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Dr. Robert Sturr asked his students in Major Modern Writers, British and U.S. (English 22073) to write an essay studying a chosen character. Here, Carolyn Adelman has examined Alice Munro’s The Beggar Maid and the actions of Flo, one of the main characters. In doing so, she argues that the family interactions are created by Flo’s need to control her environment. Led by Flo, the family moves through trauma to peace to find that their “respite, however temporary” creates “some semblance of normalcy.”

Why Royal Beatings?

Two Vancouvers fried in snot!
Two pickled arseholes tied in a knot! (14)

Alice Munro, The Beggar Maid

In Alice Munro’s The Beggar Maid, this sing-song is used by Rose to taunt her stepmother in a scene which eventually leads to what Flo calls, “one Royal Beating” (3). Almost every child has learned something similar at school and could not wait to repeat to siblings and parents the naughty ditty, knowing full well there would be censure, or worse, when it was done. But in Rose’s home, the consequences of such actions take on ominous overtones when they trigger emotional responses in Flo that are completely unrelated to the childish behavior.

“Royal Beatings” is the first of the compilation of stories that comprise the novel, and it provides the reader with insight into a dysfunctional family and Rose’s background. Munro, in her inimitable manner, describes the various roles played by the family in the beating of Rose. Ostensibly the beating is punishment for Rosé’s humiliation of Flo. Upon closer scrutiny, however, we find that the beating is less a punishment for misdeeds than it is a form of release, an almost therapeutic cleansing, an agent for ridding Flo of her frustrations over her unhappy life. Although Flo perpetuates it, each family member has his or her particular role to fulfill, and each plays his or her part to bring
the incident to its awful conclusion; yet it is Flo who determines the timing and actually orchestrates the entire episode. With these facts in mind, "Royal Beatings" is a drama, directed by Flo and masterfully performed by this family.

We know that Flo, the stepmother, and Rose have been antagonists for a lifetime, for Munro relates that "there was a long truce between Flo and Rose in the beginning" (7). But Rose is the bane of Flo's existence. Rose is definitely her father's daughter; in the habit of slipping into a world of her own, dreaming and compartmentalizing her life, disconnecting from reality when it suits her. Munro creates a humorous example when she describes the many noises emanating from the bathroom in the corner of the kitchen. Embarrassment is the most likely response to that predicament, yet it bothers Rose not at all; she simply decides, "the person creating the noises...was not connected to the person who walked out" (6). This tendency to ignore reality sparks an ongoing conflict with Flo, who is an opinionated, hard-working, no-nonsense woman with a distinctly crotchety demeanor. Since she is a realistic, practical person, her views on life are completely opposed to Rose's fantasy life. Yet she is subjected daily to the flights of fancy of a child who "had a need to picture things, to pursue absurdities, that was much stronger than the need to stay out of trouble" (3).

The frustration Flo feels over her lot in life is also a source of friction between her and the family. Although she seldom complains about her circumstances, we know that she has a husband who has more or less abdicated his family responsibilities. He sits working in his shed, talking under his breath, and daydreaming. He is more concerned with pride in his accomplishments than he is about supporting his family. Charging ridiculously low prices for his furniture repairs, "he never discussed with Flo what he charged or what was owing" (4). It is apparent that the family is poor; they live in an impoverished neighborhood, and Flo is forced to open a store in the front of the house to make ends meet. In addition to being industrious, Flo is clever in making do for her family, for Munro describes the free linoleum scraps she "ingeniously trimmed and fitted together" to cover the kitchen floor (16).

Most days Flo seems to take all in stride, exhibiting her knack for storytelling and occasionally even singing. But what is she really feeling? Perhaps she misses her carefree days of single life, living in the city, fun with friends and experiencing life on the edge. Where did it all go? Was it for love that she gave up her former life to come to
Hanratty, to live on the wrong side of the tracks? Was it for love that she chose to raise a child not her own for a man who lives in a dream world? Was it for love that she chose a life of unacknowledged struggle to keep his family going? Flo now seems to scoff at love, and Munro reveals, “It was love she sickened at. It was the enslavement, the self-abasement, the self-deception” (38). Flo obviously harbors these emotions and brings these feelings of frustration and entrapment with her on the day of the beating.

On that particular day, something has happened that prevents Flo from taking her usual trip to town for shopping and socializing, something she enjoys. Instead she is in the kitchen scrubbing the floor, in a bad mood, and quite ready to continue a long-running quarrel with Rose. According to Munro, “The wrangle with Rose has already commenced, has been going on forever…” (13). Flo initiates today’s battle, and Rose responds in kind. Flo accuses Rose of teaching Brian filth, and Rose repeats the Vancouver ditty; Flo gets angry, she yells, Rose hums it again. Onward and upward it escalates, each player using a line guaranteed to produce the desired response in the other. It is the prelude to all-out confrontation that the two are rushing headlong into. This is not an isolated incident; this same drama has played out many times before. As Flo shouts another warning, Brian runs out of the house; he has seen it all before. But no one notices:

They don’t need him anyway, except to use against each other….They can’t help continuing, can’t leave each other alone. When they seem to have given up they are really just waiting and building up steam. (15)

As mentioned, Brian, the recipient of Rose’s melodic knowledge of Vancouver, has witnessed all he cares to see; therefore, he completes his role by abruptly leaving the scene. Alone at last, Flo and Rose face each other for the inevitable clash that will pit stepmother against stepdaughter.

