

Alzheimer's, Ambiguity, and Irony

Alice Munro's "The Bear Came Over
the Mountain" and Sarah Polley's
Away from Her

Dementia challenges the foundation of the modern, Lockean self, which conceives of identity as "consciousness inhabiting a body."¹ Without the bright flame of consciousness and language to illuminate and rationally organize sensory experience, John Locke maintained in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that individuals were mere "idiots," on par with "animals" or worse, "monsters."² Locke's concept of personhood is typically understood as a continuity of identity unvarying in time, where "nothing but consciousness can unite remote existences [*sic*] into the same person" (218). Being a person means being and remaining identical to oneself; thus, forgetfulness, at any age, interrupts both memory and personhood. As philosopher Ian Hacking puts it, for Locke "the person is constituted not by a biography but by a remembered biography" (81). By offering an extended close reading of Alice Munro's "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" and of Sarah Polley's filmic adaptation of this story, *Away from Her*, this paper traces the process whereby the narratives of Munro and Polley expand our understanding of the elided complexity of the Lockean view of self. More precisely, the texts shed light on Locke's lesser-known insights into the inescapably fraught relationship between memory and passion. Munro's and Polley's texts do not merely confirm Locke's position, however. Both works present their own ironies and ambiguities that subvert the notion of an autonomous, rational self. Munro's story supplies a complicated representation of both main characters, Fiona and Grant, as individuals who lay a foundation for reading against the Lockean model of selfhood. By contrast, Polley's film installs a less complex portrayal of Grant

as a classic romantic lead, a changed man who is humbled by the chance to rekindle a romance with his wife. By playing into this domestic, nostalgic trope, however, in her adaptation of the story, Polley builds on Munro's foundation to heighten the tensions that emerge between the two characters and between the conventional narrative of the reformed rake, represented by Grant, and the unsettling shadow that Fiona's illness casts over their relationship. By underscoring the intersubjective basis of meaning and identity, both texts offer a two-pronged challenge to Locke's basic conception of personhood. First, in keeping with the ideas of dementia theorists such as Anne Davis Basting and Pia Kontos, Munro's story and Polley's adaptation emphasize the affective and embodied nature of memory.³ Second, due to their narratives' implicit engagement with and critique of the Lockean model of identity, the works under consideration here also deconstruct biomedical, mechanistic models of Alzheimer's disease (AD), exposing the ironic instabilities and ambiguities associated with the experience of late-onset cognitive decline.⁴

Passion, Memory, and Forgetting

Whereas scholars such as Ian Hacking and Stephen Katz tend to focus primarily on Locke's valorization of memory, both Munro's short story and Polley's adaptation shed light on Locke's account of the challenges to memory posed by passionate eruptions of turbulent emotions. As Locke maintains in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, consciousness itself is susceptible to "being interrupted always by forgetfulness" (302). Indeed, Locke recognized that memory is not solely the product of a voluntary cognitive activity, since memories and remembering are activated and disrupted by passion. Memories, Locke writes, are "roused and tumbled out of their dark cells" by "some turbulent and tempestuous passion" (55). As Ann Whitehead observes, Locke notes that memory is often "non-intentional and seems to initiate a chaotic, if not threatening chain of activity which releases memories from the 'dark cells' within which they have hitherto been secured and confined" (55). The disruptive effects of passion are foregrounded in Munro's story of a marriage plagued by infidelity and in Polley's adaptation, which, due to the addition of two sex scenes, enhances the story's focus on a marriage equally threatened by illness and infidelity.⁵

In Munro's story, Grant, a former university professor and self-confessed philanderer, witnesses his wife Fiona's rapid cognitive decline due to Alzheimer's disease. Knowing that her condition will only worsen, seventy-year-old

Fiona voluntarily commits herself to Meadowlake, a retirement home. The institution's policy stipulates that new residents are not allowed visitors for one month. When Grant visits his wife after the prescribed separation, he is shocked to discover that Fiona has formed a passionate attachment to a temporary resident named Aubrey, whom she knew as a teenager and whose unexpected presence at Meadowlake awakened fond memories. Equally disconcerting, Fiona treats Grant as if he were a new resident, offering him a cup of tea—a beverage he never drinks—and spending the rest of her time fawning over Aubrey at his bridge game. The transference of her affection suggests that she has completely forgotten her attachment to Grant and their life together. Rather than accept that he has been erased from Fiona's memory, Grant wonders whether his wife, known for her humour and ironic approach to life, is actually playing an elaborate trick on him.

