lifestyle with deadly consequences. The second Lazarus reference suggests that Austin’s poverty—the loss of his church, his followers, and his life—may be redeemed in the afterlife:

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me... for I am in agony in these flames.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ (Luke 16:19-26)

If Brent is cast as the rich man and Austin as the poor man, Munro’s allusion suggests that Austin warrants sympathy and that Brent will eventually get his due. Austin’s emotional torment does not prevent him from continuing to help others; even as he plans his secret future of relative anonymity in the wilderness, his chief concern remains caring for the needy.
Karin's reference to Brent as a snake links him to Satan and the underworld. Karin is clearly biassed because of what Brent has done to her, but his words and actions nevertheless sustain her view of him as sinister. After marrying Karin, they live in a slaughterhouse that smells of pigs and an odor that Karin "thought was blood" (143). When drunk, Brent not only grunts like an animal—"God damn that Morris! God-damn steps caved in. I'm going to sue the shit out of him. God damn *Fuck!*" (144)—but he acts like one. Munro's image of Brent down on all fours sniffing the floor for blood is disturbing. His "clouds of boozy breath" add to the uncanny domestic environment in the slaughterhouse they call home. Once again, the distinction between "house" and "home" drawn by Freud's interpretation of the uncanny applies. Brent worked at Morris Fordyce's construction company for a while but quit it for a destructive job: "cutting up trees" (143). And where Morris was able to shed his dysfunctional past and carry on with life--despite his mother's bizarre behaviour--the snake Brent merely changes skins following his "conversion" to Christianity: "It was the same as he was after three or four beers when there was no way he could stop himself from going for more. He was bursting. And soon enough he burst out of Austin's hold and took a good part of the church with him" (145). Brent is seductive enough to entice Austin's followers to leave, and he is described as having an "innocent and conniving" appearance (144) like Victor's in "Oranges and Apples." Just as a young Joan blindly worshipped her mother with disastrous consequences in "Oh, What Avails," those who follow Brent Duprey are figuratively swallowed whole by the power of belief in something larger than themselves—something dynamic, enticing, and dangerous. As was the case with Joan, however, it may only be a matter of time before reality shatters their blind worship with devastating consequences.
Karin's empathy for Austin results from her first-hand knowledge of Brent's destructive potential; Karin and Austin's bond is silent because both fear the potential power of Brent's spoken word. Logan has shown itself to shift loyalties quickly because of Brent's voice, and Karin and Austin fear humiliation and isolation because of it. Ironically, Brent's ultimatum to Karin more closely reflects his old self than any new and more enlightened version of it: "He said he was giving her a week to decide. No more drinking, no more smoking, Christ as her Saviour. One week" (145). Brent believes in a "new" that disregards those it displaces. Karin once felt victimized by Brent, who told her to "fuck off" (150) when she sought cab fare to take their sick newborn to the hospital (150), and she feels equally victimized following Brent's religious rebirth. He has a new life, but she is left with the haunting reminder of a horrifying past. Karin's dead baby becomes her ghost, and her lingering obsession with thinking of new ways to torment Brent reflects the depth and scope of her suffering. In another illustration of Munro's Gothic double vision, Karin's descriptions of the death of her baby ironically apply to Austin. She recalls of her baby that "he probably would have died no matter what," "he might have died," and "he probably would have died anyway" (147). Each utterance reflects Karin's repression of shame; she thinks she is responsible for her baby's death, but these thoughts are irrational. When thinking this way, she forgets that she did what she could to save the baby and that Brent may be responsible for its death. Figuratively, Brent also killed Austin's "baby," Turnaround House, and he is indirectly responsible for Austin's literal death. Like Karin, Austin feels ashamed for having lost a "child." Ironically, Brent's list of victims grows despite his spiritual rebirth.

But Brent is not alone in causing Austin's demise; he is accompanied by Loganites
moving forward without stopping to look back, and it matters little who leads the charge. Brent and those who want his changes are also like the ice formations: they are hard and cold, and some are “monsters” and others “animals” (151). In the end, though Karin and Austin share the common bond of silent friendship, theirs is indeed an incidental formation that is slowly melted by dark changes and the death and destruction they breed. Any notion of intimate friendship in “Pictures of the Ice” dies with what Brent and Logan do to Austin and, to a lesser degree, to Karin. Happiness is thwarted not by surreal ghosts but by the very real darkness Munro shows to exist in humanity. Karin may leave Logan, but she will never escape it; Munro insists that hellish memories accompany her.

