

**IS** 2020  
**INSIDE  
STORIES**

**Runaway**  
by Alice Munro

Teaching notes prepared  
by Heather Maunder



**V A**  
**T E**

VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION  
FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH



Cover image: Viveka de Costa (with minor manipulation).  
Original image sourced via Creative Commons.



# Runaway by Alice Munro

Teaching notes prepared  
by Heather Maunder

Edited by Marion White

---

© VATE 2019

May be used for educational purposes within the institution that has purchased the resource.

All educational institutions copying any part of this resource must be covered by the Copyright Agency Limited (CAL) Licence for educational institutions and must have given a remuneration notice to CAL.

Disclaimer: This VATE Inside Stories 2020 contains the writer's perspective and does not necessarily reflect the views of VATE.

VCE® is a registered trademark of VCAA.

The VCAA does not endorse or make any warranties regarding this study resource.

ABN 22 667 468 657 Inc. No. A0013525E





# Runaway

## by Alice Munro

Teaching notes prepared  
by Heather Maunder

### Introduction

---

The Canadian author Alice Munro, awarded The Nobel Prize in Literature in 2013, was cited as a ‘master of the contemporary short story.’ Munro has been publishing compelling short stories about the currents beneath the lives of ordinary women and men in provincial Ontario, Canada, since her first collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, in 1968. *Runaway* was published in 2004. Munro grew up on the family farm in County Huron and has been writing stories since she was a teenager. Her mother was a schoolteacher. Her father’s Scottish family settled in Canada, part of the early wave of new settlers from the Old World who carved out a life in the Canadian wilderness. Munro won a scholarship to the University of Western Ontario, studying journalism and English. However, she left to marry James Munro in 1951. They moved to Vancouver, British Columbia, and then in 1963 to Victoria, opening a bookstore there which still exists. After they divorced in 1972, Munro returned to her hometown in the east, where she reconnected with an old friend, Gerald Fremlin, marrying him and living ever since in his family farm home.

*Runaway* explores themes of survival, identity, home, memory and time. The eight stories reveal the loneliness, desperation and yearning, both to belong and to escape an unsatisfying home life, of the protagonists. Often characters are running away from themselves as much as the place they live in. The stories travel back and forwards in time, memories and flashbacks revealing past disappointments and family conflicts. Many of Munro’s characters are looking for love but when they find it, it is not how they expected it to be. The context of the stories very much reflects the context that Munro grew up in.

Munro is said to be a notable writer of the Southern Ontario Gothic sub-genre in literature, along with writers such as Margaret Atwood. Like Southern Gothic American writers William Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor, she critiques social conditions such as class, gender, and religion. Munro uses realism, with some supernatural elements that allow her to expose the dark undercurrents of her characters’ psyches. Use of an omniscient narrator enables her to reveal that her protagonists have unreliable memories when they seek to reflect on the past. The non-linear narrative structure facilitates shifts in time, sometimes of many decades in one story. Munro leaves many silences in her stories, inviting readers to fill in the gaps while simultaneously experiencing a sense of dislocation or alienation alongside her protagonists. Letters and dreams are features of her writing, as are deftly crafted descriptions of town and countryside. The Canadian wilderness that sits on the edge of her towns has a lurking menace that evokes fear in some of the characters, not unlike the wilderness that looms over the villagers in Arthur Miller’s play *The Crucible*.

Such settings evoke the sense of fear that is an undercurrent in the lives of Munro’s characters, and suggest readings or interpretations that consider the anxieties of a ‘settler’ nation. The social contexts of the stories expose both explicit and implicit values, particularly as these relate to the lives of girls and women, and Munro also portrays a range of male characters in mostly sympathetic ways. Students might also consider psychoanalytic readings of the stories, drawn from examining Gothic tropes.

The ‘explicit and implied ideas and values’ expressed in its stories make *Runaway* an ideal text for discussing different interpretations—student readers will find the text a rich one for

analysis, and it offers wonderful opportunities for creative responses. *Runaway* is ideal for both creative and analytical assessment tasks in Unit 3 Area of Study 1, Reading and creating texts.

## Ways into the text

- Explore with students the theme of running away. Ask them to write or speak (in a small group perhaps) about a time when they ran away or felt like running away. How did it feel? What did they do? Was the situation resolved? Students could find reports of missing persons and discuss how family members feel. What happens if there is no closure, as in Juliet's story? How easy or difficult is it to return?
- Research with the class Alice Munro's life and work. Munro's home page contains little information. What more do students want to know? They could construct a class biography of her life and work to answer their questions. The Nobel biography is detailed and sets her life and work in the context of her family's experiences as early settlers from Scotland.
- Read or view interviews with Alice Munro. Students could find these and report back to the class. Listen to the Nobel Prize (2013) interview on YouTube, as listed in **References**.
- Make a display of photographs that seem to match the settings in the stories. Add quotes from the stories that match the photos, including page numbers and the title of the story.
- For each story, ask students to devise a question they would like to ask the protagonist if they could! Ask students to swap questions and write an answer to the question in the persona of the protagonist.
- Now do this activity with a question to Munro about each story. Either of these activities can be done independently or collaboratively by students.
- Assign students a story from the collection to read, analyse and present to the class. For example, they could do a brief PowerPoint that covers the context, plot, characters, and theme of the story. They should note narrative voice, key images and the significance of the title and include key quotes.
- After sharing the presentations, ask the class to collaborate on compiling a wall chart or Google Doc that groups stories according to issues or themes explored. They can build on this as their study of the text proceeds.

## Language and style

In the introduction to the collection, Jonathan Franzen claims that Munro's stories all follow a similar pattern:

A bright, sexually avid girl grows up in rural Ontario without much money, her mother is sickly or dead, her father is a schoolteacher whose second wife is problematic, and the girl, as soon as she can, escapes from the hinterland by way of a scholarship or some decisive self-interested act. She marries young, moves to British Columbia, raises kids, is far from blameless in the break-up of her marriage. She may have success as an actress, a writer or a TV personality; she has romantic adventures. When, inevitably, she returns to Ontario, she finds the landscape of her youth unsettlingly altered. Although she was the one who abandoned the place, it's a great blow to her narcissism that she isn't warmly welcomed back—that the world of her youth, with its older-fashioned manners and mores, now sits in judgement on the modern choices she has made. Simply by trying to survive as a whole and independent person, she has incurred painful losses and dislocations; she has caused harm.

In pairs or small groups ask students to analyse each of the stories to see how they fit this pattern. A creative response would be to write the plot for a story of their own that fits the pattern, perhaps changing it to an Australian setting and context.

Students could find examples of the following features of Munro's language and style and explain how they create meaning in each of the stories. If they are using *Runaway* for the creative response task they will need to experiment with using these techniques in short responses to each of the stories as they read and analyse them.

- Settings: fog, seasons, isolation, taiga, forest, mountains, water, lakes, the sea, town, country and city, buildings: interiors and exteriors, furniture
- Characterisation: the ways Munro uses a character's dress, appearance and language to represent them
- The way the protagonist's inner thoughts are revealed
- The way Munro builds the back story of her characters
- The significance of each title
- Beginnings and endings. Is there any resolution?
- Critical moments: the moment in a story where the protagonist has a revelation

- Preoccupation with time
- Narration: voice and point of view. Reliable? Does it shift? Non-linear, dips into the pasts of characters. The story often begins at a point long distant in time from the events recounted. Third person omniscient in most stories.
- How conflict is revealed and how tension builds up through irony and nuances in the language
- Imagery: metaphors and similes; nature imagery; motifs such as dreams and letters, food
- Gothic elements
- Use of italics not just for letters but for sections of text that reveal a character's inner thoughts

## Structure of the text

This section includes a brief comment on each story with questions that invite further exploration of its features, themes, values and possible interpretations, and that prompt students to make links to other stories and the collection as a whole. The title story 'Runaway', for instance, foreshadows some of the despair, hopelessness, self-deception, and vulnerabilities of the characters depicted in the rest of the collection. Clark, Sylvia and Carla can all be said to be running away from the empty, painful realities and disappointments of their lives. As the overarching focus of the text study, it is essential to examine the extent of each of the protagonists' attempt to escape their daily lives and the factors that prevent them from doing so permanently and/or truly. Many of the other characters are running away as well.