In effect, Grant cannot decide if Fiona's feelings for Aubrey spring from her illness or if they are a purposefully ironic and wounding commentary on his own multiple past infidelities. Equally ironic, as Sally Chivers argues, Grant "cares too much now that Fiona no longer desires his attention and now that he has, in a sense, left her" (91). Readers grapple with similar questions: does Fiona's behaviour relate to the past, namely her knowledge of Grant's infidelities and their previous relationship, or does it represent an eruption of desire in the present that signals a complete break with the past and past selves? In Munro's story and, to a greater extent, in Polley's adaptation, it is never clear if, due to illness, Fiona ceases to act rationally and to exert her will. We are left equally uncertain as to whether her husband, Grant, her putative rational caregiver, acts in accordance with reason or passion throughout their relationship. Due to the irony and ambiguity associated with the workings of reason and passion in the couple's relationship, Munro's story and Polley's adaptation call into question the integrity of the simplistic version of the Lockean model of selfhood as well as the disease model, which likewise identifies memory loss with the loss of selfhood. Indeed, the basic connections Locke posits between selfhood, memory, and narration have prompted theorists such as Paul John Eakin to ask whether "'the failed narratives' of those who suffer from Alzheimer's disease reflect a 'failed identity,'" and whether "those with the disease can be said to have 'outlive[d] themselves'" (113, 121-22). In addition to highlighting the possibility of Fiona's enduring, conscious agency, both narratives emphasize the ontological implications of Grant's illicit passions: the fracturing of his identity into, on the one hand, the faithful husband

who prides himself on never having spent a night away from his marital bed and, on the other, the unrepentant adulterer. As Chivers observes, “as Fiona changes more and becomes less reliable, Grant settles into his own unchanging ways, which ironically involve unreliability as a monogamous spouse in order to express his undying devotion” (92). By highlighting these events, the story and the film both reveal ironic lapses in memory on the part of the supposedly rational, healthy, and normal care provider.

Irony, Ambiguity and the Biomedical Model of Alzheimer’s

Although many illnesses, particularly mental illnesses, work in ambiguous ways, Alzheimer’s has been particularly fraught with irony and ambiguity from the start, when the disease concept was first developed.⁶ Few people know about one of the greatest ironies concerning the conception of the disease model, namely, that when early researchers, including Alois Alzheimer himself, found evidence of dementia in an individual who was comparatively young—in her fifties—they did not believe that they had discovered a distinct and novel disease process. Instead, Alzheimer and his colleague Gaetano Perusini repeatedly insisted that they had merely stumbled on an odd case of atypical senile dementia. To the end, Alzheimer and Perusini opposed their supervisor Emil Kraepelin’s view that it was a disease entity because they remained unconvinced that they had discovered a new disease at all.⁷ Despite Alzheimer’s repeated objections, Kraepelin bestowed the former’s name on the disease after Alzheimer’s death at age fifty-one.

Since then, as medical anthropologist Margaret Lock observes, Alzheimer’s disease has remained a “conundrum.” To date, there is neither a clear understanding of the cause nor a cure for the disease. In fact, there is growing controversy—a controversy as old as the disease concept itself—as to whether Alzheimer’s is even a disease or a part of the process of aging. As prominent and well-respected Alzheimer’s researcher Martin Samuel puts it, “If we lived long enough, would we all become demented, with plaques and tangles? Is Alzheimer’s just another name for aging?” (qtd. in Groopman 42-43). Recently, several studies have supported Alois Alzheimer’s initial position by demonstrating that “there is, at best, a blurred line between normal cognition, mild impairment and full-on dementia—a declining straight line” (Ingram 123). Simply put, there is no clear distinction “between normal mental functioning and Alzheimer’s” (Ingram 122).⁸ Moreover, without this distinction, it is not possible to apply the Lockean opposition between a wholly rational being and an “idiot.”

From the perspective of researchers and clinicians, Alzheimer's constitutes an illness of which ambiguity seems almost a defining factor. With many medical conditions it is possible to point precisely to what a healthy body looks like in comparison to the unhealthy body that requires medical attention. This is how a diagnosis is reached. However, there is no base test for what the healthy or normal person without Alzheimer's should look like. A non-cancerous body versus a cancerous body or an intact leg versus one that is broken display visible distinctions not available in cases of Alzheimer's, of which definitive biological proof can normally only be given after post-mortem exams. Alzheimer's is instead diagnosed by what amounts to a very complex and methodical form of conjecture; its presence is detected through the observation of cognitive and behavioural abnormality. The problem with a method of diagnosis that relies on symptomatology in the case of this particular illness is that the way in which Alzheimer's presents in different individuals is highly variable and unpredictable, but so, too, is healthy behaviour. This confusion around the distinction between normal and abnormal behaviour results in the diagnosis of Alzheimer's being largely determined through a series of cognitive behavioural tipping points, between forgetfulness and memory loss, confusion and disorientation, and illness and selfhood. As Grant wonders of Fiona in *Away from Her*, "What if this is just her? Just being herself?" Drawing heavily on Munro's story, Polley's film explores the instability and limits of diagnosis and the near impossibility at times of distinguishing between illness and selfhood by situating her narrative so that it balances on the liminal tipping point.

