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On the Paradoxes in "The Peace of Utrecht"

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Abstract: Paradox belongs to philosophical reflections and the language of literature. Nobel Prize winner Alice Munro's early work, "The Peace of Utrecht," presents a world full of paradoxes: Helen's ardent desire for freedom becomes chains of misery for her; Maddy's overwhelming emotional yearning makes her suffer from the trial of reason; their mother's strong will to survive and her actions in the face of the grave illness turn into a driving force accelerating her own death. The paradoxes of the work contain profound philosophical connotations such as the affirmation of the reason, survive, the reflections on the relationship between individual will and morality, and the criticism of absolute rationality, unfold in a dynamic manner and possess unique literary and artistic value.

Keywords: Alice Munro; "The Peace of Utrecht"; Paradox

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1. Introduction

Alice Munro, the first Canadian winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, writes short stories marked by profound insight. Britain's *Sunday Times* comments on her works: "Brilliant at evoking life's diversity and unpredictability… an unrivaled chronicler of human nature under a vast span of aspects, moods and pressures" [1]. Praise for the depth of her writing abounds. To some extent, the intellectual depth of her writings stems from her way of observing reality through multiple perspectives. One distinctive textual manifestation lies in paradoxes, either overt or subtle. *Dance of the Happy Shades*, Munro's debut short-story collection that cemented her literary reputation, already reveals the charm of embedding insights within paradoxes. Among its stories, "The Peace of Utrecht" approaches themes from the angles of freedom, emotion, and survival. Through paradox-ridden narration covering freedom versus bondage, emotion versus reason, and survival versus death, it lays bare humanity's existential predicament of struggling amid contradictions and conveys the author's philosophical meditations.

2. The paradox-ridden world in “The Peace of Utrecht”

A paradox is defined as “a statement which seems on its face to be logically contradictory or absurd, yet turns out to be interpretable in a way that makes sense” (Page 239) [2]. Drawing upon Aristotle’s definition, Marcel Danesi interprets paradox as a statement “that runs counter to expectations” [3]. R. M. Sainsbury holds that a paradox is an unacceptable conclusion derived from acceptable premises and valid reasoning patterns [4]. Though philosophers do not hold perfectly identical views, most recognize paradox features such as contradictoriness and deviation from conventional understanding. Alice Munro prominently explores paradox in her short story “The Peace of Utrecht.” The narrative recounts Helen, a younger sister who has been away from home for years, visiting her elder sister Maddy after their mother’s death. Maddy has long borne the burden of caring for their ailing mother. The plot is simple, yet multi-dimensional paradox-driven narration uncovers subtle facets of human nature beneath ordinary-looking events and strikes a resonant chord with readers.

The story’s very title conceals intricate paradoxical implications. As implied in the text, it comes from “the Peace of Utrecht, 1713,” which “brought an end to the War of the Spanish Succession” [1]. European history records that upon the Spanish king’s death without direct heirs in 1700, the Spanish throne fell vacant. Both the Bourbon royal house of France and the Habsburg royal house of Austria had blood ties to the Spanish monarchy. Louis XIV of France sought to place his grandson, Philip V, Duke of Anjou, on the Spanish throne to expand French territory. To prevent French hegemony over Europe, Britain, the Netherlands, and other states formed an alliance to back the Archduke of Austria’s claim to the Spanish crown. This ignited a large-scale European war in which most continental powers became embroiled [5]. In the later phase of the war, starting around 1710, France and Britain began secret negotiations pursuing joint interests. Ultimately, France and the allied powers signed the Peace of Utrecht, settling the War of the Spanish Succession. The treaty recognized the Duke of Anjou as heir to the Spanish throne, on condition that he renounce the French crown and that France and Spain never be united. Spain’s European territories outside the Iberian Peninsula were partitioned. France was weakened by the succession war, while Britain acquired numerous territories and privileges from France and Spain [6]. The Peace of Utrecht meant that France, which had hoped to consolidate its dominance via the Spanish throne, lost its chance for European hegemony after the war. Spain, striving to retain its status as a major traditional European power, fell prey to partition by competing great powers. Meanwhile, Britain emerged as the dominant victor and secured its position as the master of the seas. From the background and consequences of the Peace of Utrecht, one can readily perceive paradoxical undertones: opposites such as strength and weakness, foe and friend, alliance and betrayal, unity and division contending with one another and mutually convertible. These paradoxical overtones embedded in the title foreshadow the narrative tension of paradoxes within the short story.