### Runaway

Carla is desperately unhappy and afraid, her fear apparently inspired by the return of her neighbour Sylvia, suggested in Carla's wishful scenarios that put off any contact. As the story proceeds, Munro gradually reveals why Carla is afraid, and that this is not the first time she has run away. Munro characterises Carla as a set of contradictions, simultaneously lacking in confidence and determined, ungainly yet with a big-boned grace like that of an animal. What emerges as the story develops is a portrayal of an unhappy marriage where Carla seems to be a willing participant in her own submission. Her initial attraction to Clark she attributes to sex, and it is their bedroom fantasy game, begun to keep the excitement alive, that proves to be the cause of her fear in the opening of the story. She has lied to Clark about their dying neighbour Leon being 'interested' in her during her visits to help Sylvia

in the house, the details '*dirty, dirty*'. Clark now wishes to blackmail Sylvia to acquire some of the prize money poet Leon is supposed to have won.

The wet summer, vividly described by Munro, evokes a dismal, oppressive atmosphere of hopelessness that is reflected in Carla's constant tearfulness which irritates Clark who, unhappy himself due to their business problems and lack of money, lashes out at her and the townspeople. Carla has run away from her comfortable middle-class home-life because she feels out of place, claiming she wants a more 'authentic' life. However, the adventure she began with Clark has not lived up to expectations—the reality is hard work, financial pressure, and seeming to be unable to please her husband.

Afraid both to own up to her lie and to carry out her role in Clark's scheme, Carla bursts into tears when with Sylvia, eventually explaining her distress as caused by her marriage. She grasps at the apparent lifeline Sylvia offers by helping her to leave Clark; however, afraid that she has nothing to run to, she alights from the bus and rings Clark to come and get her.

When Clark visits Sylvia in the middle of the night to return the clothing she lent Carla, he is cruel and threatening. In the midst of this uncomfortable conversation, 'an unearthly sort of animal, pure white, hell-bent, something like a giant unicorn,' rushes out of the fog, materialising as Flora the lost goat. Clark does not take Flora home, we discover when Carla reads Sylvia's letter. Carla ignores the pain of what she fears has happened to Flora and decides to avoid the possible truth that Clark has killed Flora by not investigating the tree the vultures visit. This image haunts the end of the story even though with the coming of autumn and the upturn in business Carla and Clark achieve a kind of fragile, temporary, manufactured happiness.

1. Reading the note Carla wrote to her mother and stepfather, what seems to be her notion of 'authentic'? Is the life she and Clark create for themselves 'authentic'? What kind of life does she want?
2. In what ways does the carpet Carla wants to replace reflect her life?
3. Contrast the setting as Munro describes it in summer and autumn. In what ways are the settings an evocation of the atmosphere and emotions of Carla and Clark?
4. How would you explain Sylvia's fondness for Carla and her desire to help her?

5. Read the account of Carla's two dreams about Flora (p. 7). What might Carla have suppressed?
6. How do students interpret the character Clark? Munro's omniscient narration provides us with Carla's point of view when he says 'That's what men do' (p. 6); what do readers think about Clark at this point?

## Chance, Soon and Silence

### Chance

In 'Chance', one of three stories with the same protagonist, Munro plays with the ideas of fate, opportunity, happenstance and risk-taking. The story is structured in a series of segments that jump between the present and past, and recount the lead-up to Juliet's decision to risk her future on the whim of visiting a man she met by chance on her train trip to take up a job teaching Latin at a girl's school near Vancouver, prompted by a letter she receives from him. Munro's characterisation of Juliet reveals her to be intelligent, introspective, somewhat diffident and feeling at odds with those around her. Perhaps it is the conversation with Eric, who seems to understand her feelings of guilt after a stranger she has resisted befriending commits suicide, which prompts her to take this risk. Munro constructs the relationship between Eric and Juliet through Juliet's eyes as one 'meant to be', a lot unspoken between them. Juliet has felt constricted by the expectations of both her parents and her teachers in the Classics Department, all of whom seem hypocritical in giving her advice they themselves do not heed. Perhaps because he is a stranger, Juliet tells Eric that she loves her Greek and Latin studies, something 'she had always known that she should never tell any man or boy, lest he lose interest immediately' (p. 71). Her experiences with men have been full of 'humiliation and disappointment' (p. 70), so she has invented fantasy experiences with actors to avoid repetition of this pain. Eric is married to a woman who is paralysed and unable to speak as a result of a car accident which he explains to Juliet in their discussion of guilt. In the observation car of the train, Eric points out to Juliet the constellations in the sky, and she relates to him the legends relevant to each. Juliet arrives in Whale Bay the day of the wake for Eric's wife Anne, a circumstance that could be seen as 'fateful'. Despite the hostility of Ailo, the woman who is clearing up Eric's home and who seems to be proprietorial of

him, Juliet stays the night and her dreams might have seemed to come true when he embraces her. At the end of this story, the reader is left wondering at the number of women Eric is involved with and about their long-term future as a couple.

1. How would you account for Juliet's decision to visit Eric, a man she has met once, at his home far away in Whale Bay?
2. How do the stories of Briseis and Chryseis illuminate Juliet's fears? (p. 81).
3. 'Who would want to live where you have to share every part of outdoor space with hostile and marauding animals?' (p. 83). Read Munro's description of Eric's home and the landscape it sits in (pp. 82-83). What are the causes of Juliet's discomfort? Contrast this passage with Juliet's description of the taiga on page 54.
4. 'She can tell by his voice that he is claiming her ... she feels herself ... flooded with relief, assaulted by happiness. How astonishing this is. How close to dismay.' (p. 85). To what extent might Juliet be constructing herself another fantasy?

### Soon

In 'Soon', set some years later, Juliet returns to her family home, with her thirteen-month-old daughter Penelope. In this middle story, Munro uses Juliet's reflections on her discomfort upon her return to illuminate her life choices. Juliet discovers that the train does still stop at their old station, but her parents are reluctant to welcome her publicly for fear of what people will think of them. This realisation begins her re-evaluation of her parents as different from the proud 'rebels' they liked to portray themselves as and how she remembers them. Juliet also reevaluates her notion of where home is (p. 125).

1. Find a photograph of Marc Chagall's painting 'I and the Village'. What attracts Juliet to it and why does she buy it for her parents?
2. What do we learn about Juliet's upbringing from the memories she recalls?
3. How would you describe her parents' relationship both now and before Juliet left?
4. What is unsettling about Irene? Compare and contrast her with Ailo in 'Chance'.
5. 'Soon. *Soon I'll see Juliet*' (p. 124). Why does Juliet deny Sara a reply?



## Silence

'Silence' recounts how Penelope herself has left home, apparently to escape the 'freedom' and loneliness of the upbringing Juliet has given her, in search of her own sense of belonging. The story begins years later and retrospectively tells of Eric's death at sea, Juliet's career as a TV interviewer and her move to Vancouver with Penelope. The story opens with Juliet's trip to Denman Island to visit Penelope at the Spiritual Balance Centre. Mysteriously, Penelope isn't there. The story moves back through Juliet's memories and forward through the many years of her life knowing nothing of Penelope and hoping that she will return—an interesting twist on the myth of Penelope, faithful wife of Odysseus, who waited many years for him to return from the Trojan War. Readers learn that Penelope attended Torrance House, the school where Juliet worked before she went to join Eric at Whale Bay. The bizarre beach funeral for Eric, breaking news of his death to Penelope in her friend's home, and Penelope's support during her grief present a picture of mother and daughter as close but this is undercut by subsequent events. The birthday cards Penelope sends Juliet on her own birthday cease after five years. Juliet's existence during this silence includes a series of moves to ever diminishing homes, unsuccessful relationships with men and a chance encounter with Heather, Penelope's friend, when she discovers her daughter has children of her own and lives in the far north. Juliet uncannily echoes her mother Sara's hope towards the end of her life for word from Juliet: 'She hopes as people who know better hope for undeserved blessings, spontaneous remissions, things of that sort.' (p. 158).

1. Why doesn't Juliet remain in Whale Bay after Eric's death?
2. What does the steady diminishing of Juliet's life reflect? Disappointment? Alienation? Loneliness? Lost dreams?
3. To what extent has Juliet changed as a result of 'running away' from her childhood home?
4. What comment on family relationships does the sequence of three stories make? Do students, in discussing this, have different interpretations?
5. What might Penelope's version of the story be? Eric's?

