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Re-Imagining Ageing: Spaces of Nursing Homes in Alice Munro's Short Story "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" and its Film Adaptation *Away from Her* by Sarah Polley

Abstract: This paper analyses the short story "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" by Alice Munro and its film adaptation *Away from Her* by Sarah Polley. The starting point of our analysis is the complexity of spaces of the nursing home and their representation, both in the literary text and the film, with the focus on the representation of people with Alzheimer's disease. Through such a juxtaposition, the aim is to show that the space of the nursing home, apart from being used as a lens through which we can examine the position assigned to old and ill people, holds the potential to think about nursing homes not as static places, where no new developments occur, but rather as places which allow for a more complex and diverse consideration of ageing.

Keywords: ageing; nursing home; film; literature; Alzheimer's disease

Introduction

Whilst our lives are divided into various stages beginning with birth and ending with death, being young and being old are by no means equally valued and age is not "a simple explanatory concept".¹ As Calasanti emphasizes, a system of inequality underlies the differentiation between life stages and relations between them are relations of power. This in turn has material consequences on people's lives, their access to resources and opportunities, as well as their self-perception. These are relations of privilege and oppression, of "unearned advantage and disadvantage" accompanied by "systematic inequalities in distributions of authority, status and money".² Those who are advantaged by this system of inequality do not question their right to occupy that

¹ Hannah Zeilig, "The Critical Use of Narrative and Literature in Gerontology," *International Journal of Ageing and Later Life* 6, 2 (2011): 30.

² Toni Calasanti, "Bodacious Berry, Potency Wood and the Aging Monster: Gender and Age Relations in Anti-Aging Ads," *Social Forces* 86, 1 (2007): 336.

position of privilege and do not see it as such. Being old is accompanied by the loss of power; by a diminution in the likelihood of one's voice being heard or having any impact, and by marginalization in the labor market and the workplace.³ It is always important to bear in mind that age relations intersect with other relations. The degree of exclusion that an old person experiences will be also be affected, to greater or lesser depending on their race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and gender.⁴ However, for many old people, to a varying degree, one thing seems to hold true: age brings about an irreversible change in social status.

Even though images of ageing are present in the media, they have been insufficiently theorized in the academic literature. The current constructed images of older people limit the diversity of lived experience to a formula-like set of representations. The most frequently presented image is one of a comfortably leisured old age, when one is free to pursue one's hobbies, travel, and enjoy a financially secure, well-deserved retirement. This can often be seen in many promotional materials as well as in various television commercials. However, this particular representation completely erases those who do not possess sufficient wealth to maintain such a lifestyle and frequently excludes those who are not white and those who are not healthy. Another widespread representation, as Dolan notes, associates being old with being ill, where we have a differentiation between the young body as the healthy norm and the aging body as its unhealthy counterpart, viewed only through the lens of mental and physical decline. According to this view, "the aging body is always already a problem, always already pathologised and in need of treatment".⁵ Since there has been comparatively little research done on the subject of ageing in other fields, except medical and social sciences, the representations of ageing are reduced to the image of weakness and need of assistance. Even though this might apply to a substantial number of old people, the approach is still essentializing since it "reduces the figure of the older person to little more than a set of pathological symptoms and excludes everything else that constitutes specific subjectivities."⁶ This representation, however, carries with it other problematic assumptions and discursive constructions, since the assumption that old people are passive, weak and in need of support and assistance posits them as a financial burden on society, as for example, with regard to dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

Alzheimer's has long been seen as one of the most feared illnesses one can develop when one grows older, which, at its worst, leaves nothing but the physical shell of a person behind. Elizabeth Herskovits writes about the consequences of the acceptance of what she calls the current Alzheimer construct: the roots of which lie in the writing and thinking about Alzheimer's that has emerged in the United States. She writes acutely about one judgmental impact that is implicit in that construct,

³ Ibid, 337.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Josie Dolan, "Firm and Hard: Old age, the 'youthful' body and essentialist discourses," keynote lecture (October 2010): 3, <http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/21954>.

⁶ Ibid, 4.

the judgment of ‘debased personhood’.⁷ According to Herskovits, even though this construct provides a framework for research and treatment, its popularization has had some negative consequences. In Alzheimer’s research and treatment, the use of a framework wherein a person’s subjectivity is viewed as non-existent is then amplified by numerous metaphors of loss of self.

