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UNRAVELLING THE MYSTERY OF REALITY: TYPICAL CANADIAN ELEMENTS IN THE SHORT STORIES OF ALICE MUNRO[1]

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> She loved a crisis, particularly one like this, which had a shady and scandalous aspect and which must be kept secret from the adult world. She became excited, aggressive, efficient; that energy which was termed wildness was simply the overflow of a great female instinct to manage, comfort and control.
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> Alice Munro, "An Ounce of Cure" (*Dance of the Happy Shades*, 1968)

> The story is a kind of extension of myself, something once attached to me and growing out of me, now lopped off, exposed and abandoned. What I feel isn't shame or regret exactly – it would be quite hypocritical to say I felt that, when exposure, publication, was surely what I had in mind all along – rather it's a queasiness, an unwillingness to look or examine.
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> Alice Munro, "Introduction" (*The Moons of Jupiter*, 1982)

The contemporary Canadian short story has a specific place among literary genres in Canadian literature. It culminated in the sixties of this century, when the Canadians looked to their literature with greater interest. Canadian short story writers started to write in a different tone, and showed special interest for new themes. After 1960 authors, such as Henry Kreisel, Norman Levine, Anne Hébert, Mavis Gallant, Ethel Wilson, Joyce Marshall, Hugh Hood, Hugh Garner, Margaret Laurence, Audrey Callahan Thomas, Mordecai Richler, and Alice Munro, refused to use the traditional plot, and showed more interest for characterisation. By using a typical Canadian setting, their stories began to reflect social events of their time. A new awareness of identity stepped forward, and above all their stories became a reflection of the diversity of life in all Canadian provinces. The contemporary Canadian short story writers began to overstep the boundaries of their imagination. In their short stories we can find elements of European, American, Asian and Caribbean cultures. By changing the communication of ideas, they also introduced new literary techniques. The short story gained special interest among literary critics in Canada and abroad, which put the contemporary Canadian short story into

1 The study is a continuation of my research on Alice Munro's writing, which I started in my MA thesis "Tipično kanadski elementi v sodobni kanadski kratki zgodbi" [Typical Canadian Elements in the Contemporary Canadian Short Story], University of Ljubljana, 1996.

a new position never before experienced. Since 1960 over 600 short story writers[2] in Canada have seen their works published in anthologies and other publications.

The most anthologised contemporary Canadian short story writer in Canada is Alice Munro.[3] When Munro was first making her name, it was the 1970s, she was considered as just one more feminist writer, interested only in writing stories of heartless men and emotionally or socially helpless women. Critics predicted that her books would not sell well, and even her family thought of writing as something she would get over. Today, 30 years later, Munro has proved they were wrong from the start. She has a special position in Canadian writing, which is in some ways equal to that of Margaret Atwood or Robertson Davies. Alice Munro is without any doubt Canada's most outstanding short story writer, probably the best short fiction writer in North America, and has become an acknowledged master of the literary genre. Author of eight volumes of short stories: *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You* (1974), *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978), *The Moons of Jupiter* (1982), *The Progress of Love* (1986), *Friend of My Youth* (1990), and *Open Secrets* (1994), which were collected and celebrated in her latest short story collection, *Selected Stories*[4] in 1996, Munro shows us that she is much more than what critics predicted she would become at the beginning of her career. Her literary greatness can be summed up into three meaningful assumptions: first of all, she is a writer with knowledge of the human heart, with a keen perception of the fineness or delicacy of nature, character, and manner; secondly, she is a writer of human understanding, intellect and reason, and, thirdly, she is a writer of soundness of judgement in the choice of means and ends. For these reasons Munro's writing invites the critic and reader to analyse her style, form and content.

When reading Munro's stories, we enter into a New World, into a magic place called "Alice Munro country." As readers, we are constantly experiencing life as itself. We are continually forced in an eloquent way to re-examine the meaning and our understanding of art and language; nature and place (*Dance of the Happy Shades*); love and friendship (*The Progress of Love*, *The Moons of Jupiter*); generational connections, childhood, growing up and adulthood (*Lives of Girls and Women*, *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*, *Who Do You Think You Are?*, *The Moons of Jupiter*); relations between men and women (*Dance of the Happy Shades*, *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*, *Open Secrets*) and adultery (*Friend of My Youth*); life and death.