“Oranges and Apples”

. . . it seems to me impossible to make much sense out of Gothic fiction without continual recourse to the concept of paranoia . . . . [Gothic fiction is] fiction in which the ‘implicated’ reader is placed in a situation of ambiguity with regard to fears within the text, and in which the attribution of persecution remains uncertain and the reader is invited to share in the doubts and uncertainties which pervade the apparent story. (Punter 183)

Because not knowing is the primary source of Gothic terror, the essential activity of the Gothic protagonist is interpretation. (DeLamotte 24)

“Oranges and Apples” includes elements of friendship and love that become eclipsed by the gloomy realities of “everyday” life, and Munro again uses conflicts between old and new to frame the Gothic fear and paranoia that torment her protagonist. “Oranges and
Apples” differs from the other stories in the collection, however, in two ways: first, the protagonist is male; second, Murray Zeigler’s shame, anxiety, and fear combine to create a paranoia unlike that found in any other story. Punter’s observation that Gothic fiction invites us to share in doubts and uncertainties applies to this story. Punter also observes that it is in its “concern with paranoia, with barbarism and with taboo that the vital effort of Gothic fiction resides; these are the aspects of the terrifying to which Gothic constantly, and hauntingly, returns” (184). Munro’s “vital effort” in “Oranges and Apples” is the convincing development of Murray’s paranoia. Further, the relation of “Barbara” to “barbarism” is a direct one for Murray: as he becomes more deluded, he begins to see her as brutally abandoning him and he responds with Gothic ambivalence. That Munro chooses a male to experience such paranoia suggests that men can be just as frightened and insecure—and can perceive themselves to be as equally persecuted—as any woman at any time. Murray and Almeda complement each other perfectly.

One of the most disturbing qualities of “Oranges and Apples” is that it may contain many lies and deceptions or it may contain none; it is replete with unsettling ambiguities and mysteries, and DeLamotte’s comment that “not knowing is the primary source of Gothic terror” (24) applies to Murray and reader alike: neither he nor we can determine whether Victor is villainous or whether Barbara is attracted to him. In an immensely important but completely unsuspicous paragraph, several pages into the story, the omniscient narrator leaps forward several years and relates—casually, incidentally, and as though looking back on a crisis that never happened—that Barbara and Murray have not thought about Victor much since he left (114). This pivotal paragraph establishes that Barbara and Victor’s marriage has survived the dark events that constitute the
remainder of the story, and it gives the impression that Victor’s presence had no lasting impact on their marriage. When we return to the narrative’s present and read on, we eventually discover Barbara at Sunset Steps trying to placate Murray’s fears that she betrayed him: “It wasn’t anything. It wasn’t anything bad. There isn’t anything to worry about” (135). She seems to mollify Murray into believing that everything will be all right; he responds, “O.K.” (135). Both scenes suggest that the couple’s marriage is stable following Victor’s departure. However, Barbara’s crucial last words in the story—“That’s a lie” (136) —cast the stability of their marriage into doubt. Munro’s settings, her characterization of Victor as an ambiguous villain, and her development of Murray’s paranoia contribute to the story’s indeterminate conclusion. Murray and Barbara’s marriage may be stable on the surface, but it is rippling with Gothic undercurrents.

That Victor is “the new” and Murray fears becoming “the old” is the most obvious instance of Murray’s irrationality, but it is preceded by Murray’s irrational decision in the sixties to try to change the way his generations-old family business was conducted. It resulted in a failure that still haunts him. The younger Walley was fragmented by those who favoured change and those who were apprehensive about it. Walley underwent an “orgy of smashing and renovating” to which Murray subscribed and in which “everything from an earlier time was being torn up, swept away, left to rot, disregarded” (133). Murray’s financial ruin resulted from his attempt to change; his business failure translated into feelings of worthlessness and “lost credibility” (110). Murray also lost his self-respect and sense of independence; he felt humiliated and became insecure. His attempts to shroud his feelings of failure behind off-hand focalized phrases like “Does it deserve to be called a classic?” constitute denial and repressed grief. The rapid period of change in
younger Walley—described as “insanity” (110)—has an ironic meaning for Murray in the present. His near insanity because of what he imagines happening between Victor and Barbara is foreshadowed decades earlier by his self-admitted “death wish” of “tearing the old buildings down and preserving only a remnant of the foundation” (110). He once acted irrationally and it cost him dearly. His insecurities have since prevented him from seeing the world around him through rational eyes. Walley, in the story’s present, is amidst a return to comforting old ways, but a reversion to the past terrifies Murray because his still haunts him: “It is hard to find anybody who is not in favor of shade trees and general stores, pumps, barns, swings, nooks and crannies. But Murray himself can’t quite recall the pleasure he took in these things, or find much shelter” (133). Murray is like Cornelius in “Five Points” and the unnamed narrator in the title story: all remain tortured by the past.

