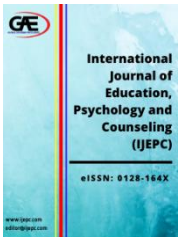
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WHERE THE 'I' ENDS AND 'SHE' BEGINS: INTERPRETIVE AUTHORITY AND GENDER PERFORMATIVITY IN ALICE MUNRO'S "BOYS AND GIRLS"

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Abstract:

This article discusses how family members' explanations of the narrator's behavior in Alice Munro's short story "Boys and Girls" gradually gain greater interpretive weight. Most existing studies discuss the story through gender socialization, division of labor, family space, and symbolic resistance. This article takes a different view. It asks how interpretive authority gradually shapes the narrator's self-understanding while she still retains agency. Butler's (1990, 1993) theory of gender performativity and Foucault's (1977) concept of disciplinary power are used in the analysis. At the language level, the analysis uses Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) transitivity system. The analysis is divided into three stages and examines material, mental, verbal, and relational processes. At the beginning, the narrator gains recognition through her farm work. She appears as both an Actor and a Senser. Later, verbal corrections, relational classifications, and gendered judgments increasingly shape how her behavior is understood. This article pays special attention to "my new hired hand", Flora's escape, and the father's final statement, "She's only a girl". The study found that the narrator's agency was not simply erased: she could still act, resist and reflect. But family members increasingly shape how her behavior is understood. These gendered interpretations also begin to enter her own thoughts. Therefore, this article argues that gender formation in the short story involves both restrictions on action and a redistribution of interpretive authority. This perspective offers another way to understand how gender norms work in everyday family interactions and shape the meaning given to women's behavior.

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Introduction

From a traditional literary-critical perspective, Alice Munro's Boys and Girls is often regarded as a classic gendered coming-of-age narrative. Researchers generally focus on the process of gender socialization experienced by the first-person narrator in the daily life of the family farm, especially on how she slipped from the subject of labor to the object of being disciplined by patriarchal discourse. However, a key paradox remains unresolved: why can the recognition the narrator gains through manual labor in early childhood not be transformed into a lasting subject identity? What specific everyday mechanism accomplishes the gendered devaluation that reduces her from a "competent child" to "only a girl" (Munro, 1973, p. 127)?

Most existing criticism attributes this transformation to the suppression of the external patriarchal environment, but pays less attention to the narrator's own perceptual conflict in this process: as she witnesses, participates in, and even acquiesces to becoming a girl, does her agency undergo a "loss" or a more complex "transformation"? At the same time, do the words of family members merely serve the storyline, or do they themselves contribute to the production of gender?

In response to the above questions, this article tries to shift the focus of analysis from "results" to "process". Therefore, it is necessary to re-examine what constitutes a gendered web that gives the narrator a brief sense of strength but ultimately constrains her as the story progresses.

Literature Review

In the study of Canadian women's literature, identity is often not a fixed concept. When discussing Canadian women's fiction, Howells (2003) pointed out that the formation of female identity is closely related to personal choices, family relationships and social norms. Alice Munro's Boys and Girls can also be understood from this perspective. The narrator in the short story does not come to know herself apart from the surrounding environment. What kind of work she undertakes at home, where she can go, how her parents and grandmother evaluate her, and how she recalls these experiences as an adult all affect her understanding of herself. In fact, her understanding of "who she is" has been slowly changing in family relationships and the judgment of others.

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Early studies on Boys and Girls often discussed gender issues from both aspects of labor and space. Goldman (1990) focuses on labor relations on the fox farm. He believes that the farm is not only the place where the story takes place, but also the place where the gender division of labor is really practiced. Feeding foxes, handling farm affairs and participating in daily production seem to be just ordinary jobs, but the allocation of these tasks is itself gendered. Ventura (1992) pays more attention to the spatial division in the short story. Although the yard, barn, fox circle and kitchen are all part of family life, they correspond to different responsibilities and identities. At the beginning of the story, the narrator can follow her father to work outside, and her ability is recognized by him to a certain extent. Later, she was increasingly asked to stay in the kitchen and help her mother with the housework. The emphases of Goldman and Ventura's discussions differ, but both studies show that the narrator's gender identity is directly related to what she can do and where she can go.

