Inescapable Choices in *Runaway*

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Runaway (2006) is the masterpiece of Alice Munro who is a famous Canadian female writer, which shows her concerns about women's living status. Through depiction of women's living states in some small places of Canada, Munro explores women's dilemmas that may lead to their inescapable and hopeless situation. The motif of *Runaway* is running away: running away from family, marriage, religion, virtue, betrayal, and even themselves, but the result of running away is no escape and still lingering at their depressed origins. The cause of this situation is women's escape from their inescapable choices, as in the different phases of female's initiation some choices do more harm than good. Through the analysis of the text and the comparison between different heroines, Munro's feminine living wisdom about the balance in dilemmas is explored from three aspects: the choice of religion, husband, and child.

Keywords: *Runaway*, Munro, woman, choice

Introduction

Munro is a remarkable Canadian female writer whose vision is beyond the binary opposition between female and male. Most of her works are about the living states of women and the complicated and tangled relationships between people. Some short stories of Munro, such as *Runaway* (2006), are written about the women living in the countryside or small towns, focusing on their daily lives which is derived from the writer's own time spent in the quiet Ottawa. Munro is a master of language and she is good at manipulating the essence power of literature, so the personality of her characters may be gentle and introverted, but infectious and insightful. The conflicts in her short stories seem uneventful, but create a revelatory impression after reading. Her words are plain and natural, depicting the simple and real life, but showing the sincere and profound emotions. In the 40 years of literary creation, Munro has published more than 100 short stories. In 1968, her first collection of short stories *Dance of the Happy Shades* was published and won Governor General's Award for Literature. Till now, Munro has won this award for three times and Giller Prize twice. In many European and American media comments, Munro has won the title "the greatest contemporary writer".

Runaway as one of Munro's masterpieces published in 2004 has a magnificent influence in the literary world, and it won the Ciller Prize for that year and is selected into the New York Times Book of the Year. Till now both home and broad, a few scholars study *Runaway*, and most of them focused on the short story *Runaway* instead of the whole collection. About the short story *Runaway*, scholars have mainly studied three aspects: women's fate, feminism narrative strategies, and female consciousness. This paper will explore the female choice and wisdom

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based on *Runaway*. In this collection, Munro once again depicts the ordinary people in a small place, especially the women who live the kind of life with pathetic regret and struggle against the tangled light-tragic fate. *Runaway* has a common motif, running away from family, betrayal, unexpected children, and other miseries, and this recurrent motif “runaway” in Munro’s fiction may be derived from “her escape to university as a scholarship student, against the odds” (Grossman, 2008, p. 649). The heroines in *Runaway* are the depressed ordinary women. Once they have a chance, they run away from the boring life, but they are not clear about what they will run away for and have to come back to the original point, which is their tangled and pathetic living state.

As an experienced and sensitive female writer, Munro does not deliver sermon about the wrong choices some women may commit, but with brief and plain words depicts what those choices will lead to and how they lead to, because according to herself, Munro does not mean to surprise the readers with what happened, but how happened, so *Runaway*, “there is no resentment, no passion, no intricate plot, and no revelation of wisdom” (TAN & ZHAO, 2011, p. 52). Munro only depicts the tragic living states of some women in the small places, about their relationships between husband and wife, parents and children, love affair and marriage, religion and family and their miseries. Munro shows that in certain phases of a woman, some choices do more harm than good for her, or they would leave a legacy of trouble and misery, enfolding them in a state or place where they want to run away from, but could not do anything about it. Thus, through the study of those women’s trivial life and struggle, this paper will analyse what choice leads them to that tangled states and explore the female living wisdom to avoid those choices.

The Choice of Religion: Dilemma in Indulgence and Prejudice

Mother and daughter is the most natural and close relationship between females, but sometimes conflicts are unavoidable. In accordance with Sigmund Freud’s theories, because of youth jealousy and Electra complex, the conflict and tension between mother and daughter derive from their instinct. Especially, when the conflict is related to religion, the tension would be fiercer. Mother’s choice and her guidance for daughter play an important role in this conflict. As in Munro’s works “the relationship between mother and daughter is feeble and unresponsive” (LIN, 2006, p. 268) because of the lack of communication and tolerance between daughter and mother. In *Runaway*, the mothers make the extreme choice: indulgence and prejudice in the religious aspect, which both leads to the broken relationship between mother and daughter.

