

Identity in Old Age

Reconceptualizing Ageing through Alice Munro's Short Fiction

Student: Marta Gort Paniello.

ID: 47981736X

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Tutor: Dr. Núria Casado Gual

Department of English and Linguistics, University of Lleida



**Universitat
de Lleida**

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Abstract

In our progressively older society, ageing studies are acquiring more importance as a research domain in the social sciences, and the study of literature is gaining ground in this interdisciplinary field. Short stories are one of the most suitable literary genres to examine the representations of old age, because they throw light on the subtleties of human psychology from different perspectives. Through a close reading of four short stories by Alice Munro, this dissertation studies how the famous Canadian writer has portrayed old age in her short fiction, and to what extent the process of ageing affects the identity of her older characters. In addition to these two research questions, and by taking into account short stories written in different periods, the study also tries to observe whether the portrayal of ageing has changed throughout Munro's career. The analysis of the short stories selected will prove that retirement, internment in residential homes and dementia directly affect the identity of the older protagonists. Still, as will be shown, these characters do not completely lose their sense of personhood and learn to adapt to their new lifestyle. It can be concluded that Alice Munro depicts the process of ageing through a multifaceted approach, portraying both its deficiencies and strengths.

Key words: *Ageing, identity, Alice Munro, short stories, literary gerontology*

Resum

Donat el context actual d'un progressiu envelliment social, els estudis de vellesa han esdevingut un destacat àmbit de recerca dins les ciències socials, i l'estudi de la literatura guanya cada cop més importància en aquest camp interdisciplinari. Les narracions breus són un dels gèneres literaris més efectius per examinar les representacions de la vellesa, perquè treuen a la llum les subtileses de la psicologia humana des de diferents perspectives. A partir d'una lectura atenta de quatre contes d'Alice Munro, aquest treball estudia com la reconeguda escriptora canadenca ha representat la vellesa en les seves històries, i fins a quin punt el procés d'envelliment afecta la identitat dels personatges grans. A banda d'aquests dos objectius, i tenint en compte narracions escrites en diferents etapes de la seva vida, l'estudi també tracta d'observar si la representació de la vellesa ha variat al llarg de la carrera literària de Munro. L'anàlisi dels contes seleccionats demostra que la jubilació, l'ingrés a centres geriàtrics i la demència afecten directament a la identitat dels personatges grans. Ara bé, com serà demostrat, aquests personatges no perden del tot el sentit de personalitat i aprenen a adaptar-se a un nou estil de vida. Es pot concloure que Alice Munro retrata el procés d'envelliment des d'una perspectiva polifacètica que mostra tant les seves deficiències com els seus punts forts.

Paraules clau: *Envelliment, identitat, Alice Munro, narració breu, gerontologia literària*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ageing studies are acquiring more importance as a research domain in the social sciences and humanities, and the study of literature is gaining ground in this interdisciplinary field. As Sarah Falcus points out, much of the work in literary gerontology shares a positive approach to literature and ageing with the intention to promote social change regarding old age (2015: 54). Gerontological research shows that the process of ageing is not a straightforward linear trajectory and, furthermore, it is experienced in an individualised and subjective way. For this reason, Mike Hepworth claims that the process of ageing must be told in a non-linear, heterogeneous space that emulates its subjective and personal nature (2000:1-2).

Short stories throw light on the subtleties of human psychology by exploring the same topic from different perspectives. Furthermore, as Hannah Spruce claims, they offer a space in which writers can express the fragmentary and unsteady experience of old age (2015: 37). Apart from that, due to the brevity of these texts, it is possible to analyze a larger number of sources. March-Russell claims that “the short story portrays human identity as a subject in process” (2009: 134) and its form lends itself to the representation of old age, since identity continues to evolve in this period of life. For all these reasons, the short story can be considered one of the most suitable literary genres to examine the ageing process.

Alice Munro is a Canadian writer that manifests a keen interest in later life, and older characters usually become the protagonists of her short stories. In 2013, she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature as a “master of the contemporary short story”. Munro’s narratives become a perfect primary source for gaining insight into ageing studies from the literary approach. Although her short stories have been widely studied, the analysis of the depiction of old age in her work is still at an incipient stage. Some studies devoted to this particular topic (Collier 2002, Jameison 2004, Jameison 2014, Casado 2013, Spruce 2015 and Stevanović and Arsenijević 2018) are specifically based on the portrayals of ageing in a short story in particular and, in the case of Collier, in collections from earlier stages of Munro’s career.

Taking ageing studies as a general framework, this dissertation analyses the ways in which Alice Munro portrays old age in four of her short stories. The analysis intends to examine the extent to which the Canadian writer depicts old age, or age in general, as

a dynamic source of identity. Finally, even though in a more marginal way, the study also tries to observe whether the portrayal of ageing has changed throughout Munro's long-standing career. The four stories selected for the dissertation correspond to different stages of the writer's own life course, in an attempt to fulfil the third objective of the dissertation. These are: "Spelling" (1977), written when Munro was 46; "Pictures of the Ice" (1990), which was written when the writer was 59; "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" (2003), which the author was 72; and "In Sight of the Lake"¹ (2012), which is part of Munro's latest collection, published when she was 81.

The structure of this dissertation consists of six different chapters. The first one is the present section that defines the main objectives of the study as well as its structure. Secondly, the literary review (which is divided in two main sections) presents the key aspects about gerontology to set up a solid theoretical ground. The first section of the literary review, "Ageing studies as general framework" provides an overall background to the field of ageing studies from a socio-cultural perspective. The second one, "narratives of ageing in contemporary literature," focuses on contemporary literary representations of older people, and it also provides a brief overview of how Munro usually depicts the process of ageing in her works.

Chapters three, four and five are devoted to the analysis of the four selected stories. In these chapters, three main aspects related to old-age identity are examined: firstly, the change of identity propitiated by the older person's internment in a residential home; secondly, the dissolution of masculine identity following retirement and the subsequent acquisition of feminine traits by older male characters; and, finally, the loss of identity due to Alzheimer's disease and the importance of life review to preserve the identity. The distribution of these analytical chapters, hence, is not done according to the number of primary sources used, but to the number of aspects that are analyzed in relation to identity in old age. Finally, a conclusion gathers the main points of this dissertation and offers some suggestions to improve the weak points of the present study in case of future research.

¹ Abbreviations used in the dissertation: "Sp" for "Spelling", "PI" for "Pictures of the Ice", "TBCM" for "The Bear Came over the Mountain" and "ISL" for "In Sight of the Lake".

2. LITERARY REVIEW

The aim of this chapter is to compile the most relevant information about ageing studies both from a socio-cultural and literary perspective so as to settle the theoretical basis of this dissertation. The literary review is divided in two main sections: ageing studies as a general framework and the narratives of ageing in contemporary literature. The second section (current representations of ageing in literary works) could be included as a subsection of the first one (theoretical framework of ageing studies) but, given the importance that contemporary narratives of ageing have in the present dissertation, it is necessary to dedicate a whole section to it.

2.1. Ageing studies as general framework

Ageing studies is a multidisciplinary field that comprises different disciplines including humanities, sciences and social sciences. The reflexive, critical and subjective dimensions of age studies cover the research in gerontology, focusing on the physiological, psychological and sociological issues of the later part of life (Stephen Katz, 2014). In this section, the process of ageing will be examined in relation to four concepts with which age is closely interconnected: identity, gender, care and cognitive decline. The selection of these four particular aspects is determined by the features that will become of fundamental importance in the second chapter of this dissertation. Hence, the following pages aim to provide a general theoretical framework, describing and developing the central concepts around which the analysis of Munro's short stories will be structured.

2.1.1 Age as identity marker

Identity is a central point of human personality and, according to Urszula Glinska, a "social category that is understood as the self-definition of human being" (2010: 20). In the Western world, chronological age is used as a marker of individual development and appropriate social engagement and functioning (Thomas Cole, 1992). Age gains significant importance due to the fact that human collectives are distinguished from others, among other reasons, because of the participants' age –children, teenagers, adults and elders–. Contemporary sociological studies claim that individualism and differentiation have enabled the individual to "become the creator of his own biography

(identity)” (Glinska, 2010: 22), but as David Chaney (1995: 211) states, this is not always the case for older people, since their identity is dictated, to some extent, by external forces:

As increasing numbers of elderly either live with age-peers or alone rather than with a family of younger members, the process of aging for more of the cohort will be conducted in a community in which institutional structures for managing change will be particularly important. It is not that the individuality of each person will disappear, but that their ability to impose that identity on social circumstance may be subordinate to more ascribed expectations.