Later studies began to pay more attention to the process of the narrator "becoming a girl". Nischik (2007) believes that the gender identity in the short story is not determined from the beginning but is gradually formed in the process of constantly responding to the expectations of the outside world. Asmarani (2023) further analyzed the different reactions of the narrator in the face of gender norms. She sometimes resists, sometimes compromises, and in some cases accepts her family's demands on her, so her change is not simply from "resistance" to "obedience". Nazlıpınar Subaşı (2023) focuses on body and behavior, discussing how social norms affect girls' movements, postures and daily performance. That is to say, "becoming a girl" is not a sudden event at a certain moment, but the result of the accumulation of many daily requirements. Family members repeatedly told her what was suitable for girls and what was not for girls. These seemingly ordinary reminders slowly changed her understanding of herself.

The plot of Flora's escape is also part of what scholars often discuss. Disney (2016) regards the narrator's release of Flora as an important turning point in the story. He believes that this behavior temporarily broke the original production logic of the fox farm, because the narrator chose to sympathize with Flora at that moment instead of acting according to her father's requirements. However, focusing only on her act of opening the gate is not enough to explain why this event is so important. What is more noteworthy is the reaction of the family later. Laird told their father, who ultimately used "only a girl" (Munro, 1973, p. 127) to explain her behavior. At this point, it is no longer entirely up to the narrator to explain why she let Flora go. She can decide whether to open the gate or not, but she can't decide how her family will finally understand the action. There is a clear distance between her original motivation and the meaning given by her family to this behavior.

In recent years, some studies have begun to approach this short story through language itself. Saraç Durgun et al. (2023) examined everyday family conversations, pointing out that these conversations constantly convey to the narrator what counts as "like a girl" behavior. Abrar et al. (2024) analyzed who is acting, who is observing, and who has the position to evaluate others in the short story. Compared with early studies that mainly discussed labor and space, this kind of research can better explain how gender norms operate in ordinary discourse. The narrator is not always faced with clear orders. Often, it is simply a correction from the grandmother, an arrangement from the mother, or a seemingly casual word from the father. When these words are repeated, they gradually form a stable standard of judgment, telling her how a girl should live and act.

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Although some studies do not directly discuss gender socialization, they are highly relevant to the questions in this article. Irvine (1987) discussed the issue of "authority" in Munro's fiction, making "who is qualified to explain experience" a noteworthy perspective. Ue (2014) focuses on the retrospective first-person narrative in Boys and Girls, pointing out that there is a certain distance between the "I" who experienced childhood events and the adult narrator who retells these events many years later. Murray (2014) analyzes the formation of the protagonist's gender identity through the Lacanian concept of sexuation. These studies use different methods, but they all remind us that the identity of the narrator is not only related to what she has done, but also to how these experiences are later understood and told.

Judging from the existing research, scholars have fully explained how labor, space, body and language affect the narrator's gender identity, and also discussed why she gradually accepts the family's requirements for women's roles. However, there is another issue in these studies that has not been fully developed. The narrator's ability to act and her ability to determine how others understand her actions are distinct.

In the short story, she did not completely lose her judgment and choice. Even in the second half of the story, she can still observe the people around her and make her own decisions. Letting Flora go is an obvious example. She took the initiative to open the gate, which shows that she still has the ability to act. But after the incident, her explanation of this behavior did not become the ultimately accepted interpretation in the family. Laird told their father about it first, and their father then judged her behavior with "only a girl" (Munro, 1973, p. 127). In this way, the same action is put back into the gender framework. She knows why she did it, but she can't guarantee that others will understand it in her own way.