## Passion, Trespasses and Tricks

### Passion

The protagonist of 'Passion', Grace is a somewhat awkward, introverted and quiet young woman who seems to be swept along in the steady, humdrum inevitability of her life. She acquiesces in what others decide she should do: her teacher, her uncle, Maury and his mother, Mrs Travers. Apart from her desire to learn as much as she can before starting work with her uncle caning chairs (p. 166), her life is devoid of passion. She is dimly aware that her relationship with Maury is based on what they expect or imagine it should be rather than any overpowering emotion. Grace seems more drawn to his family than to Maury; his mother, Mrs Travers, takes it upon herself to nurture Grace. However, when Grace meets Neil, Maury's alcoholic half-brother, she is aware of a strong physical attraction. The day she spends with him changes all their lives forever, culminating in Neil's death in a car accident that might have been suicide. Grace seems to achieve a kind of honesty at the end of the story when she will not say she's sorry to Maury, acknowledging that she did want to go with Neil in the car. The story is told from Grace's perspective many years after the events she recounts.

1. Why does Grace agree to go out with Maury, and then why does she so easily trade evenings with him for Sunday lunches with his family?
2. Why is her relationship with Maury so disappointing for them both?
3. Why does Mr Travers offer Grace the \$1000 cheque, and why does she accept it? What do both actions reveal about the society they live in?
4. Mrs Travers, while discussing *Anna Karenina* with Grace, says, 'Passion gets pushed behind the washtubs.' (p. 172). Grace thought it was, 'Mouths, tongues, skin, bodies, banging bone on bone. Inflammation.' (p. 193). What does the story suggest about passion?

## Trespasses

'Trespasses' is another story that becomes increasingly disturbing the further into the narrative we read. The protagonist Lauren is a shy young girl who is painfully aware of her outsider status at school; she understands this to be partly caused by her upbringing which has given her knowledge different from that of her peers. The story can be read as a rite of passage one, the issue being the truth about Lauren's birth. Munro constructs the narrative as a series of secrets that Lauren seeks to unlock, beginning with the box of ashes Lauren discovers that turn out to be those of a dead baby. We learn that Lauren and her parents Eileen and Harry have moved house many times, their present home on the edge of the town being adjacent to the wilderness. Lauren has had to negotiate the uncertainties and conflicts of her home life, learning eventually to avoid Eileen and Harry's rows. After she is befriended by Delphine, a woman working in the local hotel, the reader gradually realises that Delphine thinks Lauren is the baby she adopted out after birth. Lauren succumbs to the secrets, half-truths and pressure from the adults around her and falls ill, wanting to remain safe inside the house indefinitely. Harry and Eileen are forced to tell Delphine and Lauren the truth; the ashes belong to Delphine's baby, also called Lauren, who died in a car accident while Eileen was pregnant with Lauren. In the bizarre ceremony where Harry, Eileen and Delphine scatter the ashes on the snow, Eileen begins the Lord's Prayer, then Harry insists they all say 'This is Lauren', and then Eileen concludes with 'Forgive us our sins. Our trespasses. Forgive us our trespasses' (p. 234). The burrs Lauren can't remove from her shoes perhaps allow her to focus her discomfort away from the adults—this is possibly only temporary as Lauren has mentioned that they leave the town.

1. At the start of the story, what hooks does Munro create to ensnare the reader and foreshadow events to come?
2. Why do you think her schoolmates ostracise Lauren?
3. What does Munro's characterisation of Lauren's parents and Delphine reveal about the society they live in? Is Delphine's burden of grief likely to lift after the ceremony?
4. Is the adults' behaviour towards Lauren appropriate? Is it likely to have effects on her in the long term?
5. Do you think the ceremony is a catharsis for the adults?

6. Why does Eileen change to using the word 'trespasses' instead of the word 'sins'? In this story, what sins have been committed? Who has sinned, and who has been sinned against?
7. Compare and contrast Grace and Lauren. Are there any similarities with Penelope from the Juliet trilogy of stories?

## Tricks

Robin, the protagonist in 'Tricks', is a solitary character with an inner secret life. Sister and carer to the bitter, nasty asthmatic Joanne, she is dimly disappointed that her absence in Stratford during her nursing training did not provide her with an escape, perhaps through marriage. She has escaped briefly on her annual outing to Stratford to see a Shakespearian play. The outings seem to provide her with some emotional sustenance: 'those few hours filled her with an assurance that the life she was going back to, which seemed so makeshift and unsatisfactory, was only temporary ...' (p. 239). The sunlight on the fields is like the glow of 'radiance' she feels after the play. Perhaps influenced by the passion in *Antony and Cleopatra*, in a trick of fate she loses her purse and in consequence meets the attractive Serbo-Croatian clockmaker Daniel, who rescues her and arranges a tryst a year later where she is to wear the same green dress and hairstyle. Their passionate kiss and her curiosity about Danilo's village sustain her for the intervening year. However, by a cruel trick of fate, Danilo is not home when she decides to visit him. Unknown to Robin it is his deaf-mute brother who closes the door in her face. Robin is timid and, assuming Daniel is rejecting her, retreats from hope and her theatre visits altogether. In part two of the story years later, Robin has sold the home after Joanne's death and made a new, safe life for herself. After she discovers, by chance, the history of a psychiatric patient who turns out to be Alexander, the twin brother of Danilo, she reflects that, 'Shakespeare should have prepared her. Twins are often the reason for mix-ups and disasters in Shakespeare.' (p. 268). Ironically, the play that she had missed that fateful evening was *As You Like It*.

1. Look up the plots of *Antony and Cleopatra* and *As You Like It*. How does each drama illuminate 'Tricks'?
2. Contrast Joanne and Robin. How has their lot in life dictated their personality and outlook?
3. What do we learn about the social circumstances of the town where they live?
4. Research the title character of Ibsen's play *Hedda Gabler*. Why do Robin's friends think she is unlike Hedda?

5. Discuss what life might have been like in the household while Robin and Joanne's parents were there.

## Powers

Life is always so full. Getting and spending we waste our powers. Why do we let ourselves be so busy and miss doing things we should have, or would have, liked to do? (p. 300).

Nancy writes this in a letter to Tessa her old schoolfriend in the opening section of the long short story 'Powers', using the familiar phrase from Wordsworth's poem. The story begins with Nancy's diary entries in 1927 and ends decades later when she is elderly. The non-linear narrative offers enigmatic glimpses of the lives of Nancy, Tessa and their relationships with Wilf, Nancy's husband, and his cousin Ollie. The opening section, 'Give Dante a Rest', sets the context for the story in a small country town which we see through the eyes of Nancy in her diary entries. The second section 'Girl in a Middy' begins from Ollie's perspective, the omniscient narration revealing his thoughts on Nancy—this is explored further in the section Close Study. Nancy creates an air of mystery around Tessa as she takes Ollie out of town to where Tessa grows her food, makes her own butter and receives visitors on Sundays. Ollie is intrigued, perhaps as Nancy intended him to be, when Tessa visualises what he has in his pockets. Letters between Nancy, Ollie and Tessa reveal that Ollie and Tessa are to be married in the United States and Ollie has plans to have her powers tested.

The third section of the story, titled 'A Hole in the Head', is years later, and Nancy, who now spends her life caring for the mentally ill Wilf, responds to a letter from a mental hospital asking her to collect Tessa. Nancy tries to unravel what has happened, however Tessa's electroshock therapy has affected her memory. She has a vague idea someone strangled Ollie. Although Nancy promises to write to Tessa, the reader is aware this is unlikely to occur. In 'A Square, a Circle, a Star' Nancy, now in her sixties, meets Ollie by chance in Vancouver when she is on her way home from a cruise her family advised she take after Wilf's death. He claims the strain of the ESP tests overcame Tessa and that she died of leukemia. Ollie refuses Nancy's invitation to come up to her room before she can speak the words. Her letter to Ollie at the remote island Texado is returned, marked 'moved'. In the final section of the story, 'Flies on the Windowsill', the elderly Nancy seems to her children to live in the past. Sitting in her sunroom, she dreams of Ollie and Tessa. In the dream, Tessa

visualises a small pile of flies behind a curtain and is ecstatic that her powers have returned. Nancy dreams a different ending to Ollie and Tessa's life on the road exhibiting Tessa's powers in side-shows, one where Ollie decides not to use the papers he has to refer Tessa to the mental home. Just as Nancy feels a new future has been set in place she is drawn back to her present, 'leading her away from what begins to crumble behind her, to crumble and darken tenderly into something like soot and soft ash' (p. 335).

