Love, Age, and Loyalty in Alice Munro's "The Bear Came over the Mountain" and Sarah Polley's *Away from Her*

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This chapter discusses two examples of Canadian literature and film that offer a progressive perspective on age by contemplating questions of loyalty and commitment in a lifelong romantic relationship challenged by the impact of dementia. Both set in a long-term residential-care home, Alice Munro's short story "The Bear Came over the Mountain" (2001) and Sarah Polley's film *Away from Her* (2006) focus on the continuities and disruptions that define the tropes "love" and "age" in contemporary Canadian society. An adaptation of Munro's story, the film not only addresses change but represents itself the idea of a productive connection between faithfulness and the creation of something new. In Munro's tale, this correlation is realized through the intimate "relationship between memory, fidelity, and adaptation, [... which] offers insights into how [being committed to one's partner] can adapt to changing conditions" (McGill, "No Nation but Adaptation," 98–99).

In addition to conceptual emphasis and setting, the film and story share their main themes, characters, plot, and the narrative sequence of events. They depict the life of Fiona and Grant, a married couple in their seventies, who are observed in their interactions before and after Fiona develops symptoms of Alzheimer's. After experiencing a series of increasingly frequent memory failures, Fiona decides to move to a long-term care residence not far away from their home. When Grant is allowed to visit his wife for the first time after the thirty days' settling-in period, she cannot remember who he is. Moreover, she has become the companion of another patient, a physically paralyzed man named Aubrey who watches her conversations with Grant with undisguised jealousy. When Aubrey, who is only a temporary resident, is taken home again by his wife, Fiona develops symptoms of depression: she refuses to eat and spends much of her time crying. Grant's attentions make no difference to her. After a few weeks, the management considers moving her to the closed ward,

where patients are cared for who no longer participate in the shared activities of the residence. To prevent this, Grant persuades Aubrey's wife, Marian, to return him to the institution for good. The story ends with Grant announcing Aubrey's return to Fiona, who suddenly recognizes Grant as her husband and acknowledges his loyalty to her. It remains unclear whether Fiona's rediscovery of her memory will last, and whether seeing Aubrey again will actually improve her condition.

Taking into account scholarly criticism of both works, this chapter discusses the structural interest of story and film in the values inherent in lifelong romantic commitment, which they view as depending on a balance between intimacy and emotional distance. On a discursive level, the progressive correlation between love and age is emphasized in the idea of adaptation and through the rendering of life as an ongoing narrative, which conveys meaning through changes of perspective, spatial relations, and varieties of narrative order such as analepsis and prolepsis. In addition, the article demonstrates that affection and dedication are represented through intertextuality and recurrent rhetorical schemes and tropes in the story, whereas Polley's film uses landscapes and space to illustrate the partners' struggle with the nature and form of their commitment. Both works of fiction insist on keeping love alive, suggesting that in old age, a reconsideration of the idea of loyalty might mark a new beginning.

Humours of Love and Loyalty: "The Bear Came over the Mountain" (2001)

Alice Munro's short story features several notable aspects that have become identified with her work for which she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2013. One of Canada's foremost writers for several decades, her short stories have been unobtrusive yet highly articulate and valued contributions to the Canadian canon since the publication of her first collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968), which earned her Canada's most prestigious literary distinction, the Governor General's Award. Born as Alice Ann Laidlaw in 1931 in Wingham, Ontario, Munro grew up on a farm in Huron County. She studied English and Journalism at the University of Western Ontario and published her first story in a student magazine. Her work to date includes fifteen original collections of short stories and several television scripts. In the 1990s, she settled down in Clinton, Ontario, where she continues to live.[1]

Many of Munro's stories describe the challenges and relationships of "women of her own generation," who become adults after the Second World

1 | Detailed overviews of Munro's life and comprehensive discussions of her work can be found in Howells; Thacker; and Staines.

War and struggle to balance their longing for personal and professional independence with emotional intimacy (McGill, "Alice Munro," par. 18). The security that marriage and family seem to promise is challenged in Munro's writing, which studies the myriad ways in which unfulfilled desires, disillusionment, and discontent invade and undermine the stable framework of social convention. Munro's narratives are microcosms of Canadian lives in the twentieth century: they explore female opportunities in a patriarchal world, socioeconomic transformations, mother–daughter relationships, the vagaries of marriage and friendship, rural upbringing, (the mystery of) love, and the barriers of communication between individuals and within communities. Munro's preferred setting is rural Ontario, which shows an autobiographical influence on her writing, as does her dealing with themes such as the loss of parents and of children: her mother passed away comparatively young after having had Parkinson's disease for 20 years, and one of her own daughters died shortly after birth (Thacker 147, 125).

Several of Munro's stories are arranged in a cyclical pattern, which portrays events in the life of the protagonist at different stages and so combines elements of the story collection and the novel (Nischik 199). The cycle also draws attention to continuations and disruptions in characters' lives and indicates the intertextual and metafictional quality of subjective approaches to experience, memory, and the subsequent reinterpretation of both. Munro has shown interest in historiographic metafiction, a postmodern form of narration, which sheds light on how fiction is created and, in so doing, on how a story becomes a subjective account of history (see Duncan 27, 130–31). According to Canadian critic Linda Hutcheon, metafiction is a "process of creating order through myth and art," which gains historiographic significance when it is "grounded in historical, social, and political realities" (Hutcheon, *Canadian Postmodern* 2, 13). In "The Bear Came over the Mountain," sociocultural transformations such as sexual liberation and second-wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, respectively, form the background to the main character Grant's reflection on his life. The free indirect discourse of his memory reveals the associative and cognitive limits of his recollections, characterizing him as both nostalgic and self-involved. The story observes his reminiscing, though without passing judgment: Isla Duncan stresses that in Munro's writing, memory "is not always seen as a source of guilt or a reminder of disappointment"; the self-conscious re-creation of one's life "can sometimes be a means of escape, even a shelter," and as such it discloses "the interplay between characters' past and present lives" (103). Munro's figurative language and rhetorical means reflect her interest in what is, what has been, and what could have been: her allegories, allusions, paragrams, enumerations, and similes construct scrupulously detailed versions of ordinary life replete with hidden meanings, unsolved mysteries, suppressed desires, and secrets kept and revealed. The fictional lives she conjures up do

not necessarily follow a particular trajectory, as she explains in an interview: "I don't take up a story and follow it as if it were a road, taking me somewhere, with views and neat diversions along the way. I go into it, and move back and forth and settle here and there, and stay in it for a while. It's more like a house" (McCaig 93).