Munro’s characterization of Victor Sawicky as an ambiguous villain further blurs Murray’s perceived reality. Victor, as the new man in town and as the potential replacement lover for Barbara, may or may not be a liar, seducer, and betrayer; similarly, what attracts Murray to Victor—his charm, his foreign accent, and his dazzling stories, for instance—may be mere illusions or they may be the real thing. It is impossible to know whether Victor is honest or deceitful on any count. He is paradoxically “splendid and disturbing” (114) and has the propensity to stir up “ripples of attention, misgiving, excitement” (116). He enjoys night shifts at the salt mine which, as in “Meneseteung” and “Five Points,” links him to the underworld, as do his comments that “I sleep beautifully” and “I find peace” in a coffin-like “little box of a room under the hot flat roof” (125). That Victor also speaks Polish and is described as “polished” is a nice touch on Munro’s part: Poland is not far removed from Transylvania.
Victor displays some of the features of the Byronic hero; he is moody and mysterious, he desires personal freedom, and he feels persecuted for having been rejected by his country’s military and persecuted by his wife. The correspondence between Sawicky and “slickly” or “wicked” is not to be overlooked, for Victor may be “sleek” (114) in the same devilish and disturbing sense that Brent Duprey is. Like Brent’s, his disturbing presence both electrifies and frightens: he either scatters the clerks “like a cat among the pigeons” or draws them into “standing around in amazement” (114-15). Finally, like Munro, Victor is a storyteller. Barbara suspects him of embellishing stories, but her suspicions are no more founded in fact than are Murray’s suspicions that she and Victor are sexually attracted. Victor is like a ghost: his “real” self lies in shadows somewhere beyond the narrative.

The most Gothic feature of “Oranges and Apples” is Murray’s paranoia. It stems from ambivalence: he is horrified by the thought of losing Barbara to Victor but so idolizes Victor that he cannot end their friendship. Murray’s worship of Victor ultimately, and ironically, contributes to his delusions of betrayal and persecution. Whether the seductive Victor—the “sleek and princely animal” with “pale-olive” skin, protruding eyes, and large teeth (114-15)—actually has sex with Barbara becomes less important than Murray’s imagining that he could if he wanted to—and that Barbara would willingly participate. Zeigler’s Resort, Murray’s office, and the beach symbolize Murray’s increasing instability. Zeigler’s Resort lies on “rough and hilly” (108) land that suggests Murray’s “ride” in the frightening story he begins to construct. His office, a “little cage” with “wrought-iron walls around it” (116) parallels his psychological state; his mind becomes his prison as he becomes convinced of Barbara’s attraction to Victor.
Where it may be tempting to see imagery of regeneration and hope in the peaceful descriptions of the beach, and in the newness of the boardwalk and bandstand, the flight of seventy-eight Sunset Steps goes down to the water. Here, a boulder that first appears as “beautiful” soon reveals itself to be like Murray: “split diagonally and the halves fitted together not quite accurately” (134). Murray sees the line in the rock as “a fault,” but the line reflects his inability to reconcile his rational and irrational halves. That the boulder “must have come from before the last Ice Age” and “was far older than the shore on which it sat” suggests that Murray, like protagonists elsewhere in Friend of My Youth, has aged prematurely (134). Finally, the water of “Lac Mer Douce” is not always soft and beautiful—it can “change color” and “turn ugly” in a hurry (134). The water’s perpetual fluidity parallels Murray’s unstable emotions and perceptions; the water, “all the time returning—eating, altering the shore,” also has the same geological effect that Murray’s imagination has on his rational mind—erosion (134). Murray’s ability to think rationally erodes as he allows fear to dominate him.

Victor’s arrival in Walley brings with it a gradual shift in narrative perspective that draws us into Murray’s ambivalence and closer to his fear. The third-person narrator gradually focusses on Murray’s perceptions, and he remains the focalizer for the rest of the story. Through this shift, what is happening outside of Murray’s head grows increasingly indeterminable. Although Murray’s decline seems to begin shortly after Victor’s arrival, it is prefaced by the crucial statement that a “capacity for worship had been noticeable in him all through his school days” (108). The insecurities Murray suffered as a result of his business failure contributed to his already-developed capacity for worship, and we see him in the present as submissive and dependent. His worship is
dangerous and frightening, and when he is forced to choose between worshipping Barbara and worshipping Victor he becomes confused and angry. Part of him favours Victor: “for the first time, he thought that Barbara’s cynicism was automatic and irritating” (118). Murray recently admired Barbara as a “bold black-and-white lily out of the Swamp Irish–Lorna Doone with a rougher tongue and a stronger spine,” and he felt “happier than he’d been at any time since he lost his faith” (107-8). But since Victor’s arrival he has become “not proud of” her and feels persecuted by her “showing off her body, which was lavish” (120). He begins to think that there is “something unsure, risky, excessive” about her clothes and that she is “shamelessly showing cleavage” (120). Murray’s worship of Victor prompts him to doubt his love for Barbara and her loyalty to him.

But the other part of Murray is used to worshipping Barbara. In an attempt to pacify his growing concern that she will betray and abandon him—the latter of which seems to strike Murray as more horrifying—he tells himself that “She was not really very passionate” (120). He feels “despair and corruption” during his “destructive” (129) love-making session—despair because he is desperate to keep her, and corruption because he is ashamed of that small piece of him that is assertive and that becomes exposed during wild passion. Murray cannot help but hope that he can satisfy Barbara to ensure her fidelity. Because we have only Murray’s perspective, we have no idea whether his concerns are rationally founded. Our own “not knowing” (DeLamotte 24) draws us nearer to Murray’s ambivalence.