1. After reading the whole story, what irony is there in Nancy's book group's decision to read Dante's *The Divine Comedy* rather than Milton's *Paradise Lost*? What concerns does Munro foreshadow with this choice?
2. Draw on the descriptions of Tessa in 'Girl in a Middy' to write a brief character portrait of her. How and why are both Nancy and Ollie drawn to her? (Is Tessa the 'real' heroine of the story? Read the interpretation of the story at *Buried in Print* (2014), and the comments written after it.)
3. Tessa takes charge of the meeting with Nancy in the hospital. What is left unsaid here?
4. On page 321, Ollie says he 'heard the cry to get out of the box. Out of the got-to-do-something-big box. Out of the ego box.' How does Munro reveal both his deceit and his selfishness? In terms of the themes in the collection, what is Ollie running away from?
5. Nancy wants to 'open up [the past] and get one good look at it' (p. 330). What does Munro want us to see about the past? Discuss the end of the story, beginning with Tessa's discovery of the flies on page 332.

## Perspective on the text

---

In her paper, 'The Ordinary Terrors of Survival: Alice Munro and the Canadian Gothic', Katrin Berndt says, 'Munro's writing combines the Canadian motif of survival with the concealed ambitions and passions that threaten her characters in a physical as well as metaphysical sense.' Berndt analyses the title story 'Runaway', noting that Carla, Clark and Sylvia fit the gothic archetypes of damsel in distress, romantic lover and villain, and wise woman.

While it is easy to make these characters fit the types, Munro has made them more complex than that. Carla was attracted to the handsome, popular riding teacher Clark, and to the idea of a rebellious, runaway lifestyle with him establishing a riding school. Yet her role in the relationship is keeper of the house and doing Clark's bidding, including maintaining his ego and hence the peace. Selfishness, cruelty and violence are never far from the surface in Clark, and Carla is anxious and depressed as a result. Munro hints at a dark sexuality where they have to play 'dirty, dirty' (p. 15) games to sustain the excitement. When Carla lies to Sylvia that it is her marriage that is causing her tearful outbreak, it is really Clark's plan to blackmail Sylvia that is causing her distress, as it will uncover her own lies about Leon's molestation of her, invented to spice up their sex life. Sylvia readily arranges to help Carla escape Clark and her marriage, recalling schoolgirls from her past who have needed her support. However, the confrontation between Clark and Sylvia could be seen as a power struggle for control of Carla. At this point, in addition to the menace in Clark's language, Munro introduces a supernatural element as Flora the pet goat reappears, as if from some otherworldly sphere: 'First a live dandelion ball, tumbling forward, then condensing itself into an unearthly sort of animal, pure white, hell-bent, something like a giant unicorn, rushing at them.' (p. 39). It is enough to startle them into pausing in their argument over Carla. Carla resists finding out why Clark has not mentioned the pet's return but the imagery of the buzzards makes it clear to the reader that he has killed Flora, presumably because she competes with him for Carla's affection and attention, offering Carla comfort which he withholds from her. When, at the end of the story, Carla opts for survival with Clark rather than the pain of honesty, the reader is left with a disquieting sense of danger.

Other stories in *Runaway* exhibit elements of concealed or suppressed passions in the characters that they are unwilling or unable to address. Munro's spare prose, where much is implied by the gaps in characters' thoughts that the third person narrator reveals to readers, vividly evokes the uncertainty, fear and desperate tension underlying the lives of the women in particular. Munro's protagonists are unable to easily communicate their emotions and needs. In 'Chance', Juliet is so paralysed in her inarticulateness that when she meets a stranger to whom she feels able to reveal something of herself, she eventually visits him on a whim and ends up living with him until he dies, having a daughter with him. Munro suggests there is some hidden inner reticence or withholding of openness in the family in 'Silence', as Juliet's daughter Penelope has chosen to live her life in the far north of Canada with no contact with her mother. Perhaps after Eric's death there is a gulf Juliet is unable or unwilling to bridge.

The protagonists in *Runaway* have inner lives that are far more in turmoil than their outward appearance suggests. In 'Trespases', Lauren has perfected the art of pretence as a defence mechanism, concealing her feelings from her parents, her fellow school students and Delphine. Munro adds the forest that looms over the family home (rented, adding uncertainty over the future) and the box of the dead baby's ashes as macabre touches that heighten the threatening nature of the labyrinth of secrets and uncertainties in Lauren's life. The adults in the story all project their own guilt and uncertainties onto Lauren in a way that transgresses the reader's notion of how parents should nurture and protect their children. Robin in 'Tricks' hides the solace and nourishment for the soul that she gains from her trips to the theatre, then further retreats into her inner life when she assumes that Daniel has rejected her. As soon as she is released from the necessity of caring for her sister Joanne, she creates a new life for herself far away from the community that knows her, a life that is outwardly confident and successful but inwardly unfulfilled and shame filled. The sad ending of this story resonates with a sense of waste.

The context in which the stories are set—a context like Munro's own in rural small-town Ontario—is exposed as contributing to the protagonists' fears, insecurities and thwarted ambitions. Middle-class families are economically more comfortable than their poorer neighbours but do not necessarily

live happier or more contented lives. A rigid community morality based on Protestant values and the fear of what others might think instils in adults and children a necessity to live up to expectations, and a sense of fear or guilt if or when they don't manage to. The oppressive settings and the gaps and silences in the stories highlight these tensions. The differences in expectations of women and men are exposed in all the stories, which invites feminist readings and consideration of the implied and explicit values about men's and women's actions in the context of their lives.

Munro constructs her narratives as non-linear excursions into the past as her protagonists remember it. As such, the accounts of events are inevitably unreliable. Readers might question whether some characters have a tenuous grip on reality, suggested in the secrets, lies, denial and alienation that are hinted at in the imagery and language in the stories. Munro has said that she wanted to write stories with tragic endings. The stories in *Runaway* do not have the many physical corpses at the end that a Shakespearian tragedy does, but there are certainly metaphorical ones, with an accompanying sense of loss and wasted potential. However, the ability of these women to endure and to survive is admirable and reassuring.

## Characters

---

### Runaways

As the notion of running away is the overarching link in Munro's collection, a useful beginning to an analysis of the characters is to examine who is running away, from whom or what, and why. Minor characters can offer a counterpoint or juxtaposition to the protagonist. Students could make a digital version of the following table and complete it as they read the stories. It will be a useful study resource if they include page numbers and quotes.

Story	Who and why?	What changes as a result?	Quotes
Runaway			
Chance			
Soon			
Silence			
Passion			
Trespasses			
Tricks			
Powers			

- Write a mini essay that compares and contrasts three of the stories, commenting on what Munro suggests about her characters' attempts to run away from an unhappy, alienating situation.
- Imagine you are at the point of desperation. You cannot bear to stay in your oppressive family situation any longer. Write about the moment when you realise this, and what you decide to do about it in an internal monologue; or imagine you have already run away, and write a letter of explanation to a school friend; or imagine you meet a cousin months later, and explain in a role play why you left home.

## Outsiders

Each of the protagonists is an outsider: in society, in their family, in their school or workplace. Many of the other characters are outsiders too.

- Ask students in a group to construct a concept map or Venn diagram, then discuss the causes and effects of an outsider status on the protagonists.
- Creative task: write a report on the social and emotional impact on the individual of being an outsider.

## Women

All Munro's protagonists are female and disempowered or marginalised in some way. Wary, introspective and discontented, they can present as aloof, shy, non-communicative and passive. Even Nancy, who as a young woman appears lively, confident and fun-loving, changes into a dutiful wife who behaves as her father, husband and society expect her to after her marriage. Lauren has learnt to navigate the uncertainties of her parents' arguments, and to conceal from her school peers the knowledge which she has as a result of her upbringing, and this makes her appear different and superior.