Identity is bound to constant change and the uncertainty that derives from it. Hence, identity cannot be understood as a final product, but as a dynamic process of transformation that, as Marija Geiger et al. explain, identity must be “(spatially and temporally) contextualized” (2017: 262). However, there is always a close relation between the different shades of one’s identity, because its formation is an unstable construct in which “past and present are intertwined” (Geiger et al., 2017: 263). It is precisely the process of ageing which induces an “intensified awareness of the differences between past and present selves” (Jamieson, 2006: 7). Consequently, identity cannot be separated from the process of ageing.

Older people find it difficult to shape their own identity at their final stage of life because of the two opposite stereotyped representations of ageing that have been spread through our contemporary society, and which fail to adjust to their needs. ‘Bipolar’ representations of ageing –using the terminology of Kevin McHugh (2003)– circulate parallelly in contemporary Western culture: “images of old age have been split into positive and negative poles “a “good” old age of health, virtue, self-reliance, and salvation, and a “bad” old age of sickness, sin, dependency, premature death, and damnation” (Cole, 1992: 230). For this reason, the stereotype of successful ageing stands in direct opposition with the stereotype of old age, as decay and, according to Barbara Marshall, “these images of ageing shape the context through which many older people negotiate their social identities” (2015: 210). Following this line, Lorraine Green (2010: 185) presents the problem with adopting a suitable identity in old age:

[T]here is a need to retain a firm but flexible view of identity, one danger being refusal to alter previous self-concepts, such as identity based on looks or occupation or fitness, necessitating running 10 miles a day or frequent plastic surgery. The other risk is, alternatively, adopting a completely new identity, which may adhere to negative stereotypes of elderly people as passive and vulnerable, and involve submerging personality and self in the process.

Apart from having to fight against stereotyped and unrealistic images of ageing, older people’s identity encounters a second handicap: the phenomenon known as the ‘mask of ageing’. This notion signifies that one’s perception of energetic self is veiled

behind the mask of an old, fragile and deteriorated body (Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth 1991; Öberg 1996; Biggs 1997; Andrews 1999; McHugh 2000). The visual image of the old individual (which can be appreciated both by the self or by others) shows objective signs that evidence the passing of time in the body. However, as natural and biologically unavoidable as the physical deterioration may be, “human beings are indisposed to accept reality at ‘face’ value, especially their own ageing and mortality” (McHugh, 2000: 169). This leads older people to detach from their mirror image, “seeing the person inside as very different and unconnected with their actual and reflected appearance” (Green, 2010: 186). Hence, there is an identity struggle originated in the disjunction between the inner self and the body: “the crucial sociological issue in the aging process is the contradictory relationship between the subjective sense of a [sic] inner youthfulness and an exterior process of biological aging” (Turner, 1993: 258).

Identity is always connected with the process of growing and ageing, but it becomes fractured in later life as older people find it difficult to accept their essential personality. Molly Andrews contends that the concept of masked age or, as he calls it, “agelessness” is “a form of ageism, depriving the old of one of their most hard-earned resources: their life” (1999: 301). Laura Hurd and Erica Bennett state that this reflects “the societal devaluation of oldness” (2015: 134) and, as a direct consequence, the unwillingness of older people to be categorized as old. Moreover, the construction of one’s self will collide with the dichotomic representation of aging based on opposed poles, which does not provide a plausible solution to adopt a suitable identity in old age.

2.1.2. Age and Gender

Gender plays a major role in our society: “gender is a crucial organizing principle in the economic and power relations of the social institutions of the family, the state, and the market” (Estes, 2005: 552), and it determines how women and men experience ageing. The masculine gender has received more power than the female one both economically and socially but, with the arrival of retirement, masculinity is jeopardized. In industrialized and capitalist societies, the power of men is linked to their money income, but with retirement this becomes a major problem: “the older the man, the weaker he becomes not just physically and bodily, but also socially” (Hearn, 1995: 100). Seeing the strong effect that retirement has over men, it is not strange that Simone de Beauvoir focused almost exclusively on them in her study about later life, as she believed that “it is men who feel the effect most” (1970: 261). This, she explained, was due to the fact that

a man can appreciate their “obsolescence” much more strongly than a woman in capitalist societies since the latter, having traditionally been regarded as a second-class citizen, “adapts herself to her state better than her husband” (1970: 262).

It is true that older women usually live with less financial resources, and their economically disadvantaged position has received a considerable amount of research (Sara Arber and Jay Ginn, 1991; Estes, 1991). Whereas 55% of men over sixty-five have pensions, only 32% of women do and, moreover, women’s pensions are 50% as much as men’s on average (Gibson, 2018). However, although older women are less financially solvent than older men, they tend to “live more satisfying lives precisely because their former occupation and the identity associated with it, was never as sharply separated from their personal lives as it has traditionally been for men” (Gail Weiss, 2014: 58).

Retirement has very different significances for the two genders, mainly because women never retire from what is for many of them their unremunerated work at home (Evers et al. 1988). This explains why little research has been devoted to women’s retirement, considering it exclusively a male phenomenon (Arber and Ginn, 1991). With retirement men spend more time at home and they “are constructed here as newcomers” (Hearn, 1995: 101). As men had never had a role to play in the domestic space, they find it difficult to adapt to their new status and they “are often viewed as a nuisance by their elderly wives” (Weiss, 2014: 58). In this line, Hearn states that “older men are constructed as pre-death. They are relatively redundant, even invisible, not just in terms of paid work and family responsibilities, but more importantly in terms of life itself” (1995: 101).

Apart from the labour breakdown, men see their physical strength debilitated by the changes that their body undergo during the ageing process, and this becomes a second major drawback to their sense of masculinity. As Hurd and Bennett explain:

Decreases in functionality (such as loss of strength, independence and able-bodiedness), as well as physically disfiguring chronic conditions have also been found to influence older men’s perceptions of and feelings about their bodies [...] which pose a threat to their sense of having achieved and maintained idealized masculinity (2015: 134).

Physical breakdown is not only a terrifying experience for men because it entails a deterioration of the bodily but also “because it connects the masculine body with weakness, dependency and passivity –all the supposedly ‘feminine’ qualities they have spent a lifetime defining and defending themselves against” (Hearn, 1995: 106).

The acquisition of traits from the opposite gender in later life is known as “gender shift”, which Margaret Cruikshank (2009: 47) defines as—

the process by which some men take on traits and attitudes thought characteristic of women, such as nurturing, and women become more assertive. This late-life gender bending may become more common as gender stereotypes lose some of their formative influence, if that is a result of more women entering professions and more men grown through fatherhood.

The changes experienced by older women are related to a departure from the prototypical female behavior. A study carried out by Toni Liechty and Careen Yarnal (2010) indicates that older women are more worried about their functional abilities rather than their physical appearances. This finding corroborates that they disregard prescribed feminine concerns about physical appearance to build a more practical relationship with their body.

Female and masculine roles lose their traditional differentiation in later life, and the barriers between the two genders fade away, giving place to gender shifts. The process of feminization that men undergo following retirement is related to three particular circumstances. Firstly, their loss of economic power no longer grants them a financial superiority at a social level. Secondly, with their confinement to the domestic space, they enter the domain traditionally considered as feminine. Finally, their physical strength is debilitated, and this approaches them to the alleged fragility traditionally associated to the opposite sex. Women, conversely, do not suffer so much from retirement's effects and gain more confidence in themselves, adopting some masculine behavioral traits.

2.1.3. Age and care

Everyone, at some point of the life, needs to receive care; as Michael Fine puts it, "the need for care is universal, yet there is no universal template for providing it" (2015: 269). Care becomes, nowadays, one of the most powerful articulations of social assistance, and implies not only an affective concern but also the attainment of care work and a commitment of personal relationships (Rummery and Fine 2012). Caregiving can be provided in many different ways: it "covers everything from occasional help for a relative who lives on his or her own to twenty four-hour total care for a person in the same home" (Cruikshank, 2013: 124). Fine distinguishes two types of care assistance depending on their level of formality: "informal care involves unpaid assistance provided by intimate partners, family or close friends, or care that is paid but organize without formal authorization. Formal care is that provided by formal organized and authorized services and generally involves paid labor" (2015: 269). Research shows that informal care is much more abundant than formal: "Currently, 85 percent of eldercare in the United States is provided free, by family members and friends" (Eaton, 2005: 38)

There is a large gender disparity in the profession of caregiver as it is a job highly linked to the female gender: “70-80 percent of home care for elders is provided by women (some estimates say 90-95 percent)” (Cruikshank, 2013: 125) and the same applies when the task of a caregiver is not remunerated, hence: “whether women give care or receive it, whether they are unpaid in the home or underpaid outside the home, gender prescribes their role” (Cruikshank, 2013: 130). According to Diana Gustafson (2005) the stereotype of the sacrificial good mother is applied to daughters, who are socially compelled to become caretakers under the same social discourse that presupposes that the primary women’s role is to become good mothers. For this reason, according to Debra Nicholson “daughters will most likely be caught in the caretaking discourse and may inadvertently re-inscribe the good daughter / bad daughter binary if they should assume a non-caretaking position” (2010: 17). If daughters refuse to perform the social contract of sacrificial caretaking for their mothers in particular (or other relatives, in general), they are considered not only bad daughters, but also bad women for not being able to fulfill their feminine role as caretakers.

