

VOICE, SECRETS AND BROKENNESS

The two thematic levels of Voice and Power and Position and Power in both “Open Secrets” and “My Heart Is Broken” have different emotional impact. On the level of narrative voice and power, the reader is left suspended by characters who tell a story but have no real power or are morally bankrupt, offering no resolution. On the level of social mobility and power, there is a deeper call to examine the inequity of the disabled and of the sexes.

Although in “Open Secrets” and “My Heart Is Broken” Alice Munro and Mavis Gallant confer some degree of influence and power on characters to whom they give a voice (and confer disempowerment on many of the characters who they render silent or incoherent), this is superseded in both stories by the power of characters with social position. In “Open Secrets” Lawyer Stevens is the most powerful character even though his voice is compromised by a stroke, and in “My Heart Is Broken” Jean Harlowe is one of the most powerful elements even though she is no longer alive and remains only a cultural icon of idealized, sexualized womanhood. In both stories, Lawyer Steven and Jean Harlowe have the power of social influence and freedom, even though in both narratives they are not given the opportunity to tell their stories.

On an outer level, characters in “My Heart Is Broken” and “Open Secrets” who have a voice exercise a degree of power and influence simply by virtue of telling their story in the narrative.

The Voices

In “My Heart Is Broken” Mrs. Thompson appears to influence Jeannie by talking at great length about how Jeannie was inviting trouble and how other people in the camp spoke incriminatingly of her (Brown & Bennett 133). In “Open Secrets” Frances influences Maureen with her opinions on how much Heather Bell may have been responsible for her own disappearance because she may have made her own arrangements to meet a man (195). We know that Maureen in “Open Secrets” is comfortable with her status as Lawyer Stevens’ wife and being known as the “Jewel”, and that she considers herself intelligent and dependable because Lawyer Stevens had thought of her as such (201). We find out at the end of “Open Secrets” that even though Heather Bell was never found, Mary Johnstone was still justifying herself and her own lack of wrongdoing for many years to come, by writing letters to the local newspaper where she expressed

her opinion (217). The most prominent voice in “Open Secrets” is given to Marian, who goes to great lengths to incriminate Mr. Siddicup in her version of the Heather Bell case that she tells to influential Lawyer Stevens; she shapes her story of Heather Bell’s disappearance to emphasize Mr. Siddicup’s confusion and impenetrable disability (209).

The Silenced

Jeannie in “My Heart Is Broken” is the quintessentially silent and disempowered character. She remains factually insistent about being raped but says little about what actually happened; she is despondent and upset at the prospect of being disliked by her rapist (136). Mr. Siddicup in “Open Secrets” never has a chance to justify himself or explain what he saw regarding Heather Bell, because his voice is incoherent and we never hear his point of view in the narrative (209). Contrary to Mr. Siddicup’s lack of power is Lawyer Steven’s very pronounced power in “Open Secrets”, even though like Mr. Siddicup, his voice is incoherent because he has suffered a stroke (200).

Talkative characters who tell their stories in both “Open Secrets” and “My Heart Is Broken” can only get so far before they betray their own weaknesses. Mrs. Thompson is misinformed about sexuality and is portrayed as a ridiculous character in part because of her suggestion that Jeannie disinfect herself with Javex after her rape (134). Marian is also depicted with a sense of repulsiveness through her own description of the doctor striking the boil on her neck (210). Power is not conferred on characters with voices, necessarily, as much as on those who protect the guilty from ever becoming exposed – or who reinforce the status quo of the existing social norms. In “Open Secrets” Marian uses the power of her voice to change the facts in collusion with her husband Theo, who appears by the end of the story to likely be guilty of rape and murder (217). In the same story, Maureen enables her husband, Lawyer Stevens, to perform what is effectively an ongoing, degrading rape of her. Maureen chooses to not tell her story, thus protecting both her husband’s position and, vicariously, her own (214). In “Open Secrets” as well, Frances reinforces the accepted misogyny of the times by blaming young Heather for her own misfortunes. (195). The greater part of Mrs. Thompson’s dialog in “My Heart Is Broken” expresses her criticism and blame of Jeannie for being raped, wherein she insists she told Jeannie to stay away from the men (133). By not wanting to know who raped Jeannie, Mrs. Thompson is in collusion with the accepted social standards of the decades between 1940-1970 that either blamed the victim or swept the truth under the

carpet and kept it hidden. (135). Mrs. Thompson has a prominent voice throughout the story but does not want to know the truth.

