



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Aging and Family Caregiving in “The Bear Came over the Mountain” by Alice Munro: A Narrative Gerontology Study

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the importance of Narrative Gerontology theory and focuses on Alzheimer's and Dementia narratives which reflect the struggles of patients in the short story, “The Bear Came Over the Mountain” (2014), Canadian author, Alice Munro, the Nobel laureate of literature, audaciously touches upon themes that are generally repressed and are intolerable as they refer to aging, family, caregiving and Alzheimer’s disease. Munro adopts a lucid approach to the precarious condition of the human being who can only maintain a sense of existing with the aid of the memory of lived experience. However, Munro manages to surprise us further by casting a look, with great finesse and humor, at the tragic and omnipotent dimension of jouissance connected with the desire for love and survival lurking in the depths of the unconscious of each of us.

INTRODUCTION

Narrative gerontology theory examines the process of aging by focusing on personal narratives and highlighting the subjective experiences of individuals. The study incorporates multiple fields, such as sociology and psychology, to analyze how stories influence views on aging. (Kenyon, Randall 2011). This concept considers life as a continuous narrative, recognizing the influence of cultural, societal, and personal stories on the aging process (Bamberg, 2012; Jam et al., 2011). Researchers use this approach to study the intricacies of aging by analyzing the narratives individuals share about their lives, promoting a comprehensive comprehension of the aging process. While narratives have been utilized in various fields, in Gerontology, they are employed to gather subjective data, reflecting a contemporary scientific viewpoint. Narratives are used to explore the subjective components of aging that exist objectively and have their own set of norms. Contrary to this perspective, narrative gerontology contributes to the study of aging by emphasizing that all information is metaphorical, historical, and contextual. In other terms, it is legendary. All theories of aging are narratives, which is indicated by the term hermeneutic circle. The narrative root metaphor has specific ontological consequences, one being that the hermeneutic circle is fundamental. Carr (1986) states that there is

nothing beyond the story framework that can be experienced or comprehended in experiential terms (Bengtson & Schaie, 1999).

Canadian author Alice Munro was raised in Wingham, South West Ontario. She began writing short stories around 1950. Her literary works include compilations of small narratives, including one that has been promoted as a novel, and interconnected pieces that cross genres. In Canada, the author's touching stories take place in small, rural towns like her childhood. These stories explore interpersonal connections through everyday events. These works are inspired by the author's life and focus on women. In 1998, the *Washington Post* commended their full portrayal. In Munro's fiction, disability is employed in a literal rather than a prosthetic manner, making it a truer description.

Shame, Loyalty, and the Resilient Ethics in Alice Munro's "The Bear Came Over the Mountain"

Robert Masters highlights the cognitive processes of affect, feeling, and emotion in his effort to make a clear differentiation between them. According to his classification, "affect" describes a non-cognitive, naturally occurring, evaluative feeling that may or may not be consciously experienced. "Feeling" is the conscious experience of affect, with an evaluative capacity derived from physiology as well as frequently impacted relationships and psychology. "Emotion" is a socially and psychologically constructed, intensified form of feeling. "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" examines how Munro's artistic style gradually exposes the Other by guiding the protagonist's transition from unconscious emotions to conscious sentiments and psychological feelings. The reader is presented with the opportunity to engage in ethical action as well as the characters' complex moral quandaries when unacknowledged or suppressed shame surfaces and changes from an effect to a sensation and an emotion. Years 2000 Given the focus being placed today on the ethical significance of literature, should we proceed with caution? Because literature fosters relationships between the self and others, Goldman claims that ethicists such as Margaret Somerville, Martha Nussbaum, and Richard Rorty frequently view it as the ultimate ethical tool. Literature is therefore viewed as a mere instrument to evoke profound emotions of admiration and astonishment. The creative writer is then seen as a character similar to Shelley's poet, regarded as a guiding force and lawmaker for the general population. Therefore, any examination of the moral principles of literature gets intertwined with the stimulation of emotions.