The institution of the Care Home has evolved over the years, but it was not after the second World War that these homes lost the stigma of their poorhouse origins. James Struthers explains that “the modern old-age home emerged out of the shadows of its poorhouse origins as both a companion institution to the postwar hospital and an alternative to the family home as an appropriate site for the care of vulnerable older adults” (2017: 284). From 1890s to 1940s the Ontario’s Houses of Refuge only admitted elders who could prove they lived without any kind of familiar or friendship support. The inmates lived in very harsh conditions and strict regulations, which implied that they could not leave the institution without permission and, if physically able, they were forced to work. By 1945 the demographic changes demanded an imperative need to search alternatives for the institution of poorhouses. One of the main projects for postwar politicians was the desire to eradicate the old Victorian poorhouse and substitute it for the ‘home dreams’ with a “reformed old age home fit for the newly minted ‘senior citizen’ [...]. Communal areas would bring together residents for social events rather than merely for meals. All of this suggests middle-class family home” (Davies, 2006: 162).

Fortunately, nowadays care homes are no longer the inhospitable places they used to be a century ago. However, homes keep being cold spaces because, although care and medical attention are successfully provided, there is a lack of affectivity. Julia Twigg criticizes the fact that, in the United Kingdom, care time is described in terms of

measurable tasks: timeframes for bathing, giving food, and supervising are accurately marked, but this is not the same for the time dedicated to other affective activities such as relating and providing love (2000: 401). This lack of affectivity is, to some extent, motivated by our capitalist economy: “the rationale of economic efficiency creates a system wherein the measure of care lies with the physical task rather than the quality of human interaction and, as a consequence, the relationship between the care provider and recipient is not quintessentially one of caring” (Kontos et al., 2009: 133)

Caring is seen as an activity provided by a caregiver, but Michael Fine et al. signal that little attention is paid to the receiver, who is portrayed as inactive, dependent or a burden (2005). The opinions and attitudes of receivers should not be disregarded in order to understand their aversion towards becoming objects of care. Older people tend to refuse going to a care home because they conceive it as a further step towards loss of independence and control; in words of Valerie Braithwaite: “the prospect of becoming dependent on others for basic needs is regarded with trepidation by most of us. Dependency in adulthood threatens cherished values of self-respect and human dignity” (1990: 1).

When older people move to a nursing home against their will, they tend to detach from the institution in order to avoid any identification with it. Haim Hazan explains that a recurrent strategy used by residents consists in referring to the ‘care home’ under many different names that deviate from the real concept, such as: ‘hotel’, ‘second home’, ‘sheltered accommodation’, ‘board’ and ‘lodgings’ (2002: 330). As the same author exposes, only two particular collectives –which were at either pole of the scale– referred to the institution as a ‘home for the aged’:

those who had many options open to them and to whom the stigmatic tag of being in a home did not apply or, conversely—those who entertained no alternative care whatsoever and for whom the institution was a final and ultimate reality. For the rest, the constant interplay of changing boundaries and definitions was their way of rebuilding a world of situationally determined contexts of living (Hazan, 2002: 335-336).

Caregiving is a universal concept not only applicable to later life, but very frequently related to it. It can take many different shapes regarding the level of formality, the costs that receiving care involves or who provides the service (being almost always women the caregivers). Care homes have evolved over the history and, nowadays, it is difficult to detect in them any traits that remind us of their origins linked to the Victorian poorhouses but, still, many older people resist moving to these centers. In order to achieve a better integration of the reluctant inmates, it would be necessary to provide emotional therapy to help them overcome their feelings of inferiority and loss of independence.

2.1.4 Age and cognitive decline

Developing any form of dementia, such as Alzheimer's disease (henceforth, AD), means suffering from a deterioration of the brain that affects the cognitive and linguistic capabilities. Lars-Christer Hydén and Linda Örvulv claim that people with dementia have severe difficulties remembering episodes and individuals from the past, as much as creating new memories of the present (2009: 2). Being diagnosed with dementia, especially AD, implies to undergo a process of “suffering, discrimination, isolation, and, in many situations a violence of inter-relating” (Hydén, Örvulv, 2009: 1). The prejudices against patients with dementia are socially extended and perpetuated through a biased discourse used both by the media and medical scholars.

Anne Basting (2009) exposes two main narratives about the representation of dementia that predominate in North America. Firstly, the efforts of scientists that fight to combat the prejudicial dementia and ask for more time and money so as to find a solution and eradicate the illness; secondly, the slow process of losing a bright person who is progressively being emptied out by the unstoppable disease. In both cases, dementia is portrayed with highly frightening images and negative messages. Dementia is surrounded by the ‘tragedy discourse’ that attaches this illness to feelings of hopelessness. Besides, there is a shared social fear of suffering from a condition that seems completely arbitrary and out of control, both for the individual and for the scientific field of medicine (Mc Parland, 2014). This negative social attribution to dementia inferiorizes the collective suffering from this condition and results in an exclusionary and stigmatizing effect.

The ‘tragedy discourse’ is found in mass media, academic world and in the simplistic and dehumanizing nature of dementia care, based on the management of “challenging behaviours” with mechanical and pharmacological restraint (Dupuis et al., 2012). A person’s behaviour is defined as “challenging” if it puts either them or those around them at risk, and it involves attitudes such as aggression, self-harm, destructiveness or disruptiveness. Patricia Mc Parland et al. claim that this extended view of pernicious dementia has brought the public to regard “the person with dementia as ‘other’, creating a social and psychological distance between themselves and this terrifying prospect” (2016: 4). The process of othering people with dementia deteriorates into a stage of dehumanization, described by Gail Mitchell et al. (2013: 3):

the process of dehumanization in dementia that starts with predominant discourses and labeling and ends with the complete objectification that regards persons as no more than stages of disease and deficit. This dehumanizing process creates suffering by devaluing persons and rupturing relations

with the social world; it is a process that damages one's sense of self, leading ultimately to the loss of selfhood that is so widely thought to be caused by neuropathology.

This dominant discourse shows the decline, losses and limitations that accompany the people living with dementia, but fails to portray the positive aspects that remain present in their lives. Mitchell et al. criticize the limitations of the 'tragedy discourse' and point out that "there are also continuing relationships and love, persisting patterns of one's values and activities, and moments of humor, joy, and peace. Further, there is also new learning and emergent possibilities that happen when living with dementia" (2013: 10).

Persons suffering from dementia are linguistically affected and this is reflected in their difficulty in finding single words and constructing sentences (Heidi Hamilton, 1994). Pia Bülow and Lars Christer Hydén say that a way of presenting one's identity is by explaining biographical stories or events in which we have taken part: these narrations about the past enable us to negotiate our present identity (2003: 90). As a consequence of the linguistic detriment, persons with AD or other types of dementia cannot formulate coherent stories about themselves: "this fact has often been taken as one of several indications that persons with AD are gradually losing their identities and senses of self irrevocably –just leaving traces of the past in the personal void that the disease progressively opens up" (Hydén and Örvulv, 2009: 205).

Current research has shifted the perspective from the failure of linguistic retelling to other aspects of identity that are continuous despite the cognitive disease. An example of this is provided by Steven Sabat and Rom Harré (1994) in a study that shows how persons with AD usually retain their professional identities and their identities in relation to spouse and family, even as the disease progresses. Amelia DeFalco points out that dementia exposes "the nonfixity and multiplicity of identity" (2010: 125), as people suffering from dementia often live in a world without temporal, spatial and personal barriers. This is because the boundaries that separate entities such as time, place, and person shift with dementia and become more fluid and blurred (Mitchell et al. 2013).

