

History, Desire, and Sadomasochism in Alice Munro's "The Beggar Maid"

Yuhui Bao

The College of the Humanities
Beijing University of Chinese Medicine
610026@bucm.edu.cn

Abstract

Alice Munro's "The Beggar Maid" (1978) dramatizes the romantic trajectory of its lower-class protagonist Rose in mid-twentieth-century Canada, offering insights into the operation of what Mimetic Theory and Generative Anthropology have analyzed as mimetic desire. Emerging from an initially triangular dynamic, Rose's relations with her wealthy fiancé Patrick descend into what René Girard describes as pathological sadomasochism. My study traces the subtly destructive results of Rose's aspirations on her love, marriage choice and identity-shaping in an attempt to better understand the ambiguous power of mediated desire in an age of opportunity.

Keywords: mimetic desire; masochism; sadomasochism; Alice Munro; René Girard; Eric Gans, generative anthropology

* * *

Alice Munro is the first Canadian and first short-story writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature (in 2013), a belated recognition of the cultural power of a genre of which she is one of the greatest modern practitioners. One of her most notable works, *Who Do You Think You Are?*^[1] (1978), as its title suggests, is a collection of stories concerning identity-seeking. Of the ten pieces in the collection, four—"Royal Beatings," "Privilege," "Half a Grapefruit," and "The Beggar Maid"—are about the protagonist Rose's childhood experiences growing up in an economically and socially marginalized Ontario farming town—the fictional (and aptly named) Hanratty—during the nineteen-thirties and -forties. All are more or less overtly concerned with little Rose's self-conscious discovery of her peripheral status and her resentful envy of those at the center, making them potentially apt subjects for originary analysis. This paper will use Mimetic Theory and the Generative Anthropology heuristic to probe some of the insights into modernity offered by this the last-mentioned story.

If in the first three stories all her center-seeking efforts are childish and make little ostensible difference to her life, in “The Beggar Maid” the project assumes a more consequential dimension. This story concerns the period (apparently the early nineteen-fifties) in which Rose enters college and is unexpectedly granted access to a more broadly acknowledged center in life. In particular, her desire for centrality seems to be promised material fulfillment in the form of marriage with Patrick Blatchford, a slightly older graduate student from a rich background in the exotic, even “magic” (95) locale of British Columbia.

“The Beggar Maid” is about love, or its absence, about desire—which in one form or another is never absent—and about a marriage and its toppling. But in a way, all these topics circle around the changing terms of the quest for centrality in mid-twentieth-century North America. The story begins with laconic introductions of the major figures and their relationships. There are three of them, and it should come as no surprise to students of René Girard and Generative Anthropology, that they arrange themselves into the geometry of a triangle. Patrick, Rose, and Rose’s host and mentor Dr. Henshawe are knit together, that is, by complex of interlocking desires.

It might be easiest to start with Patrick, as his desires are perhaps the most legible and consistent. Why does he want Rose? Of course, sexual attraction has its own imperatives and we are to understand that Rose is more beautiful than the other scholarship students with whom she is grouped. Amusingly enough, we must see these rivals through the adolescent Rose’s judgmental gaze, as[]

four or five girls of the same stooped and matronly type ... and several bright-eyed, self-satisfied, babyish-looking boys. It seemed to be the rule that girl scholarship winners looked about forty and boys about twelve. It was not possible, of course, that they all looked like this. It was not possible that in one glance ... Rose could detect traces of eczema, stained underarms, dandruff, moldy deposits on the teeth, and crusty flakes in the corners of the eyes. That was only what she thought. But there was a pall over them, she was not mistaken, there was a true terrible pall of eagerness and docility (73-74).

So, even allowing for rivalrous distortions, Rose is good-looking and, at least in her own opinion, more spirited, even rebellious, and thus naturally attractive. But mimetic influences of course inflect all such choices, producing Goethe’s famous “elective affinities,” and Patrick gives a very clear indication of what else has moved him. “I’m glad,” he tells Rose, who has warned him, accurately, that he would think her home in Hanratty a “dump” (78). “I’m glad you’re poor. You’re so lovely. You’re like the Beggar Maid” (79). He is referring to Edward Burne-Jones’ 1884 Pre-Raphaelite painting, *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid*, which Rose of course quickly looks up and interprets.



King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid (1884)

Photo © Tate. Image available from Tate Images through a [CC-BY-NC-ND-3.0 \(Unported\)](#) license.

