

Pretending, Performance, and Escape

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Abstract

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In this essay, I examine the imaginative act of pretending in fiction as a performance of gender roles, as a survival and coping mechanism, and as a means of escaping from the harsh truths of reality. I argue that while pretending is often a way for women conform to strict socially and religiously imposed gender roles, pretending can also be a way of for women to imagine and inhabit alternate worlds that offer temporary relief from reality's social and factual constraints. I discuss my work in conversation with the works of other fiction writers whose characters and stories engage with pretending, including Alice Munro, Jamel Brinkley, and Yiyun Li. Through their characters, each of these writers explores the various circumstances that necessitate pretending and offers a unique perspective on what Jamel Brinkley calls "the performative self and the actual self."

Pretending, Performance, and Escape

“Now that Mary McQuade had come, I pretended not to remember her. It seemed the wisest thing to do” (Munro 30). So begins “Images,” a strange two-movement short story that appears in the debut collection of Alice Munro, a writer whose work has been especially galvanizing to my own. Told from the perspective of a young first-person female narrator, “Images” juxtaposes the unwelcome installment of Mary, a nurse and distant relative who comes to care for the narrator’s dying mother, and an unexpected encounter with Joe Phippen, a social outcast who lives in a makeshift, underground home in the woods. This coming-of-age story is remarkable to me for a few reasons, among them the surprising pairing of these seemingly disparate events, the depiction of the sexist treatment of unmarried women like Mary, and the portrayal of the narrator’s process of learning how to live with unwelcome truths. Perhaps what intrigues me the most is the imaginative act suggested in those opening lines: “I pretended not to remember her.” Initially, the narrator’s act of pretending feels like merely a childish game of make-believe. However, as the story progresses, the pretending begins to suggest a sort of rejection of reality, not just a rejection of Mary but of the harbinger of death that Mary comes to represent. Peering around the dismal house where her mother lies slowly dying, the narrator transfers her grief and anger onto Mary:

I could look up and see that emptiness, the stained corners, and feel, without knowing what it was, just what everybody else in the house must have felt—under the sweating heat the fact of death-contained, that little lump of magic ice. And Mary McQuade waiting in her starched white dress, big and gloomy as an iceberg herself, implacable, waiting and breathing. I held her responsible. So I pretended not to remember her. (31)

For the young narrator, pretending seems to function as a coping mechanism, a way of embodying Death into a form that the narrator feels she can talk back to, make fun of, and dismiss.

While this is perhaps the most obvious way of reading the narrator's pretending, another way I interpret the narrator's rejection of Mary is as psychological avoidance of the grim realities that women face, especially as they are evinced by the nature of Mary's existence as an unmarried woman, an "old maid" (35). The narrator observes how Mary is endlessly badgered about men due to her spinster status: "In my father's family of course it was what she was always teased about, what else was there?" (35) Later, after the narrator and her father return from their harrowing encounter with Joe Phippen in the woods, the father jokingly suggests that Joe and Mary could be a couple: "We found the one for you today, Mary.... Lives in a hole in the ground. You'd be as cosy as a groundhog, Mary" (43). In pairing Mary with a social outcast like Joe, even in jest, the father seems to underscore his perception of Mary's difference, her reduced status in the world as an unmarried woman. In the father's eyes, being an unmarried woman is nearly as socially unacceptable as being a person without housing or a person living with a mental health issue, as Joe is portrayed to be. Having observed how Mary is treated and the relative position she occupies in society, it is unsurprising that the narrator chooses to avoid Mary, to pretend not to remember her. In this act of pretending, the narrator both replicates society's dismissal of women who fall outside social norms and avoids dealing with the ominous implications Mary's existence has for her own fate as a girl who will one day be a woman too. Pretending not to remember Mary, effectively imagining the world without her in it, feels in some ways like a subversive act on the part of the narrator, a subconscious effort to displace the harsh realities that exist for women in the particular time and place that this story is set.

As a writer, I am interested in this imaginative act of pretending, especially when and as it is performed by women. I find myself wondering why and under what circumstances women pretend. What psychological function and effect does pretending have? Are there differences in how and why men and women pretend? Out of what necessities do women specifically reject reality and what other realities do they construct in their place? What roles do women perform in these alternate realities? How does pretending shape identity or perception of self? When I think about pretending as a function of story, of craft, I also wonder about the relationship between pretending, avoidance, and confrontation. Does the avoidant act of pretending ultimately and inevitably bring about and culminate in confrontation? These are questions that my writing tends to probe.

When I consider how pretending appears in the stories collected in my thesis, a few different patterns emerge. Pretending seems in many instances to be a way of conforming to strict socially and religiously imposed gender roles. In other instances, pretending seems to be a strategy for survival, a way of creating an alternate world where the harsh truths of reality can be neatly avoided.

Pretending as a performance of gender roles is displayed in Munro's story "Cortes Island." The narrator, a young recently married woman, adjusts to her new domestic role under the critical eye of her landlord, Mrs. Gorrie, a character who enforces society's strict heteronormative gender roles. Outwardly, the narrator performs her role as a good chaste woman and wife to Mrs. Gorrie's satisfaction, at least at first. For example, when the narrator and her husband Chess are first alone together in their new bedroom at Mrs. Gorrie's house, they pretend they were not about to engage in intimate relations when Mrs. Gorrie barges in with a plate of housewarming cookies, thus effectively preserving the narrator's appearance of respectability. In

other instances, the narrator pretends to be interested in going through the motions of well-mannered domestic social rituals: “We sat at her dining-room table. There was a lace cloth on it, and an octagonal mirror reflecting a ceramic swan. We drank coffee out of china cups and ate off small matching plates (more of those cookies, or gluey rain tarts or heavy scones) and touched tiny embroidered napkins to our lips to wipe away the crumbs” (120). Though inwardly she rebels against Mrs. Gorrie’s unsolicited lessons in homemaking and how to be a good wife, outwardly, the narrator politely accepts her advice: “[Mrs. Gorrie] told me things that had to do with my future, the house and the future she assumed I would have, and the more she talked the more I felt an iron weight on my limbs, the more I wanted to yawn and yawn in the middle of the morning, to crawl away and hide and sleep. But out loud I admired everything” (120). Gradually, the narrator embraces the role that she previously only identified with when Mrs. Gorrie was watching: “You would think marriage would have worked this transformation but it hadn’t, for a while. I had hibernated and ruminated as my old self—mulish, unfeminine, irrationally secretive. Now I picked up my feet and acknowledged my luck at being transformed into a wife and employee. Good-looking and competent enough when I took the trouble. Not weird. I could pass” (140). Ultimately, the narrator manages to “pass” as feminine and wifely, conforming to the limiting role that Mrs. Gorrie imposed on her from the start. Although the narrator claims to have been “transformed,” her transformation is temporary, just “competent enough when [she takes] the trouble” (140). She has not really transformed into a proper wife; she has only become more skillful at pretending.

Jamel Brinkley is another author who writes around the subject of gendered pretending, specifically performances of masculinity. I think of his story “Jouvert, 1996.” In the time since his father’s incarceration, the narrator, Ty, has become preoccupied with the idea of what it

means to be a real man, how to behave like and fit in with men. He anxiously imagines what it will be like when he goes to a barber shop for his first proper haircut, an event he seems to view as a rite of passage between boyhood and manhood: “Maybe I wouldn’t know what to say once I got there. Maybe I’d ask for the wrong thing or laugh at the wrong time, surrounded by all those clever men, grooming each other’s masculinity. Still, even if I embarrassed myself, I felt ready. I was almost a grown-up, not a boy” (31). Pretending and performance afford Ty the chance to fit in and to join the ranks of other men.

Another story from Brinkley’s collection that examines how and why men perform masculinity is called “Everything the Mouth Eats.” I think especially about the scene that shows Eric, the young male protagonist, play wrestling with his half brother, Carlos:

When we played this way, I always took on the role of the villain, the heel. I’d pick him up and slam his body onto our dingy couch, bend his spine against my knee, apply various choke holds, pretend to smash his head into the wall. We both knew that pro wrestling was fake, at times barely on the threshold of convincing physicality, and we played in the same spirit. This usually extinguished the aggression that flared within me.” (88)

In this play-wrestling scene, Eric imitates stereotypically male physicality, dominance, and violence as portrayed in wrestling, which is, as the boys know, “fake,” a poor imitation of reality. For Eric, this act of pretend violence is cathartic, temporarily “extinguish[ing]” the aggression he feels (88).

In my own stories, I explore expressions of femininity. For example, in “Performances,” the protagonist, Bethany, caught up in a shotgun marriage, preserves a calm outward appearance and continues going through the motions of the relationship. She attends church dutifully at her

husband's side, a smile pasted on her lips; she performs marriage rituals, "[h]er body mov[ing] on its own through the familiar positions while her attention drifts." Privately, Bethany feels suffocated by her marriage, her community, and the chaste, benevolent role she is expected to play. However, even when her husband offers her a way out, Bethany chooses not to break character, perhaps out of a sense of religious obligation or guilt, perhaps because for her pretending has become a function of muscle memory, automatic and habitual and difficult, like all habits, to break.

In another story I wrote called "Some Other Woman," Jill attends her husband's family reunion and attempts to meet their expectations of her, to be a dutiful daughter-in-law and wife, one that her husband will not be embarrassed of. Lying in the guest bedroom as she waits for the rest of the family to arrive, Jill imagines what it would be like not to be so confined:

"The pillow smells of someone else's perfume, their sweat. Probably the sheets have not been changed since whoever stayed here last. Jill imagines she is some other woman, someone who wears the heady scent of crushed lily and gardenia and nothing else, wraps it around her body like a damp towel. Stretching out in the bed, she allows herself to take up space. She imagines she is the kind of woman who throws her head back when she laughs without a single thought for how she looks or sounds, red lipstick smears on white teeth, someone who has never cared what other people think."

While Jill pretends all throughout this story to be someone she is not, in this scene, she imagines a more expansive, carefree version of herself, one not so limited by social expectations.

Although this fantasy provides Jill with momentary relief, ultimately she is unable to sustain her pretending. As Jill puts it, "[She] cannot be both that woman and herself." The implication seems

to be that although Jill might like to be either accepted by her husband's family or carefree and unapologetic, she is not capable of realizing either version of herself, at least not at the point where the story ends.

Pretending can also be a means of survival, a performance capable of making a hostile or undesirable reality feel more habitable. This makes me think of Munro's story "Runaway." In this dual-perspective narrative, Carla, a naïve young woman in a manipulative and increasingly abusive marriage, tells her husband made-up stories about their late neighbor, Leon. In the stories she tells her husband, Carla pretends that when she used to go next door to help clean the neighbors' house, Leon, who then lay ill and dying, used to make unwanted sexual requests of her:

This was asked and told in whispers, even if there was nobody to hear, even when they were in the neverland of their bed. A bedtime story, in which the details were important and had to be added to every time, and this with convincing reluctance, shyness, giggles, *dirty, dirty*. And it was not only he who was eager and grateful. She was too. Eager to please and excite him, to excite herself. Grateful every time it still worked. (15)

For Carla, this erotic role-playing, this pretending, serves as means to stave off her husband's turbulent moods, to earn the scraps of affection he occasionally throws her away, and to avoid becoming the target of his violence. In these moments of manufactured intimacy, Carla seems to gain relief from her misery and purchase her safety, at least temporarily.

While Carla pretends in order to maintain her dysfunctional relationship, Sylvia, Leon's wife and the story's other main perspective character, pretends in order to conceal the feelings she has developed for Carla, feelings that she seems to know will not be taken seriously by

society or by Carla herself. When, in confidence, Sylvia confesses to her friends how much Carla has come to mean to her, the “indescribable bond [that] had seemed to grow up between them,” her friends dismiss her feelings as nothing more than a crush (20). In reaction to this dismissal and diminishment of her feelings, Sylvia backtracks to the relative safety of heteronormative gender roles: ““Maybe it’s because Leon and I never had children.... It’s stupid. Displaced maternal love”” (21). Perhaps to avoid social scrutiny or rejection—or perhaps because she herself is uncertain of the nature of her affection—Sylvia constructs a more socially acceptable explanation for her feelings, one that allows her to avoid criticism and maintain her friendship with Carla, an alternative preferable to losing her altogether.

Another story in which pretending seems to serve as strategy for women to cope with an undesirable reality is Yiyun Li’s story “Prison.” After the tragic death of their sixteen-year-old daughter, Chinese immigrants Yilan and Luo decide to try to have another child to heal their loss. They return to China and hire a young woman, Fusang, as their surrogate to carry the child in Yilan’s place. As Yilan and Fusang get to know each other over the course of the pregnancy, Fusang reveals that she was sold into marriage to a man with a developmental disability and that her son went missing at two years old. In an effort to comfort Yilan in her grief for her daughter, Fusang encourages Yilan to stop thinking about her. She states that forgetting is easy, so easy that she herself never thinks about her son anymore. She explains that she chooses to pretend he has a better life wherever he is: ““It was hard at first, but I just thought of it this way: Whoever took him would give him a better life than his own parents. Then it didn’t hurt to think of him, and once it didn’t hurt, I forgot to think about him from time to time, and then I just forgot”” (123). The fact that Fusang recounts her son’s story to Yilan suggests she has not really forgotten him. Here, pretending seems vital to Fusang’s survival, a strategy that allows her to temper the

pain she feels about the loss of her son, to convince herself that she no longer worries about or misses him. Although pretending does not bring Fusang's son back to her, it allows her to make believe he is safe and avoid the pain and ceaseless worry she would otherwise feel.

This sort of pretending—this construction of false narratives as a means of self-protection or self-preservation—is one that I explore in a story called “Second Coming.” In this alternating perspective story, a young female protagonist pretends her mother is dead. Actually, the girl's mother left her husband and daughter “ages ago”; the father warns the girl that her mother is unlikely to return. At her father's suggestion, the girl pretends that her mother died and invents heroic causes for her death: “[T]he girl has since imagined her mother in all sorts of life-threatening situations—kidnapped at knifepoint by greasy mustached thugs, swept away in a flood, hurtling off a cliff on a runaway train. In every fantasy, the mother begs for her life, and her last thought is of the family she can't bear to leave behind.” These pretendings and imagined scenarios are preferable to the actual reality that the girl cannot stand to face: that she may be somehow responsible for her mother's leaving and that her mother really isn't coming back.

A final type of pretending that I explore in my stories is pretending as a means not to make an undesirable reality more habitable but to escape it entirely. Given the constraints that are placed on women in the world of my stories, it seems appropriate that the female characters in my stories seek to escape from their reality. My stories typically take place in small conservative towns, tight-knit rural communities where the pace of life is set by the churn of the rumor mill, where social rules are as sacred and non-negotiable as the Ten Commandments, gender roles are biblically mandated, and all sins are created equal except for those no one knows about. In the realm of this claustrophobic reality, women experience additional limitations and restraints as a result of the strict gender roles defined by their patriarchal communities.

Women are expected to be feminine, reverent, maternal, “pure,” well-mannered, polite. Confined by the rigid constraints imposed by their conservative, often religious communities, my characters often seem socially isolated, deeply self-conscious, immobilized, resentful of the forces that hem them in but more or less unable to entertain or even imagine the possibility of an actionable way out.

This imaginative deficit interests me and makes me think again of Munro’s story “Runaway.” Late in the story, Carla is presented with an opportunity to escape her marriage and even goes so far as to board the bus. However, before she has traveled more than a few towns away, she realizes that she has become so dependent on her husband that she feels she can no longer imagine her life, or who she would be, without him: “While she was running away from him—now—Clark still kept his place in her life. But when she was finished running away, when she just went on, what would she put in his place? What else—who else—could ever be so vivid a challenge?” (34). Though Carla possesses agency in this story—she can choose between leaving or staying—her choice to stay feels inevitable. It is as if, after living so long in a reality where she had to pretend just to survive, she has entirely lost her sense of self. As Brinkley puts it in an interview with *Wildness*, “[I]t’s not always so easy to distinguish between your own desires from those that come from another person or society itself. It’s not always to easy to tell the difference between the performative self and the actual self. Is there a pure actual self? I don’t know.” Arguably, Carla has been so conditioned by her situation that she cannot imagine any challenge more “vivid” than her abusive husband. Another way still of reading Carla’s choice is not as a loss of self, but as a final revelation of who she really is: someone who cannot leave “so vivid a challenge” unmet (34).

Given the blurriness of that line between the performative and actual selves and given how deeply entrenched my characters are in their reality with all its social constraints, I feel like many of my characters are placed in a somewhat similar position to Carla: they have options and agency, but, after all that pretending just to survive, they no longer have the imaginative capacity to entertain any other way of being. They are, at least psychologically, stuck in survival mode. Though they might be able to physically extricate themselves from their reality, they lose themselves in the process.

I think, for example, of my story “Resurrection,” where Cam moves away from Florida in the aftermath of an ugly divorce only to begin a new relationship in Texas with Robert, a man she met online. Although Cam has physically extricated herself from her emotionally abusive ex at the start of this story, she never really seems to come into her own or regain the sense of who she was before their dysfunctional relationship destroyed her sense of confidence and independence. Not long after arriving at Robert’s ranch, Cam begins playing the role of his late wife, Maybelle, wearing her clothes, cooking her recipes, responding to her name. She chooses to take on a pre-written role and pretend to be someone else rather than facing who she really is. Because her abusive relationship trained her so well to diminish herself, ultimately, she completely suppresses the person she was before, her transformation into Maybelle complete.

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