Dementia is a common form of cognitive decline very frequent in old age. Because of the complexity of this mental condition, one should avoid falling into the biased 'tragedy discourse', which has been extended and consolidated in our society. This prejudicial view of patients with dementia fails to acknowledge all the shades of their true situation, focusing only on the most negative and frightening aspects that diminish their humane condition. Anne Basting has thoroughly studied social reactions towards people suffering from dementia, and she claims that everyone could do something to improve

the lives of these patients: trying “to see dementia as more than a death sentence” (2009: 4). Nowadays, the narrative of dementia has undergone a shift in perspective in ageing studies. As Tess Maginess and Hannah Zeilig state, there is “an increasing recognition that people living with dementia have a capacity for change and growth” which “is important for destigmatizing dementia and enhancing person-centered care” (2018: 187).

2.2 Narratives of ageing in contemporary literature

Stories of ageing are increasingly becoming more popular in contemporary fiction. Characters above sixty are the protagonists of these narrations, in which their biological and psychological changes are portrayed. Maricel Oró defends that the growing interest in the ageing population has a sociological reason:

Far from being a mere coincidence, even a fashionable trend, this piece of evidence responds to an increasing preoccupation present in Western societies and extending at a worldwide level. In front of an impending demographic revolution, the interest in the last stage of a human life is being transported to centre stage (2013: 47).

Indeed, as Núria Casado and Maria Vidal claim, our societies are growing older demographically and “the voice of the elderly is becoming more frequent and insistent, and increasing numbers of writers use it to convey their messages” (2004: x).

Contemporary fiction avoids depicting ageing as a unidirectional process, and this fact contributes to present the multiple factors that make ageing a complex human experience (Oró, 2013: 47). Literature gains aesthetic value from encompassing contradictions and, as Sally Chivers points out, it is able to portray the crucial complexity of growing old (2003: x). Because of the richness and multiplicity of the experiences narrated in contemporary literature, the processes of ageing expressed in these works “enable profound and personalized presentations which contribute to a deeper understanding of the ageing process” (Casado and Vidal, 2004: x). The plurality of views gathered in literary text encompasses the opposed (or ‘bipolar’) representations of ageing, as explained in the previous section.

The negative stereotype of old age—which depicts ageing as a process of irrevocable decay—is still present in current narrations, despite living in an increasingly ageing society; Kathleen Woodward claims that “in the West our representations of old age reflect a dominant gerontophobia” (1991: 7). This prevailing paradigm tends to veil the productive side of ageing, which is implicitly perceived in terms of a narrative of decline (Randall and Khurshid, 2016). Some renowned literary characters inscribed in the

narrative of decline are Blanche Dubois in Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, or Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Eventually, these characters lose their place in society and end their lives either in an asylum or by committing suicide.

However, the perspective towards the aged collective is currently shifting towards a more optimistic tone:

[I]ncreasingly, the voice of the aged is sounding louder and older characters are being presented in a different, more positive light. Indeed, new aged role models are appearing in all art forms - literature, films, television and advertising, a trend which raises awareness of the effects of ageing on ourselves [...]" (Casado and Vidal 2004: x)

Much of the work in literary gerontology aims to "foster social change regarding old age" (Waxman, 1900: 2) by disseminating a positive image of ageing. Oliver Davis remarks that there exist potential dangers in this simplistic and naive attitude towards old age, to the extent that some gerontological work risks falling foul of the oversimplified promotion of positive ageing (2006: 17-17). Margaret Morganroth Gullette's "midlife progress novel" is an example of optimistic narrative, which defends that growth and renewal are the dominant aspects in the ageing process. This view subverts the dominant cultural narrative that associates aging with loss, decrepitude, and death and interrogates the commonly accepted associations of maturity with disillusionment and aging with decline (Gullette, 1988: xviii).

There are multiple perspectives surrounding the process of ageing and this enables literature to present this natural evolution as multiple and humane, employing different points of view and discourses (Oró, 2013: 50). Contemporary narrations dealing with ageing embrace a wide range of literary genres and, as Heike Hartung points out, fictional stories are not the only form of narrative relevant to the question of age narrativity: autobiographical writings by older people also play a relevant role in the depiction of the ageing process (2016: 10). Having acknowledged the large variety of literary genres dealing with ageing, it must be pointed out that the remaining pages of the dissertation will be devoted to analyse the representations of ageing in the work of Alice Munro.

2.2.1. Ageing representations in Alice Munro

Munro's stories subvert the cultural construction of the 'life course', which has traditionally been understood as the division of the life span into a series of separated stages of life indicating the appropriate behavior for every one of them (Sara Jamieson:

2004). As the same scholar points out, Munro “draws attention to the relative lack of such markers of maturity in later life” (2004: 106). For instance, one character describes the entry into old age with the following words: “the progression got dimmer, and it was hard to be sure just when you had arrived at wherever it was you were going” (“Jakarta”: 83). Munro’s daunting representation of mid-life as an entry into an obscure region in which one becomes easily confused, bears a striking analogy with the ways in which observers of contemporary Western culture speak of old age as an alien place (Jamieson, 2004: 106).

Nursing homes are a reiterative space in the work of Munro, and they are portrayed as a place “where her characters are often disturbed by what they see” (Jamieson, 2004: 109). The Canadian writer highlights how these institutional spaces have changed over time, driving readers’ attention towards their unfixed nature. The continuous change of care homes is extended to other architectural forms, emphasizing—

continuities between the institution and various domestic spaces which are themselves always changing, and which do not reliably provide older people with opportunities to participate in the kind of intergenerational community life often valorized in gerontological critiques of residential care and equated with living at home (Jamieson, 2014: 4).

Munro signals the disadvantages of the nursing home, yet she also portrays how these drawbacks might be mitigated (Jamieson, 2014). Indeed, the message behind her stories is that houses are not always the most suitable place for getting old, and that institutions may be preferable as they provide the required treatment and help.

Munro’s knowledge about institutional life comes, in some ways, from her biographical background: her mother, Anne Chamney Laidlaw, died in 1959 of Parkinson’s disease and spent the last years of her life in an old age home (Robert Thacker, 2016: 154). In fact, autobiography lies at the core of Munro’s narrative: she has written “no fewer than seventeen stories that feature an ill mother as the primary or tangential theme” (Nicholson, 2010: 1). According to Thacker, the writer’s autobiographical facts enrich her short stories with validity, precision, haunting beauty, and verisimilitude (2016: 154). Munro’s critics, such as Katherine Mayberry, have reiteratively commented on the difficulty to reach her writing because it “admits little access” (1992: 37). This inaccessibility lies in the employment of subjectivity and memory and, more importantly, in the use of various superposed layers that constitute the basis of her complex narrative. As Kevin Stevens states, in Munro’s stories, life is experienced “iteratively –lived, relived, remembered, reinterpreted” (2012). This blurred portrayal of past experiences derives from Munro’s understanding of the world as

something in constant flux, thus, “her pronouncements are few and her insights tentative and fleeting” (Thacker, 2013: 40).

Gerontological research shows that ageing “is not a straightforward linear trajectory” (Hepworth, 2000: 1), and it is actually a highly “individualised subjective experience” (ibid.). For this reason, Hannah Spruce claims that ageing “must be told in a non-linear, heterogeneous space” (2015: 21). As Thacker states, this non-linear narrative is, precisely, what can be found in the work of Munro:

her remembering narrators, in reflexively shifting from present to past and back again, create [...] Munro’s “jerky” narrative pace—but those shifts, and thus that pace, are essential to her stories. Munro’s work is dependent on a narrative technique that combines the past with the present, intermingling the two (Thacker, 2016: 48).

This entangled combination of temporal spaces is reinforced by the use of narratological anachrony that re-orders the events of the story. Commenting on Munro’s nonlinear narrative, Begoña Simal points out that the Canadian writer “skilfully plays with prolepsis, analepsis and ellipsis in order to reconstruct the way time changes or obliterates memories” (2014: 62). Her use of analepsis becomes the vital narrative technique that allows her to “postpone or withhold vital pieces of information that may confirm suspicions fuelled earlier” (Duncan, 201: 156).

Finally, the phenomenon of temporal fluidity becomes an excellent narrative technique to reproduce how people suffering from dementia perceive the reality surrounding them. In this way, readers gain access to the world without temporal frontier in which the characters of the short stories live. Hence, the temporally disorganized discourse vividly transmits the sensation of temporal loss experienced by the older protagonists who suffer from a cognitive decline. In this line, Spruce claims that “time operates in a misleading manner, with both the past and the present depicted as unreliable locations. Temporalities collapse as the story slips into the uncanny realm of memory and returns suddenly, horrifically, to the present” (2015: 33).