Therefore, this article does not focus on whether the narrator has gradually lost her ability to act. The more important question is: why can she still act, but it is increasingly difficult to decide what her actions mean in the family? This article calls the ability to have an interpretation recognized and thereby influence others' understanding "interpretive authority". The next analysis will examine how this authority is distributed and changed among family members, and how this change participates in the formation of the narrator's gender identity.

Methodology

This study adopts qualitative textual analysis, using "Boys and Girls" in Munro's Dance of the Happy Shades and Other Stories (1973) as the primary text. The specific analysis takes clauses as the basic unit, and interprets them in combination with the narrative context in which the clauses occur. According to the changes in the narrator's situation in the story, this article divides the relevant text into three stages. The first stage is "occupational recognition", which mainly involves the story of the narrator helping her father work on a fox farm and gaining recognition for this. The second stage is "everyday discipline", which focuses on the mother's arrangement of housework and the grandmother's repeated reminders of the girl's behavior. The third stage focuses on Flora's escape, with special attention to how Laird described the incident, how her father judged it, and how the narrator later understood these reactions.

These three stages are not handled independently of each other. The analysis mainly focuses on several questions: what the narrator does at different stages, how she understands her behavior; how other family members respond to these behaviors; and whether these responses change the later meaning of the behavior in the family. Therefore, this article will examine the

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material, mental, verbal, and relational processes in relevant clauses, and will not interpret linguistic forms apart from their specific narrative contexts.

Theoretically, this article does not use a single framework to address all questions. It mainly relies on Butler's (1990, 1993) theory of gender performativity and Foucault's (1977) concept of disciplinary power to explain how gender norms gradually take effect through repeated requirements, corrections and evaluations. Lanser's (1992) discussion of narrative authority provides an entry point for this article to understand "interpretive authority". Lanser focuses on how the narrator gains authority, while this article focuses on a slightly different issue in the story: when multiple people have different understandings of the same thing, whose statement is ultimately more readily accepted and continues to affect subsequent interaction. Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) transitivity system is used for linguistic analysis to identify process types and participant roles.

The "interpretive authority" mentioned in this article does not mean that a character becomes authoritative merely by expressing a view. To judge whether an explanation is really effective, the key lies in what happens next. Specifically, this article mainly focuses on four situations: whether the judgment is accepted, repeated or directly responded to by other characters; whether the subsequent evaluation of a certain behavior is changed; whether this understanding persists in the subsequent plot and is not clearly overturned; and whether it enters the narrator's own reflection, prompting her to understand herself in a similar way. These four criteria do not constitute a mechanical scoring system; rather, they are used to judge how much impact an interpretation has within the story according to the specific context.

The first stage mainly analyzes the narrator's position in her interactions with her father. The analysis here pays special attention to her situation as Actor and Senser, that is, what work she actually participates in and how she understands her own abilities. Her father called her "my new hired hand" (Munro, 1973, p. 116), which is an important example of this stage. This sentence not only shows that her father noticed her labor, but also shows that her father's recognition of her at this time is mainly based on her ability to work, not on the identity of "girl".

The focus of the second stage shifts. As her mother began to ask her to participate more in housework, her grandmother also constantly corrected her behavior, and gender gradually became the standard for judging whether her behavior was decent. Therefore, in addition to analyzing the process and participants of relevant sentences, this part also uses the theories of Butler and Foucault to understand how this change occurs through daily repetition. Her grandmother repeatedly used "Girls don't slam doors like that" and "Girls keep their knees together when they sit down" (Munro, 1973, p. 119). These expressions provide clear examples. What is noteworthy here is not only the sentence itself, but also the cumulative impact of similar judgments on the boundaries of the narrator's behavior through the persistence of such judgments.

The third stage focuses on analyzing what happened after Flora escaped. This part first returns to the narrator's own behavior and reflection. For example, she opened the gate for Flora to escape: "I opened it as wide as I could" (Munro, 1973, p. 125), showing that she could still act on her own initiative; her reflection, "I did not regret it" (Munro, 1973, p. 125), likewise shows that she retained her capacity for judgment. She therefore retained the ability to interpret her own behavior. That is to say, the problem at this stage is not that she can no longer take action.