That Murray blames the failed dinner party on Beatrice is another sign of his devotion to Victor, and it shows he is tumbling deeper into irrationality. Murray becomes exhilarated at the prospect of showing Victor and Barbara “off to each other” but becomes disappointed
when he thinks that “each seemed standoffish, lukewarm, nervous, ironical” (118). His disappointment marks the beginning of jealousy and anticipates his more confused emotional state, where it will appear as though this meeting marked some kind of immediate sexual attraction between Victor and Barbara. At the height of his fears, Murray will “replay” the dinner party and see what the paranoid part of his mind wants him to see: that Victor and Barbara were pretending not to be infatuated with desire from the start.

Victor’s increasingly frequent appearance at Murray and Barbara’s home brings with it an increasing uncanniness; Murray’s home no longer comforts him but instead becomes nightmarish.

The narrator’s description of the trio sitting in the back yard, drinking gin, explains an effect which is at once Gothically sublime and yet darkly realistic:

They could hear sprinklers, and sometimes distant shrieks, police sirens, laughter. That was the sound of television programs, coming through the open windows and screen doors along the street. Sometimes there was the slap of screen doors closing as people left those programs behind for a moment, and boisterous but uncertain voices calling into the other back yards where people sat drinking, as they did, or watching the sky. There was a sense of people’s lives audible but solitary, floating free of each other under the roof of beech and maple branches in front of the houses, and in the cleared spaces behind, just as people in the same room, talking, float free on the edge of sleep. The sound of ice cubes tinkling unseen was meditative, comforting. (123)

Murray cannot “float free” of either Barbara or Victor, who remain solitary and strong, and though this passage seems to reflect an “everyday” tranquil moment in the domestic life of Barbara and Murray—and in Wally as a whole—it quickly dissolves in light of the games that accompany it. The first game is “Barbara sniping and Murray defending” (122); it is a hostile game played because
Murray worships Victor and resents Barbara’s unwillingness to do the same. The second game, from which the story gets its title, also reflects Murray’s deteriorating relationship with Barbara as a result of Victor’s arrival:

It was a game of choices, going from very easy to very hard . . . The really hard choices could be between two things you liked very much or between two things that were for some reason almost impossible to compare. There was no way to win. The pleasure was in thinking up tormenting choices or in being tormented by them, and the end came only when somebody cried, ‘I give up. I can’t stand it. It’s too stupid. I don’t want to think about it anymore.’ (123)

Munro’s “double vision” persists with this game of pleasurable torment. Victor and Barbara are “impossible to compare” and yet Murray worships them both and persecutes himself by doing so. He can no more “win” in choosing between them than can he “win” by finding the fortitude to quit worshipping altogether. Instead, he chooses to remain in a state of self-abuse that is at least familiar—and that serves as another instance of masochism in Friend of My Youth.

Murray’s apparent desire for torment nourishes his ambivalence. He leaves Barbara and Victor alone—as though he wills them to betray him—and is disappointed to discover them “talking some treacherous ordinary talk” (128). He feels a “terrible elation” (129) imagining Victor and Barbara touching and caressing each other in his absence. He also insists that Barbara take the blankets to Victor and, it seems, without intending to do so as a test. Murray says nothing to Barbara about his feelings of jealousy and insecurity, and instead awaits what he suspects will be his inevitable displacement. His “pleasurable fear,” “nameless dread,” and “unnatural silence” are all self-inflicted.
The scene in which Murray comes home from work marks the climax of his paranoia, and it is terrifying not only for Murray but for us. An image of Victor in the window “as though he had a gas mask on” (126) reminds us that Munro’s fiction, like the Gothic, can be affective art. When Murray sees Victor through his own binoculars—in another brilliant flash of Munro’s “double vision”—Murray’s immediate response is not fear but arousal: he envisions Victor’s “powerful but controlled and concentrated excitement” (127). It may be that Murray has his own sexual attraction to Victor; if so, it would be yet another breach of traditional taboos in *Friend of My Youth*. Regardless, Murray’s fascination is soon overshadowed by the horrors he imagines. He perceives Barbara as though “inviting him [Victor]. Promising—no, she already was providing—the most exquisite cooperation,” and as though experiencing a “constant ripple passing over her, with little turns and twitches. Stirrings. Shiftings. It was unbearable to watch . . . it was obscene and enthralling and unbearable” (127). Murray is trapped in his head with irrationality and ambivalence. He sees himself as though in a “scene from a movie. A comedy” (127), but his state of mind is no laughing matter. He rushes away from in silence, suggesting hysteria, and though Murray considers his entire life “transparent” (127), his vision (and version) of reality is anything but clear. The most powerful and uncanny of his delusions is that after Barbara has left him for Victor, the new couple “might establish a household and ask him over in the evenings. And he might go” (132). *And he might go.* As though it is not disturbing enough to invite us to watch Murray’s degrading alienation from his own home, Munro insists that we envisage him submitting himself to more humiliation in *theirs*. Murray would go because he knows no better; his capacity for worship is boundless and his desire for punishment inexhaustible.
Though Barbara appears to console Murray with pacifying words at the story's end, not for a minute does Munro allow that they will live happily ever after. "Oranges and Apples," like "Pictures of the Ice," offers themes of friendship and happiness only long enough to subvert them with the chilling realities of Southern Ontario’s "everyday" life. Neither Victor nor Barbara can be objectively identified as villainous because we remain trapped with Murray inside of his head, and what "really" happens outside of it is never knowable. In resembling the Gothic, "Oranges and Apples" is less concerned with characterizations of Victor and Barbara as evil than it is with offering a convincing character whose imagination makes them evil. Murray's desire for pleasurable torment reflects the Gothic, but Munro also ensures our pleasure and torment: we find pleasure in watching Munro create her dark reality, but we are bothered by Murray's self-abuse. Munro's Southern Ontario is indeed irrational. And yet Gothically real.