Sara is Juliet’s mother who gives Juliet total freedom in the choice of religion, and Juliet is the heroine of the short stories “Chance”, “Soon”, and “Silence”. Sara is a religious lady and believes in faith as “something wonderful” (Munro, 2006, p. 120), while Juliet does not “believe in Cod’s grace”, which causes the religious conflict. As they are separated, Sara never teaches Juliet how to respect her own religion and others and indulges Juliet’s religious views freely developing. Then Sara is severely sick, so Juliet comes home to look after her. When Minister Don visits Sara in her deathbed, Juliet is very excited and argued with him about the existence of God. Disappointed by Juliet’s aggressive rebuttals to the minister, Sara hopes to get Juliet’s respect and understanding of her faith. However, her former indulgence makes Juliet run away instead of comforting her by appreciating her faith, which makes Juliet regretted in her rest time for her lack of tolerance and narrow mind. Sara gives no guidance to Juliet in the establishment of right religious view, but chooses the attitude of indulgence, which leads to Juliet’s persistency and apathy. Even though at that time Juliet’s own daughter is

one-year-old, Juliet is still immature in the religious aspect, which dues to her mother's indulgence without proper guidance. Sara's indulgence also foreshadows the unhappy relationship between Juliet and her own daughter Penelope.

Different from Sara, Juliet is strict in control of her daughter's religious choice, because she learns a lesson from her mother's indulgence. However, the similar tragedy also happens to Juliet, because her daughter Penelope leaves their family at the age of 13, because of the pursuit of her own faith. As Penelope cannot bear Juliet's prejudice in religion, she escapes from her mother and abandons her. Juliet is still not a Christian, and her role in the family has changed from daughter to mother. Juliet's strong control in Penelope's faith causes a reverse effect, because Juliet's education and guidance are based on her prejudice against the existence of God. Once, Penelope is not in the nonreligious home, she is bewitched in religion recklessly. Here it has to admit that, the outside influence affects the Penelope's selection in some degree. On the other hand, Juliet is busy in her "wonderful busy successful life", she ignores her daughter's "loneliness and unhappiness" and believes that it is normal that "most people feel that one time or another" (Munro, 2006, p. 132). Because of Juliet's prejudice against the impact of faith, she totally denies the possible comfort from faith. The result is that Penelope inherits her mother's apathy and selfishness, and abandons her mother as well.

The repeated tragedy of Juliet's family for three generations is due to the religious conflict which is not solved properly. Sara's tolerance in religion indulges Juliet, while Juliet's prejudice in faith irritates Penelope. A witted mother would give her daughter reasonable guidance instead of indulgence or prejudice. Hence, a wise mother will get rid of the dilemma in indulgence and prejudice about the different choice of religion between mother and daughter avoiding the potential cause of the pathetic relationship.

The Choice of Husband: Dilemma in Romance and Insurance

Marriage is an important event and turn in a woman's life. The romance of love and the insurance of life are two influential factors in women's choice of husband, but love is the essence of a happy marriage. Without wisdom women are easily lost in the dilemma. In *Runaway*, Munro provides two extreme attitudes before this dilemma: negative attitude towards love and positive attitude romance in choosing a husband.

Grace is the heroine of "Passion", and she has the negative attitude toward love. Grace never makes it clear whether she loves Neil or she just meets him when she needs marriage. Before Grace goes to Neil's home and has diner with his family, she persuades herself that Neil will be a proper husband for her. Then she feels her suppressed passions from her hesitance before the wedding. The seduction of Maury, the brother of her fiancé, tests her and makes her reveal her longing for romance. "Life seems to blur at some unknown moments, for some people, which is insignificant, but for others, such as Grace, this is a colorful and illuminated moment of her life" (CHEN, 2010, p. 65). Grace in fact, is dishonest to herself about the issue of love, and she does not recognize her own passion which is covered by the eagerness for the stability of marriage. Her negative attitude makes her compromise, because Neil and their family conditions indeed meet the standards of the ideal marriage objects. Fate does not allow Grace's "reasonable" choice of marriage. On the way back, Maury was dead of traffic accident. It is difficult to conclude that Maury's death is Grace's responsibility, but Neil and their families will not accept her any longer. If marriage is only based on the pursuit of insurance, it may be adhered to the tragedy. Grace's negative attitude towards the impotence of love in the marriage leads the relationship between Grace and

Neil to end without any result.