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Next, we need to pay attention to how this incident will be retold by others. Laird said, "Anyway it was her fault Flora got away" (Munro, 1973, p. 127), which framed the incident as a question of responsibility; then the father said, "She's only a girl" (Munro, 1973, p. 127), placing the specific behavior within a gendered classification. The analysis of this article focuses on Laird's account and his father's relational classification, and examines the status of these two sentences in family interaction.

Finally, this article compares these external judgments with the narrator's own understanding. The point is not simply to judge who is "right", but to see which explanation actually continues to affect the meaning of the event. If the narrator can still act and reflect, but Laird's and her father's explanations are more likely to become the accepted account in the family, then the difference between the two can reveal how the "interpretive authority" mentioned in this article has changed.

Analysis

The understanding of the narrator's behavior within the family can be roughly divided into three progressive stages. The first stage plays a reference role: the recognition given by her father for her participation in labor is basically consistent with her own judgment of self-worth. In the second stage, she can still act independently and reflect, but reminders and comments about how "girls" should behave increasingly enter daily interactions. The third stage focuses on Flora's escape. The narrator still has the ability to act and form personal judgments, but Laird's attribution and her father's gendered classification occupy a stronger interpretive position within the family - what others say is gradually more important than what she thinks. Throughout these three stages, the narrator's ability to act and reflect does not subside, but the family's interpretive authority over her behavior is constantly expanding. Based on this, the following will distinguish between "what she actually did" and "how her family comments on these things" and examine them separately. The three approaches are used for different parts of the reading. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) are used to identify who acts, thinks, speaks and is classified in the clauses. Butler (1990, 1993) is used when repeated references to "girl" begin to set rules for behaviour, while Foucault (1977) is used to discuss how these rules are gradually taken into the narrator's own thinking.

Stage One: Occupational Recognition Before Gender Classification

At the beginning of the story, gender has not yet become the main criterion for the family to evaluate the narrator. She often works with her father on the fox farm. Carrying water to the foxes and raking cut grass into piles are part of her regular farm work. She values her ability to participate in these things and believes that she has indeed helped her father. Her father's attitude towards her at that time basically supported this understanding. Therefore, at this stage, there is no obvious conflict between how she views her own labor and how her father views her.

Her feelings about the farm environment also illustrate this. The mother felt that the smell of peeling was unbearable, but the narrator described it as "reassuringly seasonal, like the smell of oranges and pine needles" (Munro, 1973, p. 112). The same smell has a completely different feeling between mother and daughter. For the narrator, it has become part of her familiar farm life. A similar contrast appears in her attitude toward labor: outdoor work around her father is "ritualistically important", while housework is "endless, dreary, and peculiarly depressing"

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(Munro, 1973, p. 117). She is willing to stay outdoors, not just to get her father's praise. She likes this kind of labor and is willing to associate her ability and value with it.

This position can also be seen from the transitivity structure of the relevant clauses. The narrator recalled that she "filled the drum at the pump" and then "filled my watering can" (Munro, 1973, p. 114). Later, she mentioned that she "helped my father" and "raked into piles" (Munro, 1973, p. 115). In these material processes, she is repeatedly in the position of Actor. The important thing here is not only how much farm work she has completed, but that the story makes her appear as a person who actually participates in labor at the beginning. She can take the initiative to do things and think these things are meaningful. This starting point is very important for the later analysis, because the problem that arises later is not that she suddenly loses her ability to act, but that her actions are more and more easily reinterpreted by others. These clauses also show why transitivity matters here. The narrator is repeatedly the Actor in material processes such as "filled", "helped" and "raked". In Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) terms, the grammar keeps attention on what she is able to do. At this point, her value is still closely tied to action rather than to the category of "girl".

