Christianity References in Alice Munro's "Boys and Girls"

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Recommended Citation

Balan, Ally (2017) "Christianity References in Alice Munro's "Boys and Girls"", The Mall: Vol. 1, Article 7. Available at: https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/the-mall/vol1/iss1/7

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Christian elements embedded into Alice Munro’s short stories are a reoccurring topic of discussion in my FYS101 class at Butler University. Story after story, somebody has made an intelligent discovery that leads to further examination about the uncanny relationships between Munro’s everyday characters’ ordinary lives and their allusion to certain biblical myths. Perhaps the most notable story that alludes to Christianity is “Boys and Girls,” a story about a maturing, naïve female that comes to accept what it means to be a “girl” in society. Several of Munro’s stories explore and examine the pain and necessity of innocent children choosing sides, which ultimately impacts their future lives. “Boys and Girls” is no exception; the pinnacle of the story arises when the narrator decides to disobey her father for the first time. This simple decision lends support to the argument that the narrator deliberately chooses to alter her father’s view of her, and therefore, is ready to accept the drastic changes that come as a consequence. This overall moral conflict advert to how Christians believe God views each of them and will eventually judge their fate at the end of their lives. “Boys and Girls” from Dance of the Happy Shades reveals that Alice Munro is not only a talented storyteller in terms of pure entertainment, but also a writer of depth and complexity, in which even the smallest details of her carefully chosen diction hold some level of symbolic and religious meaning.

Although the narrator remains unnamed throughout the story, Munro is careful to include subtle details that provide groundbreaking evidence when further investigated. Readers can appreciate the fact that Munro purposefully named the brother Laird, which means ‘Lord,’ or a titled gentleman. This synonym plays an important role in the story as the young girl experiences society’s unwritten gender rules forced upon her. With no initial perception of gender roles, the narrator believes she is allowed to do anything her brother can do without any backlash from society. When the feed salesman belittles the narrator by accusing that she is “only a girl” (Munro 116), the narrator is introduced to the notion of male superiority.

Throughout history, the Christian church has prided itself on being a very patriarchal society. The hierarchical theology has placed women under men’s authority in many aspects of religion, including the sacrament of marriage and within the church itself. Historically, it has excluded women from church leadership positions and continues to refuse the acceptance of females to the Catholic priesthood. Munro utilizes society’s unfair exclusions to shine light on the denial felt by the narrator.
Expanding on the theme of the hierarchy, one can view the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity as a system of superior power. As Flora escapes, Laird calls out for his father to bring him on the empowering journey. This is the verbal moment when Laird professes his recognition of his sex-determined superiority. When all seen together, the father, Henry, and Laird are so powerful that they are unable to be stopped. After the three men have passed, the narrator shuts the gate with both a sense of defeat and pride. They have gone beyond the gate into a world where the older men will commit a barbaric act and Laird will witness death firsthand. Just as the curious Adam and Eve were exposed to the dangerous world after disobeying God, Laird is no longer in the safe, innocent environment he was once so accustomed to. He has consciously chosen to act the way he did and now he must live with the consequences, regardless of the possible regret he may feel later on. The power of the three male characters in the story significantly suppresses the women, leading the narrator to feel weak and alone.

The setting also provides evidence of Christian inspiration. The narrator mentions the town of Jubilee twice throughout the story. The Hebrew word ‘jubilee’ translates into “a ram’s horn” or “trumpet,” which is blown with the intentions of exclamation. In Judaism and Christianity, the concept of the Jubilee is a special year of the remission of sins and debts. During this year of universal pardoning, all of the enslaved and imprisoned were granted freedom as a chance for a new beginning. The land that had been taken by others as a result of unpaid debts was returned back to the original owners (Wellman). This relates back to Flora, who was given the chance to escape a gruesome situation. Although she was lucky enough to run free, the narrator knew it was only a matter of time before the horse was rightfully returned back to her father—dead or alive. The narrator also describes her fantasies of riding “spiritedly down the main street of Jubilee, acknowledging the townspeople’s gratitude” (Munro 113) for her heroic acts she performs in her nightly stories. This scene directly parallels to the story told by Christians on Psalm Sunday, in which Jesus makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on a donkey. The crowd exalts in his glory, proclaiming ‘Hosanna,’ which means “save now” (Zavada). The setting may seem like a minor detail at first glance, but in reality, the choice of location Munro made provides a great deal of significance to the story.