Original image available at <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/burne-jones-king-cophetua-and-the-beggar-maid-n01771>

The first stirrings of resentment of her admirer can easily be detected in the resulting verdict. “The milky surrender of her, the helplessness and gratitude. Was that,” Rose wonders, “how Patrick saw [her]?” (80). Does he see the same “docility” that she has just sneered at in the other scholarship girls? But we can look up the painting, too and, as Munro is perhaps inviting us to recognize, both Patrick and Rose seem to be misreading it to their own desiring purposes. Burne-Jones’s beautiful Maid is actually elevated above the clearly worshipful King, gazing over his head in some sort of self-possessed trance of feminine sublimity. Far from surrendering or expressing gratitude, that is, she seems to have the power in their relationship, obviously accepting his obeisance. And there is no question that Patrick has, in his turn, mythologized Rose’s socioeconomic status. She has been centralized for him, we might say, by her victimhood, and he is clearly imagining himself the rescuing or conquering knight, who is both romantically obsessed and heroically self-sacrificial, lowering himself (as the King has literally done) to sit at her feet.

The question, of course, will be whether or how thoroughly Rose absorbs Patrick’s view of things, follows his modelling of her own status (or for that matter, the modelling of the culture of the previous century of which the Pre-Raphaelites were a prestigious expression). Clearly, she is drawn to it—she will admit she likes at least the idea of being worshipped (85). But someone else is also pulling her in a different direction.

Dr. Henshawe is the retired professor in whose house Rose stays as a scholarship student when she leaves Hanratty to come to the university. Her view of Rose’s proper identity is

repeatedly and insistently expressed: she is a “scholar” (69). Although this, too, Rose both imitates and resents:

Dr. Henshawe directed conversation. She mentioned Frank Scott and Dorothy Livesay.^[2] She said Rose must read them. Rose must read this, she must read that. Rose became sullenly determined not to. She was reading Thomas Mann. She was reading Tolstoy (70).

Even in superficial (or “sullen”) rebellion, that is, she is moving in the professor’s general direction. Still clearer is Dr. Henshawe’s affixing of a socioeconomic label to her ward. Munro’s characteristic wit registers as Rose tries out this new marker of identity, with all its opening vistas of what Generative Anthropology will call victimary centrality, on her stepmother Flo in Hanratty:

Before she came to Dr. Henshawe’s, Rose had never heard of the working class. She took the designation home.

“This would have to be the last part of town where they put the sewers,” Flo said.

“Of course,” Rose said coolly. “This is the working-class part of town.”

“*Working class?*” said Flo. “Not if the ones around here can help it.” (70)

But when Rose seems granted an opportunity through marriage to escape this category, Dr. Henshawe resists. Indeed, she wants to tear Rose away from Patrick.

As a professor, Dr. Henshawe assumes multiple roles: as a social superior of Rose, as a teacher and academic mentor, and as a surrogate parent of sorts, guiding or trying to guide Rose’s emotional life as well as her career. Part of what is fascinating yet convincing in Munro’s account is how few her interventions really are, how small the suggestions, to have such consequences for Rose’s life—but so it is.

Although less luxurious than that of Patrick’s family, the house Dr. Henshawe lives in represents the richest lifestyle Rose has seen, at least before visiting British Columbia. Seemingly kind to scholarship students, the professor’s posture is not totally altruistic. At first sight, Dr. Henshawe impresses Rose unpleasantly as a “charming nuisance” (75), who, according to Rose’s resentful perspective, assumes a role of benefactor, expecting humbleness and gratitude from the scholarship girls. Accordingly, the professor seems (to Rose) to deem it her natural right to plan Rose’s life in the way she does those of the other girls. Paradoxically enough, this interference is manifested in her enthusiastic endorsement of Rose’s ambitions. In a typically adolescent exploratory mode, Rose ventures the idea, had she been a man, of a career as a foreign correspondent.

“Then you must be one!” cried Dr. Henshawe alarmingly. The future will be wide open, for women. You must concentrate on languages. You must take courses in political science. And economics. Perhaps you could get a job on the paper for the summer. I have friends there.” (72)

Rose of course recoils from being taken so literally. And she doesn't at all like the prospect of these various exertions that she “must” make. “It was dangerous,” Munro dryly remarks, “to mention things to Dr. Henshawe” (73). And yet, Rose's eventual career as a television journalist will not be too far removed from this initial idea.

But on the matter of Patrick, the challenge is considerably greater. When Dr. Henshawe finds that he has an eye for Rose, she tries to check their love affair by probing Rose's psychology. Indeed, she is almost uncannily perceptive.

There are three critical conversations between Dr. Henshawe and Rose on the subject of Patrick. Each conversation affects Rose mimetically, subtly altering her perceptions and triggering various kinds of resentful resistance. On the first occasion, the professor spots Patrick waiting for Rose outside the door of her house:

“Oh, Rose! Come and look!” called Dr. Henshawe, in her soft, amused voice, and they looked down together from the dark window of the study. “The poor young man,” said Dr. Henshawe tenderly....