The scene of her father introducing her to the feed salesman further illustrates this point. Instead of emphasizing that she was his "daughter", he called her "my new hired hand" (Munro, 1973, p. 116). This name first confirms her role in labor. After hearing this, the narrator "turned away and raked furiously, red in the face with pleasure" (Munro, 1973, p. 116). Instead of rejecting the name, she responded by working even harder. The identity given by her father coincided with her perception of herself at that time: she wanted to be a person who could really help, and her father also introduced her to outsiders in this way. In terms of the verbal process, the father was the Sayer of this designation, and "my new hired hand" became a way to publicly describe the identity of the narrator at that time.

However, gender judgment already appears in this scene. The feed salesman immediately said, "I thought it was only a girl" (Munro, 1973, p. 116). "I thought" constitutes a mental process, and the salesman is in the position of Senser; the projected clause "it was only a girl" contains a relational process, with the narrator as Carrier and "only a girl" as Attribute. The "only" here is particularly noteworthy, because it weakens the "new hired hand" status that her father has just given her. Thus, two different interpretations of the same child emerge: the father describes her in terms of what she can do, and the salesman first judges her according to whether she is a girl. The contrast between the two descriptions can also be seen in process type. Her father speaks and calls her "my new hired hand", so he is the Sayer in a verbal process. The salesman's "it was only a girl", however, is relational: the narrator is the Carrier and "only a girl" is the Attribute (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The two clauses therefore give her two different identities; one based on work and the other on gender.

But this gendered evaluation has not become the main way for the narrator to understand herself. She did not deny her labor, nor did she stop seeing herself as a participant in her father's work. In other words, the classification of "girl" has appeared, but it is not enough to replace the self-awareness built by labor for the time being. This also constitutes an important reference for the following: in the second stage, similar gender judgments no longer appear occasionally but gradually enter her daily life through repeated reminders and corrections from family members. Butler's (1990, 1993) idea of performativity is useful here because this first label does not immediately change how the narrator sees herself. "Girl" has entered the scene, but it has not yet been repeated often enough in family life to become the main rule for judging her.

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Stage Two: Everyday Discipline and the Reorganisation of Interpretive Authority

After entering the second stage, the narrator is still able to act and still retains her own judgment. What really changes is that her behavior is increasingly understood in the gender framework. She questions the labor arrangements at home and deliberately sits and closes the door in a non-compliant way. From the perspective of transitivity, she is still often in the position of Actor and Senser. That is to say, her ability to act did not suddenly disappear. The difference is that family members began to tell her more and more frequently what a "girl" should and should not do.

This change first appeared in a conversation between parents about domestic labor. The mother said to her father, "Wait till Laird gets a little bigger, then you'll have a real help," and then added that she could ask the narrator to "help more in the house" (Munro, 1973, p. 117). The narrator was puzzled by these words. She wondered, "Who could imagine Laird doing my work...?" (Munro, 1973, p. 118), and listed tasks she had been able to perform, such as handling padlocks and pushing water tanks. What she is concerned about is ability: can Laird really do these jobs? Her mother's arrangement was not made according to this standard. Even though the narrator had proved that she was qualified for farm labor, she was still gradually pushed into the house, and Laird was envisaged as her father's future helper.

There is an important change here. In the first stage, the narrator's labor value is mainly proved by what she can actually do; at this point, gender begins to intervene in labor distribution. Her questioning showed that she did not accept her mother's logic. As a Senser, she can still judge the unreasonableness of this arrangement. But whether she can see the problem and whether she can change the family arrangements are two different things. Seen through Foucault's (1977) idea of discipline, this change does not need an open prohibition. She is gradually directed towards housework while Laird is imagined as the future helper. The discipline lies in this everyday rearrangement of where she should be and what she should do.

