The first stories published by Alice Munro (as Alice Laidlaw) appeared in Folio, the magazine of the University of Western Ontario, in 1950 and 1951. They are written from an omniscient narrative perspective and their subject matter is not entirely within the writer’s experience.\footnote{1} The story “At The Other Place,” published in the Canadian Forum in September 1955, marks a significant change, for in it Munro draws upon her family’s circumstances, employing the first-person narration that, according to Robert Thacker “became characteristic” of her fiction.\footnote{2} Of the 15 stories in Munro’s prize-winning collection, Dance of the Happy Shades, twelve are written from a first-person narrative perspective. Most of these are what the writer, in the often-cited interview with J. R. (Tim) Struthers, describes as her “real material” stories, for example, “Walker Brothers Cowboy,” “Boys and Girls,” and “The Peace of Utrecht.”\footnote{3}

“The Peace of Utrecht” is recognized as one of her “breakthrough stories” and it represents a watershed in her writing.\footnote{4} It is the first of several stories recurring regularly in Munro’s oeuvre, which explore the female narrator’s filial guilt after the prolonged illness and death of her mother. In addition, “The Peace of Utrecht” illustrates several traits that characterize the writer’s first-person narrative, which are developed and more fully exploited in her later work. Among these traits are temporal and spatial shifts; the systematic, purposeful arrangement of narrative sections; and the use of tense and aspect to convey nuances in the narrator’s retrospection. The adult narrator is not the same as the young girl who is sometimes the subject of the focalization; this “dialectic between present and past, between experience and understanding” creates a kind of dual voice akin to the narration in Harper Lee’s To Kill A Mockingbird (1960), and Margaret Laurence’s A Bird in the House (1970).\footnote{5}

I. Duncan, Alice Munro’s Narrative Art
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Both the aforementioned texts exemplify the genre of the *Bildungsroman*, whose narrator/protagonist develops greater wisdom and understanding in the course of the narrative by dint of several educative experiences and often painful lessons. In the final pages of Lee’s novel, Scout Finch surely affirms the author’s moral message when she acknowledges, “you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them.” And Laurence’s narrator Vanessa MacLeod has learned, through processes of mourning, to value her indebtedness to her ancestors, especially her grandfather, who “proclaims himself in my veins.” Munro’s narrator neither finds comfort in nor derives any benefit from the new knowledge she gleans: what she does learn serves only to confirm the gulf between her and her sister, Maddy, and to augment the burden of her filial guilt. In this story, the darkest recesses of the narrator’s “secret, guilty estrangement” are thrown open for scrutiny.

“The Peace of Utrecht” is the longest story in the collection, and it is more formally arranged than its companions, for not only does it contain several ellipses, it is also divided into two numbered sections. The use of numerals is unusual in Munro’s fiction, and in this instance I believe the numbers draw attention to how similar the opening sentences of both segments are. Each section begins with an announcement of the return of Helen, the narrator, to her former home, now her sister’s house, and each return has brought unwelcome truths. In the first section she realizes that the two sisters have grown irrevocably apart from each other, Helen having left her hometown, Jubilee, many years before, while her younger sister stayed in “that discouraging house” to look after their stricken mother in “her ten-year’s vigil” (p. 195). Helen’s visit to her former home takes place a few months after their mother’s funeral. In the second section, the narrator learns of the harrowing nature of her mother’s last few weeks, discovering, from her aunts, that her sister might have been more of a comfort during that time.

The opening sentence of the first section reads, “I have been at home now for three weeks and it has not been a success” (p. 190). The perfective aspect of the present tense conveys anterior time, during which certain events have occurred that substantiate the narrator’s assertion that her visit home has not gone well. Successive statements document the extent of the sisters’ disharmony. Most of these contain simple present tense verbs, and in the contiguous clauses, “Silences disturb us. We laugh immoderately” (p. 190), the tense could more precisely be labeled the state present, a category used to express timelessness and stasis. Another category of the present tense, the habitual present, is used when the narrator describes how the sisters spend their evenings: “At night we often