Different from Grace's negative attitudes toward love and positive pursuit of insurance of stability, Robin's love is full of fantasy, which makes her lost in the longing for romance. Robin has the positive attitude toward romance, but negative to the pursuit of love. Robin is the heroine of "Tricks", apart from her dream of dramatic romance, before the test of love she withdraws, which may not cause a serious tragedy, but pity. Love also needs to fight, rather than wait. Robin gives up her love because of the cold shoulder of the Denial's twin brother who she regard as Denial himself, which is the dramatic "twins trick" by fate. In "Tricks", Shakespeare's "As You Like It" is a *mise-en-abyme* romance, but Robin does not have the result. Robin is too infatuated with the romance in the drama of Shakespeare, making her "even forget about the distance between reality and illusion, regarding reality as illusion and illusion as reality" (WAN, 2010, p. 137). Robin keeps single without remorse, while Denial is single too, but it was not Robin's reason, perhaps he even does not remember the encounter.

Apart from love as the essence of marriage, the longings for romance and coziness are important factors that influence marriage. The proper degree of romance in love leads to marriage, and in this aspect Grace is too negative, while Robin is too positive. "There is an almost surprisingly similar life path for the heroines, which is their beautiful and basic demand of human nature ending up as a tragedy in the face of harsh reality" (LAI, 2011, p. 26), as both choices of Grace and Robin cause their tragedy.

The Choice of Children: Dilemma in Responsibility and Freedom

For women, another important and serious choice is about children including pregnancy, delivery, and nurture, and all these are concerned about moral and responsibility. In this short story collection, the birth of illegitimate children brings trouble and sorrow to both mothers and children, for example the unmarried mothers Delphine in "Trespases" and Juliet in "Soon".

Delphine gives up her responsibility and seeks freedom, when she, as a young unmarried woman, gets pregnant and gives birth to a girl. The girl is sent to the charitable organization and then she is adopted by a couple. After 10 years, Delphine is still unmarried and has no child, so she tries to find back her abandoned daughter. There is no doubt that her abandon brings a great tragedy to that little girl who dies in a car accident at about one year old. Delphine is a selfish mother and regards her own freedom over others'. She never cares about others' choice. For example, Lauren mistaken by Delphine as her little girl is upset and confused by the Delphine's appearance, because she makes Lauren suspect whether she has blood tie with her parents or not. Delphine's experience is pathetic and she deserves sympathy, but the daughter and her foster parents already may have close and happy relationship. In "Trespases", due to the death of Delphine's daughter, the combat for daughter is avoided. Then Delphine pays for the mother's irresponsibility, which caused by her choice before the dilemma between freedom and responsibility.

Different from Delphine, Juliet does not give her daughter away as an unmarried mother, and she takes all the responsibility. However, pathetically her daughter Penelope abandons her at the age of 13. Penelope leaves her mother because of the difference in religion, but the fragmentary family also foreshadows her escape. Juliet respects her own freedom in marriage, so she escapes from the responsibility to build a complete family for her daughter Penelope. Juliet's love is not complete for the health growth of Penelope, so she can not stop Penelope from running away from the incomplete family. On the other hand, Penelope's father Eric makes little

contribution in her growth. Eric is also an absolutely unqualified father, because he is married and has mistresses at the same time, and Juliet is one of his mistresses, which shades in Penelope's existence. At the same time even though Juliet gives all her love to Penelope, because of her busy career and strong religious control she ignores Penelope's growth and loneliness, which leads Penelope's extreme behavior running away from the family. When Eric's wife dies, Juliet and Eric do not get married either, and life goes on as before, so Penelope grows up in such a fragmentary family which brings Penelope miseries.

Responsibility and freedom sometimes are in conflict, so Delphine gives up her daughter, while Juliet fails in the nursery of her daughter. Even though Juliet takes the responsibility to raise her daughter, still keeps her freedom in marriage ignoring Penelope's need for a complete family.

Conclusions

Women's issues are the problem of dilemma, such as the dilemmas in indulgence and prejudice, romance and insurance, responsibility and freedom, and so on. Making a proper choice before these dilemmas depends on the art and wisdom of life. "As a writer, the performance of the universal truth of human life is all about his ideas and skills of the plot, and the plot shall include a series of actions carried out by the credibility and necessity", so in Munro's *Runaway*, she did not give an answer about how to choose, she just set out the degree of deviation and the results that degree leads to, through the plots (Seldon, 2000, p. 37). Women's issues should be solved as they appear, or these problems might be passed down to the next generation. Women, as mothers, should accumulate wisdom, and pass the wisdom on to their daughters. As a female writer, Munro uses her works as the carrier of her own female living wisdom to give guidance to women.

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