Characters like Sylvia in 'Runaway' and Mrs Travers in 'Passion' take a mentoring or caring role with a younger woman, for motives that are never stated but can be implied in their eagerness to 'improve' their protégées' lives. Carla is a version of the schoolgirls Sylvia remembers from her teaching days, ones who needed nurturing and sometimes had a crush on her. It is possible to interpret Clark's aggressive behaviour towards Sylvia as fighting to retain power over his wife. While Mrs Travers seems to feel a bond with Grace over their mutual interest in literature and takes time and makes an effort to expand her knowledge, she may, consciously or unconsciously, be seeking a closeness that she does not have with her daughter and daughter-in-law. Grace certainly seems to feel that Maury's family fills a void (left by the early deaths of her parents) that her older aunt and uncle cannot fill. Mrs Travers' dependence on Grace to keep an eye on her alcoholic son Neil, and the hints at her own mental health problems, represent her as having hidden depths that emerge as troubling later in the story.

Munro's depiction of Juliet's timidity and lack of confidence in 'Chance' is revealed in 'Soon' to be at least in part caused by her parents' expectations of her to fit in. While Juliet remembers admiring the rebelliousness her parents seem to her to exhibit, they, ironically, are afraid of what the townspeople will think of her status as an unmarried mother.

In both these stories Juliet is unsettled by the presence of a strange woman who works in the home, Ailo in Eric's home and Irene in her parents'. Both seem to Juliet to project a resentment of her and proprietorship of the home and its male occupant, prompting some jealousy. Tessa in 'Powers' possesses the same domestic accomplishment.

Juliet's relationship with her daughter Penelope, as we see it from Juliet's perspective in her intense reflections on it in 'Silence', follows a similar pattern to her relationship with her mother Sara—close at first then increasingly distant and dysfunctional. Sara, not unlike Eileen in 'Trespasses', is unwell (though physically rather than mentally) and is absorbed in her own problems. Nancy and Grace have no living mother present in their lives; the reader can sense their loss in the absence of memories, Munro leaving it unsaid. Both Robin's parents are absent, but the undercurrent of resentment can be felt in Robin's interactions with Joanne.

Robin in 'Tricks' deliberately removes herself from her home setting once a year to secretly enjoy a trip to the theatre. She does not wish to explain or justify her enjoyment which seems enhanced by its privacy or secrecy; her hesitancy is partly motivated by what others will think and say.

- Consider to what extent women in the stories in *Runaway* trust and rely on each other. How does this differ from the ways they relate with the male figures in their lives?
- Imagine you are Ailo or Irene. Tell a friend what you think of Juliet.

## Men

The male figures are either largely not present in the protagonists' lives or represented as authority figures. Yet Munro sometimes positions the reader to see sympathetically the point of view of, for instance, a father, partner or son.

Assign a story to pairs or small groups of students to work with male characters such as Clark, Sam, Neil, Danilo, Eric, Ollie:

- Construct a concept map that shows the interrelationships between the story's protagonist and the key male figures in her life.
- List five adjectives to describe the male character, and a key quote for each.
- Use the information to discuss the proposition that the men in Munro's stories, despite their privileged position in society, are as subject to uncertainty and fear as the women.

## Minor characters

- Both the more developed minor characters and the ones portrayed very briefly give glimpses of the values and attitudes of the communities in which they live. Students could collect quotations from these characters and write an explanation of what they reveal about the person's beliefs and opinions. Does Munro endorse, question or leave unquestioned these views and values?
- Other issues that Munro represents in her characters include, for instance, being an orphan, an asthmatic, or a carer. Discuss the views and values that are implied or made explicit through such characterisations.
- If students are interested in following up on Katrin Berendt's interpretation that Munro uses gothic literary archetypes, they could compile examples of: the persecuted maiden; the all-powerful mother; the dark, romantic lover; and the wise woman. These archetypes are often used ironically or subversively.

## Issues and themes

---

The 'explicit and implied ideas and values in the world of the text' are revealed through:

- settings
- characterisation
- imagery
- actions, behaviour and values that are endorsed or questioned or challenged
- the point of view we are invited to share or sympathise with
- gaps and silences in the text.

### Escape/running away

See the section on characters who are runaways, and the table. As the overarching theme of the collection, Munro's exploration of the reasons people want to run away—and the consequences of doing so, or of choosing not to—permeates the stories. Behind each episode of running away lies:

- denial, or false expectations, or dreams
- running versus facing or accepting reality
- a sense of oppression and desire for freedom
- a conflict between the urge to fight or to flee
- a search for understanding or meaning.

Examining the ideas or themes explored in the individual stories highlights the values of the society in which they are set. The following notes should help students focus this area of their analysis of the stories, in conjunction with the notes on Munro's characterisation in the previous section. As the protagonists are female, the extent to which Munro positions readers to sympathise with the entrapment, alienation, disempowerment and lack of choices they feel is worth noting, as is her affirmation of their survival and courage.

### Effect of society's values on the individual

The context of the stories in *Runaway* reflects the society of mid-twentieth-century provincial Canada. While the protagonists spend time in cities such as Vancouver, and/or on remote islands, their lives are mostly lived in small country towns. Munro exposes the fears and uncertainties her protagonists experience as they attempt to conform to expectations and conventions. Her treatment of time, as protagonists travel back in their (no doubt imperfect) memories, allows her to examine the hopes and dreams of twentieth century lower and



middle class people as they struggle to find happiness and identity in a mostly conservative community that is slow to adapt to change. Morality is based on Christian beliefs and practices, and hard work and education are valued. Munro's characterisation suggests a questioning of small-town values. In the Juliet series, for instance, Juliet rejects the rigid expectation that she should be married, while Penelope rejects her family and their religion. The cause of festering conflict that frequently erupts in the marriage depicted in 'Trespases' is related to Harry's suggestion that they abort the baby when Eileen falls pregnant while the first, adopted, Lauren is still a baby. In a story that seems to value truth and honesty, the bizarre ceremony with the ashes may imply there is value in religious beliefs and practices of the past. On the other hand, the stories seem to endorse contemporary women's increased agency. The husbands and wives portrayed in the stories are often discontented, selfish, and self-absorbed; women generally don't work after marriage (see Ollie's reflection on this in 'Powers') and the men are the heads of the family, providing the income. Life is a financial struggle for some. Carla rejects her middle class family's values as inauthentic, seeking a more 'authentic' life with Clark; however readers might suspect that her new life is not necessarily 'authentic' as it is based on deception, self-deception and compromise. Implicitly, the story suggests she'd be better off if she left him.

Settings reflect the isolation and oppressive nature of small-town life, the barrenness of some personal lives (think Delphine's room in 'Trespases'), the rich self-sufficiency of others' such as Tessa's home, which is echoed in the atmosphere in her bakery in the institution and is contrasted with her room in Nancy's dream. Juliet's parents' attic is cluttered with things they have discarded, symbols of their changing lives. The anonymity of a big city like Vancouver seems to give Juliet the opportunity to reinvent herself after Eric's death and moving to a different, larger town allows Robin from 'Tricks' to create a life where she can hide from her real self by living behind a mask of confident competence.

In exploring the gaps and silences in the text, Canada's First Nations citizens and many migrants of varying ethnicities seem glaringly absent. Students could discuss whether this suggests that Munro leaves ideas and values about displacement unquestioned, and if so, why.

## Families

Family—its presence or absence—is a concern in each of the stories. In 'Passion', Grace is willing to accept the prospect of a passionless marriage with Maury in return for Sundays with his family. However the outcome of the story suggests that beneath all family surfaces there are unresolvable conflicts. There seem to be many dysfunctional families in the stories, but perhaps Munro is suggesting that there will always be family conflicts and unmet needs because people are flawed. 'Trespases' exposes the anxieties, disappointments and pain behind Harry and Eileen's combative relationship, and the devastating effects on Lauren. Munro highlights their selfishness and lack of foresight when she has them name their biological child 'Lauren', the same name as the adopted child killed in the car accident when Eileen was driving. The setting of their rented home, on the outskirts of town, together with the information that they have moved many times and the ominous presence of the forest bordering their land, hints at the instability that has led Lauren to create defence mechanisms to survive as an outsider at school. Yet she retreats to the cocooned safety inside her home when overwhelmed by the needs of the adults in her life.