And just as it takes a while to feel at home in a new place of residence, Munro's stories require more than one reading to become familiar with all their hidden nooks and crannies. This is certainly the case with "The Bear Came over the Mountain," which was first published in her collection *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage* (2001). Gradually revealing the self-involved quality of the main character's view on his marriage, the narrative investigates the form that love assumes when one partner suffers from a degenerative disease. The story is one of several in Munro's 2001 collection that address the endurance of both love and commitment under circumstances such as misfortune, adversities, and a variety of severe strokes of fate: apart from what appears to be Alzheimer's in "The Bear Came over the Mountain," the collection's contributions deal with infertility, cancer, and suicide. As a reviewer points out, however, "in none of these stories do things go from very bad to worse" (Pritchard, par. 5). Munro is more interested in exploring what such afflictions can unearth and encourage in people's thinking and in their attitudes toward one another than in indulging in elaborate, emotive renditions of human suffering.

The revelations disclosed by Fiona's degenerative disease revolve around the couple's marriage and their life together, which, according to Grant, was a fairly good one, "without too much going wrong" (Munro 306). Told from a third-person perspective, the story is seen through his eyes, an unusual focalization in Munro's work, which more often features the point of view of female protagonists. In contrast to many of her women characters, Grant does not want intellectual or professional independence, both of which he has always enjoyed: he struggles to remain emotionally close to his wife although she has forgotten the life they once shared. His efforts slowly reveal that even before Fiona's illness, their relationship had been characterized by a careful balance of distance and intimacy that has enabled her in particular to retain her dignity during Grant's extramarital affairs. Grant's apparently noble and selfless gesture – his efforts to organize Aubrey's return to the residential home to stabilize Fiona's health, even at the cost of her being the companion of another man – appear as an attempt to make amends for betraying her in the past. According to Robert McGill, Munro's story "explore[s] the very question of what it means to be faithful" when it integrates "Grant's own possible adultery … into the project of seeking Fiona's well-being, so that in the story, adaptation and infidelity seem to go hand in hand as activities necessary for happiness" ("No Nation" 100, 101).

The story uses a combination of intertextual references and shifting narrative modes to portray both Fiona and Grant's love for one another and the tension between dedication and distance in their relationship. Particularly interesting for a narrative that explores mature romance in a care home is that the title of Munro's story is an adaptation of a North American nursery rhyme, an oral genre associated with childhood. The rhyme "The Bear Went over the Mountain" mocks an adventurous bear in repetitive verses and produces an odd contrast to the themes of the story:

> 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.*
> (Ventura 174)

In her analysis of Munro's intertextual references, Héliane Ventura suggests that the rhyme is merely a "self-parodic play on words, which relies on the opening up of expectations only to frustrate curiosity with the platitude of a tautological closure," because "[t]he world that the bear discovers is just as ordinary as the one he has just left" (174, 175). The rhyme introduces into the story the "tradition of 'Nonsense' as evidenced in the writings of Lewis Carroll and [Edward] Lear" in order to mock "all our expectations of heroic aggrandizement and magic discovery" (175). Such parody suggests reading Grant's behaviour as essentially self-serving rather than self-sacrificing, which is supported by the story's indication that he begins an affair with Marian, Aubrey's wife.

In the figurative context of Munro's story, however, the emphasis of the rhyme lies on the shift of situation and perspective, which in itself is the discovery of something extraordinary. This interpretation is confirmed by the author's choice of words: in contrast to the original nursery rhyme, Munro's "bear" does not *go* "to see what he could see"; he *comes over* the mountain, a different verb which suggests a deliberate advance to somebody rather than the mere following of a curious impulse. Moreover, given Grant's previous adultery, it is not self-evident that he would not "go," that is simply leave his wife now that she has forgotten him, but that he decides to "come over," to make an effort to approach Fiona in order to remain emotionally close to her. "On

the other side," he then finds himself surprised "to see what [s]he could see." His wife's condition compels him to move to the other side, where he begins to consider her view of him and his actions. This shift is involved in another meaning of *coming over*, which denotes a change of allegiance: forced by Fiona's illness to assume a new perspective, Grant is not only given the opportunity to view their life together from his wife's point of view; the accompanying realization also gives him the chance to show loyalty to her, and to his feelings for her. Reading Grant as "the bear" who comes over to the other side *grants him* a change of view on their marriage and the subsequent opportunity to commit himself to her well-being.