She called Patrick poor because he was in love, and perhaps also because he was male, doomed to push and blunder....

“Guarding the door,” Dr. Henshawe said. “Oh, Rose!”

Another time she said disturbingly, “Oh, dear, I'm afraid he is after the wrong girl.” (69)

Rose, of course, recoils. But she also sees freshly, sees what the professor has shown her. She doesn't like being made to see these things, but she sees them. She is forced to consider her suitor's flaws, which are of a very particular, even privileged kind. All Munro's subtle insight into the hardness or strength instilled by the kind of upbringing Rose (or she herself) has had is suggested in the assessment Dr. Henshawe's intervention provokes. Patrick, Rose fumes,

...was asking to be laughed at. He was the most vulnerable person Rose had ever known, he made himself so, didn't know anything about protecting himself. (69)

But will she take on the task of protecting him? Legitimizing his naivety by taking it seriously? It is an open question, because at the same time, Patrick “was also full of cruel

judgments, he was full of conceit" (69).

Another talk with Rose occurs when Dr. Henshawe sees that the relationship between Rose and Patrick is becoming more serious. The professor is a socialist, a founder of the Canadian party (69), and in her class-conscious way she hints that Rose has made a coup. She must have an eye on Patrick's "mercantile empire," even though, in her own version of broad-mindedness, she allows as how she herself "doesn't despise wealth" (80). But on balance, by reminding Rose of her ambition, her study and degrees, the mentor tries to pull her acolyte back from a life with Patrick. "Are you going to forget all that so soon?" (80).

There are signs, however, that this time Dr. Henshawe may be overplaying her hand—or playing it in too obvious and literal a way. Patronizing laughter at "poor" Patrick was much more effective. Now Rose subjects the professor's words to a withering critique.

Mercantile Empire was a rather grand way of putting it. Patrick's family owned a chain of department stores in British Columbia. All Patrick had said to Rose was that his father owned some stores.... She could not realize what a coup she had made because [in Hanratty] it would have been a coup for her if the butcher's son had fallen for her, or the jeweler's; people would say she had done well. (80)

Dr. Henshawe has also miscalculated the particular mimetic effect in play. As Rose reflects on this conversation, she comes to see that it is her desire for worship that has most moved her, rather than her desire for money and social status as the professor assumed. And other factors: "she believed she felt sorry for him, that she had to help him out" (80), a motivation that Patrick will later, after she witnesses the misery of his family life, explicitly evoke from her: "You see why I need you? I need you so much!" (89).

Still, this second crucial conversation does also surreptitiously make Rose doubt her love for Patrick and her future role in marriage. The discrepancy between them hinted by the professor makes Rose explode in anger at Patrick. It is a dramatic moment, that Rose can feel coming and that she tries ineffectually to forestall. They are in Dr. Henshawe's snow-covered yard at night, as a tense, half-playful exchange and rough-housing between them begins to escalate. The ever-anxious Patrick remonstrates.

"Dr. Henshawe will hear you!"

"Dr. Henshawe says you are an honorable young man," Rose said dreamily. "I think she's in love with you." ... He couldn't bear the way Rose was talking. She blew at the snow in his hair. "Why don't you go in and deflower her? I'm sure she's a virgin. That's her window. Why don't you?" She rubbed his hair, then slipped her hand inside his overcoat ... "You're hard!" she said triumphantly. "Oh, Patrick! You've got a hard-on for Dr. Henshawe!" (82)

Nor can she cease tormenting him; they begin a physical struggle, in which she seeks to provoke him to overpower her with a masculine strength she fears he does not possess. This scene does of course point towards a triangular rivalry with Dr. Henshawe, although it is not necessarily or literally a sexual one, and at the very climax of the snowy wrestling match between Rose and Patrick a beam of light from the professor's window makes the connection complete. But this is almost a kind of sacramental light, offering to purge Rose of her conflictive darkness. Dr. Henshawe calls to her in a "patient, encouraging voice," almost the way Jesus might call for a sinner to return, "as if Rose was lost in a fog nearby, and needed directing home" (83). It is indeed the moment Rose's inner conflict is at its fiercest. She is standing at the brink of the precipice.

The third conversation takes place directly after this scene.

"Do you love him, Rose?" said Dr. Henshawe. "No, think about it. Do you?" Her voice was full of doubt and seriousness. Rose took a deep breath and answered as if filled with calm emotion, "Yes, I do."

"Well, then." (83)

Here, Dr. Henshawe's intervention most clearly works against its intention. The words "as if" tell all. The professor cannot grasp that this question is not about Rose's relation with Patrick, but about her rivalry with the professor herself. Rose rises to what seems to be a challenge, matching her mentor's seriousness and adulthood. Munro, again with her consummate grasp of such dynamics, wittily signals how merely theatrical this answer is, how young Rose remains, as the pivotal exchange is followed immediately by an account of her waking that night and binge-eating chocolate bars (83).