Despite the controversies associated with the disease model, both the media's and biomedicine's portrayals of Alzheimer's elide the longstanding ambiguities and ironies that haunt the illness. In his essay on his father's struggle with AD, American author Jonathan Franzen perhaps most succinctly conveys the insufficiency of the biomedical model—which is predicated on a reductive view of Locke's theory of the self—when he bemoans the fact that the media typically portrays the illness as a terrifying scourge that destroys the self by refracting "death into a spectrum of its otherwise tightly conjoined parts—death of autonomy, death of memory, death of self-consciousness, death of personality, death of body" (89). Franzen observes further that both the media and biomedical reports subscribe to the "most common trope of Alzheimer's: that its particular sadness and horror stem from the sufferer's loss of his or her 'self' long before the body dies" (89). In response to this tidy mechanistic model,

Franzen insists that his father's brain was not "simply a computation device running gradually and inexorably amok" (89). Equally important, he wonders whether the various deaths—of autonomy, of memory, of self-consciousness, of personality, of body—"can ever really be so separated, and whether memory and consciousness have such secure title, after all, to the seat of selfhood" (89). Franzen's sense of the inescapable ambiguity associated with the impact of the illness on selfhood—an ambiguity that, as we argue, represents a challenge to Locke's model—is precisely what Munro and Polley explore in their portrayals of Alzheimer's.

As medical anthropologist Michael Lambek observes, "there is often something in situations of illness that resembles irony or that brings the recognition of irony to the fore" (6). In the case of illness, irony entails "the recognition that some of the potentially participatory voices or meanings are silent, missing, unheard, or not fully articulate, and that voices or utterances appearing to speak for totality or truth offer only single perspectives" (6). By addressing the ironies and ambiguities associated with Alzheimer's—specifically those associated with the blurring of the ability to distinguish absolutely between actions driven by passion or reason—Munro's and Polley's narratives deconstruct the Lockean paradigm that attempts to distinguish the normal from the pathological and, as a corollary, may help to diminish dementia's corrosive reputation as a shameful, "identity-spoiling" disease (Goffman).

Irony and "The Bear Came Over the Mountain"

As Linda Hutcheon observes, irony oscillates in semantic terms between the simultaneous "perception of the said and the unsaid" (39)—between literal and inferred meanings. In Munro's story, and to an even greater extent in Polley's adaptation, Alzheimer's serves as a catalyst for the creation of irony in a narrative that raises questions about remembering and forgetting, fidelity and infidelity, the instability of meaning, the workings of ironic discourse, and the abrupt transference of desire. In "The Bear Came Over the Mountain," Grant's view of Fiona accommodates irony, renders her behaviour meaningful and, equally important, implicates Grant—an adulterer—as a person prone to passionate breaks in his consciousness and, hence, his rational self, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between normative and pathological episodes of forgetting.

Munro's story opens with Grant's recollection of Fiona's childhood home and how they met in the town where they both went to university. As a young man, Grant was struck by Fiona's wealth, her irreverence for the

things that other people took seriously, her fondness for jokes, and her generally ironic approach to life: “Sororities were a joke to her, and so was politics” (274). She made fun of the men who were courting her, including Grant, “drolly repeat[ing] some of his small-town phrases” (274). In light of Fiona’s “superior” class and sophistication, Grant was surprised that she was interested in him and he thought “maybe she was joking when she proposed to him” on a beach, shouting over the waves: “Do you think it would be fun. . . . Do you think it would be fun if we got married?” (275). Gazing at Fiona, now seventy years old, Grant muses that she looked just like herself—“direct and vague as in fact she was, sweet and ironic” (276).