"Wigtime"

They could never be deeply unhappy, because they believed that something remarkable was bound to happen to them. They could become heroines; love and power of some sort were surely waiting. (Munro, "Wigtime," 253)

"Wigtime" begins as a story about two friends becoming reacquainted after thirty years of separation, but it soon reveals itself to be another display of nightmarish deceptions, betrayals, shame, and humiliation. As the last story in Friend of My Youth, it is significant that its final words are, "And they are fairly happy" (273): this ending is no less provisional than any other in the collection. The blurred perspectives, partial truths, and incomplete resolutions of conflict create
ambiguities in “Wigtime,” and Munro’s temporal and narrative shifts—the leaps between past and present and her use of not one, but two, focalizers—do the same. Images of doubles and halves abound, signifying the schism in Anita and Margot’s friendship. The collection’s title, *Friend of My Youth*, also has special significance in “Wigtime,” for any inclination to believe that Anita and Margot can rekindle a friendship after thirty years must be tempered with consideration of the past that shattered it. Her settings, her characterization of Reuel, and her portrayal of Anita and Margot’s friendship as fractured are the best indications that the past haunts the present and that Munro’s Southern Ontario reality remains irrational, ambiguous, and sinister.

Margot’s homes past and present show that events in youth invariably determine adult happiness. Margot, as an adult, has a “new house overlooking the harbor” that has “put some noses out of joint across the street, in the handsome hundred-year-old houses” (244). Clearly, Margot continues to disrupt stability as an adult as she did as a teenager; whether she destroyed Teresa’s marriage to Reuel and betrayed Anita’s friendship intentionally or carelessly remains mysterious. Margot now deems “all that natural wood look . . . passé” (245), suggesting that she rejects the past and is living in the present. Yet the living room that Anita cannot enter, described as “exquisite, shadowy, inviolate” (245), implies that Margot’s present is unstable, that it is accompanied by hidden secrets and repressed truths that she would rather not have Anita explore.

Though she and Reuel built a new house, old memories haunt Margot. Their new home covers up “children’s secret paths” (245), but Margot’s dark childhood secrets creep through the floorboards of her mind. When she later asks Anita, in one of the story’s most ironic moments, “I don’t know—do you think it was love?” (273), we ask, “To whom is Margot referring—Teresa or
herself?” Munro aligns Margot with newness; she suggests that a young Margot plowed on into the future after stealing Reuel from Teresa with the same “bold lassitude” (251) that may have prompted Reuel to choose her over Anita to begin with. Margot shows little remorse for those she hurt in her youth, and she ends up with Reuel’s house after the divorce settlement. Yet Margot’s question may be self-reflexive. It may suggest that she suffers shame and humiliation for having destroyed Teresa’s marriage and that the guilt she has been hiding below the surface of her everyday life for thirty years is beginning to emerge with Anita’s return.

Descriptions of young Margot’s house are remindful of the uncanny; her house is not a home but a source of fear, anxiety, chaos, and destruction. It has a “horrible smell of burning feathers . . . blood puddled on the oilclothed table and dripping to the floor” and, most importantly, Margot’s father’s “terrible temper” (246). Here, Margot’s “father drove them all hard, and Margot said they’d think he was sick if he didn’t hit somebody before breakfast” (247). Margot’s father is emotionally sick, and though “Margot laughed” when being chased by the “hapless comedian . . . no matter what he did,” Anita accurately observes that “The thing that Margot kept back . . . was how it must really be at home, with her father” (255). The bizarre environment shaping Margot’s youth will influence her adulthood just as Joan’s did in “Oh, What Avails.” Margot was taught to repress the truth early in life and she still may be doing it. Munro draws attention once again to parental influence. The imagery of blood foreshadows the pain and suffering Margot will experience as a result of her youthful decision to marry Reuel—just as Teresa married him and experienced the same—and it links Reuel to her father in a manner that hints at shadowy incestuous desire. Reuel’s “unspecific contempt” (254) is also like Margot’s father’s.
Dysfunctional adulthood almost always has family roots in Munro’s fiction, and the “crowdedness and confusion” (246) of young Margot’s environment forebode her choice of Reuel.