The new perspective conveyed by the connotations of the title corresponds with the changing focus in the narrative mode: on the morning before Grant visits Fiona for the first time, he experiences a "tingling" of anticipation that announces his "expectation of discovery," which is contrasted with feelings of "timidity, humility, alarm" (Munro 287, 288). In the residence, the narrative shifts from sharing Grant's sensations to reporting his meticulous observation of the care home as well as the people and activities he encounters there. This enumeration of spatial and individual details serves several purposes. Sara Jamieson has pointed out that in contemporary Canadian fiction, residential-care homes are no longer represented solely "as institutions to be avoided or escaped," and that Alice Munro's stories in particular portray "the old age home in a way that turns a critical eye to its disadvantages, yet also remains open to how those disadvantages might be mitigated and a habitable existence sustained" (2). Grant's observations in "The Bear Came over the Mountain" illustrate this aspect: the generous design and bright atmosphere of Meadowlake painstakingly avoid any association with enforced placement but instead illustrate his desire to see the elderly inhabitants comfortably located in what is now their home: "[The nurse] led him along a hall, into the light of the huge sky windows in the large central space, with its cathedral ceiling. Some people were sitting along the walls, in easy chairs, others at tables in the middle of the carpeted floor. None of them looked too bad. Old – some of them incapacitated enough to need wheelchairs – but decent" (Munro 289). When he finally sees Fiona, however, his emotional response to the place alters. Grant continues his detailed description, noticing the changes in his wife's clothes and her hair, but now his observations reveal his confusion. Her new home is no longer his, and he will soon get lost in the residence, literally and emotionally: "On the other side of the mountain," he suddenly finds himself alone in their marriage. Being with Fiona now includes the feeling of being away from her: "He could not throw his arms around her. Something about her voice and smile, familiar as they were, something about the way she seemed to be guarding the players and even the coffee woman from him – as well as him from their displeasure – made that not possible" (290). When he encoun-

ters the changed Fiona in the care home, Grant's feelings are rendered mute, leaving a blank space, an intimate omission that is resolved only at the very end of the story.

In his attempt to fill the emotional void that Fiona's disease has created, Grant looks back on their life together; he recalls their first encounter, the particularities of their marriage, and his repeated unfaithfulness to his wife. In typically ambivalent Munro fashion, Grant's reminiscing about his affairs emphasizes both his love for his wife and his lack of consideration for her feelings at the time. The independence he enjoyed has included betrayal. It is another characteristic of Munro's writing, however, that the reader can never be sure that Fiona even knew about Grant's affairs, or if she did, whether she was bothered by them. The narrative focuses exclusively on Grant's perception, which presents him as a philanderer who took advantage of the promiscuous opportunities of the late 1960s. In the story of their marriage in these years, Fiona is presented only through his eyes; her feelings and opinions are presumed only, and through his memory:

> A whirlwind hit him, as it did many others, wish becoming action in a way that made him wonder if there wasn't something missed. But who had time for regrets? He heard of simultaneous liaisons, savage and risky encounters. [...] Academic parties, which used to be so predictable, became a minefield. An epidemic had broken out, it was spreading like the Spanish flu. Only this time people ran after contagion, and few between sixteen and sixty seemed willing to be left out.
> Fiona appeared to be quite willing, however. Her mother was dying, and her experience in the hospital led her from her routine work in the registrar's office into her new job. (302)

While Grant is happy to run with the crowd, Fiona starts working as a "hospital coordinator of volunteer services (in that everyday world, as she said, where people actually had troubles that were not related to drugs or sex or intellectual squabbles)" (287).[2] He takes note of the fact that she appears to be uninterested in sexual encounters with others, but he does not question her "unwillingness." Moreover, his own retrospective view characterizes him as a narcissistic

2 | Robert McGill discusses Munro's ambivalent portrayal of sexual liberation as a feature of her general skepticism toward historical progress: "Munro's stories set during the 1960s and '70s, in particular, suggest that for all that was accomplished by the Women's Liberation Movement with regard to things such as divorce laws, abortion rights, and the availability of contraception, society has remained fundamentally sexist in important ways. [... In "The Bear Came over the Mountain"], Munro characterizes the era of 'free love' principally as a time in which husbands became freer to cheat on and leave their wives" ("Alice Munro and Personal Development" 147).

man[3] who only regrets that he missed the signs of the times at the dawn of second-wave feminism, when his approaches to his female students were no longer considered welcome:

> The shame he felt then was the shame of being duped, of not having noticed the change that was going on. And not one woman had made him aware of it. There had been the change in the past when so many women so suddenly became available … and now this new change, when they were saying that what had happened was not what they had had in mind at all. … All so that he could now find himself accused of wounding and exploiting and destroying self-esteem. And of deceiving Fiona – as of course he had deceived her – but would it have been better if he had done as others had done with their wives and left her?
> He had never thought of such a thing. He had never stopped making love to Fiona in spite of disturbing demands elsewhere. He had not stayed away from her for a single night. (286)

Congratulating himself on the uninterrupted continuity of his sexual performance, Grant takes up a phrase that is used at the beginning of the story, and which also becomes the title of Polley's film. The young Fiona proposed to Grant with the words, "Do you think it would be fun if we got married?," and he realized then that he "wanted never to be away from her. She had the spark of life" (276). And while he made sure indeed not to spend nights *away from her*, the ways in which Grant has actually *been with* his wife are conspicuously absent from his narrative. He recollects neither caring for her during her mother's decline nor being sympathetic at the news that Fiona cannot have children: "Something about her tubes being blocked, or twisted – Grant could not remember now. He had always avoided thinking about all that female apparatus" (279). His lack of regard suggests that the "fun" she was having with him had been morphed into puns, irony, and comic paragrams that allowed Fiona to share her life with Grant while keeping him at an emotional distance. He does not question her use of humour before the disease breaks out; Grant sees Fiona as a "direct and vague, … sweet and ironic" (277) woman, whose apparent indifference toward his affairs places him in the comfortable position of never having to justify himself.