The rivalry between Rose and Dr. Henshawe has made Patrick more valuable, propelling Rose towards marriage despite her reservations, and now the story turns to the struggle between the protagonist and her lover.

An intelligent and ambitious small-town girl, Rose from childhood has suffered from a deeply felt peripherality and has longed for the allure of a more central life. Her mediators in both respects have been general, vague, but oppressive and importunate. Much of Munro's fiction deals with the individual's experience of such forces. In Rose's case, her sensitivity to them allows for no easy escape. Once in college, the identity of scholarship girl cannot satisfy her desire, and she sets out hungrily seeking what Eric Gans has called "a local monopoly of attention."^[3] But not *too* local, Rose feels. "She wanted to perform in public" (72). She seeks a series of other identities so that she can be more widely, more spectacularly known and envied. These, as Munro sardonically establishes, are not practical choices.

She thought she wanted to be an actress but she never tried to act, was afraid to go

near the college drama productions. She knew she couldn't sing or dance. She would really have liked to play the harp, but she had no ear for music. She wanted to be known and envied, slim and clever. (72)

Enter, then, Patrick, his worship, his social standing, the envy and attention that her relationship with him really does generate, and not just in the disapproving mode of Dr. Henshawe. If Rose had been prone to be content with the life that the tired but not yet fully played-out knight-and-maiden configuration he offers could still provide her in the mid-twentieth-century Canadian middle class, things might have gone more smoothly. For many a couple in the era, this arrangement of desires surely still did work well enough, even if new forces (such as a half-slumbering feminism) were soon to rise. However, for someone like Rose, and even in the relatively provincial Canadian academic environment, change already is afoot, and she is indeed ambitious, animated by a stronger craving. She wants to be *known*, and Patrick's outdated idea of her as a Beggar Maid is inadequate. "What about the rest of her? Energy, laziness, vanity, discontent, ambition?" Mind you, such myopia is not entirely his fault. "She concealed all that. He had no idea" (86).

Ambition we might define as the self-conscious thematization or privileging of a pursuit of the center. Generative Anthropology leads us to expect, of course, that centrality will always attract desire, and that desire and its shadow, resentment, can take many forms or adopt many strategies. But the ambitious adopt a particularly open, we might even say, naïve approach, that lays out with special clarity the preoccupations of their society and culture. The ambitious are those who allow the rest of us to see the desires we ourselves feel but find it safer or more tactically astute to conceal.

But in certain intensities of ambition, success must be measured in ways that society does not overtly acknowledge at all, or at least as such. Once Dr. Henshawe has fallen out of the triangular relationship and Rose enters into her final binary struggle with Patrick, certain cruelties begin to appear in her behavior: she leaves ordinary resentment behind and enters the realm of sadomasochism. According to René Girard, masochism is

the mimetic representation of the subject's mimetic relationship with the most violent of models, that is to say, with the most insurmountable of obstacles.... The subject places all his faith in the impenetrable obstacle; he no longer searches for the traces of the being which is capable of freeing him from his failure, except in the one which invariably causes him to fail. (331, 333)[\[4\]](#)

So does Rose, although in an interesting way. In dealing with Patrick, a comparatively weak man over whom she clearly has some strong advantages, she repeatedly tries to detect something undefeatable in him.

If *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid* provides Patrick with a flattering model for his own quest, Munro also uses the painting to help us to recognize the source of Rose's rather

clichéd and atavistic standard for male attractiveness, a standard that dovetails only too neatly with the rather brutal realities of her upbringing (noted above)—why does Patrick not know how to protect himself? Why does he say things like, “I suppose I don’t seem very manly” (78)? But her way of processing this remark takes a curious two-step turn:

She was startled and irritated by such an exposure. He took such chances; had nothing ever taught him not to take such chances? But maybe he didn’t, after all. He knew she would have to say something reassuring. Though she was longing not to, she longed to say judiciously, “Well, no. You don’t.”

But that would not actually be true. He did seem masculine to her. Because he took these chances. Only a man could be so careless and demanding. (78)

Rose’s default position—for all the satirical distance she can put between herself and her admirer—is that he must be aggressive and have a fierce desire to conquer her. She reads his reference to the painting as indicating that in Patrick’s eyes, she is the peripheral figure to be pitied and salvaged more than loved. She might seem reflexively to reject such a role, but her behavior in fact embraces it, seeks to provoke him to dominate her. In short, she wants Patrick to take on a role that is familiar to her, that others, in Hanratty for example, have taken on as well. According to Girard,

The masochistic subject wishes to reproduce the relationship of inferiority, contempt and persecution that he believes he has with his model. It is necessary for the subject to be on the stage at which the model interests him solely as a rival, with the opposition and the violence of that rival already coming out into the foreground (330).