Throughout the Bible, God can be seen using dreams and visions to communicate with people on Earth. In these almost supernatural dreams,
God reveals His plan, how to further His plan, and other information that is unavailable elsewhere. In “Boys and Girls,” the narrator tells herself stories before going to bed each night. Although these stories are not dreams while she is asleep, they symbolize fantasies of worlds in which the narrator wishes she lived. In her initial dream sequences, the narrator explains the stories took place in a world that was recognizably her own, just as Jesus was placed on Earth in the image and likeness of man. In his hour of death, Jesus was named ‘King of the Jews,’ provoking the idea that he owned a part of the world in which he lived. The narrator admits that her stories are filled with “opportunities for courage, boldness, and self-sacrifice” (Munro 113), which parallels to the challenging life Jesus willingly endured. Just as Jesus was sent to Earth to sacrifice his life to save the sinners from their sins, the narrator dreamed of saving others from horrific situations too. The interesting parallels between the almighty biblical figure and this ordinary girl creates proof that Munro desired to include thought-provoking ideas for her readers to formulate.

When exploring Christianity in literature, one can rarely conclude without discovering a revelation about some two opposite elements in the story that allude to Heaven and Hell. Within the title alone, readers can note many instances of contrasting details in “Boys and Girls.” Munro allows for a fairly obvious contrast between the roles that the males and females play in the story to expose the pressures of society’s expectations. Just as children normally are, the two youths begin the story frightened by the dark. However, these children do not display the typical fear of the unknown. They find comfort in Henry Bailey’s distinctive sinister laugh. The whistling and gurgling of his heckling reminds them of the “warm, safe, brightly lit downstairs world” (Munro 112) that could be compared to Heaven. Although the narrator classifies this world as the floor below them and Christians associate God’s paradise with being superior to the human world, the description of the safe place evokes pleasant feelings of comfort. The narrator is happiest in the company of others, in presence of the bright lights. The literary diction Munro uses to describe the heavenly atmosphere causes readers to sympathize and relate to the narrator’s desire for security in times of fear and the unknown.

On the other hand, the upstairs, where the two sleep, is depicted as a dark place with a “stale” and “cold” atmosphere (Munro 112). Because Hell is often identified with images of bright, hot, fiery flames and constant torment, the narrator supports the suggestion of the upstairs being more Purgatory-like than Hell-like. By describing the area dedicated to the miscellaneous objects the family does not have any use for, the narrator reveals the nothingness she feels from being upstairs. The undesirable items are used to symbolize the people doomed to eternal damnation. Munro makes special mention of one of the rejected household items being a picture of the Battle of Balaclava.
This particular battle was fought during the Crimean War, a war that was a result of religious differences between Russia and France over the privileges of the Russian Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches in Palestine. The narrator also makes note that the upstairs is not finished yet. This incompletion further alludes to the popular Christian belief that those who die without having fulfilled the temporary punishment due to their sins must spend time in the intermediate place between Heaven and Hell. The narrator goes on to describe a theory she has that escaped convicts hide among the unused objects. To pass from downstairs to upstairs, one must descend down the stairs and vice versa. Munro focuses on these symbolic levels of descending and ascending to determine the satisfaction and comfort the narrator feels.

“Boys and Girls” as a whole, as well as the details, can be seen as a symbolic reiteration of many classic biblical stories and Christian ideals. Munro offers many instances of character examinations to offer a deep moral meaning in terms of the practice of Christianity. Munro has deliberately managed to incorporate some of the most pivotal biblical events and critical truths of the Christian faith in a mere seventeen pages of story about an ordinary farm family. This keen sense and ability to embed insidious literary allusions into her literary, further proves that the talented Alice Munro develops her stories with complexity in mind.
Works Cited