It is only Fiona's illness that eventually confronts Grant with his repressed but lingering uneasiness about this blank space in their relationship: did she

3 | "Grant is represented … as a narcissistic and egomaniac philanderer [… who, in spite of] his having had a great many affairs, … has never left Fiona and the final act he indulges in acquires an ambiguously redeeming dimension" (Ventura 179). Grant's narcissism is also illustrated by the Narcissus flowers he buys for Fiona upon his first visit in the residential-care institution (McGill, "Mistaken Identities" 71; Munro 288).

know about his unfaithfulness, he wonders, and does she now play "some kind of charade" (294) in order to punish him? After all, Fiona's verbal games are so much a part of her personality that her memory loss in the residence might be merely another one of her frequent jokes:

> He could not decide. She could have been playing a joke. It would not be unlike her. 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 that was what she was pretending. If it was a pretense. (292)

Over the years of their marriage, Grant has become used to Fiona's playfulness; sharing puns even became part of their routines as a couple. Fiona's illness and Grant's subsequent change of perspective forces him not only to accept that she is no longer joking – it also confronts him with the possibility that her humorous comments in the past were not meant to be funny, after all. Ironically, Fiona's dementia unearths the unreliable "memory on the part of the supposedly rational, healthy, and normal care provider" (Goldman and Powell 85). In order to adapt to the new situation, Grant now has to reconsider his established knowledge about their marriage; his failure to "read" his wife in the present initiates his recollection of a past in which he already might have misunderstood her. Grant's new perspective – his adaptation to the changing circumstances of his commitment to Fiona – confronts him with his own dormant feelings of guilt and, eventually, with his continued penchant for flirtatious games and amorous manipulations.

In two further ironic twists of romantic commitment, Grant has to secure his wife's well-being by organizing Aubrey's return to the residence, which involves Aubrey's wife Marian's cautious attempt to initiate some form of relationship with Grant. Her advances lack any tender appeal: during their conversation, she makes it clear that placing Aubrey in the care institution permanently would render her homeless and without financial provision. When she calls Grant to suggest a social meeting, she indicates a solution that would grant both of them what they want. However, in so doing, Marian reveals insecurity and want, something that calls forth Grant's old habits of erotic scheming and manoeuvring:

> It gave him satisfaction – why deny it? – to have brought that out in her. To have roused something like a shimmer, a blurring, on the surface of her personality. … Anything was possible. Was that true – was anything possible? … It would be a challenge. A challenge and a creditable feat. Also a joke that could never be confided to anybody – to think that by his bad behavior he'd be doing good for Fiona. (320)

The sequence of events absolves Grant to an extent, for he had contacted Marian first in order to persuade her to allow Aubrey return to the residence for Fiona's sake. Nevertheless, Grant indulges in the knowledge that Marian might be attracted to him, and considers triumphantly ("a creditable feat") the prospect of an affair with her.

Munro conjures up a wonderfully intricate net that intertwines her characters' different fictions of their intentions when she combines Fiona's longing for Aubrey with Grant's willingness to ensure her happiness and his relapse into his philandering past. His wife's loss of memory, her weakened condition and depression, which had provided Grant with the chance to show some disinterested motivation himself, puts him in a situation that seems to give him not only the moral right, but the obligation to be unfaithful again. In fact, he is being rewarded for being loyal with the prospect of another infidelity. This portrayal of mature romance in a nursing home "juxtaposes the sublime and the farcical, the weird and the noble, the heretic and the pragmatic, on the threshold between life and death, in a senior citizen's residence" (Ventura 179). The story presents love in the winter of life without any "pathos and self-pity in order to favour a playful, distanced, and ironic approach to the ravages of aging" that pursues nothing less than a reconsideration of the essential meaning of commitment (Ventura 174). To be dedicated to somebody, the story suggests, is an ongoing process of transformation and adaptation to new situations and challenges. This understanding of mature love as progressing still allows the characters to ignore, for the time being, what is otherwise associated with old age: loss of self, deterioration, and death. At the end of Munro's narrative, Fiona and Grant refuse to let their marriage come to a close: for a brief moment, in their final encounter, they celebrate their love, allowing themselves to enjoy the possibility of a shared future.

The last scene shows them alone once more in Fiona's private room in the retirement home. Suddenly recognizing Grant as her husband, Fiona's habitually ironic mode becomes charged with a melancholic acknowledgement of their past and their present situation, as she resorts to another paragram and takes into tender account Grant's decision to *come over* to his wife after all: "You could have just driven away [...] Just driven away without a care in the world and forsook me. Forsooken me. Forsaken" (Munro 323). Grant responds to her return to their playful mode with another enumeration of her features, listing them like the details of the residence upon his first visit, but now with a regained sense of familiarity, which indicates his feeling at home, now, with her, on the other side: "He kept his face against her white hair, her pink scalp, her sweetly shaped skull. He said, Not a chance" (323).

Spaces of Love and Age: *Away from Her* (2006)

The idea of shared life and love as a journey that continues even after one of the partners relocates to a care home also features in Polley's film, whose promotional tagline claims that "It's never too late to become what you might have been."[4] The second part of this chapter turns to Sarah Polley's cinematic appropriation of Munro's short story to address notions of adaptation, love, and age, as well as space and care. It focuses particularly on how the film continues Grant and Fiona's story in the new spatial context of the nursing home and the necessary changes of perspective that long-term residential care involves.

This section illuminates the key issues of love and age by extending a reading of these themes to a cinematographic level. In addition, it sheds light on the director's motivations to adapt Munro's short story and discusses the actual meaning of loyalty (McGill, "No Nation" 100). During the following analysis of selected film scenes, the notion of space as a carrier of meaning looms large as it contributes to the understanding of both pre-text and adaptation in terms of love, age, and care.

Away from Her (2006), a movie about an elderly couple confronted with a geriatric disease, is the debut film of Canadian director Sarah Polley, herself aged only 27 at the time it was released. When asked in an interview by Brian D. Johnson about "what drives a woman in her 20s to devote her feature directing debut to a story of old folks losing their grip" (Johnson, par. 2), Polley indicates that she first read Munro's short story at the age of 21, freshly in love with her future (and now former) husband. She adds: "I was shell-shocked. I found it so moving … It just sat there for a couple of years … this vision of a film that wouldn't go away" (par. 1). The last word of Polley's reply already alludes to the movie's title and its intrinsic semantics of intimacy and distance. At the same time, it raises the questions of who moves *away* from whom, why, and how. Further, what role do love and age play in this context?