In her eyes King Cophetua obviously satisfies such a request for violence: “He would make a puddle of her, with his fierce desire.” And Patrick, implicitly, is failing to attain the standard he himself seems to have invoked. Of the imagined King, she thinks “there would be no apologizing with him, none of that flinching, that lack of faith, that seemed to be revealed in all transactions with Patrick” (80).

So Rose is disillusioned with Patrick for his easy surrender to her. “The subject,” Girard notes,

knows by experience that disillusionment awaits him on the other side of any obstacle that can easily be overcome. So, he sets out to find the insurmountable obstacles, the unbeatable rival, and the ungraspable object. Desire seeks ever for success. But it will have nothing to do with easy success; like Nietzsche, it is only interested in lost causes (326).

Rose is repelled by Patrick’s too easily achieved devotion: “if only ... he would not start thanking and fondling and worshipping her. She didn’t like worship, really...” (85). When

they kiss in the snow his “lips were soft; his tongue was shy; he collapsed over rather than held her, she could not find any force in him” (81). In short, as a subject Rose repeatedly feels disillusioned when she remains unchallenged and a secure possessor of her object.

In Girard’s analysis, primary masochism can result in sadism. In sadism, the subject plays the role of model and persecutor (332). When Rose feels the lack of force in Patrick, she is again so disappointed that she begins to persecute Patrick both verbally and physically. Ignoring Patrick’s supplication to keep her voice down and her hands away from his fly, she tries to bully him.

If the value of the object can be measured by the level of resistance that the model puts up, it is perfectly understandable that the desire will tend to set a higher and higher value on violence itself, that it fetishizes violence and makes of it the obligatory seasoning for all the pleasures that it can still have with the object, or even—at a still more advanced level—with the model itself, which becomes the beloved persecutor. (330)

It is typical of this kind of sadism, that Rose feels more satisfied with Patrick when he begins to resist, show force: “As soon as he started to fight she was relieved—that was what she wanted from him, some sort of action. But she had to keep resisting, until he really proved himself stronger. She was afraid he might not be able to” (82). For the masochistic, if the rival is absent, pleasure is diminished or impossible. When Patrick fights against Rose’s bullying—“He forced her down, down, to her knees, face down in the snow. He pulled her arms back and rubbed her face in the snow” (82)—Rose is so pleased with his resistance that she declares her love for him, crying out: “Kiss me! Kiss the snow! I love you!” (83). But the beauty of Munro’s story is that she historicizes what Girard describes in abstract, universalized terms. The trajectory of this sadomasochism is situated in class and culture. Rose’s background makes her unable to bear the “fondling” that a woman from an entirely different background might well have enjoyed, might not at all have seen as a sign of masculine weakness. But even for her, such an atavistic idea of gender roles cannot be sustained in the world Rose is actually coming to inhabit—she herself will not be able to sustain it.

But for the moment her ferocious desire to be dominated and her sadistic longing to provoke such domination intensify, leading to a spectacular scene of emotional violence. There is a particular challenge to staging a lover’s quarrel in fiction, and Munro both prepares and executes this one with consummate skill. It’s a tour-de-force of built-up resentment and invective, which the reader enjoys as much as Rose herself. Both have been well prepared.

It begins quietly. After the first edgy comments, he asks if she is premenstrual. She says she is not but “realized with dismay that she was” (93). She moves ahead.

"I don't want to get married," she said, backing away from the cruelty of *I don't want to marry you*.

"When did you come to this decision?"

"Long ago. This morning."

They were talking in whispers." (93)

An intermediate stage involves tears and apologies.

"It's just so hard to tell you!"

"Tell me what?"

....

"I don't love you!" she said. "I don't love you. I don't love you." She fell on the bed and put her head in the pillow. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I can't help it." (94-95)

But this is soon enough left behind. The plausible half-truth comes next, the accusation of class snobbery, a weapon that has been at hand from the start, from the reference to the painted Beggar Maid, but that Rose only now brings to bear.

"You despise me. You despise my family and my background and you think you are doing me a *great favor*—"

"I fell in love with you," Patrick said. "I don't despise you. Oh, Rose. I worship you." (95)

This predictable defense, in all its earnest weakness, brings on the final onslaught. Patrick would doubtless have been better advised to have said or hinted that he did look down on her. The model cannot worship the subject, and survive in that role, at least not where Rose comes from. The discharge of resentment is made with memorable relish, and its terms are all Hanratty.

"You're a sissy," Rose said. "You're a prude." She jumped off the bed with great pleasure as she said this. She felt full of energy. More was coming. Terrible things were coming.