Unlike the traditional view of literature as a means to create a cohesive moral society, (Goldman, 2007; Jam et al., 2017) aligns with Wylie's perspective that emphasizes literature's appreciation for complexity. Literature prompts readers to confront the complexities of conflicting choices that require repeated judgment, rather than promoting a singular ethical position. In (Massey, 1963) Lecture titled "The Educated Imagination," Northrop Frye demonstrates the significance of literature in terms of ethics. He argues that literature carries ethical weight by fostering tolerance, generating creative conflict, and evoking emotions. Frye highly values literature's capacity to evoke terror. Building upon Aristotle's concept of catharsis, the author argues that this emotional capacity serves an ethical purpose. It is possible to think deeply on the ethical role of literature by reading Alice Munro's books. *The Bear Came Over the Mountain* by Munro presents a complex picture of the ethics of representation, leading to a discussion on truth, certainty, and individual and collective responsibility. Given its important function in evoking empathy, I contend that shame is an essential emotion in the narrative. The feeling that makes it easier to relate to and comprehend other people is called empathy. This applies to both the reader and the text's portrayal of other people, as well as the interactions between the characters. But unlike many stories in which Munro explores shame candidly and has her characters define and discuss it openly, I contend that in "The Bear Came Over the Mountain," shame is a deeply ingrained emotion that is not discussed in public but nonetheless has a substantial impact on the characters' growth and, as a result, their personalities and identities. The analysis is centered on how shame affects ethics. Is there a way for

shame to transition from being a negative emotion to something that can help someone modify their moral behavior once it becomes apparent to them? Can we learn anything about the limits of comprehending alterity and the Other inside ourselves, as well as the moral precepts of fiction, from Munro's investigation of shame?

In the course of the story, a chain of crises and alterations of the main character is built with considerable reference to the flash-back technique and told by an omniscient narrator. Consequently, the narrative is touched by Grant's vision, erasures, associative reminiscences, affect-as-such, and emotive states. Grant is a sheltered, retired professor of Icelandic literature with fifty years of marriage to Fiona under his belt and seems satisfied. After being diagnosed with *Alzheimer's*, a type of cognitive impairment, Fiona's memory deteriorates; she then moves to a new nursing home called Meadow Lake, which is in the same neighborhood as Willow Creek. This is the first time the couple has been apart as a married couple, and Grant watches his wife change and make new emotional ties in the nursing home, and he is confused and upset about it. When Aubrey's wife Marian brings him home from his temporary apartment, Fiona becomes extremely depressed. Her once-strong bond with him has now become a deep sadness. Grant is worried that Fiona would be sent to Meadow Lake's dreaded second floor, where few prisoners return, due to her rapid deterioration in both mental and physical health. It's why he tries to bring back Fiona's health and her love of life, even if it means bringing Aubrey back into her life and encouraging her "unfaithfulness" against him. The primary focus of the narrative centers on Grant's moral dilemma within himself, forcing him to make a decision between his love and moral duty to his spouse and his own emotions of worthlessness and dread of losing anything. An unanticipated event in Fiona's life that eventually gives her more freedom to redefine her relationships and sense of self is her diagnosis of dementia and placement in an institutional care facility. (Howells, 2009; Kanval et al., 2024) speculates that the married life of the protagonist is predetermined and planned. In addition, other unclear disclosures, such as the admission that she and Aubrey had a brief romantic relationship in their younger years, emphasize Grant's detachment from Fiona's existence and his eventual realization of her position as a close and significant person who is different from himself. Grant's increasing involvement in a complex network of emotions causes him to feel empathy towards Fiona, prompting him to reevaluate his own life and behaviors based on his perception of her point of view. (Fraile, 2018; Rashid et al., 2023) Grant perceives Fiona's present conduct as reflecting his previous infidelity, and imagines himself inflicting upon her comparable emotions of pain and confusion to those he is presently enduring. They argue that his eerie internal stranger arises in his conscious awareness, challenging his perception of self-identity. The title of the story, which is a variation of the North American folk song,

"The Bear Went over the Mountain,"

The bear went over the mountain,

The bear went over the mountain,

The bear went over the mountain,

To see what he could see.

And what do you think he saw?

And what do you think he saw?

The other side of the mountain,

The other side of the mountain,

The other side of the mountain,

Was all that he could see.

it symbolizes the metaphorical journey that Grant undergoes as he discovers his true self while also developing empathy towards others. the act of travelling creates an opportunity for recognition, as defined by Siemerling, which can surpass simple acknowledgment of oneself about others and instead actively involves embracing and understanding differences. (Fraile, 2018) Grant is shown as a narcissistic and egomaniacal womanizer. Despite his numerous extramarital affairs, he has never left Fiona. The final act he engages in is open to interpretation and may have a redeeming aspect. Grant's narcissism is further exemplified by the Narcissus flowers he purchases for Fiona during his initial visit to the residential care facility. He was indecisive. It is possible that she could have been playing a joke. It would be typical of her. She had inadvertently revealed her true intentions by pretending to believe that he may be a recent inhabitant. If that was her pretense. If it was a pretense. (McGill,2016)

In the final scene, they are depicted once again in Fiona's exclusive chamber within the retirement facility. Upon realizing that Grant is her spouse, Fiona's typically sardonic demeanor takes on a somber tone as she acknowledges their shared history and current circumstances. She employs another program and considers Grant's choice to join her as his wife. *"You could have just driven away [...] Just driven away without a care in the world and forsook me. Forsooken me. Forsaken"* (Munro 323). Grant reciprocates her return to their playful mode by enumerating her attributes, much to the details of property during his initial visit. However, this time he does it with a renewed sense of familiarity, indicating his comfort and feeling at home with her. *"He kept his face against her white hair, her pink scalp, her sweetly shaped skull. He said, not a chance"* (323).