Munro uses the short story to depict the multiple faces of old age and she does not hesitate to portray the ‘perils’ as well as the ‘pleasures’ of ageing (Segal, 2013). As has been mentioned, the same applies to care homes: the author exposes both their positive and negative traits. Hence, Munro tries to portray old age from a realistic perspective, involving the two poles of the ageing process. For this reason, trying to inscribe Munro’s style either in the ‘successful’ or in the ‘decline contemporary discourses of ageing would mean to fall victim of a simplistic and impartial reading of her writing. Therefore, Munro’s work escapes from the current dichotomic representation of ageing offering an

alternative discourse, in which “old age and dementia are deprived of their alleged meaninglessness and become, instead, part of a new quest for meaning” (Casado, 2015: 401).

The following chapters, devoted to the analysis of the work of Alice Munro, focus on examining the ways in which the writer portrays old age in four of her short stories. The aim of the following chapters is to analyze the extent to which Munro depicts old age as a dynamic source of identity. The four stories selected are: “Spelling” (1977), “Pictures of the Ice” (1990), “The Bear Came Over the Mountain” (2003) and “In Sight of the Lake” (2012). Three main aspects related to old-age identity that have been observed in these short stories will be examined in the sections that follow: firstly, the change of identity propitiated by the older person's internment in a residential home; secondly, the dissolution of masculine identity following retirement and the subsequent acquisition of feminine traits by older male characters; and, finally, the loss of identity due to AD and the importance of the life review to preserve identity.

The corpus of the selected works includes a considerable diversity of older characters regarding the figures' sex, civil state and mental and physical conditions. For this reason, it can be considered that these short stories portray a heterogenous group of the ageing population. “Spelling” narrates a family conflict in which Rose, a middle-aged woman, comes back home to take care of her stepmother. After spending some days together and observing that Flo is in an advanced stage of AD, she decides to take her into a nursing home. “Pictures of the Ice” is the story of Austin, a man in his seventies, who has been widowed for a year and, after retiring from his job, plans to move to Hawaii to get married again. However, his idealized project will turn out to be just a cover for his premeditated death. “The Bear Came Over the Mountain” portrays Fiona’s internment in a care home. Fiona, the protagonist of the short story, is an older woman who suffers from AD. The story reflects the process of adaptation of her husband, Grant, who decides to ensure Fiona’s well-being by helping her to preserve an extra-marital relationship with another patient of the care home. Finally, “In Sight of the Lake” is a dementia narrative that captures Nancy’s decision about resorting to the support of a care home after being diagnosed with AD.

3. IDENTITY AND RETIREMENT

Retirement represents an inflection point in life-course that, inevitably, changes one's routines, organization, interests and, as a consequence, also has a great impact on the older person's identity. Traditionally, retirement has been considered a gendered space because women do not completely retire from their former occupation in the domestic space (Gail Weiss, 2014). This idea led Beauvoir to conclude that men are the ones who suffer retirement the most (1970). Debora Price et al. show that, even today, a large disparity of working patterns exists between the two genders: a life course that approximates long-term full-time engagement with the paid labor market has so far been true for only a quarter of women (2016). The present section focuses solely on analysing the changes that masculine characters undergo after being retired. Retirement is portrayed following the traditional model in the literary world of Alice Munro and, hence, male characters represent its effects in a more perceivable way than female figures.

3.1. Identity and retirement in “Pictures of the Ice”

Austin, the protagonist of this short story, is a retired man of over 70 years old. At the beginning of the story, he is trying on clothes to buy his wedding suit. He has been widowed for one year and, after the United Church has found a new minister, he decides to spend his retirement in Hawaii, where he will get married in two weeks. Austin is going to buy a “burgundy sports shirt and a pair of cream, brown and burgundy plaid pants” (“PI”: 137) that, taking into account his age, is a pretty “youthful” outfit (“PI”: 137). According to Paul Higgs, the current retiring generation has been part of the new consumer society and takes the habits of consumption into later life (2009: 119). Hence, older people “find themselves monitoring their dress to avoid out-of-date, unfashionable or ageing looks that signal moral failure in this new culture of positive ageing” (Twigg, 2015: 154) while, at the same time, they are expected to wear body-covering clothes of darkened tones. The reason for this unflashy and muted dress code rests “on negative judgements about the body in age, which is perceived as a form of abjection, a falling away from the youthful ideal that is valorized and celebrated in surrounding visual culture, so that for an older woman to be socially acceptable, her body needs to be hidden” (Twigg, 2015: 150-151).

The cultural diffusion of this sober dressing code has particularly affected older women, who become fiercely condemned for wearing ultra-fashionable or sexually explicit clothes. As

Eileen Fairhurst remarks, this is reflected in the British cultural trope of ‘mutton dressed as lamb’ (1998). This expression is applied to Austin signaling that, with the retirement, he has already acquired some feminine traits: “‘With the darker shirt and the lighter pants you can’t go wrong. It’s youthful’ Austin cackled. ‘Did you ever hear that expression ‘mutton dressed as lamb?’ ‘Referred to ladies’” (“PI”: 137). In fact, Western fashion has traditionally been constituted as a feminized field, closely linked with the lives of women, “who typically shop more frequently for clothes, spend more money on them and engage more fully with the topic through the media” (Twigg, 2015: 150). Therefore, when Austin is shopping for clothes, he performs a prototypical feminine activity and, besides, he goes to the salon—a space associated with women—: “then he says he’s going uptown to have his hair cut” (“PI”: 146). As Frida Furman (1977) and Anthea Symonds and Caroline Holland (2008) show in their research, salons that serve a predominantly older customer have emerged, and these environments play a distinctive role in the negotiation of gendered ageing.

Apart from displaying prototypical feminine attitudes, Austin also emanates an image of frailty: “Karin is nervous when Austin stands alone to take pictures. He seems shaky to her—and what if he fell? He could break a leg, a hip” (“PI”: 151). Another physical feature associated with delicacy and debility is paleness, which is also one of Austin’s traits: “Even though he’s just in from the cold, he’s white. Put a candle behind his face, it’d shine through as if he were wax or thin china” (“PI”: 154). Frailty, weakness and delicacy are some typical features attributed to women that grant their submission to men, from whom they will receive effective protection. This feeling of fragileness is transferred to retired men—and older people in general— who lose their autonomy becoming dependent on younger generations. Being perceived in such a vulnerable way transforms older people “into objects of pity” (Hepworth, 2000: 100).

Despite exhibiting an image of fragility and lack of energy, Austin is planning to go through a radical change of lifestyle: a decision that implies a physical exertion that the protagonist does not seem able to endure. In fact, Austin exteriorizes the intention to spend in Hawaii the last years of his life: “He shows her a postcard picture of the town where Shelia lives. The town where he will live in Hawaii” (“PI”: 140). Lifestyle migration is the movement of relatively affluent individuals to new destinations in the quest for a better life (Benson and O’Reilly, 2009). As Karen O’Reilly and Michaela Benson expose, the ‘good life’ migrants seek is “intangible rather than material” (2015: 420), and it is expressed as a relaxed pace (Mari Korpela, 2009), quality of life (O’Reilly, 2000), the relief of constraints (Hoey, 2009), and the opportunity to benefit from a pleasant climate or a wonderful landscape (Benson, 2011).

Although not exclusively related to old age, there are certain connections between lifestyle migration and ageing: “notions of successful, positive retirement and ageing are therefore often central themes, with the (potential) severing of the connection between place of work and residence signaling a turning point towards a period of greater control over where, how and with whom to live” (O’Reilly and Benson, 2015: 421).

Austin’s physical weakness is at odds with the idea of positive ageing and his bodily condition prevents him from pursuing a successful lifestyle migration: “How can anybody believe that this tottery older man, whose body looks to be shriveling day by day, is on his way to marry a comforting widow and spend his days from now on walking on a sunny beach? It isn’t in him to do such a thing, ever” (“PI”: 154). Opposed to the idea of an enjoyable retirement, Austin’s life ends tragically: he died “drowned in a boating accident in a lake whose name nobody had heard him mention” (“PI”: 137). According to Jamieson, this ending reflects Munro’s disbelief in successful ageing: “When suicide emerges as the only acceptable alternative to, or as the ultimate expression of, independence in old age, Munro’s critique of ‘positive aging’ appears severe indeed” (2004: 117).

Having acknowledged the impact of gender shift in retirement, it must be said that Austin’s attitudes after being retired cannot be explained exclusively in terms of the acquisition of feminine traits. He resists the institution of retirement not because he fears to lose his masculine authority, but because his excessively considerate nature cannot consent to cease helping others. His bodily degradation is enhanced not only by the passing of time (and the physical decay implied in it), but by his consuming mental struggle: having to conceive an adoption of a new identity. He cannot bare the social pressure that forces him to renounce to his identity based on being a profitable entity in society, and this leads him to ideate a plan to become involved in another church to continue with his former job. However, Austin might notice that his physical exhaustion does not enable him to perform this task anymore and, therefore, prefers to put a halt to his life before accepting what, according to him, would be a ‘useless’ identity.