"You don't even know how to make love right. I always wanted to get out of this from the very first. I felt sorry for you. You won't look where you're going, you're always knocking things over, just because you can't be bothered, you can't be bothered noticing anything, you're wrapped up in yourself, and you're always bragging, it's so

stupid, you don't even know how to brag right, if you really want to impress people you'll never do it, the way you do it all they do is laugh at you!"

Patrick sat on the bed and looked at up her, his face open to whatever she would say. She wanted to beat and beat him, to say worse and worse, uglier and crueller, things." (95-96)

Patrick is frozen in the posture of King Cophetua, gazing up. From primary masochism to secondary masochism, such a pattern of relationship recurs, as Rose tries to make Patrick subject to the ill-usage she believes herself to suffer from the hands of Patrick as a model.

And yet they do, after all, marry. It is what men and women do, it is the way of the visible world, all the world's signs point to it. To be called "wife, sweetheart. Those mild lovely words ... it was what she had dreamed of; it was not what she wanted" (81). The distinction matters. "Desire," Girard observes, "can easily see that appearances cannot be trusted. It lives more and more in a world of signs and indices" (328). When the mere signs do finally move from the virtual to the material fact of marriage, it is no wonder that Rose cannot feel its worth. The marriage fails, but not for the sorts of sexual reasons that might have been predicted from Rose's attack on Patrick's masculine strength. Their lovemaking, as students before they are even engaged, unexpectedly, is a success. She need not counterfeit, and before long "pleasure presented itself" (84). Patrick needn't be as violent as the king to grant her this. In Patrick's bedroom, after, while he is out fetching coffees and she gazes about herself in post-coital languor, she wonders if the signs and the desired experience towards which they beckon really can merge.

Might it not be possible, to feel as she pretended? If this sexual surprise was possible, wasn't anything? Patrick was not much help; his chivalry and self-abasement, next door to his scoldings, did discourage her. But wasn't the real fault hers? Her conviction that anyone who could fall in love with her must be hopelessly lacking, must finally be revealed to be a fool? ... she could see him as a likable, intelligent, even humorous person; no hero; no fool. Perhaps they could be ordinary. (85)

This is sensible, plausible: the imagined life to which ordinary triangular desire can bring ordinary human beings, the life other people live. But it is easier imagined than achieved. She cannot fully abandon the masochistic imperative, clings to the sense of humiliation she is made to suffer and the disdain that she is made to undergo in relation to the absolute superiority of the model, a psychology typical of Girard's masochistic imitator: "All the time, moving and speaking, she was destroying herself for him, yet he looked right through her, through all the distractions she was creating, and loved some obedient image that she herself could not see" (85). This demanding, controlling, disapproving, seemingly tough aspect of Patrick is the bond that connects her to him, because of which Rose both wants and does not want to fall out of love with him.

It is not that there aren't opportunities to accurately measure the possibility of attaining that commonplace human felicity that she glimpses in his bedroom. The trip to Patrick's family in British Columbia, for example, unmasks Rose's illusion about the central life under the shining armor: Patrick's emotionally abusive family choke people off, diminish rather than exalt them. Comparing Patrick's family and her own, she comes to the sensible conclusion that the central life she longs for is only in form rather in content. A trip back to Hanratty delivers its own set of insights—both visits brilliantly handled with Munro's characteristic talent for the comic grotesque, and her equally potent feel for the paradoxical allegiances created by the long experience of *home*. Rose comes to the correct conclusion, the conclusion that readers too can easily see is wise, and asserts her self-respect to the extent that she determines to break up with Patrick. Why then doesn't she?

The key reason may be glimpsed near the start of the violent scene discussed above. Just before her escalation into cruelty, Rose notices something disconcerting about Patrick's changed posture towards her. She finds him not as suppliant as before: "he who used to plead with her *do you love me, do you really*, did not bring the subject up now" (94). His diminished passion (or neediness) makes Rose more attached to him because for the masochist, the stronger the rival, the more interested the subject will become in him. After the quarrel, during which she ostensibly tries to drive him from her, "viciously" concluding by claiming that she never wants to see him again (96), his measured approach is also striking. He writes a calm note, saying they should talk but proposing they wait two weeks to do so.

Tantalizingly, Rose seems to pull back from the mimetic maelstrom, acknowledging again the triangular role of Dr. Henshawe, to whom she returns. She tells the professor that she is not seeing Patrick while she studies for her exams. "Rose could see that even that pleased her" (96).

But, crucially, she does not reveal the breakup to Dr. Henshawe, or to anyone else. "She didn't like giving up being envied; the experience was so new to her" (96). And, perhaps worse, she illogically feels she cannot choose the professor's modelling and can only exit the triangle completely: "it seemed clear that if she escaped from Patrick, she must escape from Dr. Henshawe too. And she did not want to stay on at the college, with people knowing about the broken engagement" (96). There are harsh pragmatic implications to this decision, casting her loose from social and economic support and thus into the material temptations Patrick offers. But at bottom it is the result of a failure to recognize the power of the mimetic, a failure to realize that the only escape from one subjection is another and hopefully better desire.