Complementing the profound Southern Ontario Gothic aura that Anita and Margot must survive as children is a Walley “set up like a barricade” (151) reminiscent of Toronto in “Meneseteung.” Houses and stores are also described as “barricades” (252). Metaphors for secrets hidden in the mind, these physical fortresses are overshadowed only by what could easily be called “Gothic High.” The girls’ school is “like a fortress, with its narrow windows and decorative ramparts of dark-red brick, its long flight of steps and daunting doors, and the Latin words cut in stone: Scientia Atque Probitas” (252). Here, pictures of “royalty and dead educators” hang on walls, lights in the assembly hall are “harsh,” and humiliation is “imminent” (252). In one of Munro’s few light moments in the collection, she offers an academic “unnamable dread” that becomes named and yet remains dreadful for those whose turn it is: “In front of the class” (252).

Gossip is pandemic in Munro’s small-town Southern Ontario. The girls’ fear of “being laughed at for countrified contrivances” (248) is one example. Fear of what townspeople might think or say plagues protagonists throughout the collection, and here the threat is as strong in adulthood as in youth. Anita’s mother and her Puritan obsessions with propriety—in addition to the humiliation she attempts to cast on Anita for failing to meet her expectations—add to the bizarre environment; Anita’s mother fears gossip more than the danger Reuel poses to her daughter. Despite her hysteria after discovering Reuel and Lana, Margot’s worry is not about leaving but about who might be watching: “she’d have to do it
all herself, right in the middle of everybody’s gossip—which she’d had enough of once before” (270). “Once before” undoubtedly refers to the gossip following her betrayal of Teresa. More gossip would have surrounded Teresa’s supposed suicide attempt. The two scenes are related with the appropriate prescription of Munro’s double vision, as which of the two events—the betrayal or the suicide attempt—was more humiliating for Margot remains unanswered.

Reuel influences happiness and misery in “Wigtimne,” and his characterization as ambiguous further overshadows themes of friendship and reconciliation in the story. At first sight, Reuel seems decent and caring; he is referred to merely as “Margot’s husband” and as a man who “has done well” by taking “children to school and senior citizens to see the blossoms in Niagara” (244-45). But Reuel may also seem a villain, given his cold indifference, unnatural silence, and two-time marital infidelity. However, to call him villainous is complicated by uncertainties. Does he seduce Margot or does she go willingly? Did Margot and Reuel actually have sex? What is Teresa’s true character? We have only Anita’s and Margot’s accounts of her, and neither is objective. How old was Margot when all of this happened? Can Reuel be added to the list of taboo-breakers (and law-breakers) in Friend of My Youth? It is probably no coincidence that both Margot and Lana are assigned an age near eighteen when they become involved with Reuel, because “near eighteen” borders on legal sexual consent. By not answering any of these questions, Munro creates ambiguity. We want to call Reuel a villain based on the evidence presented to us, but that evidence is provided only subjectively and in fragments. If we trust Anita and Margot, one thing is certain: Reuel, after thirty years (and like Brent after his religious “conversion”), has changed little. Only by the story’s end does the irony with which Munro chooses the expression “took children to
school” (244) shed light on Reuel. He takes Teresa, Margot and possibly Lana Slote for rides in life: he “drives” Teresa into premature aging and madness and Margot into hysteria. Though Lana’s fate remains nameless, it, too, will probably be filled with dread.

If we concede that the focalized accounts of the younger Reuel are accurate, he can be aligned with Brent Duprey and Victor Sawicky as devious, secretive, and seductive. Reuel’s inappropriate “tail-o could be found-o” song seems an attempt at seduction, and its theme proves devastatingly true for those whose “tails” he traps. Anita’s multiple fantasies and dreams about Reuel foreshadow the betrayal she will feel when she discovers that he and Margot have been involved in—to use Anita’s mother’s puritanical words—“jaunts and misbehaving” (261). In the hospital, just before Anita is told about Reuel and Margot’s outings, she imagines him showing her “a sombre tenderness, a muted passion. He loved her but relinquished her, caressing her hair” (261). Munro’s timing invokes as much irony as her word selection, and “muted passion” and “relinquished” are precisely how Anita feels when she awakens from her dream to find out about Margot and Reuel—her dreams and reality are warped versions of each other. Romance is impossible for Anita in Walley, and though she immediately discredits what she hears about Margot and Reuel, it soon follows that she wants “to go and live somewhere else . . . and now Anita was the one who would become a nurse, not Margot. She made up her mind that day. But she felt that it was second best. She would rather have been chosen” (263). But would she?