The lay media are replete with clichéd metaphors and representations in which Alzheimer’s is characteristically drawn in colorfully dramatic terms that paint vividly disturbing images. Words used to describe AD include *killer, thief, terrifying, ruinous, living death, never-ending funeral, and private hell of devastation and destruction*. People with Alzheimer’s are *outlandish, bizarre, deranged and wacky, shells of their former selves*.⁸

Mitchell et al. also point to the widespread representations of people with Alzheimer’s as zombies as well as to the frequent comparison between Alzheimer’s and a ravaging beast, as illustrated by the titles of many books about Alzheimer’s, which perpetuate fear and dehumanize people.⁹ Images, in policy documents, of an ‘epidemic’ or a ‘tsunami’ serve no positive purpose here, other than to instill terror.¹⁰ What these scholars criticize is the emphasizing of tragedy and fear over compassion and empathy. There is a lived reality of people with dementia who, together with their families, do find themselves surrounded by challenges and losses. But the complexity of reality cannot be reduced merely to challenges and loss, since “there is also the reality that the person with dementia is still an embodied being who expresses selfhood and desires, suffering and joy”.¹¹

All of this has contributed to the widespread fear of “losing our minds as we grow old”.¹² Beard notes that much of the research on Alzheimer’s is embedded solely in the discourse of loss, thus diminishing, as well as eliminating the person’s subjectivity so that “[t]he dominant story told about people with memory loss is one where their speech is deemed meaningless, their memories defective, and their recollections are discounted in the planning of care”.¹³ Jessica C. Robbins, in her analysis of the 1995 White House Conference of Ageing’s final report, discusses the construction of a normative old person by the state and the representation of Alzheimer’s as “an

⁷ Elizabeth Herskovits, “Struggling over Subjectivity: Debates about the ‘Self’ and Alzheimer’s Disease,” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 9, 2 (1995): 148.

⁸ *Ibid*, 152.

⁹ Gail Joyce Mitchell, Sherry L Dupuis, Pia Kontos, “Dementia Discourse: From Imposed Suffering to Knowing *Other-Wise*,” *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics* (2013): 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 4.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 6.

¹² Herskovits, “Struggling over Subjectivity,” 148.

¹³ Renée L. Beard, “In Their Voices: Identity Preservation and Experiences of Alzheimer’s Disease,” *Journal of Aging Studies* 18 (2004): 417.

object of research”¹⁴, and points to the importance attributed to the financial cost of the treatment. The exclusion of lived experience is evident in the construction of the “economic threat” posed by Alzheimer’s.¹⁵

The question that we pose in this paper is: can cultural production help us in this drive to understand Alzheimer’s better or to develop a different and more nuanced perspective on it and, if so, how? Sarah Falcus acknowledges the importance of looking beyond the field of medicine to fully understand different aspects of the disease.

Understanding that Alzheimer’s disease, though a disease with very real and often terrible effects on the material body, is also experienced in relation to its cultural construction and its intimate connection with the representation of ageing as decline, makes clear the urgency of interrogating the narratives that make up this discourse, and this includes literary texts.¹⁶

The potential for the reconfiguration of social attitudes is a power that films can also possess. People consume media probably more than ever before. Many now have easier access to it and the media can, to some extent, impact the way we think about the world around us. The impact of the media on the perception of the ageing process is not unimportant.

According to the toolkit for media professionals devised by the International Longevity Center – USA, many old people in the United States belong to the generations of people who grew up with television and who are therefore more likely to be negatively impacted by negative stereotypes they see on TV, especially in terms of their perception of their own self-worth.¹⁷ Beyond this, what young people see on television has the potential to affect the way they see their own future, since we/they will all grow old, and secondly, to have an impact on the way they interact with old people in the present.¹⁸ According to Chivers, “atypical representations of old people in fiction and film allow readers and viewers a new approach to addressing old age”.¹⁹

This paper analyses “The Bear Came Over the Mountain”, a short story by Alice Munro that first appeared in the *The New Yorker* magazine in its December 27, 1999 issue, together with its subsequent film adaptation. The short story was reprinted on

¹⁴ Jessica C. Robbins, “Older Americans’ and Alzheimer’s Disease: Citizenship and Subjectivities in Contested Time,” *New Directions in Medical Anthropology* 17 (2008): 27.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁶ Sarah Falcus, “Storying Alzheimer’s Disease in Lisa Genova’s *Still Alice*,” *EnterText* 12 (2014): 75.