While the stories depict families that function on the surface, the gaps and silences in the stories, along with the self-absorption of the protagonists, suggest that children are often unable to communicate their fears and needs, and this can have a generational effect. For example, Juliet remembers when she grew away from mother and daughter activities with Sara and formed a close relationship with her father, one filled with discussions. This might be why she resents her father's relationship with Irene. Her own daughter Penelope seems to have spent much of her childhood fishing with Eric and while Juliet remembers mother and daughter as being close and herself as reliant on Penelope after Eric's death, she acknowledges that their aim to raise Penelope with the freedom Juliet felt she lacked as a child ultimately leads to Penelope seeking spiritual fulfilment by 'running away' from her life with her mother. Both Eric and Juliet seem to have rejected their religious beliefs but it appears that they have not been able to nurture Penelope's spiritual needs.

It certainly seems that in the stories in *Runaway*, self and identity are an issue for the child protagonists even into adulthood; Munro suggests that families are a defining factor in our lives whether we reject or adopt their values. An examination of the stories where one parent is absent or dead would offer further illumination of Munro's views on family.

## Communication, truth and lies

Munro's characters' interior lives reveal their uncertainties, anxieties and resentments through their reflections on the memories that shape the narratives of the stories. Many are inarticulate, unable to communicate their feeling which, of course, leads to misunderstandings. In addition, they seem to live essentially fearful lives. Children and adults make assumptions based on interpreted partial observations.

Munro explores the idea of truth and lies through her narrative style and the behaviour of the characters in her stories. Truth becomes a moveable feast when the protagonists remember the past, and to an extent remembered truth is possibly partial truth because of the unreliability of memory. Characters lie to each other and themselves.

Lauren in 'Trespases' retreats into herself in her attempts to navigate the fraught atmosphere and series of secrets, lies and evasions in her family life. While this gives her an understanding of how to avoid conflict, it ironically means that she hides behind a mask in order to avoid conflict at school. Harry lies to Lauren, he and Eileen keep secrets from her, they lie to each other. The story is an indictment of the destructive nature of deceit as well as an exploration of the fears that underlie such behaviour.

## Alienation and entrapment

Protagonists in *Runaway* feel alienated from their families or society, and powerless to change this. They feel trapped in unhappy marriages, unhappy families, their place in society, in unfulfilled lives. Munro uses the settings and imagery in her stories to reflect the oppressive atmosphere, weight of expectation and lack of choices available to them. A close analysis of the imagery, section titles and places in 'Powers' reveals Nancy's lingering regret, the limited options she and Tessa had, particularly as women, and the effects of their difference in class and family circumstances. In 'Chance', Juliet retreats into contemplation of the landscape passing by the train window, finding solace in its 'Rocks, trees, water, snow'. Munro uses the scene where Eric points out the constellations to Juliet and she reciprocates with explanations of the myths to foreshadow their future relationship and to suggest a possible reason for Juliet taking a 'chance' to seek him out far from the confines of her home town. That this place is a small island suggests that she could be replacing one form of entrapment for another. While she has changed her place of residence, she still feels like an outsider.

Robin feels alienated and an outsider in her home and town, paradoxically reveling in her anonymity in Stratford during her yearly trip to the theatre. Munro uses her glimpses 'through the train window' to represent the temporary sense of warmth and fulfilment she gains from this annual respite from the life she is trapped in: 'There was a radiance behind [that life] ... expressed by the sunlight ... and long shadows on the summer fields, like the remains of the play in her head.' (p. 239).

## Time and memory

Munro's choice of non-linear, omniscient narration allows the reader to witness the fallibility of memory as the protagonists reflect, at times, how things weren't as they remembered. In 'Soon', when she visits her parents with baby Penelope, Juliet re-evaluates her idea of where home is and decides that it is not in Whale Bay with Eric.

The past woven through the stories like this reveals the disappointments, rejections, frustrations and misunderstandings that have motivated characters' choices, as well as the fondness with which they remember an idealised time or childhood. In 'Powers', which spans generations, Nancy doesn't want to live in the past, she wants 'to open it up and get one good look.' Her dream about a changed future for Tessa may at some level be her recognition that choices made in the past can have unexpected, unintended consequences and a desire to right a wrong. The Juliet series spans three generations, enabling Munro to set the factors that shaped Juliet's life against the changing familial and social setting. This prompts the questions, to what extent does the past shape the future, and can we ever escape it?

Some of the runaways in Munro's stories re-escape into the world they were running from. Grace is clearly unsettled when years later she revisits the place she escaped by accepting Mr Travers' bribe, but Munro affirms her choice to seize a way out of the life she is trapped in.

## Love and betrayal

Many of Munro's characters are looking for love or seem vaguely aware of some emotional gap in their lives. In 'Passion', Grace seems drawn to Maury's family and to enjoy the closeness of their Sunday family meals. While her elderly aunt and uncle obviously care for her, she is dimly aware of something missing; perhaps it is that to her the Travers family seem to have everything that she does not: wealth, stability and companionship. Of

course as the story unfolds, cracks appear in this outwardly happy family, revealing the tensions beneath. Mrs Travers' strange request that Grace look after Neil is the catalyst for Grace's discovery of the passion of sexual attraction, and Maury sees her car trip with his brother as a betrayal. It could be argued that the whole family blame Grace for his death in the car crash and view her perceived responsibility as a betrayal of their friendship and trust. However, Grace's refusal to lie to Maury is more honest than continuing to pretend they have a future together in a passionless marriage. It would seem Munro endorses this honesty and Grace's acceptance of the thousand dollar bribe Mr Travers offers her to break her engagement to Maury.

In 'Runaway', Clark equates love with power over Carla, and while Carla acknowledges that what attracted her to him at first was sex, she perpetuates the unhappy cycle, firstly, with her attempt to spark his jealousy in order to maintain the excitement of their attraction with her lie about her next door neighbour attempting to molest her, and then by aborting her flight to a new life in Vancouver.

Juliet and Robin both construct fantasy love affairs, Juliet to avoid the pain of previous disastrous relationships and Robin in the hope of escaping the unfulfilling home life she endures as carer for her sister.

Nancy and Wilf's marriage seems based on societal expectation rather than love or passion, and the details of their relationship are not revealed. The reader might see a contrast between Nancy's easy going relationship with Ollie and her compliance with social expectations about marriage and married life. The end of the story, where Wilf has died mentally ill and Ollie has proven to have betrayed both Tessa's and Nancy's trust, suggests that Munro views neither relationship as truly fulfilling for Nancy, and perhaps that Munro values a traditional view of marriage.

### Illness, carers and caring

Munro appears to endorse the unselfishness of carers, as the stories reveal the pressures on individuals and families when a loved one is unwell. The stories feature characters that are ill or disabled, physically or mentally, and need care: Juliet's mother Sara, Eric's wife Anne, Robin's sister Joanne (and Daniel's brother Alexander), Nancy's husband Wilf, Lauren's mother Eileen. While Munro characterises those unwell as needy, querulous, demanding and selfish, the family member caring for them seems to do it unquestioningly, despite some loss of their

aspirations and personal freedom. In 'Powers', Munro contrasts Nancy's unselfish care of Wilf with Ollie's unwillingness to care for Tessa after his exploitation of her powers damages her mind. Ollie commits her to an institution, exhibiting a callous lack of compassion that highlights his totally selfish, pecuniary interest and desire for fame. Nancy's dream at the end of the story suggests that she feels responsible for Tessa's plight as she introduced the pair and did not undertake Tessa's care when she reached out for help.

Munro's depiction of the carers suggests that although they accept their role it can create resentment and unhappiness, imprisoning them in circumstances beyond their control. When so many of the characters run away from the restrictions their home and family place upon them it is interesting that others like Harry, Eric and Robin do not. Guilt seems to motivate Eric, and Robin compromises by escaping once a year to the theatre. She cares for Joanne but creates a new life for herself after Joanne's death. The reader can imagine the many secretly resentful hours she may have spent with the bitter Joanne and next-door neighbour Willard. It is ironic that Robin has trained as a nurse and in her new life she works with psychiatric patients and satisfies her love of escape through theatre by acting in an amateur company.

### Suggested classroom activities

To compile an overview of the issues and themes raised in *Runaway*, ask students to make a digital copy of this table. Once they have a list of which stories raise which issues and themes, they will be able to discuss Munro's stance, and how we know this.

(Their reading of the stories may suggest other ideas that they wish to prioritise and of course the themes overlap; another relevant theme, for instance, is survival.)