According to Munro, the function of art is to stay above reality. By taking a piece of reality, Munro interweaves it into the rest of her narrative – even if the reader may disagree, be shocked or even be highly indignant at what she has written. One must fish through one's imagination to find what serves the story at a particular moment. If short story writers wish to preserve their integrity, they

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2 Cf. Kustec, "Tipično kanadski elementi v sodobni kanadski kratki zgodbi" [Typical Canadian Elements in the Contemporary Canadian Short Story], pp. 63-85.

3 Cf. Kustec, "Tipično kanadski elementi v sodobni kanadski kratki zgodbi" [Typical Canadian Elements in the Contemporary Short Story], pp. 70-71.

4 *Selected Stories* includes twenty-eight of her finest short stories written in the past 30 years of her career. They were selected with the help of Alice Munro herself.

should, as Munro asserts, "pursue their own visions of reality to the deepest - and possibly the darkest - places in their imagination."[5]

Alice Munro is such a fine writer that her short story collections have rightly found their place in the Canadian literary canon. The distinctive features of her stories are expansion, enlightenment and intensity. Her stories can be compared with the rhythm of a day. They represent a moment of recognition, an experience, or a certain kind of transition. Munro is very careful and elegant in her choice of words - particularly her beautiful use of unexpected adjectives must be pointed out – formation of balanced sentences, and use of startling idioms. Many symbols (for example, one that stands out are the *royal beatings* (*Who Do You Think You Are?*), meaning life's reality, which is brutal and without mercy), contrasts and oppositions can be found in her short stories. Munro shows all the characteristics of good style and harmonised rhythm. But even without such wonderful writing, her stories would speak for themselves.

The fact of the matter is that many Canadianists have asserted that Munro's realism can be defined as "deceptive", "magic", "heightened"[6], "hyper- or super-"[7], even "documentary"[8], and that her understanding of reality is to be understood as a "dance of the sexes"[9], "controlling the uncontrollable"[10], or "the tumble of reason"[11]. Alice Munro heightens realism to the level that the truth becomes self-evident to the reader. In a similar way as William Wordsworth, she weaves material out of her memories or observations and transforms ordinary life into art. For this reason, Munro is such a great writer. By giving us just enough information to form our own conclusions, Munro creates a brilliant balance between writer, text, and reader. When Alice Munro is writing a short story, she wishes to achieve the following:

> I want to make a certain kind of structure, and I know the feeling I want to get from being inside that structure. / I don't know where it comes from. It seems to be already there, and some unlikely clue, such as a shop window or a bit of conversation, makes me aware of it.
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> Then I start accumulating the material and putting it together. Some of the material I may have lying around already, in memories and observations, and some I invent, and some I have to go diligently looking for (factual details), while some is dumped in my lap (anecdotes, bits of speech). I see how this material might go together to make the shape I need, and I try it. I keep trying and seeing where I went wrong and trying again.[12]

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5 Munro, "What Is Real?" in *Making It New*, edited by John Metcalf, p. 224.

6 Moss, "Introduction" in *Here and Now: A Critical Anthology*, p. 9.

7 Moss, *A Reader's Guide to the Canadian Novel*, p. 215.

8 Cf. Visser, "Canadian Short Fiction: A Comparative Study."

9 Cf. Rasporich, *Dances of the Sexes: Art and Gender in the Fiction of Alice Munro*.

10 Cf. Carrington, *Controlling the Uncontrollable: The Fiction of Alice Munro*.

11 Cf. Heble, *The Tumble of Reason: Alice Munro's Discourse of Absence*.

12 Munro, "What Is Real?" in *Making It New*, edited by John Metcalf, p. 224.

Personally, Munro believes that her stories are "elaborations and combinations that it is very hard to figure out what they started from".[13] When Munro subverts reality, she actually reflects it, as if we are looking into a mirror:

> I learned very early to disguise everything, and perhaps the escape into stories was necessary." / "I'm not a writer who is very concerned with ideas. I'm not an intellectual writer. I'm very, very excited by what you might call the surface of life ... It seems, to me very important to be able to get at the exact tone or texture of how things are.[14]

Munro's stories are not to be read in the traditional way from beginning to end. Although traditional short stories are supposed to observe a convention of "unity of time and place," we find the contrary in Munro's collections: a single story of Alice Munro's may cover a whole era, and move from Hanratty to Vancouver. When reading her stories, Munro wants us to experiment in every possible way: t. i. from end to beginning, or to simply go into the story at any certain part - in the middle or towards the end - and to continue from there. We should read her stories as Munro[15] reads stories written by other authors:

> "I don't take up a story and follow it as if it were a road, taking me somewhere, with views and neat diversions along the way. I go into it, and move back and forth and settle here and there, and stay in it for a while. It's more like a house. Everybody knows what a house does, how it encloses space and makes connections between one enclosed space and another and presents what is outside in a new way."[16]

Her stories are not autobiographical, but she takes pieces from her "personal material".[17] There is an unconscious thread throughout Munro's creations, or as Lorna Irvine says, Munro moves us with "the fluid relationships between order and disorder, between stillness and movement, and perhaps most important, between revelation and secrecy".[18] In *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), as in *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978)[19], Munro uses the same method of narration. In these two

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13 Munro in "On Writing 'The Office' " in *Transitions II*, edited by Edward Peck, p. 259.

14 Munro in *Personal Fictions*, edited by Michael Ondaatje, p. 224.

15 Alice Munro's most favourite short story writers are: Eudora Welty, John Cheever, Elizabeth Spencer, Edna O'Brien, John Updike, Katherine Anne Porter, Hannah Green, Maeve Brennan, Vladimir Nabokov, Mary Lavin, Frank O'Connor, Mavis Gallant, Flannery O'Connor, Grace Paley, Elizabeth Cullinan, and William Maxwell, from Canadian authors: Clark Blaise, Beth Harvor, Audrey Thomas, John Metcalf, Hugh Hood, Shirley Faessler. Cf. Alice Munro, "The Real Material: An Interview with Alice Munro". *Probable Fictions: Alice Munro's Narrative Acts*, edited by Louis King MacKendrick, p. 11.

16 Munro, "What Is Real?" in *Making It New*, edited by John Metcalf, p. 224.

17 Cf. Alice Munro, "The Real Material: An Interview with Alice Munro", *Probable Fictions: Alice Munro's Narrative Acts*, edited by Louis King MacKendrick, p. 17; Munro in "On Writing 'The Office' ", *Transitions II*, edited by Edward Peck, p. 259; Munro in *Personal Fictions*, edited by Michael Ondaatje, p. 224; Munro in "author's commentary", *Sixteen by Twelve*, edited by John Metcalf, p. 125; Munro in "The Colonel's Hash Resettled", *Narrative voices*, edited by John Metcalf, p. 181; and Munro in "What Is Real?", *Making It New*, edited by John Metcalf, p. 224.

18 Irvine in "Changing Is the Word I Want". *Probable Fictions: Alice Munro's Narrative Acts*, edited by Louis King MacKendrick, p. 99.

19 After receiving the Governor General's Literary Award for *Dance of the Happy Shades* in 1968, Munro was given the prestigious award for the second time in 1978 for *Who Do You Think You Are?*. She

short story cycles we deal with stories that are both self-sufficient and interrelated, that is, each short story can be read as a part of a sequence, or for itself.[20] In *Lives of Girls and Women* the stories are about Del Jordan's maturation. They are arranged chronologically, and all of them take place in Jubilee, a southern Ontario town. In *Who Do You Think You Are?* Munro tells us retrospectively by a third person narrator a story about Rose's development from childhood to adulthood. Even though only five out of 10 stories take place in Hanratty, Ontario, the town is significant in all of the stories. Each short story in the two cycles has a certain function, therefore, there is a kind of balance between the stories inside the cycle. In spite of this fact, not one story loses its individuality and specificity. If we were to leave out a short story from these two collections, this balance would be lost.