¹⁷ Nicole S. Dahmen and Raluca Cozma, ed., *Styleguide for Journalism, Entertainment and Advertising: Media Takes: On Aging* (Sacramento: International Longevity Center – USA and Aging Services of California, 2009), 16.

¹⁸ Dahmen and Cozma, *Styleguide for Journalism*, 13.

¹⁹ Sally Chivers, *From Old Woman to Older Women: Contemporary Culture and Women’s Narratives* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003), xxxvi.

October 21, 2013, in recognition of the year Alice Munro received the Nobel Prize for Literature. In between, the story was included in Munro's short story collection called *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*, published in 2001. This story, which is the last one in the collection, was made into the film in 2006, called *Away from Her*, which was Sarah Polley's directorial debut. The film features Julie Christie as Fiona, Gordon Pinsent as Grant, Olympia Dukakis as Marian and Michael Murphy as Aubrey.

The story of "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" centers on Grant and Fiona, a couple in their seventies, who have been married for more than forty years and who now live comfortably in the country house that is their home. After noticing some initial symptoms, it becomes evident that Fiona has Alzheimer's disease, which prompts her to move to Meadowlake, the nearby nursing home. It is the management's policy at Meadowlake not to allow visits to residents during the first month after admission. This means that Grant is not allowed to visit Fiona for thirty days and when he does get to see her after that time, she no longer seems to remember him. Through Grant's recollections, we find out that during the time he worked as a university professor, he was unfaithful to Fiona. In the short story, he justifies this behavior by invoking the so-called 'Spirit of the 1960s'. On a subsequent visit Grant makes to see Fiona in Meadowlake, he finds out she has become friends with Aubrey, a temporary resident at the home. Grant visits Fiona frequently but she seems to tolerate his presence rather than really to remember him. When Aubrey's wife and primary caretaker, Marian, after her return from a respite holiday in Florida, takes him home, Fiona becomes very depressed and her condition worsens. Grant goes to see Marian to try to convince her to place Aubrey in the nursing home permanently but she refuses, acknowledging that she would not be able to pay the costs of his care unless she sells their house, something she is not willing to do. However, as is only *implied* in the story "The Bear", but shown *explicitly* in the film, through engaging in a romantic relationship with Marian, Grant manages to engineer Aubrey's return to Meadowlake, only to discover that whilst Fiona, in the meantime, has forgotten Aubrey, she seems now to remember him.

This paper uses the version of the story that was published in the 2001 short story collection for its content analysis. For the film, the paper bases its understanding and analysis both on the film and its script notes, together with preliminary press notes. The last of these sources offers an insight into the views of people who worked on the making of the film directly. The aim of this paper is to examine the multiple and, at times, conflicting representations of the nursing home, both as a space of 'non-life' and a space where new developments are possible, as well as displaying the complex internal dynamics of the nursing home. Analytically, the paper traces the alterations from the short story that find their way into the film and explores the extent to which such changes communicate with the source text, drawing attention to the new insights that can be obtained from their points of interaction.

The nursing home: the waiting room for death?

The nursing home can be seen as “one of the most restrictive institutions of contemporary Canadian society” and old age is mainly treated “as a dead end in the narrative of life, a point of stasis from which nothing new, aside from further forms of illness, will appear.”²⁰ The image of a person who has no memory of his/her former self and who has become merely an empty shell, physically alive, but not *living life*, may be one of the first that comes to mind to many. Owing to ongoing medical research and various awareness-raising campaigns, Alzheimer’s is not as mysterious a condition as it used to be. However, one of the problems is that, even though consciousness-raising about Alzheimer’s has been enabled, it is usually painted in solely negative terms, emphasizing the more dramatic aspects of living with it and the tragic consequences it can have.²¹ One example of this negativity can be seen in some of the comments about the film *Away from Her*:

[...] [I]t is not an easy film to watch, since it faces us with our deepest fears, indeed so deep that they tend to remain inarticulate. Perhaps that is where the delicately compelling quality of the film lies: in its ability to bring us face to face with the black hole, or the white blankness, that we dread but nonetheless carry within us.²²