Grant’s musings on the gradual and insidious appearance of Fiona’s symptoms likewise support his view that Fiona may be playing a trick on him. He recalls how once she went for a walk across the fields and came home by the fence line. On her return, she remarked that “she’d counted on fences always taking you somewhere” (276). Reflecting on her comment, Grant admits that it “was hard to figure out. She’d said that about fences as if it were a joke” (277). He is equally at a loss when she dismisses her symptoms: “I don’t think it’s anything to worry about . . . I expect I’m just losing my mind” (277). Recalling their first visit to the doctor, Grant describes how he tried “without success to explain how Fiona’s surprise and apologies now seemed somehow like routine courtesy, not quite concealing a private amusement. As if she’d stumbled on some unexpected adventure. Or begun playing a game that she hoped he would catch on to” (277). In keeping with Franzen’s refusal to view his father’s brain as a clock winding inexorably down, Grant similarly assumes that Fiona is playing a strange and potentially wounding game. When he drives her to Meadowlake, she reminds him of the time they had gone skiing at night. “If she could remember that, so vividly and correctly,” Grant muses, “could there really be so much the matter with her?” (279).

For Grant, the game of communication continues, although under a different guise. Viewed in this light, the text’s repeated references to bridge games emphasize the intersubjective aspects of the production of meaning and identity. As noted earlier, when Grant first visits Fiona, he finds her hovering over Aubrey at the bridge table. To his dismay, Grant finds himself the unwelcome intruder and even the other players look at him with displeasure. Only Fiona greets him warmly: “Bridge,” she whispered, “Deadly serious. They’re quite rabid about it” (288). After offering him a cup of tea, Fiona gazes in Aubrey’s direction: “I better go back,” she says, “He thinks he can’t play without me sitting there. It’s silly, I hardly know the game anymore”

(290). As well as raising questions about her competence, her comments remind us that no one can play the game of generating meaning without the other's presence. Aubrey seemingly depends on Fiona's role as witness to enable him to inhabit his role as a player, an ironic echo of her relationship to Grant. In both instances, the men cannot maintain their identity without Fiona acting as a witness to their games. In effect, her agency and her actions highlight the intersubjective foundation of identity. As represented in the story and in the film, this factor, together with the affective and embodied nature of memory and the instabilities associated with Alzheimer's, undermines the Lockean notion of the autonomous, rational self.

Munro's text continues to underscore the intersubjective facet of selfhood when Fiona, before returning to the bridge game at Meadowlake, tries to console Grant: "It must all seem strange to you but you'll be surprised how soon you get used to it. You'll get to know who everybody is. Except that some of them are pretty well off in the clouds, you know—you can't expect them all to get to know who you are" (290). Again, like the wise fool in a Shakespearian play, Fiona's words are instructive. If, as Jesse Ballenger insists, Alzheimer's "affects us all" (153), then her memory loss and institutionalization are, indeed, equally his experience; Grant is thus akin to a new resident who must work at understanding the Other (his transformed wife and, due to the reciprocal nature of their roles, himself).⁹

For his part, Grant reflects on words of wisdom during their first brief exchange to determine whether he accurately detected the ironic marker: "She had given herself away by that little pretense at the end, talking to him as if she thought perhaps he was a new resident. If it was a pretense" (291). The sly strangeness of Fiona's statements and behaviour eventually prompt Grant to quiz Fiona's nurse, Kristy: "Does she even know who I am?" he wonders, admitting to himself that, for his part, he cannot decide: "She could have been playing a joke. It would not be unlike her" (290-91).

Further ironic complications arise when Aubrey's wife, Marian, decides to take Aubrey back home. His departure plunges Fiona into a life-threatening depression. In an effort to help her, Grant pays Aubrey's wife a visit. Marian mistakenly assumes that Grant has arrived to castigate her for allowing Aubrey to "molest" his wife. Quite the opposite, Grant hopes to persuade Marian to return Aubrey to Meadowlake and to Fiona. During their meeting, ironic reversals abound: Grant praises Marian for being "noble and good" and caring for her husband at home, but she promptly informs him that she simply cannot afford to keep him in an institution. Grant assumes that

Marian will dismiss him as a “silly person . . . who didn’t have to worry about holding on to his house and could go around dreaming up the fine generous schemes that he believed would make another person happy” (316). Instead, Grant awakens Marian’s sexual interest, and when he returns home he finds a message from her on his answering machine inviting him to a dance for “singles” at the Legion.