Her grandmother's corrections further reinforce this change. She kept telling the narrator, "Girls don't slam doors like that" and "Girls keep their knees together when they sit down" (Munro, 1973, p. 119). These words address very common physical behaviors: how to sit, how to close the door, and how to act. It is in these trivial things that "girl" gradually changes from a simple identity label to a standard for evaluating behavior. In the past, there was no need for special explanation. Now there is a difference between "like a girl" and "suitable or not". The grammar of the grandmother's remarks also matters. She is the Sayer, but inside the quoted clauses "Girls" becomes the Actor of "slam" and "keep" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Her comments therefore turn the narrator's individual behaviour into a general statement about how girls behave.

The narrator did not obey immediately. She recalled: "I continued to slam the doors and sit as awkwardly as possible, thinking that by such measures I kept myself free" (Munro, 1973, p. 119). This sentence shows that she knows very well that she is being restrained and deliberately resists these constraints. Judging from the material process, she is still the Actor of these behaviors. She decided how to close the door and how to sit. But it is now difficult for these actions to maintain the original neutral meaning. For her, they are protecting freedom; in the gender standards established by her grandmother, they become "not like a girl" behaviors. Therefore, the same action begins to have two different interpretations at the same time. For Butler (1990, 1993), this repetition is important. Every time the grandmother begins with

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"Girls...", an ordinary act is tied again to a gender rule. The narrator resists the rule, but she is already responding to it; even her resistance shows that this standard has entered the way her behaviour is being judged.

The narrator's subsequent reflection on the word "girl" makes this change more direct. She recalled that the word had formerly seemed "innocent and unburdened, like the word child"; now, however, a girl was "not ... simply what I was; it was what I had to become" (Munro, 1973, p. 119). The point here is not only that she began to realize her gender, but that the word itself has acquired a normative role. It no longer simply describes identity, but begins to stipulate behavior. Being a "girl" means learning a set of requirements about posture, labor, speech and behavior.

The way she imagined herself also changed. Earlier in the story, the stories she made up often put herself in the center of action: facing danger, solving problems, and even saving others. Later, she began to imagine herself as the person waiting for others to rescue her. This change shows that gender requirements in the family are no longer just external words. They began to influence how she conceived what kind of person she might become. This is especially important according to the criteria for judging the interpretive authority in this article, because the classification imposed by others has entered her own reflection and imagination. This is close to Foucault's (1977) account of discipline at the level of self-observation. Earlier, the rule comes from other people's corrections. Here it begins to affect the kinds of roles she can imagine for herself, so the pressure no longer comes only from outside.

Butler's (1990, 1993) theory of gender performativity can help explain this process. Gender is not formed suddenly by a single explicit command, but gradually becomes natural through repeated messages about how girls should and should not behave. The grandmother's words seem merely to correct the sitting posture or the way of closing the door, but in fact, these behaviors are constantly associated with the identity of "girl". Over time, gender is no longer just a name for a character, but a set of criteria for judging whether behavior is appropriate.

The concept of discipline in Foucault (1977) further explains why these words work. There is no single coercive event here, and no one requires the narrator to completely change herself at once. Discipline occurs in the details of daily life: the sitting posture is corrected, the way of closing the door is corrected, the labor position is rearranged, and even the way of speaking and acting begins to be noticed. Because of the repetition of these interventions, the narrator becomes more and more aware that her behavior may always be compared with a standard of "what a girl should do".

Later at this stage, the family members already have a relatively stable language for interpreting her behavior. The correction of the grandmother, the arrangement of the mother and the repeated classification of "girl" echo each other, making gender gradually a more authoritative interpretation within the family. The narrator did not stop acting because of this. She still questioned and resisted, and she still knew why she did it. However, her own explanation is no longer the only voice that can determine the meaning of her behavior.

This is the most important difference between the second stage and the first stage. In the previous stage, what she did, how she understood herself and how her father evaluated her can be roughly confirmed by each other. At this time, the relationship begins to loosen. She still acts and forms judgments, but she increasingly needs to face the gendered interpretations of

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these actions by others. After Flora escapes, the gap that has emerged will become more obvious.