Alice Munro is not interested in the great moments of our lives, as, for example, novelists are. The short story builds on unimportant events, and teaches us why and how certain forces form our lives. When interpreting her short stories, we should focus on analysing the story's content. Therefore, it is expected that we shall show interest in the perception of the force, and not in the force itself. Although there is a close relationship between plot and character in her stories, the primary attraction lies in her characters and her illustrious ability of characterisation. Munro shows us the complexity of their inner lives – the emotional, the intellectual and moral of human personality. There is no doubt that Munro would also be a great painter, for she is capable of portraying even the ugly things with beauty and truth, including the understanding that a final truth can be found.

What is crucial to our understanding of Munro's writings is that we are concerned with three separate, but closely connected, activities. Firstly, we should be able to establish the personalities of her characters and to identify their qualities (moral, intellectual and emotional). Secondly, we should be concerned with the narrative techniques she uses to create, develop and present (portray) her characters to readers. Thirdly, we should ask ourselves whether her characters are credible and convincing. In evaluating her stories, the third issue is particularly crucial, for characterisation carries her work to the point of final value and importance.

Munro constantly surprises us with new characters, situations, events and insights. The central characters in the stories are all women, who undergo significant character change. Through their eyes Munro examines the culture and values of her world. Her protagonists and antagonists have to show a continued effort to resist force or free themselves from constraint. This struggle is full of passion, joy, adventure, and also despair. Her characters embody a complex mixture of positive and negative qualities, very much in the way their real life counterparts do. It is the protagonist's fate (the conflict or problem being wrestled with) on which the attention of the reader is focused. The protagonist is always, in a typical way, set between the devil and the deep blue sea, which sets off dramatic complications and creates crisis situations. Often her titles identify the protagonist. Sometimes it is very difficult to identify her antagonists, for she may use a hostile

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earned her third Governor General's Literary Award in 1986 for the international best seller *The Progress of Love*, which was also selected as one of the best books of the year by the *New York Times*.

20 Cf. "Cikel kratkih zgodb" [Short Story Cycles] in my MA thesis, p. 25-30.

social or natural environment, instead of the presence of a human being. Munro uses flat (one-dimensional) and round characters. Her flat characters (Uncle Benny, Flo, Jack, George, etc.) usually play a minor role in the stories in which they appear. Flat characters are often convenient devices to draw out and help us to understand the personalities of characters who are more fully realised. In a way, if I broaden Martin's assertion[21], they represent the peculiar, rough, grainy world of small-town Canada.

Her round characters (Del, Rose, Prue, Frances, Louisa, Maureen, Gail, Marietta, Lydia, etc.) embody a number of qualities and traits, and are complex multidimensional characters of considerable intellectual and emotional depth who have the capacity to grow and change. For example, in *Who Do You Think You Are?* Munro reveals a new tip of heroine, who after reconciling with her step-mother, father and other people from the past, comes to know more about herself. It takes Rose 15 years, t. i. after she returns to old Hanratty, where she helps to place Flo in an old age home, for her to become aware that there is no such thing as absolute truth about human relationships and identity. We have to see life in a subjectively psychological manner: *each of us is something special and no one can take this something away from us.* Rose is finally prepared to accept herself.

Munro's characters are, first of all, very dynamic, for they exhibit a capacity to change, which comes slowly and incrementally over many pages. Her static characters leave the plot as they entered it, largely untouched by the events that have taken place to the protagonist. In presenting her characters, Munro uses several different methods or techniques of direct and indirect characterisation. She reveals her characters through the use of names, through appearance, through dialogue, and through action. By using these techniques the author reveals, establishes, and reinforces character. Like Munro in life, her characters experience a sharp conflict between dependence and ambition. She reveals them gradually by showing, or immediately by using direct methods of characterisation. Munro shows the reader the illusionary nature of everyday, common and well-known life, but keeps an ironic distance, and by doing so is able to keep her thinking and final judgement to herself. She does not impose upon the reader with her writing, but wishes only to open the door. We are to form our own opinions and we are allowed to understand her short stories in our own way. Munro's characters are doomed to have a rich imagination. They have to be able to think, if not they are likely to suffer dire consequences, and are faced with an uncertain future.