The silence between the two girls over how they feel about Reuel is unnatural, given that they are best friends. Nothing that young Anita and Margot say suggests that they actively competed for Reuel’s attention; only Anita’s departure and the “momentary pleasure” she takes
in later realizing that “a woman like Margot can still be fooled” (271) imply it. When Anita learns that Margot’s life was overturned by Reuel’s affair with Lana—how Margot fell victim to a “healthy battering” (271) of the mind and heart (just as Teresa did and Lana will)—she exhibits a growing pleasure. She enjoys hearing of Margot’s marital collapse and admits feeling “a completely comfortable treachery” (271). Teresa, she learns, has “funny spells” and is “pretty mixed up” (272-3); Lana, whom Margot’s children thought “a joke” (267), has proven to be part of an act that resulted in destruction and not laughter; and Margot, despite her calm surfaces, is left to piece together some semblance of a life based on illusions of happiness and denials of having done to Teresa what was in turn done to her. Though Anita spends thirty years distanced from Margot and Walley for what she deems to be a combination of her own failures and Margot’s betrayal, she thinks she discovers that second best sometimes turns out better than first. But Anita’s smug satisfaction with Margot’s ruined marriage, coupled with her confession that she can feel regret about her series of meaningless relationships “but no repentance. Warmth, in fact, from the tidy buildup. An accumulating satisfaction” (272), implies that she has some ghosts to confront. Both Anita and Margot have been damaged by events from the past. The two middle-aged women depart Friend of My Youth “fairly happy,” but that they “are not ready to stop talking” (273) can mean two things: they may become friends again, but more likely, the worst is yet to come. Anita and Margot may never rediscover the friends of their youth, and they instead may become more distanced by dreadful memories of betrayals and batterings.

“Pictures of the Ice,” “Oranges and Apples,” and “Wighttime” are the only Southern Ontario stories in Friend of My Youth that seem to end positively, but the flashes of love, friendship, and
reconciliation only intensify the repression, dread, silence, and paranoia that dominate Munro’s eerie everyday reality. Men in these stories have a more ambiguous effect on the lives of women than in other stories, and the stories themselves are riddled with uncertainties concerning the distinction between reality and imagination. Despite their silent friendship, Austin and Karin suffer from destructive changes, and Munro’s paranoid but still-married Murray complements her hysterical and deceased Almeda. Like Joan’s in “Oh, What Avails” and Brenda’s in “Five Points,” Anita’s life is one of an “accumulating satisfaction” of sexual encounters that seem to signify happiness but that could, at any moment, turn chilling. Her friendship with Margot is haunted by the past just as the unnamed narrator in the opening story remains haunted by a lost friendship with her mother. The first and last stories in Friend of My Youth—and many of them in between—belong to the Southern Ontario Gothic world where what we think we see must take into account Munro’s enjoyably frightening double vision.
Conclusion

The novel that I had all planned in my teens I still think about. I can see how it clearly relates . . . . I can now see some significance in it. It's very dark; it's very imitative and very Gothic. (Munro in Thomas Tausky interview 9-10)

Her characters are always becoming aware of, and often trying to come to terms with, the paradoxical nature of the world and of humanity—the coexistence of the dull with the exciting, the grotesque with the commonplace, the prosaic with the romantic, the mundane with the marvellous—and the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of distinguishing the real and meaningful from the illusory and delusive. (Lorraine McMullen 144)

Munro's 1986 interview with Thomas Tausky foreshadowed what would become not another novel but Friend of My Youth. From her reference to a "Gothic Mother" in 1968 to this 1990 collection and beyond, Munro has brilliantly explored the relations between the surfaces of "everyday" life and its Gothic undercurrents, between ""the reality I see . . . [and] the reality you feel"" (Munro in J.R. Struthers interview 7). She uses the language of vision in her interview with Tausky to discuss how she imaginatively planned her first Gothic novel and to identify the heart of her realist fiction—the differences she observes between seeing and feeling reality. Both Lorraine McMullen and Helen Hoy use the language of vision to describe Munro's more recent storytelling: McMullen, above, comments on Munro's fascination with blurring distinctions between the real and the illusory; she also observes that "Munro's vision darkens in her later works. Her bizarre characters become less eccentric than grotesque, not loveable reminders of our own weaknesses
but pathetic victims of our brutality” (152). Hoy notices the same trend in her review of _Friend of My Youth_, calling Munro’s “vision of desolation . . . increasingly prominent” (15). Munro’s vision is indeed more solemn in _Friend of My Youth_ than in her previous work, and terms like “darkens,” “victims,” and “desolation” are appropriate for describing it. Although Munro is by no means the only writer to address the ironies and violence of our century, her strength lies in exploring the eerie sides of human—particularly family—relationships: spouses who victimize each other, small towns alienating those who fail to comply, houses that fail be homes, parents who cannot nurture, and friends who cannot be trusted. All represent the darker dimension of our everyday twentieth-century reality, and Munro explores it in _Friend of My Youth_ with an intensity unlike that found in her prior fiction.

Munro reproduces twentieth-century places, events, and relationships so accurately that to call her work anything but realism may seem risky, but the Gothic nevertheless remains integral to _Friend of My Youth_. It gives Munro the most effective tool to dissolve what we think we know into surfaces and depths—into the often scary differences between reality as it is seen and felt. At the same time, it allows her to prompt us to doubt that we know anything at all by making us question how we try to distinguish the real from the illusory. Munro obscures differences between the two by pairing them, and in so doing she ensures that we experience the same distorting and disorienting effects as her characters do. We continually question whether things happen the way characters perceive them as happening.