According to Polley's statements, she instantly fell in love with Munro's short story. She blamed her enthusiasm on young love and her own budding relationship with the film editor of *Away from Her*, her first husband David Wharnsby: "The idea of a long marriage became fascinating to me. … What does [love] look like after decades – after you've failed each other? That became so much more interesting to me than a traditional love story about people when

4 | McGill, "No Nation" 109. The quotation "It's never too late to be who you might have been" has been attributed to George Eliot since the nineteenth century, but it is not contained in any of the writer's publications (Mead); the phrase is also the title of a motivational publication (Gallagher). The slightly modified "It's never too late to become what you might have been" is the title of a song about "sinners with the best intentions" by the US band Cities Never Sleep.

they're young and dumb and boring" (Johnson, par. 3). What also drove Polley to produce this film was a biographical fate she shares with Alice Munro: both lost a close relative at a very early age. When Polley was 11, her mother died of cancer. Similarly, Munro had to face her mother's diagnosis with Parkinson's disease at the age of 10 and nursed her for another 18 years.[5] Moreover, in her 20s Polley had to experience the illness and death of her maternal grandmother, who suffered from Alzheimer's (Casal 136). Both Munro and Polley are therefore very familiar with what it means to care for an ill or old relative. It is very likely that the film production helped Polley cope with her experiences, as McGill ("No Nation" 105) and Sally Chivers (86) point out.

Polley's childhood and younger years were exceptional for further reasons. Born in Toronto in 1979, she was in contact with the film industry at the age of four, signed up for her first movie when she was six, and quickly developed into a child star who featured in various Canadian series, Disney films, and other international movies. After dropping out of school at 14, she moved into her own apartment and became engaged in left-wing politics for some time. Polley returned to the screen in the late 1990s and starred in numerous Canadian and Hollywood movies, many of them independent productions. Her debut film *Away from Her* received two Oscar nominations for best leading actress (Julie Christie) and best adaptation. Polley has produced two more Canadian feature films so far: *Take This Waltz* (2011) and *Stories We Tell* (2012), the latter a documentary about her own family. Interestingly, all three films negotiate questions of love, age, memory, shifting perspectives, adaptation, and fidelity. Polley is currently producing the CBC miniseries *Alias Grace*, an adaptation of the award-winning novel by Margaret Atwood, which will be released globally in 2017.

With regard to the question of who adapts to whom, why, and how, McGill has argued that Polley's *Away from Her* is not only an adaptation but also a "text *about* adaptation" ("No Nation" 99; emphasis in original), which "aligns adaptation with love" (100) on several levels of meaning. Not only does Polley artistically adapt (to) the source text out of love for Munro's short story on an extratextual level, but the fictional characters of the film themselves are also confronted with notions of memory, fidelity, and the necessity to which they have to adapt. In fact, the film's plot mirrors the process of artistic adaptation in a particularly striking manner. After Fiona's diagnosis, the couple adapt to their new situation and environment in a similar way in which the filmmaker Polley adapts to the source text: both disregard notions of fidelity. According to Linda Hutcheon's adaptation theory, "faithfulness" – that is, fidelity criticism –

5 | The personal difficulties of nursing a relative with Parkinson's disease are also reflected in Munro's short story "The Peace of Utrecht," published in *The Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) (Albertazzi 5).

is an outdated concept (*Theory* 6–7). Instead, Hutcheon regards adaptations as "ongoing dialogical process[es]" (21)[6] between pre-text and adaptation in which neither is valued over the other. On a discursive level, the same holds true for Grant and Fiona as well as for Polley. However, the more the adapter attempts to adhere to the "original," the less likely she or he is to succeed. Hutcheon proposes "repetition with variation" (4) as the key factor in an adaptation's effectiveness, as it is the play with memory and deviation that evokes pleasure in the audience. Similarly, Grant has to adapt to the new situation in the residential home by continuing to care for and thus remain "faithful" to Fiona. His deviation is stronger in the film version, as Polley explicitly depicts him having an affair with Marian (Olympia Dukakis). Nevertheless, Grant can achieve his own personal loyalty to his wife only by shifting his perspective and transforming from "jealous husband to procurer of romance for Fiona" (McGill, "No Nation" 100).

The movie's title, which differs from the one Munro chose for her short story, already offers a variety of readings in terms of changing perspectives. While Grant (Gordon Pinsent) can be identified as the "bear" who needs to "come over the mountain" and thus shift his perspective, the film's title is a direct quotation of one of Grant's early memories of Fiona (Julie Christie) (Munro 276) but is somewhat equivocal. Whereas Munro's title raises the questions "what bear, what mountain?," Polley's choice makes the audience wonder "who is she?" and "who is the one moving away, why, and how?" On a diegetic level, the suggested spatial relation of this title refers to Grant's unfaithfulness during their marriage. Further, it alludes to Fiona's abandonment of Grant after she moves into the care institution and forgets who he is. It can also be read as Aubrey's (Michael Murphy) departure from the nursing home that triggers Fiona's severe depression and subsequently leads to Grant's decision to support their reunion. Against the backdrop of artistic adaptation, McGill stresses the "necessity [of] certain infidelities within the parameters of a broader loyalty to the original text" ("No Nation" 102). Like Grant, Polley needs to detach from her love object (Munro's short story) in order to remain "faithful."[7] The director has to avoid mere mimicry as it would inevitably lead to artistic failure (Herrera 108). Thus, for both Polley and Grant the lines between fidelity and infidelity become blurred. The filmmaker achieves her

6 | By referring to Amelia DeFalco, Jamieson likewise points to "aging as a process" (2), which in turn can be regarded as a form of constant adaptation to new situations and surroundings.