Linguistic changes and communication between the Alzheimer patients and caregivers

Grant began to notice several small yellow notes placed up all over the house more than a year ago. It was nothing new at all. Ever since then, Fiona had taken notes. The recently received notes were unique. Pencils, dishrags, and knives stuck to the kitchen drawers. In this section, Fiona is shown by the narrator who exists outside the story and knows everything but also takes on the perspective of Grant, a character within the story. Fiona's tendency to affix notes to kitchen drawers is a result of her concern over forgetting the location of items. However, it also indicates her difficulty in establishing a connection between the symbol (signifier) and its intended meaning (signified). The visual symbols, which also serve as audio signifiers, have to be associated with the signified—the real physical objects they represent—in order for Fiona to be able to identify them. Nevertheless, he contemplates the possibility that in the future, individuals may possess knowledge solely of inscriptions, while lacking an understanding of the practical purpose and utilization of the things. The ultimate inquiry posed after the above excerpt is: "Couldn't she have just opened the drawers and seen what was inside?" (Munro 2001: 275) suggests a parallel situation in which not just the term that denotes an object is lost, but also the actual use of the object itself. Additionally, the question is presented objectively, which seems to embody Roland Barthes's notion of the "middle voice" (1989), as the narrator talks from Grant's point of view.

Thus, here, Fiona is ill; her main problem is not related to forgetting; she is unable to link the signifier to the signified. She cannot perform the unification of the linguistic sign as before. If this is a purely formal and conventional correlation, where the signifier and the signified are by no means linked in any natural way, for instance, the problem of Fiona's inability to speak would not exist. If we were to swap the roles of a fork and spoon, then both of these are tools; however, they are used for different purposes now. The problem is originating from the use, and practices that are considered as culture within the society in which we live. The smallest unit which is accounted for in language is defined as each word which is a thought and a sound image. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that, being the structure of connections between the words, the language exists in the mind. In his insightful write-ups, Ingold (2016) basically captures this as what Saussure has to say on linguistic theory. As a result, Fiona's condition is problematic not so much because it allows her to freely combine words

and objects, signifiers and signified, but rather because it is a mental disease that defies standards that have been socially and historically accepted in terms of language and cognition. She is unable to coordinate her voice and thinking (Derrida 1976). Fiona occasionally commits grammatical errors. On the first occasion, this happens while eating dinner with another couple. "Would you care for some wine, wine, or ween?" Fiona asks, taking hold of the bottle and about to pour its contents into the glasses. The guests feel embarrassed and think they had to grant her request, so they say, "Why not, some wane!" Here's my transcription.

Another important event which is considered rather sensitive and described as the most emotional in the whole story, and commercial accurately pictured, occurs when Grant brings Fiona a dinner and introduces her to Aubrey who was with her only several days as a temporary patient. This should be done with the belief that taking an attempt to elicit the prior positive feelings may be beneficial to Fiona. She envelops Grant in an embrace and utters: "You could have just driven away Just driven away without care in the world and forsook me forsaken me forsaken " (Munro 2001: 321) This attempt of simple work of imitating the pattern of irregular verb in simple English using the Mnemonic method which is a very basic instruction of English for conjugation is enough to prove that Fiona understands the intended message promptly but struggles to find the correct phonetic but she has recognized Grant, and in doing so, 'taps the ears gently', an affectionate gesture that they both know and have shared through their married years.

The Bear Beyond and Over the Mountain

The short story's title may be misleading because it references a children's song, but reviewer Héliane Ventura offers an insightful interpretation. An interpretation of "it" according to the intertext. The mountain and the bear don't belong together on this level setting. However, these two inherent aspects are inevitable in classical Canadian writing. The story of the bear and the mountain frequently symbolizes the struggle between humanity and the natural world. In this particular instance, Fiona is also compelled to combat the forces of nature. The bear may encounter the declining or lowering phase of one's life, commonly associated with aging, on the opposite side of the mountain. However, the text presents a challenge to this straightforward approach by maintaining an unresolved storyline, characterized by missing information and unspoken or suppressed elements (Casado-Gual 2015). Two older couples with different lives are Fiona-Grant and Aubrey-Marian. Grant and Fiona are the quintessential independent nuclear family of the modern age, common in the capitalist parts of the Northern Hemisphere, and they have no family members or children. To be more precise, when Grant is by alone, he takes full responsibility for a number of responsibilities, including driving a car, taking care of the house, cooking his own food, and shoveling snow. When the main character admits that his skiing routine has become repetitive and boring, it suggests that he is dependent on Fiona.