Imagining ourselves in the position of the people in the film, being aware that something similar could happen to us too, can help viewers develop empathy, interest and concern. On the other hand, what it might also do is trigger people to “shrink away in terror” instead of “reach[ing] out with compassion”.²³ This apprehension permeates the spaces of nursing homes. Moreover, the whole of the nursing home is embedded in the discourse of separation and isolation. Cathleen Climie, the film’s production designer, acknowledges that moving from her own home to a nursing home represents a turning point for Fiona:

Meadowlake, the location, was the embodiment of the transition in Fiona’s life from outdoors to indoors, from reality to a memory of that reality. So we created an oversized nature mural in the facility visiting area which became a perfect metaphor for that journey.²⁴

²⁰ Milda Danyté, “Changes in Identity in Alice Munro’s Stories: A Sociopsychological Analysis,” *Literatura* 56, 4 (2014): 63.

²¹ Amir Cohen-Shalev and Esther Lee-Marcus, “An Insider’s View of Alzheimer: Cinematic Portrayals of the Struggle for Personhood,” *International Journal for Ageing and Later Life* 7, 2 (2012): 74.

²² Teresa Casal, “Introduction to *Away from Her*,” *ULICES – University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies, Anglo Saxonica* 3, 2 (2011): 135.

²³ Susan M Behuniak, “The Living Dead? The Construction of People with Alzheimer’s Disease as Zombies,” *Ageing & Society* 31 (2011): 84.

²⁴ *Away from Her*: A Film by Sarah Polley, Production Notes, Lionsgate Films, March 13, 2016, www.lionsgatepublicity.com/home-entertainment/awayfromher/.

What we can see here is the perpetuation of the image of a nursing home as a space of ‘non-life.’ There is no space for people to continue their lives in this kind of narrative. As an example of this view, in one scene in the film, we see a dining room full of people. Some of the people living in the home are sitting and eating by themselves and some are sitting and dining with their families involved in a conversation. From what the supervisor mentioned earlier, we are aware that what we are looking at is an early Christmas dinner arranged for the families of the residents. This scene ends with family members, one by one, rising from the tables and leaving the elderly people sitting or slowly moving about the room alone, in utter silence, accompanied by slow, solemn music. What this tells us is that the only real animation comes from the visitors and that, in the end, the people living in the home are abandoned there. This underlines Berthin-Scaillet’s argument that “[m]ost of the stylistic devices the film-maker resorts to are aimed at rendering a slow process of fading away”.²⁵ Old age in the nursing home is here presented as indeed a point of stasis, an enclosed existence that simply mimics life. It also echoes Danyté’s claim: that old age is perceived as “a dead end in the narrative of life”.²⁶ Not only for Fiona, but for other people living there as well, the nursing home represents the transition to the closed indoors and the ‘turning inwards’ of the personal qualities of the individual.

In the fictional nursing home, Saturdays are the time for visits and as could be seen from the earlier example of the Christmas dinner, times for visits are useful for illustrating the perceived separation of the nursing home from the world outside its walls. In “The Bear”, the visits are portrayed as rather tense. The only people exempt from that feeling are small children, the only ones who are “without apprehension”,²⁷ who can engage in playful behaviour; like, for example, choosing one color of the squares in the corridor to walk on or treating people’s wheelchairs just as a vehicle for getting around the place. However, those children who persist in doing that are usually “removed to the car”.²⁸ They are removed, since their behavior does not correspond to the perceived somber nature of the place. No one seems to enjoy visiting the nursing home, as evidenced by the fact the children’s father or some older child very happily “volunteered to do the removing, and thus opted out of the visit”.²⁹ Behuniak’s *politics of aversion* come into play here as well. Older children find the thought of eating in the nursing home sickening and men do not want to watch women wipe away the dribble from older people’s chins and look the other way. In the film, one teenager who is there for a visit finds the place “fucking depressing”.³⁰ We can also see that there is a seemingly insurmountable difference between the outsiders and the insiders, the visits serving to highlight that difference even more sharply: “And now surrounded by a variety of outsiders

²⁵ Agnès Berthin-Scaillet, “A Reading of *Away from Her*, Sarah Polley’s Adaptation of Alice Munro’s Short Story, “The Bear Came Over the Mountain,” *Journal of the Short Story in English* 55 (2010): 3.

²⁶ Danyté, “Changes in Identity in Alice Munro’s Stories,” 63.