7 | Ironically, the German translation of the movie title reads *An Ihrer Seite*, which means "*by* her side," a phrase that lacks the semantic ambiguity of the original. On the other hand, the German title corresponds to the paratexts of the movie – namely the DVD cover and poster – which depict the loving couple in intimate proximity.

goal to produce a successful adaptation not only by adding new scenes that slightly alter Munro's plot but moreover by her clever use of "a wide range of cinematic devices" to "mirror Munro's disruptive chronology" characterized by Grant's memories or flashbacks (Herrera 109, 113). The transfer of Munro's narrative into a visual medium is one of the key advantages of this adaptation, as "memories materialize, become images" on the space of the movie screen, as Agnès Berthin-Scaillet points out (2). It is arguably the case that Polley is to the film what Grant is to Munro's story: the bear who must "come over the mountain." The young filmmaker has to shift perspective in order to "survive" artistically when dealing with a long-term love relationship of an elderly couple confronted with the necessity of residential care.

This change of perspective is apparent also on a cinematographic level, and the discussion will now turn to showing how the film text constructs Grant's transformation from jealous partner to provider of love and care for Fiona, a shift occasioned by his wife's relocation to the care home. The analysis focuses on different aspects of space as carriers of meaning and it will demonstrate that space itself, as a product of culturally coded signs, can fulfill a symbolic function. Movements through space, for instance, not only by characters but also by the camera, contribute to the meaning of a text. Physical spaces can likewise be read symbolically and thus extend the interpretation of a narrative. Further, the use of light and colour creates an atmosphere that functions as a reflection of the protagonist's mood or general state of mind. With regard to the shift in perspective, the analysis will particularly focus on *spaces of transition*, which include certain locations such as cars, snowy landscapes, homes, care homes, beds, and corridors that are symbolically enhanced and contribute to realize the change in perspective on an audio-visual level.

Polley's movie begins *in medias res* with a medium shot of Grant driving through a housing estate in his car on a winter's day. The camera pans to the right and displays a note in his hand, on which is written Marian and Aubrey's home address. Shortly after, the camera pans back to Grant's face and then fades to a greyish and grainy close-up of a young, blonde, smiling woman – Fiona. She is shot in front of what seems to be a seashore. In a voice-over we hear Grant's voice recalling: "She said, do you think it would be fun if we got married?" A female voice asks: "Then what did you say?" Grant replies off screen: "I took her up on it. I never wanted to be away from her. She had the spark of life." After this conversation, the young woman's lip movements indicate the sentence "What do you think?" Finally, the camera fades to white (*Away from Her* 00:00:00–00:01:07).

Grant's movement in his car through the housing estate echoes former events that will be narrated in retrospect as the movie proceeds. The way he moves around in his vehicle, seemingly disoriented and relying on a note he holds in his hand, recalls how Fiona relies on notes she sticks to things in

their house before she moves to the old-age home Meadowlake. Grant's car thus functions as a vehicle or (meta-)space of transition: he is on his way to Marian in order to ask her to move Aubrey back to the nursing home and is hence forced to change his perspective on love, age, and the notion of loyalty. It is in this space (the car) that he is actively about to "come over the mountain" right from the film's exposition. The subsequent fade to Grant's memory of Fiona further aligns love with time or age and interconnects the past with the present. The juxtaposition of Grant's elderly complexion with the image of Fiona's younger self combined with her playful question regarding their engagement indicates one of Grant's "cheerful" flashbacks. Recalling Berthin-Scaillet, Grant's memories materialize on the film screen. This constitutes the benefit of the medium as the words of the short story transform to images on screen. In Polley's movie the seashore functions as a spatial metaphor for both remembrance and the loss of memory, especially with regard to Fiona's deteriorating mental state, triggered by her dementia.[8] In terms of spatial metaphors, Fiona's depiction in front of a seashore amplifies the cinematographic effect of reminiscence; in this case it points to Grant's own perspective on his long-term marriage.

What follows after the final fade of the first sequence is a medium pan shot of two parallel tracks on a snowy surface. The camera then moves upwards and we see a two shot of a couple from behind who are following the tracks. The skiing characters, Grant and Fiona, then move away from the audience's perspective into the vast landscape. The next full shot depicts Fiona skiing to the left of the screen frame on her own tracks while Grant takes a slightly different direction in the background, only to join her again in the next shot. Both of them are reunited in their parallel tracks and continue to move toward a house in the distance. The scene ends with another white cross-fade and the inserts *Away from Her*.

Two aspects of this scene are remarkable: first, the dominance of snow, and second, Grant's temporary deviation from their common tracks. The snowy landscapes serve as a spatial leitmotif in the film; they appear at the beginning, in the middle and the end of the film, thus framing the narrative. Of particular importance in this scene is Grant's movement through space. Against the backdrop of love and age, his temporary deviation from the couple's common tracks serves a symbolic function on three levels: first, they visualize Grant's

8 | Chivers as well as Goldman and Powell identify these flashbacks as "ironic lapses in memory" (Goldman and Powell 85) with regard to Grant, who from now on can "settle into his unchanging ways" (Chivers 92) as a disloyal husband only wishing to care for his equally disloyal wife. According to Chivers, Polley uses Alzheimer's, a disease associated with old age, "as a metaphor for infidelity" (92; Goldman and Powell 91), thus aligning love, age, and loyalty on an audio-visual level.

former affairs with his students while never "leaving" his wife; second, they allude to his seemingly selfless distancing from Fiona by bringing Aubrey back to the nursing home; and third, they hint at his eventual return to their shared path (followed by the cross-fade and the inserts *Away from Her*), which expresses his faithfulness to Fiona. The visuals alone suffice to evoke the idea that a successful long-term relationship depends on a balance between intimacy and distance. Berthin-Scaillet emphasizes that "this … series of shots dissolving into each other provides the choreography of the couple's life in common, on a filmic scale" (5). Furthermore, the spatial metaphor just described also works on a discursive level, as Polley has to achieve a careful balancing between intimacy and distance, pre-text and adaptation, faithfulness and deviation. In Berthin-Scaillet's words, she "successfully follows the tracks of Munro's text" (3). Like Grant she needs to temporarily move *away from her* (i.e., Munro) in order to accomplish a successful and durable adaptation. Polley achieves this deviation by adding new scenes and deleting or maintaining others, thus adhering to the artistic rule of "repetition with variation" stressed by Hutcheon *(Theory)*. In the end, both Polley and Grant remain faithful precisely because loyalty involves an occasional departure from the main track. However, this reading renders Grant's actions selfless and altruistic whereas his behaviour is rather self-serving than benevolent. One important variation of Polley's movie underlines this reading, as it shows Grant and Marian actually having an affair instead of him only fantasizing about it, as he does in Munro's short story. The film depicts the two of them in bed in what seems to be a "post-coital embrace" (Goldman and Powell 90). Here, the bed functions as one of the film's spaces of transitions and underlines the symbolic potential of spatial representations.