For Marian, however, there is nothing more to which she can rely but her strength. She is a mother but her son lives on the western side and hardly comes visiting. He only buys new technology devices for his parents, an electric coffee pot for a crippled father and a satellite T. V sports channel for his father. In doing so he tries to substitute affection with showers of money. That there is an answering machine in this technology means that this short story is not before the mid-1980s at the latest, or the early 1990s at the earliest. The main difference between these two nuclear families lies in the sphere of their financial situation and opportunities, as Fiona and Grant are presented as the representatives of the upper middle class, who can afford to pay for the necessary procedures in the private clinic. On the other hand, Marian cannot economically back the notion of paying for a permanent divergence with her husband at the clinic because she would have to sell the only asset in her possession, the house.

Finally, for Fiona's benefit, Grant makes his first visit to Marian in an attempt to convince her to bring her husband back to the clinic. Marian discloses her smoking habit in a lighthearted manner during their talk. She asks whether Grant has never smoked or whether he has successfully quit after hearing

that he doesn't smoke. He admits it and remembers that it was the beginning of his adulterous affair with Jacqui. Consequently, the word "quit" seems to indicate. Instead of smoking, direct your attention towards Fiona. Undoubtedly, he ended his relationship with Fiona previously, and it is possible that he has done so again. Conversely, Marian asserts that she has ceased her habit of giving up. She has voluntarily declined to cease smoking or feigning cessation. She has not ended her relationship with her spouse, whom she continues to support, despite the personal sacrifices and renunciations it entails. When she departs from her spouse at the clinic, it is solely for a little holiday. Nevertheless, the regular exhaustion she experiences from caring for her immobile spouse and keeping him confined to bed while he remains entranced by the television does not appear to provide favorable outcomes. In contrast, Fiona's impact on Aubrey's mobility has resulted in a little but noticeable enhancement. Marian's demeanor reflects the weariness and exasperation experienced by caregivers, who inevitably deplete their available resources. Grant and Marian embody distinct archetypes of caregivers, both impacted in unique manners by the sorrow and challenges associated with tending to disabled individuals who may not consistently demonstrate acknowledgment or gratitude. Both individuals remain steadfastly committed to their cherished partners, driven by their sense of marital obligation, deep affection, and a shared existence marked by both favorable and challenging circumstances. The most notable aspect is the profound solitude experienced by the characters. This story also depicts a society that highly values individualism, with a complete absence of communal bonds. Fiona's example is particularly remarkable because her choice exemplifies both personal freedom and self-determination. While the decision to depart from her residence and spouse may still appear unlikely and uncommon, especially in Southern European nations where religious and traditional factors may hinder such an action. The Italian society is characterized by a strong sense of family relationships, where elderly, crippled, and mentally disturbed individuals are cared for in their own homes.

CONCLUSION

As a culture, we must cultivate a greater level of openness, compassion, and curiosity towards the diverse experiences and challenges faced by individuals as they age or encounter different realities. Instead of infringing on the rights of others, we have the opportunity to engage in intellectual and personal development, as well as demonstrate affection and empathy towards others, in ways that are morally upright and filled with compassion. In contemporary Western society, the process of aging is often accompanied with a predominantly unfavorable shift in social standing. Moreover, depictions of elderly individuals have been notably restricted, if not entirely lacking. The prevailing paradigm of active retirement is excessively simplistic, just as the commonly held image of the aging process as a constant source of worry is unnecessarily simplistic. From this perspective, individuals might be seen as just collections of medical symptoms, which can be a demeaning encounter for those who are subjected to such a viewpoint. An instance of this phenomenon arises when the consequences of Alzheimer's disease are elucidated by highlighting the medical or economic aspects of the disease, or by employing metaphors that depict the erosion of one's identity. "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" portrays a man and a woman who embody the concept of 'active retirees' and introduces a complicating factor that goes against this commonly recognized concept - sickness. The focal point of the story revolves around the nursing home, which is subjected to highly derogatory ageist prejudices. The nursing home, in essence, is a multifaceted environment with fluid interpretations. The pronoun "we" We can utilize it as a prism to examine the role of the elderly in our societies, analyzing their different characteristics and behaviors, as well as their potential for both positive and negative outcomes.

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