Stage Three: Action with Reduced Interpretive Authority

In the third stage, the narrator's actions and others' understanding of these actions began to be clearly separated. She did make a specific choice: "I opened it as wide as I could" (Munro, 1973, p. 125); after that, she also made it clear that she "did not regret it" (Munro, 1973, p. 125). But after the event entered the family conversation, it was retold in a different way. Laird attributed Flora's escape to her, and her father finally explained her behavior with "She's only a girl" (Munro, 1973, p. 127). She is still able to act and still knows how she views this matter, but it is difficult for her own account to determine how her family will understand it in the end.

The plot of Flora's escape brought the previous two experiences together. On the one hand, her father still regards her as a person who has the ability to complete the task. When Flora broke free, he told her to shut the gate (Munro, 1973, p. 124), which showed that the image of reliability she had previously built in farm labor had not completely disappeared. On the other hand, she has long lived in an environment where she is constantly reminded of "what girls should do". Munro presents a sequence of actions here: "I could run very fast", "I ran across the garden", "I lifted it out of the gravel", "carried it across the roadway", and "I had it half-way across" (Munro, 1973, p. 124). These sentences put the narrator in the position of Actor. She acts throughout and carries out the task as her father requested. The process types make this point quite concrete. In the series of actions around the gate, the narrator remains the Actor; in "I did not regret it", she is also the Senser of a mental process (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). She is therefore still doing and judging for herself, even though the family is beginning to control the explanation of what she has done.

The change happened after she reached the fence. Instead of closing the gate, she opened it (Munro, 1973, p. 125). She later recalled, "I did not make any decision to do this; it was just what I did" (Munro, 1973, p. 125). This sentence does not provide a complete and clear motive, and because of this, the act of opening the gate is not fully explained at that moment. Whether it means sympathy, resistance, or some kind of instinctive choice, the text does not immediately provide a definitive explanation. What really makes it have a fixed meaning is the family members' later accounts of the event.

In fact, the narrator herself is not without judgment. She admitted that this matter would cause trouble to her father, but she still said that she did not regret it (Munro, 1973, p. 125). At dinner, Laird had already summarized the matter as follows: "Anyway it was her fault Flora got away" (Munro, 1973, p. 127). The father then asked, "What did you do that for?" (Munro, 1973, p. 127). On the surface, the question asks for a reason, but it places her in a position where she must explain her mistake. She did not answer, and her father did not continue to ask, ending the conversation directly with "She's only a girl" (Munro, 1973, p. 127). Therefore, the specific act of opening the gate is no longer just a personal choice, but is understood through the gendered label "girl". At dinner, the pattern changes. Laird speaks about what happened, and the father's "She's only a girl" is a relational clause: "she" is the Carrier and "only a girl" the Attribute (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The focus has moved from the narrator's own material and mental processes to other people's speech and classification of her.

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The shift between "I" and "she" is especially clear here. When the narrator talks about her behavior, she uses the first person: "I opened it as wide as I could" (Munro, 1973, p. 125). At the table, the same child becomes "she" in Laird's account, as in the father's statement, "she's only a girl" (Munro, 1973, p. 127). She was obviously at the scene, but what her behavior meant was mainly explained by others.

It's not just pronouns that have changed here. When she opened the gate, she was able to tell what she had done from her position; when it came to family discussions, she became more and more like an object of explanation by others. She didn't lose her capacity to speak, but it was difficult for her words to have the same weight as Laird's and her father's judgments.

The whole short story is still retrospectively narrated by the first-person narrator as an adult. This does not mean that the first-person voice has really disappeared; rather, it is necessary to distinguish between two different positions: the adult narrator has the power to retell the past, and in childhood, she does not have the same ability to influence how her family members understand her at that time. Lanser's discussion of narrative voice and authority can help illustrate this difference. The adult narrator can later reorganize this memory, but the child narrator at the time could not make her explanation the most authoritative account in the family.