3.2. Identity and retirement in “The Bear Came over the Mountain”

Fiona’s husband, Grant, is a masculine retired character of great relevance in this short story. Grant was a university professor but, after taking an early retirement with reduced pension, he moved with his wife in a farmhouse in the countryside. Although Grant is no longer an active lecturer, he does not completely dissociate from his previous job and continues his

research: “They talked about his work (he was writing a study of legendary Norse wolves and particularly of the great Fenris wolf who swallows up Odin at the end of the world)” (“TBCM”: 284). Grant enjoys an active retirement and practices physical activity: “He skied for exercise but never went as far as the swamp. He skied around and around in the field behind the house as the sun went down” (“TBCM”: 284). According to Cassandra Phoenix and Meridith Griffin, leisure time physical activity contributes “to the rise of ‘the new ageing’, a movement that celebrates growing older as a period of growth, enjoyment, consumption and leisure” (2015: 332).

Linked to this idea of positive and active ageing, the couple shows an enthusiasm to travel around the world. SooCheong Jang et al. explain that, over the past decade, the number of older tourists has notably increased, and this collective has been referred as the ‘senior’ or ‘grey’ tourist market (2009). The shift from considering old age as a period of decline and dependency towards seeing it in more positive terms has fostered the emergence of a new group of older consumers, who are willing to take part in travel experiences (Long, 1998). The motivations of these older tourists are potentiated by the active lifestyles promoted by marketers and the media (David Ekerdt and Evelyn Clark, 2001). Grant and Fiona are portrayed as part of this ‘senior’ tourist market: “They had gotten the idea that they too should travel while they could, and they had gone to Greece, to Australia, to Costa Rica” (“TBCM”: 283).

With their change of location and settling in the countryside, Grant succeeds in protecting their marriage by putting a halt to his extra-marital diversion: “There were no more hectic flirtations. No bare female toes creeping up under a man’s pants leg at a dinner party. No more loose wives” (“TBCM”: 295). Once he is retired, Grant has to reshape his identity as a husband and propitiates a positive change in the couple’s love by stopping his disloyal affairs. In the years preceding the retirement, Grant sustained a vacuous relationship with her wife, mere based on commitment and lacking both intimacy and passion; in the words of Ping Wei and Yu Tang:

When Grant is enjoying himself in the playfield of women, Fiona’s mother is on the edge of dying. Grant fails to cater to Fiona’s psychological needs and leaves her licking her own wounds. Even though he has never been away from her for a single night, their psychological distance is widening. Their marriage now is an empty shell supported merely by commitment (2015: 37).

It is true that Grant “had not stayed away from her for a single night” (TBCM: 286) but this cannot compensate his unfaithfulness and betrayal. Grant is highly aware of having deceived his wife and his sense of remorse is clearly depicted in the story: his haunting visions of the old Meadowlake are, in fact, “an effect of his aggravated awareness of how he has failed

Fiona throughout their marriage” (Jamieson, 2014: 7). In order to compensate his unfaithfulness and save their relationship, Grant promises his wife a new life, far away from the sexual distractions of the urban landscape. With his retirement, Grant achieves to maintain a consummate relationship with his wife –the most complete form of love (Sternberg, 1989)–. Their consummate love embraces intimacy, commitment and passion, even involving sparks of sexual desire: “This was their time of liveliest intimacy, though there was also, of course, the five or ten minutes of physical sweetness just after they got into bed– something that did not often end up in sex but reassured them that sex was not over yet” (TBCM: 284).

Once Fiona develops the first symptoms of dementia and goes to a nursing home, Grant is forced to change his role as husband. He adopts a completely different position in their marriage by accepting that his wife has an intimate relationship with another resident, Aubrey. In order to secure Fiona’s psychological stability, Grant starts an affair with Aubrey’s wife, Marianne, not because he likes her, but as a strategy to ensure that Fiona can be closer to Aubrey again. Hence, instead of searching his own satisfaction –as he did in the past–, now Grant tries to seek the comfort of his wife and–

learns to temporarily ‘forget’ his role as a ‘husband’ and accept, instead, a new role as his wife’s companion or even confidante which will suit her new necessities better. Likewise, his surrendering to another extramarital affair entails the restoration of a troubling past which, ironically enough, helps him resuscitate his conjugal loyalty (Casado, 2015: 393).

After being retired, Grant gradually adopts a completely new identity as a husband. Firstly, he decides to put an end to his extramarital affairs and stay faithful to his wife, which represents a substantial change in his lifestyle. Secondly, when Fiona moves to Meadowlake and becomes interested in Aubrey, his former role as the disloyal member of the couple gets paradoxically subverted. So, in the case of this couple, gender shift is brought to a full realization. Ensuring Fiona’s mental stability becomes Grant’s main goal, which makes him realize he has an important task to develop in his remaining years of life. It is precisely the feeling of utility what retirees constantly seek; this sense of usefulness can take the form of a leisure activity as gardening (for the villager of Highman), continuing with the former job but from a retired position (for Nancy’s husband), or taking care of your beloved ones (for Grant).

3.3. Identity and retirement in “In Sight of the Lake”

There is a close connection between the experience of ageing and the perception that time passes more quickly. As Giovanni Frazzetto exposes, this phenomenon is related to the functioning of our brain’s internal clock: “with age the precision of our internal clock declines.

In particular, what becomes more pronounced as we get older is the compression of time, or the perception that the duration of a given period of time is shorter than it actually is” (2017: 30). Consequently, retired people can get entertained with one activity without realizing that they have been doing the same for a long time. The two male characters who are in their retirement age show differing attitudes towards their free time, and towards their experience of being retired in general: namely, Nancy’s husband, and a resident of Highman, the village where the protagonist goes to visit the gerontological specialist. Neither of these characters is given a name in the story: the absence of name makes them look more "generic" as older adults.

Nancy’s husband is officially retired, but he struggles to preserve his job: “He is an economist who watches sports half the night and works on his book the other half, though he tells her to say he is retired” (“ISL”: 218). Apart from the comment that he regularly spends some hours of the night working on a written project, the use of the verb in the present tense –“he *is* an economist”– shows that he strains to remain professionally active. Bringing to a halt one’s career is a recurrent problem in contemporary Western society and, in fact, retirement’s nature is increasingly becoming ill-defined and fragmented; as Sarah Vickerstaff states: “routs into (and back out of) retirement have become more complex and varied, suggesting that as an identity it is more fluid” (2015: 299). In a study carried out in 2010, Nicole Maestas indicates that as many as half of retirees in the US follow a non-traditional route, which implies either partial or phased retirement or unretirement (2010). The Western cultural conception of work and gender leads to the consideration that men’s retirement is closely linked to the acquisition of feminine traits (Cruikshank, 2009) as well as social displacement and unproductiveness (Hearn, 1995). Consequently, some older men try to preserve their masculine identity by continuing with their professional career.

The second retired character is presented in this way: “a man has come along one of the paths, carrying a pair of shears” (“ISL”: 224). Readers do not know neither the age nor the profession of this character, but it can be inferred that he is an older man (and, hence, retired) because he spends his time gardening a piece of land that belonged to his deceased friend: “when he died I came up just to get rid of the place and go. Then I got hold of this land cheap because the contractor had left it just a hole in the ground and it was an eyesore” (“ISL”: 225). One possibility is that this character is tidying up the garden as a way to commemorate his dead colleague; as implied in the story: “The garden [is] perhaps a memorial to the friend who died” (“ISL”: 226). In fact, gardening can be a spiritual activity, one that helps people connect with those who have passed away (and who maybe were gardeners before them). In line with this

idea, Anne Same et al. expose that “gardens can be a powerful symbol of memories and loss, a living reminder of a deceased partner” (2005: 256).

The older man spends his free time taking care of the land, which, according to Christine Milligan and Amanda Bingley, is a common activity among retired people: “gardens, as both sites for public consumption and domestic spaces of gardening activity, have increasing appeal as an occupational pursuit in later life” (2015: 322). Gardening provides this character with the satisfaction of doing a profitable job: “‘Actually, I only feel comfortable when I’m doing something that needs attending to’, he says” (“ISL”: 225). Mark Bhatti suggests that the determination to continue taking care of the garden in old age represents a form of resistance to decline (2006). In this line, Milligan and Bingley explain that older people’s motivation for gardening is–

a sign that despite the limitations of the ageing body, older people draw on their experience and ingenuity to find ways to maintain their independence and expression of individuality. In this way, the domestic garden becomes a source of pride, a way of demonstrating to themselves, family and the wider community that the creative mind is still alive and the body able to complete difficult physical tasks (2015: 323).