The paradoxical human condition oscillating between freedom and bondage runs through the whole story: Helen’s fervent longing for freedom forges lifelong, inescapable fetters for herself.

Helen may not have consciously set absolute freedom as her life goal in childhood. Still, possessed of a conceited self-image, she made a promise to herself that she would leave her small hometown and see “much bigger things than Jubilee” (Page 192) [1]. This self-vow harbored her burning yearning for freedom. To act without restraint, she was prepared to pay any price — even at the expense of her own mother.

Helen ranked freedom as her supreme life pursuit. Her mother, incapacitated by illness, robbed of speech and physical mobility, stood as the greatest obstacle on her path to freedom. Moving far away and shirking household duties as well as care-giving for her sick mother became her strategy for attaining freedom.

When the two sisters were in secondary school, their mother developed Parkinson's disease. She became a "Gothic-looking" invalid, physically impaired and with a dreadful appearance, constantly requiring her daughters' attention (Page 190–210) [1]. Worries and complaints stemming from her illness made home feel oppressive to her daughters. When Helen left for university, she refused to come home even during vacations. To her mind, returning home meant nothing but endless misery inflicted by her mother and a suffocating sense of repression. Her urge to escape her mother in pursuit of freedom grew so powerful that she paid no heed to her sister's feelings or the potential harm inflicted upon their mother. Right after graduating from university, she married, moved far away, and gave birth to two children. In this way, she completely severed ties with home and shook off the burden of her ill mother, leaving Maddy alone to look after their disabled mother. She deluded herself: "she may have been able and may even have chosen to live without time and in perfect imaginary freedom as children do, the future untampered with, all choices always possible" (Page 196) [1]. She only returned home upon her mother's death.

Yet freedom is never absolute; it is inextricably bound up with responsibility. Her quest for absolute freedom devoid of responsibility was doomed to failure. In truth, chasing absolute freedom drove her toward its very opposite. Her resolute pursuit of liberation brought her no joy of emancipation. Instead, throughout her so-called free life, she suffered constant torment from guilt, trapped in mental self-reproach for the rest of her life. This is clearly reflected in changes to her character and demeanor. Before leaving home, Helen would grow irritated while caring for her mother, yet such irritation remained superficial and short-lived. When her mother was lucid, mother and daughter would converse peacefully (Page 200) [1]. Back then Helen possessed inner peace and composure, and was a beautiful young woman. But after her mother's death, when Helen returned to the family home, scenes from the days of her mother's sickness repeatedly surfaced vividly in her mind. Subconsciously, she half-expected her mother to call out to her, as if reliving the old days when she looked after her mother. She genuinely felt the weight of what she owed her mother (Page 198), and turned hypersensitive and suspicious [1]. When neighbors mentioned her mother and the funeral in her presence, Helen interpreted their remarks as veiled, intentional personal attacks condemning her abandonment of her mother. When Aunt Anne accused Maddy of forcing their mother into hospital, which left her confined to the hospital bed and hastened her death, Helen read the words as moral condemnation directed also at herself. She could never shake off her sense of culpability. She felt her "whole identity, that pretentious adolescent construction, come crumbling down" (Page 194) [1]. Tormented inwardly, the once self-admiring beauty turned into a thin woman living in constant vigilance (Page 197–198) [1]. Her burning craving for freedom landed her in far more stifling bondage.