"Maybe it was true" at the end (Munro, 1973, p. 127) further develops this shift. After the father said "she's only a girl", the narrator recalled: "I didn't protest that, even in my heart. Maybe it was true" (Munro, 1973, p. 127). This "maybe" does not indicate complete agreement, but it is also different from her earlier explicit resistance to her grandmother's discipline. She did not completely accept her father's judgment, but she has begun to reconsider herself through this judgment. Butler (1990, 1993) makes the father's wording significant because "girl" is being used to explain the act, not simply to name the narrator. The label is repeated as a rule for understanding her behaviour. The next sentence also recalls Foucault (1977): "I didn't protest that, even in my heart" suggests that the judgment is no longer only something said to her. It has begun to enter her own thinking, although "maybe" shows that acceptance is still uncertain.

From "I opened it as wide as I could" to Laird's "it was her fault Flora got away", to her father's "she's only a girl", and finally "maybe it was true" (Munro, 1973, pp. 125, 127), the same event receives several different interpretations. At this stage, the most remarkable thing is not whether the narrator can still act, but whose words can finally determine the meaning of these actions. She has always been the agent of the action, but it is increasingly difficult to retain control over the meaning assigned to her behavior. Butler (1990, 1993) makes the father's wording significant because "girl" is being used to explain the act, not simply to name the narrator. The label is repeated as a rule for understanding her behaviour. The next sentence also recalls Foucault (1977): "I didn't protest that, even in my heart" suggests that the judgment is no longer only something said to her. It has begun to enter her own thinking, although "maybe" shows that acceptance is still uncertain.

Conclusion

This study examines how the narrator's actions in Alice Munro's "Boys and Girls" are increasingly defined by family members with greater interpretive authority. She remains capable of acting, judging, and reflecting throughout the story, but as the narrative progresses, her own interpretations of her actions carry less weight, while the accounts of her father, Laird,

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and grandmother carry more. Gendered identity is gradually formed through this redistribution of interpretive authority between the narrator and her family members.

Three main findings emerge from the analysis. First, the opening stage establishes a point of reference: her sense of being useful and her father's recognition of her labour are largely aligned. Second, repeated corrections and judgments about how a "girl" should behave gradually gain greater influence. Their effect becomes visible when the category "girl" begins to shape not only others' evaluations of the narrator, but also how she understands and imagines herself.

Third, in the Flora episode, the gap between the narrator's ability to act and her ability to explain her own behavior becomes more obvious. She could still make a choice and did not stop thinking about her behavior, but after the incident, Laird's and her father's statements gradually gained greater interpretive weight. The "maybe it was true" at the end (Munro, 1973, p. 127) is particularly noteworthy, because this sentence shows that the external evaluation no longer remains confined to family conversation, but begins to enter the narrator's own thinking. She initially said, "I opened it as wide as I could" (Munro, 1973, p. 125), to explain what she had done; her father said, "She's only a girl" (Munro, 1973, p. 127), to explain what kind of person she was. Putting the two statements together shows an obvious change: the narrator can still use "I" to describe her experience, but in the family interaction at that time, it was difficult for her understanding to be recognized to the same extent.

From this perspective, the discussion of Boys and Girls in this article does more than reiterate how gender norms limit the narrator. More importantly, the same behavior can be explained by different people, and these explanations do not carry equal weight within the family. The narrator's ability to act does not guarantee that her understanding of her behavior will also be accepted by others. "Interpretive authority" focuses on this relational dimension, that is, how a person's statement is recognized in interaction, and thereby affects others' perceptions of a certain behavior or character. In this way, the investigation of the narrator's agency can also be further extended from "what she did" to "what she said about her behavior, and who ultimately decides how others understand it".

The analysis of this article still has certain limitations in scope. The research mainly focuses on several key paragraphs in a short story, so the current findings cannot be directly applied to all of Munro's works. Future research can extend this close reading by combining transitivity patterns, evaluation resources, and narrative authority across more texts, and examine whether a more general pattern exists in the relationship between character action and the interpretation of behavior. Extending this analysis to a broader range of Munro's works, and even other works of women's literature, can further examine the scope of application of the concept of "interpretive authority".

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