The first part of the movie displays the couple in their cottage in a medium two shot in an exchange of affection, Grant on the left and Fiona on the right side of the bed. The camera then fades to white and repeatedly displays Grant driving in a car on his way to Marian and Aubrey's house (00:04:21–00:04:50). The bed scenes are reiterated throughout the film, but with variation: shortly after Fiona decides to move to the care home Meadowlake, the main couple is depicted in exactly the same two shot in bed, their backs turned to one another this time. While Grant sleeps, Fiona leaves the film frame, thus leaving the right side of the bed empty. In contrast to the previous skiing scene, she is the one creating a distance between the two (00:27:46–00:28:10). In a later bed scene during the last night they spend together in the residential home, Grant in turn exits the frame after Fiona tells him to "go now," leaving an empty space on the left side of the bed (00:36:45–00:37:36). In the second part of the movie, Polley films Grant and Marian in a similar two shot in bed after the characters have evidently slept together (01:33:39–01:43:06). This time, however, Grant is situated on the right side, which can be read as an indicator that he has finally "come over the mountain." For Berthin-Scaillet, these repeated shots and

sequences are to be interpreted as a kind of "inverted mirror image" in order to visualize the "feeling of estrangement from his wife that Grant has to cope with. … Everything is repeated but inverted" (5). The beds of Grant, Fiona, and Marian thus function as spaces of transition: not only is Fiona never the same again after her husband leaves her in the nursing home, but it is here also that Grant finally *grants* his wife more free *space*. Beyond that, he literally fills his own empty space with a new lover. Grant's (sexual) relationship with Marian is of particular importance to Polley's artistic strategy. The images fill in the blank spaces of the pre-text: Munro's short story only hints at a sexual relationship between Grant and Marian, while the film text materializes his fantasies.

Another metaphor representing love, loyalty, and age and the necessary shift in perspective is the opposition "home vs. care home." To begin with, Grant's and Fiona's "home," their house in the countryside, represents their shared memories. When Fiona sets out for a trip on her skis, this time alone, she gets lost in the snowy woods close to their cottage (00:14:49–00:16:07). The camera displays her in a frontal medium shot outside of their home, to which she turns, clearly confused, and then wanders off into oblivion. She later lies down in the snow, the camera shooting her from a bird's eye perspective until the screen fades into the night sky. This scene serves as a turning point with regard to her deteriorating mental condition. The snowy landscape, combined with the camera technique, nicely illustrates the "blank page[s] of lost memory" (Johnson, par. 16). As Herrera emphasizes, "The movement of the camera, zooming over her as it circles down from above, adds to the sensation of utter loss" (115). There is a similar scene later in the film in which Grant is shot from exactly the same angle in front of their house (00:41:52–00:42:38). He, too, turns around to look at their home – a signifier of their marriage and memories – in an obvious example of remembering, while he compares Alzheimer's disease in a voice-over to the extinguishing of lights: one by one the lights in Fiona's mental space are switched off. More important, the fact that both Grant and Fiona are not skiing "along the perfect symmetry of parallel tracks" (Berthin-Scaillet 5) in these scenes, but moving through space separately, indicates their mental and emotional change in direction. As a result, the snowy landscape functions not only as a visual leitmotif for memory but also as a space of transition where the couple is forced to take on a new perspective on their relationship.

The final space that will be discussed is the nursing home Meadowlake. The residential home is divided into two levels: the first floor for patients who can still live relatively independently, and the second floor for those who are in need of constant care, who are lost and have "lost it" (Munro 299). It is this space "where residents transform into patients": it ironically represents an "opposite movement" by which people ascend to an upper floor and are removed "from the public sphere and everyday life" (Adams and Chivers, par. 22). In Polley's adaptation, Fiona is transferred to the second floor after her condition deteriorates and

thus simultaneously moves to another mental state, namely severe dementia paired with depression. The film text establishes a clear connection between the physical space of the old-age home and the mental space of its residents.

A particular space of transition manifests itself in one of the large and long barrier-free corridors of the nursing home, with its huge windows that let in a lot of light. Annmarie Adams and Sally Chivers point out that "[w]ayfinding and daylighting" are typical architectural features of institutions such as hospitals and care homes. The aim of this design is to "diffuse generalizations such as 'old' and 'sick'" whereby these buildings "both challenge and reinforce relationships among aging, illness, care isolation, and immobility" (pars. 4 and 5). Adams and Chivers remind us that Polley's film emphasizes visually what "most of us take for granted: that nearly all long-term care settings include these special provisions" (par. 6).[9] In terms of movement through space, there are two noticeable scenes in the movie. First, we see Grant walking *away* from the camera along the well-lit corridor on his own during his first visit after the required thirty-day settling-in period, devastated that she has not recognized him (00:49:24–00:49:41). Second, Fiona also moves *away* from the film audience's perspective together with Aubrey, pushing his wheelchair (01:02:15–01:02:38). As a result, the corridor in the care home – the main transitory sphere – serves as a meta-space of transition that forces Fiona and Grant to take on new perspectives and break out in a new direction, which Polley skilfully visualizes on screen. The Meadowlake care home embodies various forms of transformation: from home to "home," from health to illness, from youth to age, and from loyalty to disloyalty to loyalty; and, in the couple's final embrace, it also possesses the circular quality of reunion.