Munro’s story never reveals what transpires between Grant and Marian, whereas Polley’s film portrays the couple in a post-coital embrace—a change that underscores the disruptive impact of passion which does not simply entail the breaking of a marital vow, but, instead, instigates chaotic sequences that disrupt the protagonists’ ontological integrity. Both the story and the film, however, conclude with Grant delivering Aubrey to Meadowlake. “Fiona,” Grant says, “I’ve brought a surprise for you. Do you remember Aubrey?” (322). Rather than elicit joy, however, Grant’s surprise gift devastates Fiona and, for the first time since she became a resident at Meadowlake, Fiona seemingly remembers Grant. “You’ve been gone a long time,” she remarks. “You could have just driven away. . . . Just driven away without a care in the world and forsook me. Forsooken me. Forsaken” (322). This episode—even more forcibly than Fiona’s unwilling memories of her relationship with Aubrey as a teenager, triggered by his unexpected presence at Meadowlake—powerfully dramatizes Locke’s insight that memories are “roused and tumbled out of their dark cells” by “turbulent and tempestuous passion” (55). Due to the shifts in verb tense in the passage cited above, readers wonder if Fiona is referring to Grant’s reaction to her recent infidelity, to her illness, or to *his* past infidelities. The story concludes ambiguously with Grant’s response. He presses his cheek against Fiona’s withered visage and murmurs: “Not a chance” (322). Like Fiona’s remark, Grant’s comment remains opaque; although he seems to be professing his love for her, it is also quite possible that he has just been unfaithful to her again and he is satisfied to have Fiona out of the way so that he can pursue his affair with Marian.¹⁰

The structure of Munro’s narrative repeatedly draws an ironic parallel between Fiona’s memory loss and her surprising attachment to Aubrey, and Grant’s prior infidelities which he chose to “forget” and which Fiona had also learned long ago to “forget.” This parallel forces readers to read the former against the latter in a pairing that highlights how both passion and illness instigate different forms of memory loss and, as a result, lead to forms of ontological and, in this case, marital infidelity. The parallel is evident in both the story and more obviously in the film, in which

“marriage is primary to the secondary plot about Alzheimer’s” (Pevee qtd. in Chivers 86). According to Chivers, the film uses Alzheimer’s disease “as a metaphor for infidelity” (92). As she observes, while “Grant and Fiona’s marriage bond is deteriorating under the pressure of her illness, it also continues to be assaulted by infidelity, this time on the part of both spouses” (92). While acknowledging the complexity of the dénouement of Munro’s story, some critics have nevertheless ultimately viewed Grant as absolutely selfless in returning Fiona’s lover, Aubrey, to Meadowlake. Héliane Ventura, for example, describes the story as “a reconfiguration of love at twilight” (n. pag.). Yet such readings, which split Grant’s character simply into the formerly unfaithful spouse and the newly redeemed husband, are not supported by the text; nor do they do justice to the ongoing ironic oscillations in Grant’s character that persist to the end. In the final version of the story, Munro added sections in which Grant reflects on what he stands to gain from using his sexual allure to convince Marian to return Aubrey to the nursing home.¹¹ Figuring Marian out, he suggests, would be like “biting into a litchi nut” with an “oddly artificial allure” (317). The fact that his sexual satisfaction remains at stake is further clarified when, elaborating on this sexist conceit, Grant insists that his plan “would not work—unless he could get more satisfaction than he foresaw, finding the stone of blameless self-interest inside her robust pulp” (319). The narrative also juxtaposes the final scene in which Grant seemingly selflessly appears with Aubrey in tow to Grant’s prior lustful contemplation of “the practical sensuality of [Marian’s] . . . cat’s tongue. Her gemstone eyes” (321). Ultimately, the extended ambiguities and ironic doubling that pervade Munro’s story highlight Fiona’s agency, her role as a witness, and her potential status as an ironic trickster figure. This, coupled with the story’s emphasis on the impact of passion on memory, call into question reductive medical myths about loss of self and subjectivity through aging and Alzheimer’s disease.

Irony and Adaptation: Sarah Polley’s *Away from Her*

Though the theme of ambiguity surrounding Fiona’s illness is certainly well represented in Munro’s story, Sarah Polley’s adaptation heightens the difficulty of distinguishing between Fiona’s personality and her illness with the addition of several scenes that trouble the definitiveness one traditionally seeks in diagnosis. The memorable line Fiona delivers in a clinic waiting room, “What an ugly baby!” is one of Polley’s most thought-provoking additions.¹² In his article on Polley’s adaptation, Robert McGill

unambiguously attributes Fiona's lack of social correctness in this scene to her illness, saying, "The moment seems intended to illustrate the intransigence of Alzheimer's by showing Fiona to have forgotten social protocols, a common sign of the disease" (n. pag.). While this is certainly a possible reading, Polley does not approach the moment in question with anything close to the certainty with which McGill reads it. Fiona's exclamation immediately follows her first meeting with the doctor for an assessment to determine whether she may have dementia. In the film adaptation of this scene from Munro's story, Fiona frequently blunders during the meeting. Still, she is shown to be extremely aware of the social protocols McGill accuses her of having forgotten. For instance, when she is unable to determine what the proper course of action would be if a fire were to break out in a movie theatre, she attempts to distract from the fact that she cannot answer the doctor by directing the conversation towards the lack of any decent films to see. When she realizes that she has mistakenly gone to retrieve her coat before the end of her appointment, she insists she is simply cold, covering again for what she realizes a moment too late is not appropriate behaviour. In this scene, Fiona displays an almost heightened awareness of how she should be behaving and of when she fails to do so. It seems unlikely that after Polley makes such a strong effort to draw attention to the struggle between Fiona's attempts to keep up appearances and her confusion that she would suddenly encourage us to see Fiona's composure as completely lapsed. Adding to the ambiguity of the moment is the fact that Grant laughs at Fiona's words, seemingly finding them in keeping with her ironic, occasionally irreverent character.