Rose's rejection of Patrick then inexorably softens, in terms that clearly suggest it is his new-found aloofness, his reasonableness, his very lack of desperation and love that works on her.

He had behaved well. He had not tried to rouse her pity, he had not bullied her, he had not molested her with pitiful telephone calls and letters. He had not come and sat on Dr. Henshawe's doorstep. He was an honorable person.... (97)

Observing him from behind, "almost in darkness" (97), undetected, as he works at the university library, she returns to the realm of signs, of visions. It is surely crucial that he is oblivious, back turned, cannot betray any feeling towards her and therefore might be uncaring, even rejecting.

Then she had a compelling picture of herself. She was running softly into Patrick's carrel, she was throwing her arms around from behind, she was giving everything back to him.... She saw them laughing and crying, explaining, forgiving. *I love you. I do love you, it's all right, I was terrible, I didn't mean it....* This was a violent temptation for her; it was barely resistible. She had an impulse to hurl herself. Whether it was off a cliff or into a warm bed of welcoming grass and flowers, she really could not tell.

It was not resistible, after all. She did it. (97)

She has indeed been reduced to the dark condition of non-existence. Patrick has become more superior as a model, and it is more desirable to make up with him. The more risky the adventure, the more excited the imitator, since "desire aims to achieve shattering triumphs and pleasures that cannot be described" (327). Like Oscar Wilde, she can resist anything but temptation, in her case the temptation to fling herself against the most obdurate model, to allow herself the shattering triumph of being defeated by him. But that of course is not what she finally experiences. She merely experiences a failed marriage, a few hours or days of that ordinary felicity she imagined but many more days and months of mediocrity and unhappiness.

"If the object has not been designated in the first place, the model would never be transformed into an obstacle and persecutor" (334). From the beginning, Patrick is designated as model because of his rich family background. Due to the halo brought about by their relationship, Rose begins to taste the sweetness of prestige: she is envied by college students; the better people in Hanratty offer to talk with her. Her stepmother, Flo, could be humbled in Patrick's presence. But prestige has two sides: it makes Rose feel nervous as well as flattered. While it brings blessings to Rose, it also makes her psychologically troubled. There are moments when Patrick is portrayed neutrally without being distorted by the perspective of envy or desire. Certain passages discussed above, in his bedroom after love-making, or in the library before she goes to him, are examples. Others occur in the account of their subsequent marriage, when "sometimes, without reason or warning, happiness, the possibility of happiness, would surprise them. Then it was as if they were in different though identical-seeming skins, as if there existed a radiantly kind and innocent Rose and Patrick, hardly ever visible, in the shadow of their usual selves" (99). But these are

not enough. Is this because of the continuing shadow cast by darker, more fundamental urges, the hunger for the stunning triumphs dreamed of by the ambitious masochistic?

However her journey may have begun, Rose experiences the everyday irony, or the disillusion, of any subject moving from the periphery to the desired, or at least ostensible center. As a small-town girl, she understands and cannot help but also continue to feel the resentment of the peripheral people around her, even as their manners at the Hanratty dinner table to which she invites Patrick now mortify her. But upon arriving at the table of Patrick's parents in British Columbia, for example, or at her own domestic table in her married life, neither the desire nor the resentment can sustain her.

When the marriage is over, she reflects on what brought and for a time kept them together, and on what happened to her in the crucial, triangular interval described by the story. After sorting through the more obvious factors and giving them their due, the crucial source she settles on for her personal disaster is somewhat surprising, something "she never said to anybody, never confided: ... that it had not been pity or greed or cowardice or vanity but something quite different, like a vision of happiness" (99). And through a largely miserable marital life she still caught glimpses of it, brief visions, that reminded her of the ones she had had when they were students.

Then it was as if they were in different though identical-seeming skins, as if there existed a radiantly kind and innocent Rose and Patrick, hardly ever visible, in the shadow of their usual selves. Perhaps it was that Patrick she saw when she was free of him, invisible to him, looking into his carrel. Perhaps it was. (99)

It seems the visions, what Girard calls "signs and indices," never dissipate entirely, whatever the experiences of disillusion or for that matter the subject's maturation and practical escape from their grasp. They remain to haunt her. But for all that they may have shown her something true, honourable, or generous about her future husband, Rose, or Munro, is unequivocal. "She should have left him there" (99).