Munro is inclined to use the retrospective narrative technique. By doing so, she keeps a balance between different points of view, and creates some sort of a prism, which provides the means for the reader to clearly understand the sequence of events. With the third-person limited narrator Munro wishes to produce a totally distinct effect, as she does in all of her short stories. She chooses to employ more freedom, so that she can intervene at any time she desires and needs to. By going forward and backwards, Munro wishes to remind her readers of what John Orange calls "inexorable change and unfathomable fate."[22] The author achieves this by

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21 Martin, *Alice Munro: Paradox and Parallel*, p. 102.

22 Orange in "Alice Munro and A Maze of Time", *Probable Fictions: Alice Munro's Narrative Acts*,

using flashbacks, reflections and spatial intervals, which are shown by applying double spaces inside the texts. Many times the narrator reminisces about the past, and then at crucial moments returns to the present to show the on-going action.

All through Munro shows us people who are in confrontation with contradictory impulses and emotions. By using deceptive realism with humour, wit, paradox, irony, staggering comparisons, eagle-eyed details, absurd-comical scenes and split personalities, Munro succeeds in convincing the reader about the absurdity, though truthfulness, of this world. In Munro's realm we meet real people living in a world that is bloodthirsty, cruel, unkind. Truth, veracity, honesty and sincerity can be found only in an imaginary world, a world that surpasses us mortals. This ability to show the reader the world of a small Canadian man has contributed to her international reputation and affirmation.

Alice Munro selects material for her short stories from her personal experience and experiences of others, but she must see the material through her own eyes, by doing so she transforms it into art. Writing to her is an invention of ideas, words should follow in a free manner. Munro does not rewrite her texts. She sticks to the first (original) draft, and by doing so, she believes her writing does not lose on its originality and its final effect. In contrast to Hugh Hood, another great Canadian short story writer, she does not have a set plan when she sits down to write, she creates stories as she goes.[23] Munro's writing is very spontaneous. When she is taking material from life – she wishes to achieve "a straining of something immense and varied"[24], so that we can get "a whole dense vision of the world"[25], and then she offers a work of art to the reader, who may/will understand it in his own way: "The writer removes (fields, roads, landscapes, dishes itn.) from their natural, dignified obscurity and sets down in print."[26]

Besides exploring female themes - for example *feministic search*, which is the main topic in most of her stories - Munro also deals with subjects that are typically Canadian. For example: the question of *Canadian identity*, a topic that has been a matter of debate since the 1970s with the publications of the so-called *Canadian thematic school*: D. G. Jones, *Butterfly on Rock: A Study of Themes and Images in Canadian Literature* (1970); Northrop Fry, *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (1971) and *Divisions on a Ground: Essays on Canadian Culture* (1982); Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (1972), and John Moss, *Patterns of Isolation in English Canadian Fiction* (1974). Her characters are constantly asking themselves about the quality or condition of being the same in substance. Another topic, which is very close to Munro and the imagination of Canadian women writers, is *survival.*[27] Before Munro's characters achieve the goals to which their effort or ambition has been directed to, they usually have to "suffer", for they live their lives simply, directly

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edited by Louis King MacKendrick, p. 96.