In another added scene, Polley plays even more blatantly with Fiona's particular brand of humour as an unsettling factor in the attempt to separate her personality from her illness. Grant is talking to Fiona about her impending move to Meadowlake when Fiona turns around and delivers a completely convincing performance that suggests she has no idea what he is talking about. The moment is broken a few seconds later when she giggles, "Just kidding." Grant immediately recognizes and appreciates Fiona's trick as characteristic of her sometimes dark sense of humour. By introducing this small character moment, Polley not only offers a potentially more convincing justification for Grant's suspicion regarding the reality or extent of Fiona's illness than Munro provides, but also plays with the conventions of many dementia narratives with which she can assume her audience will be familiar. If Polley were to follow the conventional narrative treatment of

dementia, Fiona's line would not be undercut, but would act as a moment of tragic drama. In keeping with Munro's story, Polley resists both the simplicity of the supposedly rigid categories of illness and selfhood, and the narrative conventions she finds herself working within and against. The result is the destabilization of the assumptions viewers might make on these grounds.

These two small but significant moments are added to Polley's script to further emphasize and complicate the suspicion Grant holds, present in both the film and Munro's original text, that Fiona might possibly be pretending, taking revenge for his years of infidelity. In her reading of the film, Chivers supports this approach by stressing the significance of the fact that Fiona watches as Grant flirts with the nurse, Kristy: "As Fiona watches her husband flirt—yet again—with a younger woman, his wife's motivations and potential for subversion are palpable" (91). Grant is not only worried that there may be some conflation of Fiona's at times eccentric personality and her illness. Both the Grant of the story and the Grant of the film constantly question Fiona's level of consciousness and, more than that, the possibility of her will and ability to choose. Fiona's will is established as the driving force behind her move to Meadowlake and away from Grant, a story point that already separates her from the convention of dementia narratives in which characters with Alzheimer's are usually placed in homes by their family members. In *Away from Her*, Fiona makes the choice to move to Meadowlake herself, while Grant is shown to be the one who is resistant. Polley's film also uses the added sex scene to enhance Fiona's agency, as she is the one who initiates sex with Grant when she arrives at Meadowlake; she is also the one who insists that Grant leave Meadowlake after they make love.

Fiona's will is also a crucial factor in one of the central plot lines of the film, the love triangle between Fiona, Grant, and Aubrey.¹³ The status of this triangle is dependent on Fiona's remembering and forgetting. Through Grant's perspective, the viewer is encouraged to question the source of, first Fiona's forgetting of him, then her remembering of Aubrey, then her complete switch to remembering Grant and forgetting Aubrey at the end of the film. Polley troubles the ease with which the viewer (and, potentially, the reader of Munro's story) might simply decide that Grant is paranoid, self-centred, or in denial in thinking that Fiona in any way wills herself to forget or remember, by frequently hinting at brief flashes of Fiona's will that seem to emerge through her illness. In this way, Polley blocks any attempt to attribute Fiona's behaviour entirely to illness, but she also never goes so far as to decisively indicate with absolute certainty whether it is anything more than that.

It is during the first phase of the love triangle story, as Grant is forced to watch his wife grow closer to another man and move further away from him, that he develops a theory that she may be purposefully performing forgetting him and that her attachment to Aubrey is a punishment for his former deviances. Her forgetting seems so impossible that it does not seem real, particularly since the thirty-day rule at Meadowlake means that Grant does not experience a process of being forgotten, but is subjected to the full brunt of it at once. During this phase, Polley makes adjustments to several scenes from “The Bear Came Over the Mountain” so that the question of the extent of Fiona’s agency over her own remembering and forgetting is enhanced. In the car on the way to Meadowlake, Fiona expresses her wish that she could forget some of the more painful elements of her marriage to Grant that seem to linger on while the happy memories of their new life together disappear. This scene restates the lack of control that is often thematically foregrounded in dementia narratives. However, once Fiona has largely forgotten Grant, or at least forgotten who he is to her, several hints of a partially willed forgetting of him punctuate their interactions. When Grant asks Fiona what she is doing with Aubrey, she replies steadily, “He doesn’t confuse me. He doesn’t confuse me at all,” an addition to the film adaptation of Munro’s story that implies an at least partially willed focus on the relationship with a man who reminds her not only of a painful past, but also of all that she is losing and has already lost. In another addition of Polley’s, a more emotionally charged exchange occurs when Grant attempts to force Fiona to remember that he is her husband. She cries and passionately pleads, “Please, don’t.” This small but powerful line is Polley’s, couched between the polite, repetitive inanities that are present in Munro’s story and have come to define Fiona’s interactions with Grant. Fiona’s illness may make it difficult for her to identify exactly why she is crying or to process the incongruity between her emotional response and her polite conversation, but in *Away from Her*, part of Fiona seems to surface for just a moment to insist that Grant let her forget him.