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Stories</b>	<b>What values are evident?</b>	<b>Evidence</b>
Society			
Families			
Communication, truth and lies			
Love and betrayal			
Entrapment and alienation			
Illness, carers and caring			
Time, memory and the past			

- Write the introductory paragraph to an essay that explores Munro's stance on one or more of these themes; what values are evident?
- Develop a proposition on the issue and write a 500-word essay to justify it, using at least three of the stories. Share these in class and discuss readers' different interpretations.
- Explore one or more of these themes in a story that has an unresolved ending.

## Close study

### Runaway

**'For three or four days they had been just too busy ... She held out against the temptation.'** (pp. 44-47).

This excerpt, the conclusion to 'Runaway', contains Sylvia's letter to Carla that tells her of the return of Flora the pet goat. From the moment in the story that describes when Flora switched her allegiance to Carla (p. 9), Munro has made her a symbol of Carla. Flora seems to have run away as Carla herself ran away to live with Clark. Sylvia's account of Flora's reappearance confronts Carla with the possibility that Clark has done something to Flora, as he has not mentioned her reappearance.

1. Find all the references to Flora in the story. In what ways does the pet goat represent Carla and her relationship with Clark?
2. What does Sylvia's letter tell us about her and her feelings for Carla?
3. How does Carla react to the revelation that Flora returned and has disappeared again? What is the 'murderous needle' in her lungs?
4. List the things that could have happened to Flora. Which one is the most likely, and how do we know?
5. What emotions are evoked by the image of bones buried beneath 'bare trees where the buzzards had held their party'?
6. How likely is Carla to give in to the temptation to visit the tree?
7. Discuss students' interpretations of the character Clark, and the values implied in this story.

### Trespasses

**'Can't we go in the kitchen? ... She was so sick of these burrs that she wanted to beat her hands and yell out loud, but she knew that the only thing she could do was just sit and wait.'** (pp. 231-235).

Here, in the final pages of the story, Munro reveals the reasons for the mysterious trip to the forest in the snow that begins 'Trespasses'. In the penultimate scene, Harry explains to Lauren the history of her birth after the death of her adopted sister, also called Lauren, and Eileen's trauma after the accident. He says that Delphine 'made the mistake of thinking [the adopted baby] was you' (p. 232). He claims that as a family they are going to expunge the misery and

blame. Munro's third person omniscient narration and episodic plot have allowed the reader glimpses of the confusing world Lauren negotiates in her quest to survive with her identity intact. Harry's explanation explains the 'truth', no doubt edited to ensure he is free from responsibility for the secrets and deceits that have pervaded their lives.

1. What does Harry and Eileen's discussion of the idea of having an abortion reveal about each of them? What effect does it have on Lauren? What is your opinion of them telling her all this?
2. How likely is it that the bizarre little ashes-scattering ceremony is going to do what Harry claims, e.g. wipe out the misery and blame?
3. Munro gives us detail about Delphine and Lauren's actions and thoughts; what does it suggest about who this ceremony is really intended to help?
4. Discuss the internal monologue that might have been running through the mind of Lauren while this is happening: 'and they all said, "This is Lauren," with Delphine's voice very quiet, mumbling, and Eileen's full of strained sincerity and Harry's sonorous, presiding, deeply serious.' What might Delphine, Eileen and Harry have been thinking? What view do readers have of how Delphine might feel about the decision to name Lauren after the dead adopted baby?
5. Eileen mutters the words from the Lord's Prayer, 'Forgive us our sins. Our trespasses. Forgive us our trespasses.' In your opinion, what sins have they committed, and against whom? Are they seeking forgiveness, and if so, do they experience it?
6. What do the burrs clinging to Lauren's pyjamas and fingers represent?
7. Compare Lauren with Juliet and Penelope from the trilogy of stories. How likely is it that Lauren will run away from her home and family the way they did?
8. What comment on parents and children is Munro making in this story?

### Powers

**'She was a girl who would drink untreated water .... But she had to get hold of her excitement and Ollie of his off-kilter attraction and surprise.'** (pp. 287-293).

From 'Girl in a Middy', this excerpt describes a pivotal moment in the story. Nancy seems to spend far more time with Wilf's cousin Ollie than with Wilf, whom she is shortly to marry. Ollie and Nancy have an easy-going, friendly relationship that Nancy's

diaries have described thus far. Here the omniscient third person narrator reveals Ollie's point of view, in particular, his view of Nancy. The visit sparks in Ollie an interest and attraction to Tessa that proves fateful.

1. Ollie feels that he is destined for something special, but that Nancy would have to settle for less, 'as she had already done—being a girl' (p. 288). What does this section of the story reveal about the lives of girls and women in a small provincial town in the time when the beginning of the story is set? What has changed years later when Nancy is an elderly woman?
2. Discuss the relationship between Tessa and Nancy. Why does Nancy feel guilty after the visit? What does Munro foreshadow?
3. What hints are there that Ollie might not be as open and friendly as he seems?
4. Compare Tessa as she appears here with the Tessa in Nancy's dream on page 331.
5. Compare Tessa with Ailo from 'Chance' and Irene from 'Soon'. What role do such female figures play in the lives of Munro's protagonists?
6. Tessa's clairvoyance is the 'power' described in 'Girl in a Middy'. Is the story just about this? How many other powers can you identify, and what is Munro suggesting about them?
7. How does this final story fit into the collection as a whole?

## Further activities

---

- Ask each student to frame a question that expresses one of Munro's concerns for each story. For example, 'What are the consequences of making decisions on a whim?' They could swap questions with a neighbour and list the answer/s Munro seems to give in the story. They should provide some evidence!
- Read Ted Gioia's review of *Runaway* at <www.thenewcanon.com/> (see **References**). Set up a Google Doc and ask students to write a response to the review. Publish as a class blog.
- Beginnings and endings: Assign a pair or small group of students to each story. Ask them to design a chart to represent the way Munro invites the reader into the story, the moment of revelation for the protagonist, and what has changed (or not) at the end.
- Imagery: Ask students to fill a Google Doc with their favourite images from *Runaway*. Accompany each quote with an explanation of what the image represents.
- Group story to include in the collection: Ask students to read the story pattern Jonathan Franzen describes in his introduction to *Runaway*. Use one of Munro's themes and devise a story plot to illustrate it. Give it a one-word title. This activity would be a way to introduce a creative response task.
- Devise a table that gives an overview of the collection according to title/key metaphor.
- Interview Alice Munro: Devise ten questions. Role play in pairs. This might be a good revision activity once students have completed their initial study.
- Research the Southern Ontario Gothic genre.
- Read or listen to Katrin Berndt's (2010) essay: 'The Ordinary Terrors of Survival: Alice Munro and the Canadian Gothic'. Discuss Berndt's analysis of Munro's characterisation in the story 'Runaway', and apply these tropes to another story:

I suggest reading the three main characters as ironically subverted versions of Gothic stock characters. Carla the young wife, Clark her husband, and Sylvia the older friend, are representations of such archetypes as the damsel in distress, the dark lover, and the wise woman, respectively. All three characters are entangled in a triangle of suppressed desires and contested power relations. (Berndt 2010).

- The context of these stories invites an interpretation that takes a feminist perspective. For example, see the excerpt from ‘Powers’ examined in **Close Study**. For each story, discuss:
  - Who has power and independence, men or women?
  - Is a girl or woman’s life changed as a result of marriage?
  - Does the story criticise inequality of males and females?
  - Ask students to frame an analytical text response question that invites a feminist interpretation of *Runaway*.
- A challenge: Read the psychoanalytic interpretation of the story ‘Runaway’ written by Raheleh Bahador and Esmali Zohdi (2015). The article is long and complex; however, you may want to use part of the article to introduce the notion of a psychoanalytical reading of one or more of the stories. This would fit with some work on the gothic elements in Munro’s stories. Questions could also lead students to a similar analysis of another story:
  - Are there silences in the text that suggest there are things a character doesn’t wish to talk about?
  - Does the character have dreams? What might these symbolise?
  - Is there a difficult relationship between a mother and son or a father and daughter? What might these conflicts suggest about the child’s maturity?

## Key quotes

### Runaway

The days passed, and Carla didn’t go near that place. She held out against temptation. (p. 47).