Gardening is a gendered activity and, as Mark Bhatti and Andrew Church argue, gardens can be perceived as an extension of the domestic sphere (2000). Donna Armstrong’s research shows that women tend to spend more time than men in gardens (2000) and, apart from that, women undertake more serious gardening, even drawing on committed horticulturist skills (Mintel, 1997). Gender roles are clearly defined in this field and men undertake more physically demanding tasks: they are “more likely to refer to using tools and machinery to construct or destroy: mowing the lawn, doing heavy digging, mending netting, pruning, cutting back hedges and so forth” (Milligan and Bingley, 2015: 326). However, the older man of the story has to adapt to light gardening, probably because of his physical condition, adhering to typical women’s chores: “bending and snipping at a plant that is encroaching on the path” (“ISL”: 224).

The two masculine characters seem to engage in an active retirement, even though in very different ways: Nancy’s husband by struggling to continue with his former job as an economist, and the villager by gardening. In fact, gardening draws some parallelisms with the preservation of work: “the domestic garden can represent a sit of leisure for older people (lazing and gazing), but also a site of replacement work, where pleasure is gained through productive endeavor post-retirement” (Milligan and Bingley, 2015: 327). Despite their different strategies to keep themselves busy, their masculinity is, in both cases, jeopardized: on the one hand, Nancy’s husband is formally retired and, with his entrance into the domestic space, he

undergoes a gender shift; on the other hand, the gardening enthusiast also incorporates some feminine traits, since taking care of plants has traditionally been considered a female activity.

The two male characters of “ISL” achieve a more successful retirement than Austin by engaging in activities that provide them with the pleasant feeling of being useful in life. It is true that Nancy’s husband continues to carry on his previous work but, as opposed to Austin, he accepts to become officially retired. This is, in fact, what enables him to build a more suitable identity: he does not contradict social conventions. On the contrary, Austin distances himself from the generally accepted practice of retirement and strains to achieve a new working position. The construction of one’s identity needs, to some extent, the approval of others or, on the contrary, the individual will feel miscomprehended and displaced from the community –as Austin–. The two retired characters of “ISL” fulfill to attain a socially plausible identity for their new life stage, by respecting the social conventions and conducting personally meaningful activities.

3.4. Conclusion

In Munro’s stories, the impact of retirement is mainly perceived in male characters, who usually adopt feminine traits. Austin is presented for the first time in a clothes shop and, apart from getting involved in this feminine activity, his physical appearance displays two features traditionally associated with women: weakness and paleness, and he is described as someone fragile and vulnerable. These adjectives, according to Hepworth, inspire a sense of compassion. Therefore, Austin becomes an object of pity for readers. In the case of “ISL”, the villager becomes highly interested in plants once he is retired. The four male protagonists have difficulties in leaving their jobs, but Austin is the only one who continues to be officially employed (although he has already surpassed the retirement age). Contrary to him, Grant and Nancy’s husband keep involved in their previous tasks from a retired position at home. The prolongation of these characters’ professional careers signals the phenomenon of partial retirement that is increasingly spreading across the Western world, (Maestas, 2010) and this is not the only age-associated feature that can be observed in Munro’s work. As the writer gets older, her representation of retirement becomes more positive. Whereas in “PI”, written when Munro was 59, Austin is unable to adapt to his retired condition, and his unwillingness to accept this new state leads him to commit suicide, in “TBCM” and in “ISL”, written when the author was 72 and 81, respectively, the male characters adopt a suitable identity in their successful retirement.

4. IDENTITY AND RESIDENTIAL HOMES

Residential homes are, for many people, the only plausible place to spend the last years of life. According to Dirk Houttekier et al., this is especially the case of patients who have developed dementia (2010). Older people tend to oppose going to a nursing home: “‘I’d rather die than go there’ is a commonly heard statement from people who have passed seventy-five” (Cruikshank, 2013:12). The strong hostility towards care homes lies in the fact that entering to these institutions entails renouncing one’s autonomy and self-independence. As Robert Rubinstein et al. state, Western culture values independence so much that “to have a home, to live in one’s own home, to be in the home are very much part of a sense of personal coherence and continuing physical viability” (1992: 19). Hence, older people’s identity becomes directly affected and severely questioned when moving to a care home. Internments that do not count on the resident’s collaboration may entail negative consequences: “Not every older person can forgive his or her relegation to the margins of life implied in the dispersal of the home, especially when it involves involuntary removal into residential accommodation” and, consequently, “a deep sense of anger rather than gentle resignation may be provoked, especially when an older person feels betrayed” (Hepworth, 2000: 104). However, this is not the case of any of the selected short stories, in which all the protagonists willingly accept to be taken to a nursing home.

Although characters agree to move to a care home, these institutions are initially depicted in a discouraging tone. Both in “TBCM”, “Sp” and “ISL” residential homes are depicted as an imprisoning space. Firstly, the landscape that Grant and Fiona encounter on their way to Meadowlake suggests an analogy with a prison grille: “The swamp-oaks and maples threw their shadows like bars across the bright snow” (“TBCM”: 186-187). Through this description readers gain access to characters’ thoughts about the care home, since Munro projects the protagonists’ inner feelings onto the landscape. Secondly, Rose has a nightmare related to taking her mother to a residential home: “someone was taking her through a large building where there were people in cages [...] in one of the cages Rose spotted Flo, who was handsomely seated on a thronelike chair” (“Sp”: 188). Finally, the first time Nancy goes to the care home, the door opens automatically for her, but, as the narrative progresses, she feels trapped inside the building: the exit door is locked, and struggling to push it, Nancy claims it is “too heavy”, “it won’t budge” (“ISL”: 231). Referring to Nancy’s traumatic incident, Spruce says that “her frantic banging of doors suggests a prison space” (2015: 35).

The imprisoning imagery displayed in these short stories parallels the Western mediatic discourse about care homes, which strongly influences our conceptions about these institutions. Although care homes are present in the lives of many people, they remain on the periphery of the society's vision and, according to Edward Miller et al., citizens' understanding of the nursing home seems to arise mostly from media stories portraying them in a negativist tone, adopting a non-neutral light (2017). In this line, Chivers claims: "[t]he popular press focuses on nursing homes as contemporary 'gulags', sites of increasing use of chemical restraints, places of abuse and violence, and locations of tragedies that reveal high levels of neglect" (2015: 134-135). Munro may be playing with the socially expanded conception of nursing homes as an imprisoning space to highlight that their current pessimistic representation does not correspond to the reality: in most cases, patients feel trapped in their cognitive disease, not in the care home itself.

4.1. Identity and residential homes in "Spelling"

The care home of the short story stimulates the speaking and interaction of its residents through some activities that are adapted to the patients' physical and cognitive limitations:

On the first floor were the bright and tidy ones. [...] They visited each other, played cards. They had singsongs and hobbies. In the Crafts Center they painted pictures, hooked rugs, made quilts. If they were not able to do things like that they could make rag dolls, mobiles [...] They organized concerts; they held dances; they had checker tournaments. [...] Up one floor there was more television watching, there were more wheelchairs. There were those whose heads drooped, whose tongues lolled, whose limbs shook uncontrollably. Nevertheless sociability was still flourishing, also rationality, with occasional blanks and absences ("Sp": 186).

Studies in gerontology show that fostering creativity improves the welfare of older adults; in the words of Andrezej Klimczuk: "the creative capital of older people should be understood as their activities and work that can be an opportunity for maintain a healthy lifestyle, engaging in lifelong learning (LLL), and enjoying a high quality of life" (2015: 31). Gene Cohen's research proves that creativity has many benefits for older people: it reinforces essential connections between brain cells, strengthens morale, improves sleep and mood disorders, prevents forgetfulness and promotes a positive outlook and sense of well-being that boosts the immune system (2001). Hence, incorporating activities that potentiate creativity in care homes (as in the one of "Sp") directly benefits the well-being of residents.

Through the story, Flo systematically refuses external help. At the beginning, she repels the assistance of her stepdaughter: "Flo's bark, her waving cane, her fierce unwillingness to be the object of anybody's rescue!" ("Sp": 183) and, later on, she refuses

the care of a doctor: “I don’t want no woman doctor, you can just clear out” (“Sp”: 191).