Helen's paradox of freedom and bondage proved inescapable. Deeply influenced by modern Western conceptions of freedom, she failed to recognize freedom's limitations and embraced ego-centered freedom as her creed. Rooted in traditional Western philosophy, modern notions of freedom feature the subject's capacities of "I-can" and "for-me," taking the self as both point of departure and ultimate aim. This is subject-centered autonomous freedom: freedom is an in-born ontological category, while responsibility is an obligation derived rationally from freedom, with freedom preceding responsibility. Under such a framework, moral responsibility risks becoming a mere form of "ought-to" [7]. Having grown up in a society where this modern Western view of freedom was deeply entrenched, the two sisters could not foresee the problems that their pursuit of freedom through evading responsibility might bring about. This mindset determined their choice to chase absolute freedom, a pursuit destined to result in unfreedom. Emmanuel Levinas' ethics offers

a sound interpretation for this paradox. Unlike traditional philosophical conceptions of freedom originating from and centered upon the subject, Levinas grounds freedom upon the absolute Other. Freedom is finite and manifests itself through responsibility for others, with responsibility preceding freedom [7]. According to Levinas, freedom represents transcendence over natural instincts. True freedom can only be attained when one internalizes responsibility toward the Other as one's own need. Helen in the story pursued freedom above and beyond, shouldering responsibility, regarding responsibility as shackles to cast off. Such pursuit of freedom was illusory. It brought endless remorse toward the Other for whom responsibility was evaded and subjected her to heavier fetters.

The opposition between emotion and reason constitutes a classic motif in Western literature. "The Peace of Utrecht" also depicts Maddy's paradoxical existence torn between reason and emotion. Sigmund Freud's analysis of psychological personality structures sheds light on its underlying psychological mechanisms. In discussing personality structures, Freud writes: "The ego represents what we call reason and good sense, in contrast to the id, which contains the passions" [8]. "In its relation to the id the ego is like a man riding a horse; it needs greater strength to hold the reins of the horse. The rider seeks to do so with his own muscular power, while the ego makes use of borrowed forces… If the rider does not want to be parted from his horse, he is often forced to lead it where it wants to go; similarly the ego frequently carries out the wishes of the id as though they were its own" [8]. This suggests that, though repressed and latent, the irrational subconscious drives of the id may grow sufficiently powerful to gain mastery over the ego. Consequently, human beings may yield to surging emotional temptations and make irrational choices. After caring for her mother for some time, Maddy in the story succumbed to the lure of romantic love and abandoned her rational duty to care for her mother. Though from Helen's perspective Maddy was the sister who stayed behind to look after their mother, Maddy nevertheless failed to fulfill her filial obligations. While providing care, she irrationally fell into an immoral love affair with Fred Powell, a married man (Page 194) [1]. Obsession with romance made her forsake her rational duty of care, and she left her mother entirely in the hands of hospital staff until her mother's death. Forces of the id broke through the repression by the ego and superego, and she could no longer persist in rationally sacrificing her own romantic desires for the sake of caring for her mother.

Freud also points out that although the ego may grant partial, indirect satisfaction to the id, it expends most of its energy restraining irrational impulses originating from the id [8]. Meanwhile, the superego, the higher moral psychological agency within personality, regulates the ego through conscience and other ethical principles. Martin Heidegger holds that "Dasein is guilty by the very ground of its Being" [9]. Conscience lies within Dasein's mode-of-being. The call of conscience summons "Dasein lost in the 'they-self'" toward its own authentic potentiality-for-being… calling it to its authentic being-guilty. Accordingly, when people give in to worldly desires such as emotional cravings and disregard rational demands, their inner conscience will stir, making them aware of their failings so they may return to the right path. Hence, gratification of the id is only temporary. It triggers powerful push-back from ego-restraint and superego ideals, plunging the individual into rational torment. Maddy could never shake off her sense of guilt toward her mother for the rest of her life. After her mother's death, she no longer dared to pursue open, legitimate romantic love, and wallowed in unrealistic relationships, enduring the torment of rational judgment. When Helen urged her to forget their deceased mother and restart her own life, the once-arrogant Maddy responded with certainty: "Yes I will, …Yes I will," yet she smiled in despair and asked: "But why can't I do it, Helen? Why can't I do it?" (Page 210) [1]. Her chase after passion brought her no emotional fulfillment. Instead, it left her with a sense of

emotional indebtedness and subjected her to the interrogation and punishment of reason.