This is the final sentence of the story. Carla has made a deliberate decision not to investigate the bare tree where the buzzards had a ‘party’. Afraid that she might find Flora’s bones and that this will confirm her suspicion that Clark might have killed Flora, Carla opts for uncertainty so that she can avoid the reality of her subjugation to Clark. In doing so, she succumbs to her fear and to the violence lurking beneath her relationship with her husband.

### Chance

Personal fate was not the point, anyway. What drew her in—enchanted her, actually—was the very indifference, the repetition, the carelessness and contempt for harmony, to be found on the scrambled surface of the Precambrian shield. (p. 54).

Juliet, watching the landscape ‘going by’ through the train window, reflects on the way her parents and teachers had urged her to get out into the world and the possibilities fate might hold. Munro’s image suggests that Juliet is drawn to the secrets beneath the surface of life.

### Soon

He appraised her, covertly, perhaps he saw her now as a woman displaying the fruits of a boldly sexual life. Juliet, of all people. The gawk, the scholar. (p. 103).

Juliet gains satisfaction from the thought that she might have defied people’s expectations of her when she sees Charlie Little staring. So long pressured to fit in by her parents, she gains some pleasure from flaunting her unmarried-mother status which she seems to hope gives her a mysterious experienced air.

### Silence

*Penelope does not have a use for me. Maybe she can’t stand me. It’s possible.* (p. 158).

Juliet is imagining how she might explain to Gary, if they could be a couple, her hurt that Penelope has removed herself from Juliet’s life. This resonates with the reader when they think of the ending of ‘Soon’,

where Juliet silently packed away the tea things and ignored her mother's plea. It is ironic that Penelope has made a life for herself that seems very like the one Juliet rejected when she went to Whale Bay.

## Passion

She herself did not understand how cold she was—she believed that her show of eagerness must be leading to the pleasures she knew about, in solitude and imagining, and she felt it was up to Maury to take over. Which he would not do.

These sieges left them both disturbed and slightly angry or ashamed, so that they could not stop kissing, clinging, using fond words, to make it up to each other as they said good night. (p. 173).

Munro's account of Maury and Grace's unsatisfactory attempts at physical intimacy reveals the gulf between Grace's romantic expectations of love and lovemaking, her desire for passion, and what seems to her Maury's lack of passion based on his ideas of how he should behave. The sad irony is that perhaps they have drifted into a relationship that is partly driven by the social expectation to get engaged and married before having sex.

## Trespasses

'See—what I am telling you is very upsetting to Eileen and that's why it has got to be a secret. That's why you were never told about it, because Eileen cannot stand to be reminded. So now you understand?'

She said what she had to say. Yes. (p. 203).

This excerpt reveals—especially in the words 'she had to say'—the pattern of avoidance and deception at the heart of the family's relationships. Harry is avoiding telling the truth in order to avoid all of them having to face the history of the baby whose ashes have been found. He appears unaware of the horror of Lauren's macabre discovery and how she must be feeling.

## Tricks

She is not going to spare a moment's gratitude for the trick that has been played. But she'll come round to being grateful for the discovery of it. That, at least—the discovery which leaves everything whole, right up to the moment of frivolous intervention. Leaves you outraged, but warmed from a distance, clear of shame. (pp. 268-269).

When Robin reflects on the trick fate has played on her, she does not dwell on what she has lost,

but rather on how it salvages her pride and self-confidence. The story ends on a wistful note, Robin wishing she could tell Daniel what happened.

## Powers

Yet he had an idea—he couldn't have mentioned this without making a joke of it—that he was meant for something unusual, that his life would have some meaning to it. Maybe that was what drew them together. (p. 287).

Ollie and Nancy seem to relate in a way that Wilf and Nancy do not. They are at ease with each other, yet Nancy feels the need to show off Tessa as something special about the town. The incident at Tessa's house foreshadows the ways their lives will move forward from this point.



## Analytical text response

---

1. How far would you agree that Munro's characters do not solve their problems by running away from them?
2. 'The fantasies Munro's characters create about their lives are what doom them to unhappiness.' Discuss.
3. 'We cannot escape the past; it determines our future choices.' Discuss the extent to which Munro's characters resolve past conflicts.
4. 'Munro's protagonists lie not just to others, but also to themselves. Discuss the consequences of lies and deceit.'
5. 'The stories in *Runaway* suggest that once an outsider, always an outsider.' Discuss Munro's exploration of loneliness and alienation.
6. How do Munro's stories evoke the desperation and indecisiveness of her protagonists?
7. 'Munro's bleak small-town homes bordered by the threatening wilderness reflect the isolation and uncertainties of their inhabitants.' Discuss fear and courage in *Runaway*.
8. 'The stories in *Runaway* depict families that are so fragmented that they are doomed forever to search for escape.' Discuss.
9. To what extent are Munro's characters paralysed by fear?
10. "... it's what happens at home that you try to protect, as best you can, for as long as you can." 'The characters in *Runaway* find home a source of both pain and comfort.' Discuss the ways Munro represents home in her collection of short stories.

## Creative text response

---

If you haven't done this previously, listen to the interview, Nobel Prize in Literature (2013) on YouTube, 'Alice Munro, In Her Own Words'. Explore with students some of Munro's ideas about writing. For example, how would they rewrite the ending of 'The Little Mermaid'?

Munro says she first started writing stories with happy endings, then wanted to write ones with tragic endings. Are any of the endings in *Runaway* happy? Students could explore how to change the ending of one story, noting other things they would have to change in the story to do this, like plot moments and characterisation, maybe even imagery.

Students should use what they learned about Munro's writing craft in the **Language and Style** section's activities to plan and do their written explanation. They should give examples from the text and from their own writing to explain the decisions they have made. The gaps and silences in the stories provide opportunities to explore the text creatively, either in written form or oral tasks such as an internal monologue or a speech. The topics below can be adapted to either a written or oral response.

- Write a story of your own to be published as part of a revised edition of *Runaway*. It will be necessary to practise emulating Munro's syntax and vocabulary—read some aloud, perhaps recording it so that you can listen to the language.
- Write an epilogue to the story 'Runaway'.
- Write a story of your own titled 'Runaway'.
- Write the internal monologue of Tessa as she sees Nancy approach her bakery.
- Write Penelope's story, or Eric's.
- Write a story that explores the pain of unresolved family conflict, using memories as a narrative device.
- Write about lost opportunities using a literary work as a motif.
- Use the archetypes of the damsel in distress, the dark lover, and the wise woman in a triangle of suppressed desires and contested power relations.
- Write about the ways people seek to assuage their loneliness and unhappiness.
- Write and deliver Nancy's eulogy.
- 'Then she thought that some shift must have taken place, at that time, which she had not remembered. Some shift concerning where home was.' (p. 125). Explore the meanings of home in a non-linear narrative.
- Use letters, myths and or dreams in a piece of writing that explores the themes of love and betrayal.

## References

---

- Bahador, R & Zohdi, E, 2015, 'Alice Munro's *Runaway* in the mirror of Sigmund Freud', *Research Gate*, <<https://www.researchgate.net/>>
- Beardwood, R 2018, *Literature for Senior Students*, fifth edition, Insight Publications, Cheltenham, Victoria, Australia.
- Berndt, Katrin 2010, 'The Ordinary Terrors of Survival: Alice Munro and the Canadian Gothic', *Short Story in English* 55, Autumn, <<https://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1079>>
- Buried in Print* 2014, blog, "'Powers" Alice Munro', <<http://www.buriedinprint.com/>>
- Gioia, T 2005, 'Runaway by Alice Munro', review, *The New Canon*, <<http://www.thenewcanon.com/runaway.html>>
- Munro, Alice 2006, *Runaway*, Vintage Books, London.
- Nobel Prize* 2013, biography, <[www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2013/Munro/biographical](http://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2013/Munro/biographical)>
- Nobel Prize* 2013, YouTube, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EgKC\\_SDhOKk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EgKC_SDhOKk)>
- Thacker, R 2013, 'Alice Munro: Biographical', *The Nobel Prize*, <[www.nobelprize.org](http://www.nobelprize.org)>



**IS** 2020  
**INSIDE  
STORIES**

**Runaway**  
by Alice Munro



**41187587**

1/134-136 Cambridge Street  
Collingwood VIC 3066  
T 9411 8500 F 9411 8511

[www.vate.org.au](http://www.vate.org.au)

**VATE**

VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH