



## Space as Metaphor for Resistance in Alice Munro's "The Office"

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### Abstract

**Background:** Alice Munro's short story "The Office" describes a female writer's struggle for independent creative agency in a patriarchal environment. The story echoes the major feminist claims, such as Virginia Woolf's statement that women should have financial independence and a literal and figurative room of their own, and the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir that work is what liberates women from parasitic dependence.

**Objective:** The objective of this paper is to examine the protagonist's yearning for independence and her fight against patriarchal oppression. An attempt is made to understand what form and mode of resistance she puts up and whether it is successful or not in the end.

**Methods:** This analysis is qualitative, with a literary-critical approach that reads Munro's story through the theoretical lenses of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Close textual analysis of the primary source is supported by secondary criticism from Munro scholars.

**Analysis:** This paper identifies that the protagonist rents an office as a main act of resistance and is symbolic of claiming intellectual and physical space. These strategies of hers are subtle and non-confrontational in nature; she seeks permission from her husband and internalizes societal ridicule. This resistance is systematically thwarted by the invasive acts of her landlord, Mr. Malley, and the deep-rooted gender dynamics within her household, leading to her eventual capitulation.

**Conclusion:** The paper consequently concludes that, though the protagonist does long for freedom and is even able to succeed in certain concrete actions of resistance, the subtlety of her strategies along with strong patriarchal pressures prevents her from gaining durable autonomy. Munro thereby criticizes the continuous social obstacles that stand in the way of fulfilling women's creative and professional ambitions.



**Novelty:** While Munro's feminism is widely acknowledged, this study provides a focused analysis of the specific nature and strategies of resistance in "The Office," tracing its nuanced failure and contributing to a deeper understanding of how patriarchal domination operates in the mundane, professional spheres of women's lives.

**Keywords:** Alice Munro, resistance, space, patriarchy, feminism

## **Introduction**

Alice Munro's short story "The Office" offers a poignant exploration of a female writer's struggle for creative autonomy within the confines of a patriarchal society (Taher et al., 2024; Nischik, 2014). This narrative powerfully echoes the foundational feminist arguments put forth by Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir a generation earlier. Woolf (1929) famously contended that women need both literal and metaphorical space, asserting that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (p. 5). Beauvoir (2011) expanded this argument, maintaining that "work alone can guarantee her complete freedom. The system based on her dependence collapses as soon as she ceases to be a parasite" (p. 737).

Munro's protagonist embodies this struggle by making a tangible effort to secure a private workspace, an act that resonates with the convictions of both Woolf and Beauvoir. However, her endeavor is met with insensitivity and intrusion from her male landlord, a dynamic that symbolizes the broader societal constrictions placed on women's intellectual potential. Through this narrative, Munro critiques the gendered expectations that undermine women's autonomy, reinforcing the claim that women's creativity is often stifled by external forces. This paper starts from the hypothesis that the female protagonist in "The Office" resists patriarchal domination with a deep longing for freedom which she ultimately fails to achieve.

The enduring relevance of this struggle is a key reason for selecting this story. The gender inequality in terms of roles, responsibilities, and opportunities that prevailed during the eras of Woolf and Beauvoir still persists, allowing readers to relate to the subtle feminism in Munro's work. Her genius lies not only in exposing stereotypical gender disparities but also in portraying female characters who express a sense of rebellion, however discreetly. By presenting a protagonist who is a sharp observer of her own predicament, Munro gives voice to a quiet resistance. Yet, the protagonist's ultimate failure to attain the freedom she longs for serves as a sobering reflection on the status of women, suggesting that legal and social progress has not yet fully dismantled the psychological and structural barriers to female autonomy.

## **Methods**

This paper employs a qualitative, literary-critical approach to analyze Alice Munro's "The Office." The primary methodological framework is a feminist literary analysis, which is operationalized by reading Munro's story through the specific theoretical lenses of two cornerstone feminist texts: Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*.

The analysis will proceed through a close reading of the primary text, "The Office," focusing on key passages that illuminate the protagonist's internal conflict, her actions, and her



interactions with male characters (her husband and Mr. Malley). These passages will be systematically examined for how they illustrate the concepts of space, financial dependence, and resistance. The theoretical precepts of Woolf and Beauvoir will serve as an analytical toolkit to interpret these narrative elements. For instance, Woolf's concept of a "room of one's own" will be directly applied to analyze the protagonist's quest for an office, while Beauvoir's ideas on woman as the "Other" and the importance of productive work will inform the examination of how her ambition is systematically dismissed.

This primary analysis will be supported and contextualized by secondary criticism from established Munro scholars, such as David Staines, Beverly Rasporich, and Li-Peng Geng. Their insights will be used to corroborate and deepen the arguments presented, ensuring the analysis is engaged with the existing academic conversation about Munro's feminism. The objective is to synthesize primary text, theoretical framework, and secondary criticism to build a coherent argument about the nature, strategies, and ultimate efficacy of the protagonist's resistance.

## **Analysis**

### **The Longing for Space and the Internalization of Patriarchy**

The protagonist's resistance begins with the conscious desire for a separate space, an office, which she pursues despite its perception as a "finicky requirement, a piece of rare self-indulgence" (Munro, 1998, p. 63). This framing reveals the extent to which she has internalized patriarchal norms; her ambition is not seen as a professional necessity but as a personal whim. The word "office" itself holds power for her, possessing a "sound of dignity and peace" (Munro, 1998, p. 64) unavailable to her at home. Munro masterfully contrasts the domestic experiences of men and women to highlight this disparity. For a man, the house accommodates his work—"a place is cleared," and he is not burdened with constant interruptions (Munro, 1998, p. 64). For the woman, however, "she is the house; there is no separation possible" (Munro, 1998, p. 64). This condition echoes the predicament of women writers described by Woolf (1929), who were forced to write in the common sitting room and were "always interrupted" (p. 63). The protagonist's awareness of this unequal dynamic, and her decision to seek a space despite it, constitutes the foundational act of her resistance.

Her strategies, however, remain subtle and non-confrontational. She seeks permission from her husband, the acknowledged "authority" of the house, who dismissively consents with, "Go ahead, if you can find one cheap enough" (Munro, 1998, p. 64). His tone underscores the lack of seriousness afforded to her endeavor, a direct consequence of her financial dependence. As Woolf (1929) powerfully argues, money—the five hundred pounds a year—provides a freedom far more concrete than the vote, as it guarantees "food, house and clothing" (pp. 36-37). Lacking this economic autonomy, the protagonist's resistance is inherently constrained from the outset.

### **The Invasion of Space and the Mockery of Ambition**

The protagonist's efforts to establish autonomy are further thwarted upon renting an office from Mr. Malley. He becomes a new patriarchal authority figure outside the home, poised to



dominate her. His response to her profession is telling: he “absorbed the information with good humor” (Munro, 1998, p. 66), reducing her serious artistic pursuit to a mere hobby. By stating, “I’m a great man for hobbies myself... I daresay you’re the same” (Munro, 1998, p. 67), he enacts a symbolic violence that dismisses her professional identity. This mirrors the historical context provided by Woolf (1929), where women who wrote were labeled “blue stockings with an itch for scribbling” (p. 61). Mr. Malley’s invasive conduct—his unannounced entries, his rearranging of her furniture, and his paternalistic “tidying up”—is a physical and psychological assault on her hard-won space. It represents the patriarchal intolerance not only of a woman stepping out of her domestic role but also of a woman asserting herself as an artist (Rasporich, 1990, pp. 32-33).

### **The Limits of Resistance and the Ultimate Surrender**

The nature of the protagonist’s resistance, while evident in her initial act of renting the office and her sharp observations, proves insufficient against these combined forces. Her resistance is internal and observational, lacking the aggression needed to defend her space. She is caught in a double bind: had she wished for traditionally feminine items like “a mink coat, [or] a diamond necklace,” her family would have understood, but her intellectual ambition is met with “skepticism and unconcern” (Munro, 1998, p. 65). This highlights how patriarchy naturalizes women as objects of adornment rather than subjects of intellectual production.

Ultimately, the protagonist’s strategy is one of retreat. Unable to tolerate Mr. Malley’s bullying and the constant violation of her space, she is forced to abandon her office. This surrender is not a failure of will but a testament to the overwhelming power of the patriarchal structures she confronts. As Staines (2016) notes, “the feminist echo is ‘heard’ only on the extratextual level,” while within the story itself, her longing for a room of her own fails (p. 86). Her departure confirms the paper’s hypothesis: she longs for freedom and exhibits resistance, but the subtle, non-aggressive strategies available to her, compounded by her financial dependence and the pervasive mockery of her ambition, lead to her defeat. Munro, therefore, does not present a triumphant feminist narrative but a realist portrait of the ways in which patriarchal domination, even in a modern context, can effectively quell a woman’s quest for autonomous space and creative freedom.

### **Conclusion**

This analysis of Alice Munro’s “The Office” through the feminist frameworks of both Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir affirms the paper’s central hypothesis: through a deep-seated wish for freedom, the protagonist struggles against patriarchal domination and never quite attains it. Her desire for a room of her own serves as a clear, though quiet, rebellion against the expectation that her identity is not divorced from her domestic role. Through this quest for a separated professional space, she aims to carve out that autonomy which Woolf and Beauvoir identify as key to creative and personal freedom.

The nature of her resistance, however, served only to confirm its insufficiency in the face of entrenched patriarchy: it relies on spousal approval, internalized self-doubt, and takes a non-confrontational stance. Mr. Malley’s invasion of her rented office is more than just a personal



issue; it symbolically reaffirms the patriarchal stranglehold on female ambition. He reduces her writing from a profession to a hobby-a reduction that is consonant with society's refusal to take seriously the intellectual work performed by women. She ultimately retreats from the office into a tragic surrender that underlines the impossibility of individual resistances against systemic oppression. Munro's story is thus a powerful and enduring critique because it shows that the theoretical need for space and independence highlighted by earlier feminists is a deep and abiding practical challenge. The failure of the protagonist is not a measure of personal weakness but a testimony to how resilient the patriarchal structures remain, even when women resist most intensely. The story leaves us with a poignant understanding: the ache for freedom is a crucial first step, but without more aggressive strategies and systemic change, the room of one's own may be an unattainable ideal.

**Transparency Statement:** The author confirms that this study has been conducted with honesty and in full adherence to ethical guidelines.

**Data Availability Statement:** Author can provide data.

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