"The Peace of Utrecht" further presents the paradox where the sick mother's will to live accelerated her march toward death. Stricken with Parkinson's disease, the mother was consumed not by fear of the illness itself, but fear of death. Though Parkinson's disease is not directly fatal, its symptoms induce near-death sensations that filled the mother with terror of dying. "Fear of death is not some casual, accidental 'weakness' of isolated individuals, but a fundamental state-of-mind of Dasein" [9]. In other words, fear of death is no individual aberration, no fleeting mood, nor mark of weakness. It is universal to humanity. As her illness progressed, the mother sensed death drawing near and experienced dread of death, dread of absolute Otherness, fearing an unimaginable hell-like afterlife. Therefore, the prospect of death brought her suffering and frailty. As her disease worsened, her fear of death intensified, and she craved sympathy and comfort from her daughters. She would repeatedly cry out for help, wearing her daughters down with tears. To win greater consolation, she kept recounting her tragic fate to others (Page 198-201) [1]. Yet her daughters found it hard to grasp her near-death anguish. Their own demands for freedom and emotion blinded them to her suffering. Gradually overwhelmed by her constant pleas, they grew cold-hearted and confined her to home as much as possible (Page 199) [1]. Her daughters' indifference deepened her isolation and despair in the face of this unknown threat of death, and further ignited her tenacious will to resist dying. Though death looms as a threat, it remains temporally distant. Out of fear of death, human beings will grasp at every possible chance to evade it, even if such attempts are blind and may only hasten demise. The mother then began her struggle against death. "She kept herself as much in the world as she could, not troubling about her welcome." She refused to resign herself to fate or submit to her illness. Terrified of being stripped of everything and deprived of life, "she was not resigned; she must have wept and struggled in that house of stone until the very end" (Page 199) [1]. However her struggles only earned greater repugnance from her daughters, and she was eventually sent to hospital. There she felt death drawing closer. "After she went in there, she felt she would die; everything kind of closed in around her, and she went down so fast." Unwilling to submit, she begged visiting Aunt to pressure Maddy into taking her away from the hospital. Once certain Maddy would not come for her, she resisted even more fiercely and attempted an escape: "She got out. She got out the side door where the ambulance comes in, it's the only door that isn't locked…. She got her dressing gown and her slippers on, the first time she ever got anything on herself in years, and she went out and there it was January, snowing, but she didn't go back in." So overpowering was her will to live that she lost the capacity for rational reflection. She gave no thought to whether the hospital would simply let a Parkinson's-disease patient undergoing treatment leave without reason; nor did she consider whether she could survive out in the bitter cold with no family to care for her. She was soon caught and brought back to hospital. "After that they put the board across her bed" (Page 207–208) [1]. Trapped in bed, to her mind she was left merely waiting to die. She passed away soon afterward from despair. To a certain degree, it was the mother's dread of death and fierce will-to-live that drove her desperate fight for time and brought the Grim Reaper forward.

The above-mentioned paradoxes constitute the main thread driving plot development. Interwoven alongside other paradoxes such as closeness versus alienation, they jointly construct this multi-dimensionally paradox-infused fictional world.

3. The unique significance of the paradoxes in "The Peace of Utrecht"

Paradoxes originated and developed in Ancient Greece and drew the attention of philosophers. According

to Roy Sorensen's research, the ancient Greek philosopher Anaximander (610–545 BC) contemplated the first paradox ever recorded in written history [4]. Aristotle once documented Zeno of Elea, the Ancient-Greek philosopher, who put forward Zeno's paradoxes concerning the distinguishable qualities and movable objects in the fifth century B.C. To this day, paradox remains an important topic in philosophical circles. Paradoxes also frequently appear in literary and artistic creation. Cleanth Brooks held that "the language of poetry is the language of paradox," and that even for a poet such as William Wordsworth, who insisted on plain diction, "the underlying paradox is absolutely indispensable" [10]. Literary theorists including Cleanth Brooks, Charles D. Preberg, and so on also noticed paradoxes in dramas and novels. Alan Paskow conducted comprehensive and in-depth research on artistic paradoxes in his book *The Paradoxes of Art: A Phenomenological Investigation* [11]. Even so, paradox remains a perplexing yet fascinating subject in philosophy and literature, serving as a speculative tool for humans to explore the unknown. The paradoxes in "The Peace of Utrecht" possess irreplaceable value.

From the philosophical perspective, "The Peace of Utrecht" employs paradoxes as a vehicle to express the author's philosophical viewpoints. Through paradoxes, the work articulates Alice Munro's philosophy of life and demonstrates its appeal. The modern philosophy of life emerged in the nineteenth century. It is a philosophical trend that focuses on human life-values and meanings, and seeks to break the grip of rational absolutism by affirming the value of human life. Arthur Schopenhauer's will to live and Friedrich Nietzsche's will to power constitute the ideological foundations of modern philosophy of life [12]. Drawing on her own understanding of life, Alice Munro's works echo the viewpoints of philosophers of life in her own manner. First of all, the paradoxes in "The Peace of Utrecht" affirm the human will to live. The sick mother's tenacious will to live is manifested through paradox-ridden plot developments. Especially after she is admitted to hospital, her will to live grows stronger, yet death soon follows. From begging Maddy to take her home, to pleading with Aunt Anne for help; from discovering the one unlocked side-door through which she might escape, to acting when medical staff is preoccupied; to dressing herself in clothes and slippers for the first time in years and fleeing into the snow far away from home — every detail lays bare her uncontrollable desire for survival amid desperate circumstances. Although all her instinct-driven efforts to evade death only hastened her demise, her persistence in breaking free from the grip of death bears witness to her existence as a living being. Only by means of paradox, within sharp contradictions and conflicts, can the primordial life-force of the novel's characters be fully revealed. It also manifests the author's awe-struck affirmation of life-force, and thereby conveys her life-philosophy that reveres life.

The paradoxes in "The Peace of Utrecht" also illustrate Alice Munro's views on existential ethics. Twentieth-century Western moral philosophy is most notable for its irrationalist tendency, chiefly manifested in regarding individual existence or self-intentions as forces that shape the external world, as the source of morality and the basis for moral choices [13]. Deeply influenced by irrationalist intellectual currents, Alice Munro advocates respect for individual will to live. Nevertheless, she does not unconditionally endorse the irrationalist moral tendency of satisfying self-intentions. Within paradoxes, she observes the contest and clash among individuals' self-intentions. Irrational indulgence of individual life-will can only lead to mutual harm for all parties involved. Though Alice Munro shows sympathy for the three mother-and-daughter figures, the paradoxes in "The Peace of Utrecht" undoubtedly reject taking self-intention as the sole basis for moral decision-making. One can glimpse Munro's ethical stance from the sisters' divergent psychological reactions to their mother's death at the end of the story: respect for individual life-claims cannot come at the

cost of ignoring the requirements of humanitarian moral norms. Only by reconciling the two sets of demands is it possible to extricate oneself from various ethical dilemmas. In her view, paradox serves as the optimal medium for embodying the contradictory yet interdependent relationship between individual will and moral norms, drawing people's attention to the real-life predicaments behind paradoxes.

Furthermore, through paradoxes, "The Peace of Utrecht" lays bare the limitations of formal logic and the dilemmas of rational thinking, mounting a critique of the traditional-philosophical notion of absolute reason. Using paradoxes, Alice Munro reveals the limits of reason dictated by human natural attributes and criticizes the concept of absolute reason. If the mother's loss of rationality under the torment of Parkinson's disease and inescapable fear of death represents a special case, the daughters' irrationality represents a non-negligible general condition. For there exists no absolute reason capable of completely suppressing the irrational id; reason transcending the cognitive limits of an era is inconceivable for ordinary human beings. It is not that the two sisters were unaware of their duties, nor that they made no effort to restrain their desires. Rather, as ordinary people, they could not transcend socially-accepted values including freedom. Their reason was momentarily powerless against their instinctual id-drives. Their choices violated filial morality and lapsed into irrationality, illustrating the bounds of reason and exposing the illusory nature of absolute reason. "The Peace of Utrecht" does not merely present paradoxes; it accentuates their contradictory effects. Through paradox-driven narration of how the three women succumb to irrational instincts over rationality, the text criticizes the Western-philosophical idea of absolute reason and demonstrates the author's affirmation of paradox.