²⁷ Alice Munro, *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 289.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 297.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Sarah Polley, *Script for Away from Her* (Toronto: Pulling Focus Pictures Inc., 2007).

these insiders did not look like such regular people after all.”³¹ It is under the gaze of the outsiders that the residents feel less human. Munro depicts well how this affects the visitors and the ones “being visited”³² alike. To the ones living in the home, visits were a time of stress since the lives they led, “a busy life in their heads” and “the life of their bodies”³³ were not deemed appropriate for sharing with their visitors. Not knowing not what else to do, “[a]ll they could do was wheel or somehow propel themselves about and hope to come up with something that could be displayed or talked about. There was the conservatory to be shown off, and the big television screen. Fathers thought that was really something. Mothers said the ferns were gorgeous.”³⁴ Thus the conversation seems to be reduced to sets of phrases that meet the needs of social convention and the nursing home becomes a place devoid of any reference to the life within. Hazan, for instance, writes of the detachment old people employ in order to sever any link and identification with the institution of a nursing home, using the images of a hotel, for example, so that they do not immediately “assume the role of ‘the other’”³⁵ and we can observe a similar practice being employed here. Because of the insurmountable difference that is imposed between the visitors and the people in the home, the visits from family members seem like unwanted occurrences, whereas, inside its walls, the nursing home reimagines and projects what ‘normal’ means.

However, the image of a nursing home as a prison / hospital type of institution is presented with much more complexity in both the film and the story. There are many interpretations as to why Alice Munro chose the title “The Bear Came Over the Mountain”. “The Bear Went Over the Mountain” is a folk song, a popular children’s nursery rhyme with the following, albeit sometimes slightly varying, lyrics:

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.

To people who have no knowledge or experience of the nursing home as institution, living there – seen rather as being institutionalized there – could seem like

³¹ Munro, *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*, 297–98.

³² *Ibid.*, 297.

³³ *Ibid.*, 298.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Haim Hazan, “The Home Over the Hill: Towards a Modern Cosmology of Institutionalization,” *Journal of Aging Studies* 16 (2002): 335.

crossing a mountain, representing a relocation and the start of a new and different existence. For that matter, Alzheimer's is also often seen as the loss of the "former self" and so is retirement, albeit to a lesser degree. However, here, there is no big revelation and our sense of expectation is somewhat thwarted by the rather uneventful ending to the song and where, in effect, we are asked to rethink our expectations of what this transition is supposed to look like. Our expectations are thwarted at the end of "The Bear" as well (and consequently with some alteration at the end of *Away from Her* too). Instead of a big catharsis and reunion, we are left with an ambiguous and a deeply ironic ending. The choice of the title thus corresponds well with Munro's complex narration and it functions as a warning that our expectations as to what will happen might not be met.

The pivotal turning point in the film examines the complexity of the notion of a home through the experience of one of the protagonists making the transition from a home to a nursing home. In the film, during the time of Fiona's worsening depression that follows her separation from Aubrey, Grant takes her on a 'field trip' to their house, where she comments that the people who live there kept it like it used to be. She does not seem to remember the place, but some part of her finds it very familiar and its elusiveness for her does not allow for the audience to pinpoint any specific meaning. Moreover, at the end of this scene, she expresses her wish to go "home" because everything reminds her of "him". Here, Fiona's words destabilize the easily-assumed simple difference between her former and present self and between the private home she shared with Grant – as the only proper home – and the nursing home – as an alien, artificial environment – as her pronouncement challenges the notion that a simple difference can be easily imposed between the two. Jamieson writes of this widespread perception that living in a nursing home is inferior to living 'at home' and attributes this to "the pronounced gerontological emphasis on the segregating and depersonalizing aspects of residential care".³⁶ She critiques this narrative of segregation from the outside world, calling into question whether there is such an unequivocal division between the community and the supposed closed spaces of the nursing home. She sees Munro's work as emphasizing "continuities between the institution and various domestic spaces which are themselves always changing, and which do not reliably provide older people with opportunities to participate in the kind of intergenerational community life often valorized in gerontological critiques of residential care and equated with living at home".³⁷ Jamieson problematizes the "emphasis on the artificiality of the institutional community" since it

runs the risk of romanticizing the authenticity, familiarity, control, and independence supposedly enjoyed by older people who remain in their homes, and of underestimating the extent to which living at home,