The use of light and colours in these and other scenes ties in nicely with the many fades of the film, indicating flashbacks and (the loss of) memories. On the morning of Fiona's departure from their common home, she is displayed in a close-up of her face, dressed in a white coat, backlit by soft bright light shining in through a window. The lighting, almost resembling a halo, can be read as an allusion to Fiona's innocence and purity, for she always remained faithful to Grant (00:30:00–00:30:46). It might also point to the metaphorical lights slowly switching off in her mental space as she is about to move to Meadowlake. After she gets seriously involved with Aubrey, her clothes occasionally change to bright colours, which Grant strongly criticizes and calls "tacky." The use of lighting and colours demonstrates the increasing distance between the couple on a purely visual level. Moreover, it underlines the "transitory nature of the new locale" that Adams and Chivers emphasize (par. 19). In terms of movements through space, Grant generally functions as an intruder in the nursing home

9 | *Away from Her* was filmed in Kitchener's Freeport Health Centre, an award-winning care institution (Adams and Chivers, par. 17).

most of the time. He interrupts Fiona and Aubrey's card game in the common room and also gatecrashes their farewell. Ventura offers a similar reading when she compares Munro's Meadowlake with Lewis Carroll's wonderland: "Like the young Alice, the elderly Grant is an intruder in a territory which is not his and, like her, he meets unmitigated hostility" (178). In the film version, Grant is also a stranger in a place that is figuratively and literally Fiona's new home. As in Munro's story, we witness the events and the (new) impressions of the care home through Grant's critical eyes. In spite of his doubts about the residence, "Munro invites readers to recognize and question the assumptions that may underlie their own perceptions of institutional space" (Jamieson 5; the same can be said of Polley). This is mainly achieved by depicting a happy elderly woman who has found new love in old age – Fiona – in large and bright spaces.

The snowy spaces in *Away from Her* not only link the human psyche with the fading away of shared memories but are also associated with ideas of peace, hope, and rebirth, especially at the end of Polley's film. Here we see Grant and Fiona reunited while the camera circles around them, fading into a grainy close-up of Fiona's younger self before the image dissolves into the snowy landscape with the symmetrical tracks we are familiar with from the film's exposition (01:40:39 – 01:45:15). This sequence recalls an earlier moment in the movie where Fiona and Grant dance together in their living room on the night before they leave for Meadowlake (00:29:35–00:29:56). The couple's last dance in their home is constructed as an intimate and happy rather than a sad and frightening moment, accentuated by the warm lights but also by the audio space of the soundtrack, consisting of Neil Young's song "Harvest Moon," which unites the notions of love, age, and care:

> Because I'm still in love with you
> I want to see you dance again
> Because I'm still in love with you
> On this harvest moon.

The characters' movement through space, their dance, and the soundtrack create a couple deeply in love or, more precisely, "still in love" with each other, despite the obstacles they had to face not only during their lengthy marriage but also during Fiona's move to the care institution. These semantics are echoed at the end of the film: in the care home, the camera shoots Grant and Fiona embracing each other in the same position as in the previous dance scene in their living room, taking up the same space on screen. In contrast to the earlier dance sequence, the camera now circles around the two, enhancing the notion of reunion and everlasting love. The film constructs this scene as a loving farewell by reversing the movements through space; whereas Grant and Fiona move in front of a static camera during the dance scene in their country

house, the final sequence operates with a circling camera around a frozen couple in the care institution. As a result, this spatial inversion introduces a shift in perspective, which is manifested on a cinematographic level: both have finally "come over the mountain." Their relationship has reached an end while the camera moves on. After a fade to the familiar parallel skiing tracks, we see the younger Fiona in a close-up again, turning her head *away* from the spectator, which underscores their farewell. However, the narrative context of the film makes clear that both Fiona and Grant have found new partners, namely Marian and Aubrey. Thus, the circular movements through space as well as the snow imagery equally evoke hope, peace, and a new beginning.

Polley's adaptation abounds in spatial imagery, oppositions, and metaphors such as houses, homes, care institutions, cars, beds, corridors, and snowy landscapes. Against the backdrop of aging, Alzheimer's disease, and sanity, Herrera stresses that "Munro clearly questions the ways in which we tend to draw a neat dividing line between sense and non-sense, remembrance and dementia, the world of children and the world of seniors" (120). In the context of adaptation, McGill adds that the film version of the pre-text "bridges the space between an older generation – represented by Munro as well as by Fiona and Grant, … and the future of the artistic culture … embodied in young artists such as Polley" ("No Nation" 103). Put simply, and expressed in spatial terms, the film not only crosses the borders between source text and adaptation but also blurs the lines between youth and age, sanity and dementia, and homes and care homes by creating a dialogical atmosphere. In fact, McGill describes the movie as a demonstration of Polley's "artistic coming of age" as a Canadian artist (109).

We wish to conclude this chapter with some lines from another song that appears during the credits of Polley's movie. Canadian icon Neil Young's "Helpless" vividly illustrates the interplay of love and age as well as space and (lost) memory in this Canadian film adaptation:

> There is a town in north Ontario,
> With dream comfort and memory to spare,
> And in my mind
> I still need a place to go,
> All my changes were there.

In this stanza, the words "dream," "memory," "mind," "place," and "changes" are intertwined in a way that reminds us of the challenges that elderly patients and also relatives have to face when adapting to new situations such as long-term residential care. As we hope our analysis has demonstrated, Alice Munro's "The Bear Came over the Mountain" and Sarah Polley's *Away from Her* engage with both the anxieties triggered by conventional stories of dementia and care-home institutions and the possibility of narrating a new story of love, age, and loyalty.

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