From the perspective of literary art, unlike the "static" presentation of paradox emphasized by Cleanth Brooks and other scholars, paradoxes in "The Peace of Utrecht" unfold chiefly in a "dynamic" fashion. The "static" presentation of paradox, from traditional to modern, across poetry, novels and dramas, has been thoroughly studied in Cleanth Brooks' series of literary-theory works on paradox-related themes. In his analyses ranging from Shakespeare to T. S. Eliot's poetry, Brooks focuses on demonstrating the paradoxical structures of poetic language and "how these poets exploit the possibilities of word-meanings" [13]. He applies this same analytical approach to paradoxes in drama and fiction. By contrast, Alice Munro experiments with dynamically unfolding paradoxes within her works, displaying the appeal of paradox in a more comprehensive manner. One cannot perceive the embedded paradox merely from the characters' fine initial hopes for their futures and destinies as the story opens. As the narrative proceeds, readers vaguely sense that the actual paths the characters take run counter to the goals they strive for. It is only at the story's conclusion that the characters' fates are definitively reversed, landing them in outcomes diametrically opposed to those they have struggled to attain: the daughters' pursuit of freedom forges fetters for themselves; their chase after passion brings the judgment of reason; the mother's struggle for survival turns into a process of hastening death. Only at this point are the novel's paradoxes fully laid bare, revealing the special quality of dynamic paradox. This enables a fuller, deeper understanding of literary paradox.

Meanwhile, the paradoxes and their philosophical implications within "The Peace of Utrecht" are of positive significance for philosophical-paradox research within contemporary Anglo-American literary criticism. As Liao Changyin observes, "paradox bears great cognitive significance in helping people interpret literary phenomena and their laws" [3]. By deploying paradoxes to manifest ideological implications concerning philosophy of life, ethics, and views on rationality, "The Peace of Utrecht" furnishes another case study of how paradox can bring out the connotative values of literary texts, deepening understanding

of paradox's role in revealing literary meaning. At present, philosophical paradoxes uncovered in Anglo-American literary and cultural criticism mainly touch upon discipline, religion, race, gender, psychology, and other spheres. Paradoxes falling within philosophy-of-life and ethical domains remain relatively limited. "The Peace of Utrecht" highlights the non-negligible position of such paradoxes in modern-and-contemporary literary-paradox studies.

In her short story "The Peace of Utrecht," Alice Munro constructs a literary world where truth emerges amid contradictions by means of paradox. She expresses her longing to perceive the true essence of life behind opposing appearances, and demonstrates the distinct philosophical and literary value of her use of paradox.

4. Conclusion

Milan Kundera (2022) has stated on more than one occasion: "The novel is not the author's confession; it is an exploration of human life trapped in worldly snares" [14]. Alice Munro's paradox-infused short stories constitute profound and ingenious demonstrations of such exploration of human existence. "The Peace of Utrecht," an outstanding work, subverts traditional deterministic and absolute perceptions and conclusions through paradoxes. Via the dynamic presentation of paradoxes such as freedom versus bondage, reason versus emotion, and survival versus death, it vividly depicts the struggles and helplessness of ordinary people, fully affirms human life-force, reflects meditations on human beings caught in ethical-moral dilemmas, and delivers a critique of the notion of absolute reason. In-depth exploration of Alice Munro's paradoxical art helps us further grasp her mode of paradox-driven thinking characterized by the co-existence of opposites as well as her creative tone. It reveals the depth with which she portrays the essence of life and offers enlightenment for readers.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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