23 See Munro, "The Colonel's Hash Resettled" in *Narrative voices*, edited by John Metcalf, p. 182.

24 Munro in author's commentary, *Sixteen by Twelve*, edited by John Metcalf, p. 125.

25 Munro in author's commentary, *Sixteen by Twelve*, edited by John Metcalf, p. 125.

26 Munro in "The Colonel's Hash Resettled" in *Narrative voices*, edited by John Metcalf, p. 181.

27 Cf. Margaret Atwood's *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature.*

and often painfully. Many obstacles stand ahead of them on their way to the destination of their (more or less laborious) journey. Munro's originality can be compared to James Joyce's, both use universal themes and lay them on philosophical foundations. Munro makes us morally content, but at the same time, stimulates us intellectually. She uses an immense quantity of material, creating what Robert Thacker calls "a dialectic between present and past, between experience and understanding."[28]

Most of Munro's stories take place in native Canada, and particularly in the small Ontario towns. It is right to say that Munro has south-western Ontario - Jubilee (*Lives of Girls and Women*), Hanratty (*Who Do You Think You Are?*), Carstairs (*Open Secrets*), etc. - as her setting, therefore, her imagination is stimulated by that region. She uses the rhetoric of her people, and speaks in an easy conversational voice. It is close to the speech found on the streets, but maintains a language that expresses the matter-of-factness of everyday life. She is deliberately robust, sarcastic, and at moments quite blunt or harsh in her narration. Munro continues the tradition of typical Canadian humour employed in the past by Haliburton, Thomson, Leacock, today by Mitchell, Ross, Atwood, and Kroetsch. Her attitude towards rural Ontario is comparable to Leacock's attitude towards provincial (smalltownish) Ontario, which Leacock so excellently displays in *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912). Both Leacock and Munro approach it with a majestic dimension of compassion and irony. A tone appears in Munro's short stories which is distinctively refined and recognisable. Paradox becomes a structural, technical and linguistic device, which Munro uses very skilfully. By employing paradox Munro wishes to expose the differences and oppositions that are present in everyday life. All her stories capture the notion of death, or the shadow-of-the-coming death. For example, in *Who Do You Think You Are?* Rose's father is mortally ill, Simon ("Simon's Luck") and Ralph Gillespie ("Who Do You Think You Are?") die unexpectedly, Flo goes to an a old people's home, many characters die mysteriously and peacefully. It is *Death* that makes life mysterious, and for this reason it is impossible to foretell the outcome of events and the duration of our staying.

This voice of destiny does not only speak about the private lives of the main characters, but also the internal and external voice of all women. Munro does not only speak about feministic search, she wishes to open the path to the imaginary world, where one can find the answers to the shoes that pinch us. By using juxtaposition of episodes, the reader is forced to change his perspectives of reality, in a similar way as we do in everyday life. For example: What Rose felt for Patrick ("Providence"), Clifford ("Mischief"), or Flo and her father, the author puts into contrast later in the story of what Rose feels for herself. Or as Coral Ann Howells asserts, "the relationship between realism and fantasy is one of opposition".[29] It is a fact that in literature we examine realism and fantasy as two separate notions, but

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28 Robert Thacker in " 'Clear Jelly': Alice Munro's Narrative Dialectics" in *Probable Fictions: Alice Munro's Narrative Acts*, edited by Louis King MacKendrick, pp. 37-38.

29 Coral Ann Howells in "Worlds Alongside: Contradictory Discourses in the Fiction of Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood" in *Gaining Ground: European Critics on Canadian Literature*, edited by Robert Kroetsch and Reingard M. Nischik, p. 121.

in everyday life they coexist with each other. We should not see fantasy as a world alone, where reality has no part, but as a world where we can find small pieces of reality. Our imagination has to challenge and provoke our understanding of presence. This does not mean that the notions can be united, reality acquires only a new dimension. As Heble points out in *The Tumble of Reason: Alice Munro's Discourse of Absence* (104-105), Munro is interested in both the realistic surface of things and the creation of invented worlds.

As Munro has implied on several occasions, we must learn to live in this world, and we have to find our own way in this maze of confusion. We should not wander about in some world of imaginary truthfulness. Real life itself is too full of unexpected moments of recognition, events that may turn the course of our lives forever, or as Alice Munro writes in *Friend of My Youth* (49):

> *To know that what you think – and, for a while, hope – is the absolute end for you can turn out to be only the start of a new stage, a continuation.*

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