The evidence of Fiona’s willed remembering of Aubrey after their separation is much more solid than the rather ambiguous treatment of her forgetting of Grant, and is drawn more directly from the source text. Fiona clings to memories of Aubrey. She keeps the portraits he drew of her on the wall and seems to be committed to a sustained mourning period. Grant asks her if she could possibly try to let go of her pain, indicating once again his belief that she has at least a modicum of control over what she remembers

and what she does not, despite her illness. Fiona fairly lucidly explains, “If I let it go, it will only hit me harder when I bump into it again,” possibly drawing from her experience of forgetting Grant. In “The Bear Came Over the Mountain,” the line is originally a part of Grant’s interior monologue and reads, “if she let go of her grief even for a minute it would only hit her harder when she bumped into it again” (307). While Fiona’s intentionality is still implied, in Munro’s story this observation is part of Grant’s occasionally questionable reading of Fiona. Polley’s redistribution constructs a Fiona who is consciously struggling against her illness, striving not to forget.

The last twist in the triangle storyline occurs in the final scene of the film when Fiona remembers Grant for the first time since her move to Meadowlake and forgets Aubrey, seeming unable to hold both men in her mind at the same time. While it is fairly clear that Fiona now remembers Grant, her forgetting of Aubrey is slightly less definite, a direct reversal of the state of the two men in Fiona’s consciousness in the second part of the narrative arc. When Grant asks Fiona if she remembers Aubrey, her eyes glaze over and focus away from him and, during an extraordinarily long pause in film terms (twenty seconds), her hands begin to shake as she nervously taps them on the book she is holding, the beginnings of tears in her eyes. Finally she looks up and smiles weakly, saying, “Names elude me.” It is worth noting that Fiona does not refer to Grant by name in this final scene as she does in every other scene throughout the film, or at least in the ones in which she remembers him, suggesting that the forgetting of a name may not mean the forgetting of a person due, in part, to the workings of passion and embodied memory. Once again, Polley creates space for ambiguity and opens Fiona’s behaviour up to a series of seemingly unanswerable questions. Does Fiona really not remember Aubrey? Is it the memory of him or the inability to remember him that seems to disturb her? Does she have a vague sense of him that her illness makes it impossible for her to solidify? Or is she, at least in part, willfully choosing to forget him, perhaps to protect herself from the pain of remembering? It is also worth noting that the film closes before showing the probable return to confusion, wherein Fiona might well become horrified by her embrace of Grant. In doing so, the film fleetingly traffics in the same romantic hope portrayed in Hollywood films about Alzheimer’s such as *The Notebook*, which likewise concludes with a portrait of a husband embracing his wife, whose mind throughout the film remains clouded by dementia; yet, for one tender moment at the end, her confusion dissipates and she recognizes her beloved.

In the closing scenes of Munro's story and *Away from Her*, however, Aubrey hovers outside the room, raising the question whether Fiona's passion for him will cause her to remember him when he comes into view. Polley refuses to simplify Fiona's character to the point that any of these questions can be answered confidently, and does not seem to suggest either that Fiona is making fully conscious choices or that her illness has completely removed her ability to choose. Instead, the film encourages the viewer to inhabit the space of confusion that seems to characterize the mysterious, almost duplicitous nature of dementia.

As the earlier discussion of Franzen's criticism of the media's treatment of dementia attests, the discourses around dementia are full of ineffectual metaphors. Polley's film draws attention to these discourses by adding narratives from self-help books and biomedical texts, such as the one that Grant reads that posits the disease as being like a "series of circuit breakers in a large house, flipping off one by one," when in reality the "lights" seem to flicker, go out, dim, and turn back on again at random.¹⁴ The circuit breaker metaphor, akin to the analogy of the clock winding down that Franzen rejects, is proven to be inadequate by the film's and indeed the illness' insistence on ambiguity. After Fiona leaves for Meadowlake, the film adds another scene not present in the story. This one portrays Grant contemplating their home, watching the lights go out in each room. Rather than serve as an image of the damaged circuits in Fiona's brain, the image underscores the losses, which include his home and, more generally, his former existence as Fiona's husband. Although the mechanical model proves unsuitable, Munro offers up another organic metaphor that may be more apt simply because it embraces uncertainty. In this case, Polley adheres very closely to the original story. Fiona and Grant take a walk through a nature reserve and when Fiona reaches down to feel for the heat supposedly exuded from skunk lilies, she remarks, "I can't be sure if what I can feel is the heat or my imagination." She follows this thought with a bluntly delivered statement regarding the biological function of the heating mechanism, saying, "The heat attracts the bugs. Nature never fools around just being decorative." The flower and the ambiguous experience it conjures up can be read as a metaphor for Fiona's illness, and, by extension, our own experience of her illness and the uncertainty surrounding illness and selfhood. The heat inside the flower is real, just as the illness inside Fiona is real. *Away from Her* does not seek to dispute biological truths. In both Munro's story and Polley's film, it is rather our very perception and the confusion that occurs when we are

confronted by the ambiguities generated by unwilling illness coupled with “tempestuous and turbulent passion” and willed acts characteristic of a conscious self that remain in question.

NOTES

- 1 Qtd. in Wright 30; see Katz, Higgs, and Williams.
- 2 Locke insisted that to be human required the capacity for abstraction; he ranks dementia on the very bottom rung of existence and compares “idiots” to “brutes” in Book II (11:11-12). He also likens “changelings” (a synonym for “idiot”) to “monsters” in Book IV (4:15-16). For more information on this subject, see Wright; Goodey.
- 3 See, for example, Anne Basting’s *Forget Memory* and Pia Kontos’ and Wendy Martin’s “Embodiment and Dementia.”
- 4 Whereas Amelia DeFalco accepts the biomedical model of Alzheimer’s in her reading of the story in *Uncanny Subjects*, this essay argues that the works of Munro and Polley expose the ironies and ambiguities that have haunted the biomedical model since the disease concept was developed in the late nineteenth century. DeFalco, for example, argues that Grant willfully misinterprets Fiona’s symptoms of dementia as facets of her eccentric or “foreign” nature. According to DeFalco, this willful blindness to the obvious symptoms of dementia suits Grant’s self-serving tendency to betray Fiona repeatedly, all the while remaining entirely lacking in empathy for his wife (77).
- 5 As Sally Chivers observes, Polley adds two sex scenes; in the first, Fiona begins her Meadowlake stay by “initiating sex with Grant, after which Fiona instructs him to leave” (90); in the second, “Marian’s advances to Grant are consummated” (91).
- 6 See Margaret Lock’s *The Alzheimer Conundrum*.
- 7 See Bick et al. 1-5, 82-147.
- 8 One of the most paradoxical elements that both early and more recent research into Alzheimer’s disease (AD) has shown irrefutably is that large numbers of people with so-called AD neuropathology in their brains never become demented in old age (see Groopman; see also Ingram 99-126). This finding, which has been known for many decades, is now undeniable due to neuro-imaging. Yet, as Jerome Groopman observes, it is ignored in the AD research world, and no one can explain what it is that protects some people from dementia (42).
- 9 As DeFalco states, “it is Grant who now occupies the role of ‘reluctant witness’” (79).
- 10 This essay’s reading of the enduring ambiguity of Munro’s conclusion recalls Coral Ann Howells’ observation that Grant’s “Not a chance” is “an echo of his old duplicitous reassurances,” emphasizing the indeterminacy of the closing scene (77).
- 11 There are two extant versions; the short story published in *The New Yorker* in 1999 and the final version published in Munro’s collection in 2001. There are notable structural differences primarily due to the additions to the final version. However, none of the changes fundamentally alter the characterization or plot of the original story.
- 12 Dialogue from *Away from Her* transcribed by the authors.
- 13 In the film version, Marian is loved neither by Aubrey nor by Grant. In both versions of the short story, Grant’s interest in Marian is purely sexual.
- 14 As Chivers observes, unlike the story, Polley’s film includes narration from self-help books and medical information about Alzheimer’s in addition to snippets of poetry and

music. Rather than serving as an authoritative discourse, however, as Chivers astutely notes, Grant reads the former “as though they were the Ondaatje poetry featured early in the film” (92). As a result, the medical and self-help materials have the same status as the poetic and musical intertexts.

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