In the silence that ensues, Rose awaits her cue. That it will come soon there is no doubt; the timing, however, will be decided by Flo. The seconds drag on — and then — finally, out it comes! Flo “becomes amazingly theatrical…saying it was for Rose that she sacrificed her life. She saw her father saddled with a baby…and here she is, on her knees” (15). Rose taunts Flo by smiling sweetly, and responding with “poisonous reasonableness and…displays theatrical unconcern” (15). Rose, knowing full well that the royal beating is coming, continues the display, and plays the role as expected of her. It is interesting that
Munro treats the two combatants equally, as though they are two adults rather than acknowledging Rose’s youth (Rose is somewhere around ten years old). She thus gives evidence of the strength of Rose’s character and also of the depth of emotions raging between the two. Munro has now set the stage for the horrifying second act of her drama; it is time for Flo to enlist the aid of the unseen family member.

Flo, sensing that she has carried out the tirade as far as she can with the recalcitrant Rose, decides now is the time to bring the father into the fray. After all, this entire situation and her frustrations have originated with him; let him be the one to resolve it. Without hesitation, she interrupts his reveries and calls him to carry on, to play his part in the beating. The executioner has been summoned. Flo knows the appropriate words to use to infuse him with anger so that he will get on with the beating. She comes up with a new voice, “enriched, hurt, apologetic, it seems to have been manufactured on the spot” (Munro 16). Up to this point the father has had no part in the confrontation, has no idea what they are fighting about or what the problem is. He knows only that Flo insists “things that Rose has said to Flo are such that if Flo had said them to her mother...her father would have thrashed her into the ground” (16). Thus the punishment has been suggested, and Flo finally comes up with a justification: “She humiliates me” (17).

With an air of satisfaction, Flo steps back to let the father, the true root cause of her frustration, carry out the punishment of Rose, the daily reminder of her frustration. Meanwhile, Rose, caught in the middle, reflects that how they got to this point is irrelevant, for “it is the struggle itself that counts, and that can’t be stopped, can never be stopped” (17). At her young age, she recognizes the futility of trying to bring about any change in the scene. Consequently, the beating takes place, severe, humiliating, abusive, while Flo and Rose beg the father to stop. By this time, Flo has had enough. The violence has had a cathartic effect on her; her rage has spent itself. She now proceeds to mollify the father and attempts to minister to Rose’s wounds.

We know that the aftermath of the beating is as much a part of the ritual as the beating itself, for Rose realizes that Flo’s “step on the stairs...contains...a sure knowledge of the whole down-spiraling course of events from now on” (Munro 20). Flo, in her regret of the incident, and perhaps to assuage her guilt, offers Rose delicacies from the store on an anonymous tray outside her door. This, too, is part of the ritual; Rose knows in advance what the tray will contain. She is all too
familiar with the internal struggle she will have trying to reject the goodies (as symbols of appeasement from her parents) while she consumes them one by one. Rose's intention of never speaking to the parents goes unfulfilled, and the parents find themselves blaming each other for the severity of the beating.

In spite of the complex emotions aroused this day, Rose eventually calms herself and remembers the outcomes of all the similar incidents which she has endured:

Rose will understand that life has started up again, that they will all sit around the table eating again...They will be embarrassed, but rather less than you might expect considering how they have behaved. They will feel...not far off satisfaction. (21)

Thus, Munro brings down the curtain on a chilling event in the life of this family. So much has been said, yet few words have been spoken. Messages have been sent and actions taken in response to Flo's cues. Tragically, not one person in the family recognizes what has actually taken place, even though they have unwittingly contributed to the outcome.

A family feeling satisfaction from an act of violence is a strange conclusion to this story, but from the depths of emotions explored by the author, it seems frighteningly real. It seems impossible for someone who has never experienced this type of encounter to be able to describe in such infinite detail the innermost thoughts of an abused child. Since the narrator speaks to us from the child's perspective, we know little of what Flo is thinking when she interacts with Rose, but Rose, although not particularly fond of Flo, does not speak badly of her. Rose does not blame Flo; it seems Rose has come to expect this kind of treatment.

Flo acts from frustration over emotional and physical needs left unmet by her husband. These frustrations are taken out on the child, who is the focal point between Flo and the actual source of her disappointments, her husband. Yet as real as these feelings are, she seems unable to verbalize them or resolve them in a normal manner. Rather she resorts to role-playing and violence within the family to bring about an atmosphere in which she feels secure. Almost like following the script of a play, we see an example of every character in the family having a definite part to play in the beatings, the scene never varying. Each player comes away having gained something, although it is Flo who gains the most. Following the beating, Flo has once again gained some measure of control over Rose. By having her husband administer the beating, she has compelled him to take an active role in the household.
She has also forced him into conversation with her if only to argue the blame and harshness of the beating. Moreover, she has certainly reestablished the fact that she is in total control, although she would want the father to think otherwise (thus her act of humility and hurt when wanting the father to beat Rose). The father has pleased his wife by doing her bidding and Rose has, for a short time, been the center of concern by her parents, something that probably did not happen at any other time.

In the closing paragraphs of the story, Munro paints a picture of familial bliss; the group sits at the table conversing and having fun, again led by Flo. After all the trauma of the day, we find that from the depths of the shameful and disgusting actions of this family has come a respite, however temporary, during which there appears some semblance of normalcy.

Works Cited