By presenting self-reflexive examinations of the power of voice in a narrative's characters, both writers draw attention to an underlying theme that women have little social mobility to achieve higher positions in the social strata they write about. Both are saying, thematically, that society is not enabling women like Maureen, Marian, or Mrs. Thompson to ever become powerful, which is why they resort to collusion, distortion of reality and truth, vicariousness, and misinformation. By giving voices to women who have less power than a movie starlet (Jean Harlowe in "My Heart Is Broken") or a morally deficient, stroke-inflicted man (Lawyer Stevens in "Open Secrets"), the self-reflexive narrative is also providing the theme in both cases - which is both subtle and ironic. The primary female characters Marian, Maureen and Mrs. Thompson have voices but their stories are nevertheless of their own secrets and brokenness .

Munro and Gallant make different choices regarding whether or not they give both voice and power to a man, to a woman, to a healthy and able individual, to a person of social stature, or to a person who is already dead. However, regardless of whether the characters have a voice or not, both writers demonstrate that voice does not always confer power on a character and the real power lay in social position. If one were to draw a matrix whereby social position was given a 4, narrative voice was given a 3, being a man was given a 2, and being a woman was given a 1 - and plugged each of the primary characters in "Open Secrets" and "My Heart Is Broken" into it, totaling their attributes of position, voice and sex - only characters high up in the social strata resonate as being powerful enough to do whatever they want and make all of their own choices about how they live.

Lawyer Stevens and Jean Harlowe are the most powerful characters and are held in very high esteem by others. Everyone in Carstairs believes that Lawyers Stevens is a man in a million who could have been a judge, a senator, or whatever he wants to be (201), which is very ironic given the fact that after suffering his stroke what he chooses to be is in fact a rapacious torturer of his own wife. Jean Harlowe is Mrs. Thompson's idol and her death was so upsetting to Mrs. Thompson in her youth that she never got over it (130). Jean Harlowe portrayed as an idol of Mrs. Thompson's is also rather ironic, given the fact that Jean Harlowe was a sex kitten fabricated for the needs of men. Theo does have the

social position of being a man with a job, but is portrayed as overly thankful, quiet, and giggling (205). Theo ranks with a 4 for social position because he is employed, and is providing Marian with status through marriage to him.

The characters with voices in the two stories are Maureen, Marian, and Mrs. Thompson, and they all have a mid-range power quotient. While they are conferred with some ability to influence others and express their own level of comfort in their positions, they are neither high-up in the social strata, have employment like men do, or enjoy the freedom to do what they want. Maureen senses that Marian has covered up her husband Theo's guilt, but chooses not to say anything about it to anyone because it may compromise her own position which necessitates her hiding her husband Lawyer Stevens' guilt (216). Marian also protects her marriage, which gives her the only position that she has. When Theo attempts to caress her hand, she clamps down on it, suggesting that Theo and their marriage have been tough to protect (212). Mrs. Thompson indicates to Jeannie that Jeannie is somehow to blame and her rape has ruined the peace of the work camp where women are lucky to have men looking after them (134).

The characters with the least power in "Open Secrets" and "My Heart Is Broken" are Mr. Siddicup and Jeannie, neither of whom are given any voice. Mr. Siddicup is described by Maureen as a degenerated character who was not welcome anywhere (207). Jeannie is quiet and unassuming, and so badgered by Mrs. Thompson's opinions that she does not even remember the rape that just happened to her (135).

Structural Differences: Munro and Gallant

Structure is used differently in these two meta-fictional stories wherein the subject of the narrative is the issue of writing and drawing voice and character. In "Open Secrets" Alice Munro creates a symphonic structure with a myriad of male and female characters who have varying degrees of audible voice and social position (Maureen, Marian, Frances, Lawyer Stevens, Theo, and Mr. Siddicup), whereas in "My Heart Is Broken" Mavis Gallant draws a counterpoint of two central characters (Mrs. Thompson and Jeannie) against two mythic characters (Jean Harlowe and Lana Turner) with varying degrees of audible voice. Although these structures are different, both writers examine the power of voice in a narrative while playing with the notion that those who speak have influence, power, free choice, and hold sway over a society's beliefs.

