

# *Exploration of Runaway and Return in Alice Munro's Runaway*

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**Abstract:** With the rapid development of modern society, people seem to get lost in the pursuit of happiness and freedom and there appeared literature works of the theme of runaway, discussing why people ran away, what they ran away from and where they returned, as is shown in Alice Munro's *Runaway* with the example of Carla and other characters in the story. By analyzing the characters' runaway, it is proved that people ran away to return with the hope of living a worthy life despite the hurts and imperfection, which may be one reason why the story brought the writer praise and prize.

## 1. Introduction

As American writer Christopher Darlington Morley said, the opening and closing of doors are the most significant actions of mans life. [1] Since Ibsen's Nora slammed the door and ran away from her family, countless Noras from the Chinese and foreign literary world have run away, including Alice Munro's Carla in *Runaway*. However, Carla is not the only one who ran away in the story. The Jamiesons, Clark, Flora and even the librarian from town did run away. People get lost in the pursuit of happiness and freedom. This is still confusing and will continue to bother human beings. After all, it is what people started to pursue the day they were born.

## 2. Alice Munro's Runaway

*Runaway* is the title of a collection of short stories written by Alice Munro, a writer of contemporary short stories born in Ontario, Canada in 1931. *Runaway* was published in 2004, brought her the Canadian Giller Prize, and was selected as the New York Times Book of the Year. During her lifetime, she wrote 11 collections of short stories and a collection of similar stories. Alice Munro won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2013.

Carla is the heroine of a short story named *Runaway*. Carla lived in a remote town in Ontario with her husband Clark and they made a living by running a racecourse. Their business didn't run well with the unfavorable location and bad weather. Carla sometimes helped her neighbor, Mrs.Jamieson, to support the family. Life became hard with time passing by. Carla felt depressed for lack of money and love in the family. She broke down while chatting with Sylvia (Mrs.Jamieson) who just came back from Greece after her husband Leon died. Carla complained about her suffering

in marriage in tears. Sylvia helped her to escape the town to start a new life in Toronto. However, Carla finally changed her mind and decided to get off the bus to Toronto and returned to Clark.

### 3. Female characters' runaway

The story centers on the heroine's runaway with no doubt, but other characters did run away. Alice Munro tells the story so tactfully that a careful reader can predict that they will return for sure.

Firstly, with time passing by the weather was changing from being rainy to cloudy and bright, which indicated that things would get better like the change of weather. In the beginning of the story, it is described as a gloomy period, which goes in this way: "This was the summer of rain and more rain"[2]. It is not enough to use a "rain" to modify the summer to impress the readers how hopeless it was to have so much rain. It seemed that the rain would never ever stop. This reflected Carla's depression and despair at that time.

But Alice Munro is not going to let her down, which is shown in the description of the weather: "Just enough to get your hopes up—the clouds whitening and thinning and letting through a diffuse brightness that never got around to being real sunshine..."(Alice Munro, 2004:5) Indeed, there is always a way out. There may be loads of worries and disappointment, whereas there is still something worthy, such as her planning of their life, for she liked the rhythm of her regular chores, the high space under the barn roof. Ever when she was getting away, leaving the land where she was once living with Clark, it occurred to her that she must tell Clark about this that perhaps they had chosen what was for some freakish reason a very wet and dreary corner of the country, and there were other places where they could have been successful. She was imagining a brighter future then. The world she chose to live in after abandoning the old one with her parents was what she loved, where she felt "authentic" even when she was hurt by Clark. At least, she had company, her animals and the country. After all, all she really wanted and had wanted all her life was to work with animals and live in the country.

In fact, this was her second time to leave everything behind. The first was from her parents' home. She eloped with Clark when she was still an unsophisticated girl at the time, with her hope and belief in Clark's love and their future. She thought of him as the architect of the life ahead. She proudly declared to her mother: "I have always felt the need of a more authentic kind of life, I know I cannot expect you to understand this." But this escape did not bring her an ideal life; on the contrary, it put her into a deeper predicament. So Carla fled again, only to find that runaway was not the best choice this time.

On her way to Toronto, the sun was shining, as it had been for some time. Carla thought about her life with Clark and found that she would not live without him. She thought of her escape from her parents with Clark. She considered him as the architect of the life ahead of them, herself as captive, her submission both proper and exquisite. She made the choice and got the life she wanted. But leaving everything behind this time seemed wrong. She could not bear a future without Clark. She felt she would be lost. Alice Munro repeated the statement to emphasize Carla's feelings for Clark. So she returned to the man and the world in which she would not be lost. Then came the days when the bright weather continued. Carla has more and more moments of enlightenment. In the story, it is said that as the dry golden days of fall came on—an encouraging and profitable season and Carla found that she had got used to the sharp thought that had lodged in her. As is known to all, although it does hurt a lot, it is not bad to break down, for it is right from the broken part that light can come into the dark world.

Secondly, the little white goat Flora's runaway and return reflects Carla's bewilderment and lucidity. Flora kept the horses company in the barn and in the fields. When Flora was still a half-grown kid, Clark brought her home from a farm where he had gone to bargain for some horse

tackle because he had heard about how a goat was able to bring a sense of ease and comfort into a horse stable and he wanted to try it. It turned out that Flora was a good company not only to the horses but also to Clark and Carla. At first she had been Clark's pet entirely, following him everywhere, dancing for his attention and her resemblance to a guileless girl in love had made them both laugh. But as she grew older she seemed to attach herself to Carla. In some sense, Flora is an intimate company to Carla, or it can even be said that Flora's growth symbolizes Carla's.

When Carla met Clark, she was eighteen and just out of high school. She was getting mature after living with her husband.

Unfortunately, Flora ran away to nowhere one day, which was a hint and cause of Carla's runaway. Although Clark had posted a Lost Goat notice on the Web, there was still no sign of Flora. Clark assumed that Flora might have just gone off to find herself a billy. Carla looked for Flora desperately and had dreamt of Flora several times. In one dream Flora ran away when she saw Carla coming. Her leg seemed to be hurt but she ran anyway. She led Carla to a barbed-wire barricade of the kind that might belong on some battlefield, and then Flora slipped through it, hurt leg and all, just slithered through like a white eel and disappeared. She felt sorry for its missing but it was put in this way: "It was almost a relief, though, to feel the single pain of missing Flora, of missing Flora perhaps forever, compared to the mess she had got into concerning Mrs. Jamieson, and her seesaw misery with Clark. At least Flora's leaving was not on account of anything that she---Carla---had done wrong." (Alice Munro, 2004: 16) This can be seen as an indication that the following runaway is the right choice for Carla. She had every reason to run away.

What a coincidence it was that Flora returned the night Carla came back to Clark. But Flora did not return to the barn and the fields where she kept company with the horses. Instead, she appeared from a wide shallow patch of land near the Jamiesons' just in time when Clark was asking Sylvia not to interfering in his life with his wife. Alice Munro described the scene with vivid words as following: "The fog was there tonight, had been there all this while...But now at one point there was a change. The fog had thickened, taken on a separate shape, transformed itself into something spiky and radiant. 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." Both Clark and Sylvia were frightened and shocked, which can be seen by their reactions: 'Jesus Christ,' Clark said softly and devoutly. And he grabbed hold of Sylvia's shoulder. She considered it in the way that he did it either to protect her or to reassure himself. And in Sylvia's description of the reappearance of Flora in her letter to Carla, she told the story, "But truly terrifying. I think I shrieked out loud. I had never in my life felt such bewitchment, in the true sense. I suppose I should be honest and say fear. There we were, two adults, frozen, and then out of the fog comes little lost Flora." (Alice Munro, 2004:45) A little dancing white goat, Flora returned in such a magical way that both Sylvia and Clark were frightened and confused. So did Carla. It was never expected by Sylvia and Clark that she would return shortly after her runaway.

Actually Carla is not the only one that runs away and returns. Sylvia is the other one. In the very beginning of the story, Sylvia made her presence by driving a car topping the little rise in the road that around Carla's home. She struggled her way in the road with an expression portrayed as "determined and exasperated and amused at her exasperation—just the way Mrs. Jamieson would look negotiating such a road". (Alice Munro, 2004:4)

That was Sylvia's obvious and reasonable runaway after her husband passed away. She went to Greece to enjoy the sunshine and the sea in a world without her husband. When she came back, Carla came to help her with some chores, and Sylvia told her something about Greece, "It's wonderful. And then I figured out what there was to do, and there were just these few simple things but they could fill the day." In Greece she enjoyed the meals, got rest, did some reading and went for a swim. What a wonderful time!

However, Sylvia did not enjoy a wonderful life with Mr. Jamieson though She “seemed so haunted and bewildered, as if she was walking in her sleep” after her husband died. Otherwise, she would not have had those struggles with the ride from her college to the house, “the odd-looking triangular affair” that her husband built years ago.

Carla and Clark had known the Jamiesons only as neighbors who kept to themselves up until the year before. She taught botany at the college forty miles away, so she had to spend a good deal of her time on the road. He was a poet. But he seemed to be occupied with other things. Sylvia was about twenty years younger than her husband. She did not get what she longed for from the marriage, no children, no common interest and viewpoint. She taught him the name of every wildflower, and sadly he forgot. As a poet, he may have no interest in the names of the flowers. It may be tolerable to forget their names. What's worse, the previous spring she went out once and picked him a small bunch of dog's-tooth violets, but he looked at them as he sometimes looked at her with mere exhaustion, disavowal. There was no love and affection at all. When it came to the magical reappearance of the little goat, she even wondered if, possibly, Leon could have had something to do with it. If she was a poet she would write a poem about something like this. But in her experience the subjects that she thought a poet could write about did not appeal to Leon. How bitter she felt! She suffered in this marriage and she did not run away. Instead, she got into the bed but it was impossible to stay there, so she lay down on the sofa, where she had slept for the last three months of Leon's life. In her husband's countable living days, she chose to be away from him, only within the house.

After her husband died, Sylvia took actions. As Ms. Munro presented in the story, “all the paraphernalia of illness had been removed. The room that had been Sylvia and her husband's bedroom and then his death chamber had been cleaned out and tidied up to look as if nothing had ever happened in it.” Sylvia tried to get rid off everything that had link with Leon. Every piece of clothing Leon had ever worn and some things he hadn't, including gifts from his sisters that had never been taken out of their packages, had been piled in the backseat of the car and delivered to the Thrift Shop. She dumped all the stuff into plastic bags to be hauled away as garbage. She even said, “I wish I hadn't taken the clothes to town. I wish I'd burned them all up in the incinerator.” The way she dealt with the things demonstrated her bitterness.

Sylvia did not run away when Leon was alive. But she did run away spiritually with Carla when she decided to help her. Deep down inside, Carla was her, the young version of Sylvia. That was why she bought Carla an expensive present, a bronze horse with a boy rider urging on to the limit of its strength, even though she did not mention that the boy had made her think of Carla. That was why she told her friend Ruth that Carla was not a lame duck at all. That was why she thought the brown linen jacket a mistake for herself and the style was too brusque, but she thought how handsome the girl had looked in the fresh clothes. She hoped that Carla would be brave enough to run away from the man who hurt her, instead of living like her, keeping in company with Leon till his death and rushing to abandon all his stuff to pretend that she had not been hurt by the man she loved. Unfortunately, Carla is Carla, not Sylvia or any other girl.

Even Joy Tucker, the owner of a quick-tempered little chestnut mare Lizzie, ran away from the “dump”. She boarded her horse Lizzie with Clark. She flared up and complained about the roof's not being fixed yet though there was nothing the matter with Lizzie actually, which irritated Clark who had formerly made the little mare his pet, and refused to have anything more to do with her. Consequently, her horse's feelings were hurt.

When she showed up again, tanned and friendly after holidays to hike in the Rocky Mountains, she and Clark joked as if nothing had happened.

#### 4. Male characters' runaway

Clark was a smart handsome man who hadn't waited even to finish high school and had altogether lost touch with his family. He thought families were like a poison in your blood. So he did run away from his family.

He had done all kinds of jobs before meeting Carla as a riding teacher, attendant in a mental hospital, a disc jockey on a radio station in Lethbridge, Alberta, a member of a road crew on the highways near Thunder Bay, an apprentice barber, a salesman in an Army Surplus store. And those were only the jobs he told her about. He was not well educated, but he was not lazy. He had his dream, his plan, to have a riding school, a horse stable, someplace out in the country. He was handsome, but not a playboy. Although scads of women were after him, they would take up riding just to get him as their teacher, he did not take pride in that and got annoyed when Carla teased him about his women. He took love and family serious. That was why Carla left everything behind even when her mother told her "You don't know what you're leaving behind", as she felt an "authentic" life with Clark.

However, Clark did not know how to deal with interpersonal relationship. According to Leon, he was "just unsure of himself, just a bit too friendly". Clark had fights with many people when he failed to communicate with them. When Carla told him that he flared up, he said that was what men do. So he ran away from face-to-face communication and sat in front of the computer, humming to himself as he often did. In the virtual world he enjoyed himself. He did not want to pay attention to anything but the computer screen.

There is another man who ran away. Leon, Sylvia's husband. He was a poet. Everybody knew that much. But he seemed to be occupied with other things. He improved the drainage system on his place, cleaning out the culvert and lining it with rocks. He dug and planted and fenced a vegetable garden, cut paths through the woods, looked after repairs on the house. It seemed that he did everything but writing poetry. He did not treasure his young wife when he sometimes looked at her---with mere exhaustion, disavowal. He left no unfinished work or scribbled drafts. He had told her, months before (his death), that he had pitched everything. And he had no regrets. He couldn't wait to run away from this world. He had never taken out the gifts from his sisters. He was a man who ran far away from his family. He was a poet who would not remember the names of wildflowers his wife taught him. What he did remember and write was unknown, but people learned from his obituary that "Leon Jamieson had been the recipient of a large prize, five years before his death. A prize for poetry."

#### 5. The meaning of runaway

People run away to return. Those people are just like the birds. In the book Alice Munro wrote: "Birds were everywhere. ...At first they just sat there, drying out their voluminous wings, lifting themselves occasionally for a trial flight, flapping around a bit, then composing themselves to let the sun and the warm air do their work. In a day or so they were restored, flying high, circling and dropping to earth, disappearing over the woods, coming back to rest in the familiar bare tree." (Alice Munro, 2004:43) Carla figured out what she really wanted on the way to Toronto and she returned to Clark as a deeper woman. "Though it was as if she had a murderous needle somewhere in her lungs, and by breathing carefully, she could avoid feeling it." (Alice Munro, 2004:46)

As for Clark, he got to know how important families meant to him because when he read Carla's note, he felt it was just like he went hollow inside. He told her if she ever went away, he'd feel like he didn't have anything left in him. Busy as he was now when Carla returned, he was never too tired, never cross. He had a better interaction with his wife and better relationship with others, and he

became high-spirited now, irresistible as when she had first known him. He learned to maintain a family, which he once thought poisonous.

And Sylvia didn't have to struggling to and fro the bumpy country road anymore because she took an apartment in the college town where she taught while the house Leon and his friends built was not up for sale---or at least there wasn't a sign out in front of it. She also learned something from the reappearance of both Flora and Carla and had a deeper insight into her own life. Though Leon ran away for good, he got some kind of posthumous award. He took refuge in the common and ordinary things, building his house and garden. The common and ordinary things serve certain functions and therefore retain the wholeness of nature.[3] So said Lin Yutang. So did Leon.

## 6. Conclusion

In the bustling world, it seems that everybody run away in their own way. Runaway is not the goal but a way to deal with problems. Just as Sylvia put in her letter to Carla, she had made the mistake of thinking somehow that Carla's happiness and freedom were the same thing. People all can make such a mistake. There is always something missing. So people keep making the same mistake so long as there are human beings. According to Lu Xun, freedom is not something that money can buy, but it can be sold for money [4], which explains the reason why people run away. Luckily, people run away to return because there is always something worthy, which is called happiness.

## References

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