Munro's stories cover a period in history (in Canada and in the West generally) where extreme economic depression and poverty are rapidly being replaced by growing wealth. It was a period when economic inequality was also precipitously lessening—economists call it "the great contraction" because the wealth of the rich is not so far removed from the wealth of the middle class and even poor. It is a period now receding from view,[\[5\]](#) but it remains possible to imagine and learn from the accompanying psychological strains. Great writers like Alice Munro explore and articulate these strains, the stresses of desire in an era of rising expectations, the accompanying resentments, and the potentially disastrous lurch out of "object" desire, out of mere triangular rivalry, and into such pathologies as sadomasochism. Girard analyzes these phenomena in a largely abstract, timeless frame, even if his situation of "internally mediated desire" (of which they are a feature) in

modernity is always implicit. But Munro very specifically locates them in time, place and person, and gives us some sense, furthermore, of the human price to be paid.

Rose, to a degree, recovers. She has her career, and the other stories in *Who Do You Think You Are?* trace her variably successful pursuit of identity, her negotiation of the forces of love and resentment through adulthood. But the central paradox of her life is never fully resolved—perhaps because it is a version of the paradox of desire itself. The hauntings of possibility and their destructive shadows persist. Perhaps the darkest and saddest of the various wonderfully realized scenes in “The Beggar Maid” is its last. In a repetition of the structure of the library scene, Rose encounters Patrick by chance in an airport, almost a decade after their divorce. As in the library, she sees him before he sees her, and her reaction replicates the earlier one.

She had the same feeling that this was a person she was bound to, that by a certain magical, yet possible trick, they could find and trust each other, and that to begin this all she had to do was go up and touch him on the shoulder, surprise him with his happiness. (99)

She is “bound to him” only too truly, but bound as in helplessly chained, or as one of Girard’s other titles has it, “to double business bound,”^[6] the double business of reciprocal obsession. Still, she remains sufficiently anchored now in the ordinary world not to give in as she had done before, not to approach him. She observes him from a distance, sees how his birthmark has faded, the birthmark that had seemed to be the very locus of his primal character for her before, her ambivalence towards him (68). But then he turns and does see her. And he reacts.

He made a face at her. It was a truly hateful, savagely warning, face; infantile, self-indulgent, yet calculated; it was a timed explosion of disgust and loathing. It was hard to believe. But she saw it. (100)

It is a glimpse into the furnace of pathological sadomasochism that is the final truth of this kind of desire. She flees, shaken by this “sudden, hallucinatory appearance of [her] true enemy” (100). Her shock is poignant, even though the more reflective reader might be tempted to recall her own earlier cruelties and the mutually destructive cycles of emotional violence through which the couple has passed.

She was not really able to understand.... How could anybody hate Rose so much, at the very moment when she was ready to come forward with her good will, her smiling confession of exhaustion, her air of diffident faith in civilized overtures?

Oh, Patrick could. Patrick could. (100)

The last sentence of the quotation, and of the story, seems to leave the possibility that one

member of this deadly pairing was more to blame. And throughout the story we are certainly offered plenty of good reasons to prefer Rose to Patrick, to condemn his oblivious masculinity, his snobbishness, his shallow intellectualism and pettiness, and to forgive her for her own failings, attributable to the rather awful circumstances of her birth, her various victimhoods. In short, we are encouraged in easily activated resentments of Patrick's wealth and status, gender and culture. He is not made an attractive character, to us, for all that Rose sometimes protests that he is. Munro does not forgo this resource for pleasing her readers. The closing scene is a final reassurance that we were right to dislike him—that we are free to enjoy doing so.

But we also register the diagnostic phrasing of “civilized overtures,” reminding us of the kind of forces the story is dramatizing. These are the forces that Girard is concerned with, that civilization cannot control, that always return for all our attempts to tame them. Rose's more comforting narrative—the attractive, ambitious, spunky poor girl, the beggar maid who rejects the label and transcends her background—is shadowed by a darker one, about the human costs of rivalrous desire in an age of opportunity. Munro tells this story too.^[7]

Notes

[1] The collection was published in the United States and Britain under the title, *The Beggar Maid*. Quotations are from this edition: Knopf (1979) and Allen Lane (1980).

[2] Minor Canadian literary luminaries of the day.

[3] Eric Gans. *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology*, Stanford University Press, 1993, p. 128.

[4] All quotations are from René Girard, with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, Trans. Stephen Bann, Stanford University Press, 1987.

[5] This development has been widely reported. For example, a little after the period Munro writes about, in 1965, bosses made about 20 times as much money as the average worker. They now make about 200 times as much. Jill Lepore, “We Work”, *The New Yorker*, January 18, 2021, p. 69.

[6] *To Double Business Bound: Essays on Literature, Mimesis and Anthropology*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

[7] The author wishes to thank Professor Ian Dennis of the University of Ottawa for editorial advice and assistance.