Gothic art is affective art, and so is _Friend of My Youth_. It is never difficult to empathize with Munro’s characters, because, like her Gothic predecessors, Munro withholds the information
necessary for the reader to come to terms with reality as it exists outside of the protagonist’s mind. Munro invites us to experience anxiety; we seek information that will clear up uncertainties and ambiguities but, like her protagonists, we never receive it. Throughout the collection, neither we nor Munro’s characters can discern what is certain: Murray’s paranoia stems from fears of being betrayed and abandoned, and his fears may be entirely irrational. Or they may not. He never finds truth, and nor do we. Almeda hallucinates about a crow. Or does she? The unnamed narrator in the title story may or may not still be dreaming about her dead, dying, and somehow undead mother. Austin may or may not have committed suicide. Anita and Margot may or may not renew their friendship. Munro draws attention to reality both as it is seen and felt, and the term “realist” is useful for describing how Munro captures places and events. But it is insufficient by itself to describe the feel of her stories. Reality includes things that we cannot know and that are difficult—if not impossible—to accurately name or locate. To return to Eugenia DeLamotte, “Because not knowing is the primary source of Gothic terror, the essential activity of the Gothic protagonist is interpretation” (24). Our study of Munro’s realism in Friend of My Youth quickly becomes an exercise in interpretation, and our “not knowing” what is real can be as frightening as watching the lives of her characters.

As this study has demonstrated, terminology used to describe Gothic fiction for the last two-hundred years can be used, over and over, to peek under the surfaces of what Munro says in order to get at what she doesn’t. And what Alice Munro doesn’t say is equally eerie. Unnatural silence, pleasurable fear, nameless dread, guilt, humiliation, repression, hysteria, paranoia, and death lie at the centre of Southern Ontario in Friend of My Youth, and that
these terms and phrases are so integral to Munro’s twentieth-century realist writing makes us question how Gothic our real world might be. Freud’s two key notions of the uncanny—that it occurs when the line between reality and imagination becomes obscured and that it is manifested in houses that become unhomelike (unheimlich)—provide a direct link between Friend of My Youth and the Gothic, because “uncanny” best describes how Munro represents “everyday” life in Southern Ontario. Indeed, her accuracy in capturing the surfaces of everyday life gives her writing its realist label, but her demonstration that those lives are rooted in uncanny terror and confusion draws her closer to the Gothic. She reminds us to look at the elements of everyday life that are forgotten amidst daily routines but that can rapidly surface with disquieting consequences. We are invited to peek deeper into ourselves to see whether we share any of her characters’ frightening experiences.

The remaining three of the ten stories in Friend of My Youth, “Hold Me Fast, Don’t Let Me Pass,” “Goodness and Mercy,” and “Differently,” retain some of the disturbing elements of those stories explored in this study, and yet they remain strikingly different. The key difference is unquestionably their departure from Southern Ontario. “Hold Me Fast, Don’t Let Me Pass” is set in Scotland, “Goodness and Mercy” aboard a ship crossing the Atlantic, and “Differently” in Victoria, and without Southern Ontario as the focal point, these stories fall beyond the scope of this study. Each protagonist experiences anxiety, fear, and isolation, but she is never confronted with a small-town consciousness and its obsession with order and propriety. Conflicts between old and new fail to have the same devastating influence on a protagonist’s life, and though Munro continues to focus on fractured relationships and psychic fragmentation, characters here do not suffer the
same dread and despair as their Southern Ontario counterparts. Fear exists but does not lead to paranoia or hysteria; men are not characterized as ambiguous villains but as obvious scoundrels or supplementary characters; and there are no hints at incest or masochism. There are no towns that seem like asylums and no houses that fail to be homes. Repressed emotions become mostly resolved, and each of the female protagonists has freedom from the undesirable chains of domesticity and patriarchal oppression that killed Almeda Joyn Roth and drove Brenda into infidelity. Even the endings—though retaining Munro's trademark ambiguities—do not conclude with the same disturbing uncertainties as those discussed in this study. And there are no horned cows.

*Friend of My Youth* is the first of Munro's collections to concentrate on such issues as marriage, infidelity, divorce, lost friendships, broken families, grave illnesses, and death. Even stories like "Oh, What Avails" and "Wigtime" focus on youth only long enough to establish its ominous consequences in adulthood. In each of the Southern Ontario stories, desires are overshadowed and prevented by painful realities. Munro has come a long way from *Lives of Girls and Women* in her treatment of everyday life. In the years ahead, Munro may continue to use Gothic conventions to enhance her Southern Ontario fiction, because they provide an effective and entertaining means of exploring dualities. The most disturbing aspect of Munro's Southern Ontario Gothic fiction is not that her characters have lives they lead and lives they feel, but that they need two lives to survive.
Bibliography