Voices and Groundedness in Unreality

The invented realities of Marian, Maureen, Mrs. Thompson and Jeannie seem to further suggest their lack of power in real life, and their need to escape. Most prominently ungrounded in reality is Mrs. Thompson, who is a middle-aged woman who walks dolls in a baby carriage (136) and believed so strongly in Jean Harlowe that Harlowe's death marked her for life (130). Similarly, Jeannie looked to the power of another movie star, Lana Turner, to learn the facts of life (135). Maureen has very vivid daydreams that seem so real that they challenge the realness of her real life (216), and Marian alters her appearance with a feathered hat, suit and heavy make-up to give Lawyer Stevens her contrived story of what happened regarding Mr. Siddicup and the disappearance of Heather Bell (205).

Voice and the Undercurrent of Loss

While on an outer level these two stories are about a disappearance and a rape, both of young women, both stories also suggest a deeper loss of self on the part of the middle-aged women whose voices we hear. The real powerlessness of these central characters causes them to cover up truths, act in collusion with harmful elements, and make up stories that alter the truth to reassure themselves that nothing is amiss. Although having power of influence through the sheer possession of a voice when others are silenced, these characters are actually anti-heroes who express loss. The deeper level of both "Open Secrets" and "My Heart Is Broken" is really the secrets and brokenness of powerless victims who influence events through their telling of their stories (which their real power would make unnecessary).

Voice and Undesireability Expressed

Munro and Gallant effectively draw subtexts of powerlessness in descriptions of their characters who have voices in their narratives. These descriptions are primarily of their physicality and their attitudes towards men.

Frances is described as "a dumpling sort of woman with gray hair like brambles all over her head, and a plain, impudent face". (197) Miss Johnstone is described as "She was left with short legs, a short, thick body, crooked shoulders, and a slightly twisted neck, which kept her big head a little tilted to one side" p. 197 Open Secrets. Maureen is described as "...getting broad in the beam and her hair did not suit her piled and sprayed like an upside-down mixing bowl". (197) Marian is described as "... a husky woman of about Maureen's age... Marian's body was clumsy but quick, and her

graying hair was cut short, so that bristles showed on her neck. She had a loud voice, most of the time a rather rambunctious manner.” (204) Mrs. Thompson is described as “... a nice, plain, fat, consoling sort of person, with varicosed legs, shoes unlaced and slit for comfort, blue flannel dressing gown worn at all hours, pudding-bowl haircut, and coarse gray hair.” (131)

Voice and Self-Blame Expressed

Descriptions of the central characters’ relations with men and their opinions of female sexuality in both “Open Secrets” and “My Heart Is Broken” demonstrate a blaming of women (Frances), a girl-like attitude (Mary Johnstone), a hiding of having been raped (Maureen), a controlling attitude (Marian), and an incrimination of women (Mrs. Thompson).

Frances describes that it was Heather Bell’s own fault that she disappeared. “They will try to make out she was some poor innocent, but the facts are dead different,” Frances said (195). Mary Johnstone describes her girl-like attitude towards men as a foreign species with strange needs. “What Mary Johnstone told the girls in her talk as always more or less the same thing ... what Miss Johnstone called ‘plain talk about boys and urges’” (215). Maureen rushes around after an abusive encounter with her husband to clean up all evidence of it and hide her feelings. “Maureen escaped to the bathroom. she had to keep her mouth closed not on any howls of protest but on a long sickening whimper of complaint that would have made her sound like a beaten dog.” (214). Marian manipulates and controls her husband. “But Marian stopped him. She said something to him, she clamped a hand down on his. The way a mother might interrupt the carrying-on of a simple-minded child...” (212). Mrs. Thompson blames Jeannie for being raped. “... Here you’ve got a good, sensible husband working for you and you don’t appreciate it. You have to go and do a terrible thing.” (134).

Works Cited

Brown, Russell and Bennett, Donna, editors *Canadian Short Stories*, 2005.