³⁶ Sara Jamieson, "Reading the Spaces of Age in Alice Munro's 'The Bear Came Over the Mountain,'" *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 47, 3 (2014): 3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

especially in situations of ill health and immobility, can carry as much potential for dependency and isolation as living in an institution can.³⁸

This scene in the film brings us back to an earlier one, also present in “The Bear”, showing the first time Grant comes to visit Fiona in Meadowlake. When they talk and she mentions her grandparents’ house as the place where she used to spend her summer holidays, Grant tells her that he knows where that is since it is “[...] where we lived. We live”.³⁹ (In “The Bear”, Fiona’s grandparents’ house is the place “where we live. Lived”.⁴⁰) It is his confusion of which tense is appropriate to use that also tells as about his shifting perception of and uncertainty about what now constitutes home for Fiona.

Thus, we are challenged to shift from seeing the transition from a private home to a nursing home as a one-directional transition to a secure indoor institution. Instead, what we are shown is a considerably more complex representation of the meaning of home from the outset of the Grant and Fiona’s story, as well as complexity of the internal dynamics of their relationship.

Conclusion

As a society we need to be more open, more compassionate, more curious about the differences that surround us when persons age or experience different realities. Instead of violating others, we could be learning, and growing, and loving others in far more ethical and compassionate ways.⁴¹

As this paper has discussed, in Western society currently, growing old is accompanied by a generally negative change in social status and when not altogether absent, representations of old people have been rather limited. The default model – that of active retirement – is overly simplistic, as is the widespread perception of the aging process as something of which to be chronically fearful. From this standpoint, people can be viewed merely as sets of medical symptoms, which can be a dehumanizing experience for those on the receiving end of such a perspective. An example of this occurs when the impact of Alzheimer’s disease is explained by emphasizing the medical or economic side of the disease, or through metaphors of the loss of self.

“The Bear Came Over the Mountain” and *Away from Her* take a man and a woman who fit well into the trope of ‘active retirees’ and complicate that easily identifiable trope with something that the trope abhors – disease. At the centre of the

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Polley, *Script for Away from Her*.

⁴⁰ Munro, *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*, 291.

⁴¹ Joyce Mitchell, Dupuis, Kontos, “Dementia Discourse,” 13.

narrative is the nursing home, itself on the receiving end of very negative ageist stereotypes. The nursing home, in its turn, is a complex place with shifting meanings. We can use it as a prism to help us look into the place assigned to the old in our societies, looking at its various features and practices, but also looking at its potentiality for better and/or for worse. “The Bear Came Over the Mountain” and *Away from Her* inform one another here.

In “The Bear...”, visits are a time of tension, illustrating well that all visitors, with the exception of young children, react to the home with apprehension and that many of the people who live in the nursing home feel the imposed difference. In the film, the transition between a private home and the nursing home is illustrated through changes in photographic style and the emphasis that is put on the lighted corridor, showing characters moving away from each other, alone, walking away from the viewer, into the light. In the film, in the dining room, once the visitors are gone, the residents are left alone and deserted. The film itself is more replete with metaphors that communicate this process of gradual isolation and increasing solitude/loneliness. The transition from the open outdoors to the closed indoors is present both in the film and the short story, whereas the process of increasing infantilization is present mainly in “The Bear”, where old people are treated as children and their relationships with one another deemed of little importance. On the other hand, Fiona resists the narrative of the transition to the nursing home as the beginning of the end. During the time she spends in the nursing home, where it is thought that only changes for the worse will happen, Fiona forges a new relationship for herself and, as a result, new developments unfold. Fiona’s still-sharp sense of humor presents points of interruption of some of the more somber scenes in the film, thus counteracting the pervasive view that personhood is erased by Alzheimer’s.

Both “The Bear...” and *Away from Her* infuse layers of complexity into their respective narratives of the characters’ lives *once they are already old*, rather than depicting and romanticizing their lives when they were younger. In fact, here, it is their lives when there were younger which complicate the narrative. Neither Munro’s text nor Polley’s film present an overly simplified picture of what life in a nursing home is supposed to look like. Each in her own way, they open up space for agency, new developments and narratives that offer new insights and open up new questions about the diverse spaces of nursing homes and make us question and resist the representation of people with different forms of dementia as socially non-existent, letting us inquire into our own expectations and entrenched assumptions.

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