Andrew Papanikitas explains why older people oppose being helped:

There may be cultural constraints, which lead to older people being less likely to demand the health care or support services available to them. This might include a dislike of strangers in the house; concerns about modesty, or not wanting to complain, leading (respectively) to refusing home help for housework; refusing assistance with activities of daily living [...] or generally not seeking help (2006: 132)

Another reason that leads Flo to dislike the nursing home is the association it has with the poorhouse: “‘Now I’m ready for to go’ Flo said. ‘Go where?’ ‘out there’, said Flo, jerking her head. ‘Out to the whattayacallit, The Poorhouse’. ‘The Home,’ said Rose” (Sp: 189). Brian Gratton exposes that almshouses became public old age homes, because elderly occupants dramatically increased in comparison to other collectives, which were progressively removed from those institutions (1986: 132). Therefore, as Michael Katz explains, care homes are linked to poorhouses: “For the most part, poorhouses became old-age homes, which paid a high price for their origins. Emerging as part of the structure of public relief, they never wholly lost the stigma attached to welfare” (1986: 93). Stephen Katz indicates that poorhouses were not transformed into old age homes until the mid-twentieth century in Canada, with the passing of the 1947 Homes for the aged (1996: 58). Then, according to Norma Rudy, the term “house of refuge” was replaced by “home for the aged” (1987: 99). As this change occurred in Canada later than in other states, the association of the ‘home for the aged’ with the ‘poorhouse’ still prevails among Canadians. Therefore, Flo is afraid that becoming a resident of a care home would diminish her social status.

Living in a nursing home negatively affects Flo’s identity in two ways: it means the loss of her independence, and (for her) it implies being relegated to a lower social class. However, Flo is not forced to go to the nursing home and, in fact, she is the one who asks Rose to be taken there. Flo’s collaborative attitude helps her to better adapt to the institution, where she even spends some good moments, such as the delighted laugh she shares with Rose in one of her visits: “Flo laughed so that she rocked back and forth in her crib” (“Sp”: 191). Apart from Flo’s positive predisposition to becoming a resident, the activities offered in the care home contribute to her wellbeing by potentiating her creativity.

4.2. Identity and residential homes in “The Bear Came over the Mountain”

The story recounts how Fiona distances from her previous identity when she is dressed in clothes that are not hers in the care home: “a silly woolly hat and a jacket with

swirls of blue and purple, the sort of thing he had seen on local women at the supermarket” (“TBCM”: 298). Joanne Entwistle defends that the body, the dress and the self are closely linked, which means that a change of dress transforms one’s identity or ‘self’ (2000). Hence, it can be stated that Fiona’s sense of selfhood is jeopardized when she is dressed not accordingly to her style. This causes her objectification, which is defined by Miriam Ryvicker as “the treatment of residents as objects or instruments for performing professional duties, where residents become a means to an end in caregiving routines” (2009: 13).

Fiona is treated as a body that needs to be dressed, regardless of her preferences or even personal belongings. Hence, she suffers from the invasiveness of physical care provided by staff: she is merely rendered as a body that needs to be “cleaned, dressed, maintained, and treated” (Ryvicker, 2009: 13). Fiona is physically described by Grant as a “local” woman, an adjective that carries negative connotations, because Grant and Fiona never got involved with the local life of the village. Consequently, Fiona incorporates a foreign, unfamiliar trait that endangers her previous identity: her “unaccustomed resemblance to a ‘local’ foregrounds the ambiguity of her communal allegiances and articulates a critique of the depersonalizing practices of the institution in a way that avoids comparisons with idealized notions of home and community” (Jamieson, 2014: 10). Munro depicts the carers of Meadowlake with irony and, through the use of the language, she criticises the institution. One of the caregivers, Kristy, dissociates herself from residents by reiteratively referring to them with the pronouns “them” or “they” and treating the older patients as if they were small children: “‘Like when your kids start school,’ Kristy said. ‘There’s a whole bunch of new germs they’re exposed to’” (“TBCM”: 282). Kristy also addresses Grant as if he was a child who needs constant guidance to behave properly: “See? [...] You just go up and say hello and try not to startle her. Remember she may not- Well. Just go ahead” (“TBCM”: 289).

The denial of Fiona’s individuality is strengthened by the care home’s strict regulations, such as the rule that forbids visitors for the first thirty days. This regulation depicts “how the total institution depersonalizes its inmates by separating them from their past identities and roles” (Jamieson, 2014: 7). Fiona’s identity is also affected by the imposition of a strict routine in Meadowlake. O’Shea and Walsh claim that, in Western culture –where personal freedom is heavily emphasized–, the adherence to rules and routines in care homes diminishes one’s sense of autonomy and identity (2013). However, Qi Wang shows that having a routine may have positive effects. In her study, older participants noted that they were willing to adjust to life routines, as following a planned schedule gave them the comfortable feeling of knowing what to expect at every time (2017: 77). Care homes assign

a specific time for getting up, eating and sleeping that usually differ from the ones followed at home. On the contrary, though, Munro's story "intriguingly aligns such regimentation with Fiona's life at home before she enters Meadowlake, and before the onset of her illness" (Jamieson, 2014: 8). In fact, Fiona used to follow a strict schedule: "7 a.m. Yoga. 7:30-7:45 teeth face hair. 7:45-8:15 walk. 8:15 Grant" ("TBCM": 276). So, although Fiona needs to adapt to an imposed timetable in her new home, she is used to following a fixed planning.

In order to compensate these depersonalizing practices, nowadays, care homes try to create a more person-centred lifestyle. Mike Nolan and Serena Allan explain that, in many institutions, residents have a private bedroom that they can personalize choosing some furniture and bringing their possessions (2012). In fact, Fiona has her own room, but she does not take advantage of the opportunity to personalize her intimate space: "nothing on the bedside table, except a box of Kleenex and a glass of water. Not a single photograph or picture of any kind, not a book or a magazine" ("TBCM": 288). Possessions are important to those who relocate and, as reported by Seymour Wapner et al., they provide historical continuity, comfort, and a sense of belongingness to nursing-home residents (1990). Furthermore, the concrete nature of objects enables them to operate as a steady reference in the life course of individuals. As Sheldon Tobin comments, personal possessions become tangible connections that individuals have to their unique, historical past (1996). Fiona has not taken any personal belonging to Meadowlake that reminds her of her past. This fosters her complete dissociation from her previous identity, a process that involves her loss of interest in Iceland and, what is more, in her husband.

Fiona's identity experiences some abrupt changes once she moves to Meadowlake. However, her identity crisis is more related to her dementia than to becoming a resident of the care home. She is not dressed with her own clothes, but had she claimed she did not want to wear them, caretakers would have rearranged the situation. Hence, she does not offer resistance to being given a new identity. The same applies to the room: she could have personalized her intimate space to reinforce her personality, but she does not take advantage of this possibility. Finally, external rules such as strict timetables do not consistently affect her previous lifestyle. Consequently, the nursing home cannot be blamed—at least, entirely—for Fiona's loss of identity.

4.3. Identity and residential homes in “In Sight of the Lake”

Nancy visits the care facility, an unfamiliar location for her, which is depicted as an uncanny space. Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs affirm that “an ‘uncanny’ experience may occur when one’s home is rendered, somehow and in some sense, unfamiliar; one has the experience, in other words, of being in place and ‘out of place’ simultaneously” (1998: 23). This is precisely what happens to Nancy: she has been living in a care home for a while, but one evening she fails to recognize that the institution is her actual home now. Her overwhelming disorientation leads her to the desperate impulse of escaping the residential home and, feeling trapped in an immense confusion, she finally suffers from a panic attack.

Nancy’s sense of displacement is fuelled by the lack of familiarity with the place. Focusing on the importance of the domestic space for women, Dena Shenk et al. affirm that “the home, and its contents, would represent anchors in various ways to the woman’s past role as wife (and mother) and provide representations and guideposts to her future life as a widow” (2004: 158). According to James Krasner, “[t]he physical organization of the home thus becomes a representation not only of the owner’s identity but of her life story” (2005: 211). In other words, familiar routines lived in the home help to recreate past experiences, and this reinforces one’s identity. Nancy has lost her husband and, now that she living in a care home, she cannot rely on the familiarity of the domestic space to get support from past experiences. Powell Lawton remarks that remaining in the place where one has lived for a long time provides “a family of schemata for comprehension and action” (1990: 639) that creates a feeling of security. For instance, as Kim Dovey points out, we can easily find light switches in the dark because the familiar environment enables us to feel them (1985). In relation to this, Graham Rowles explains that the connection to the domestic space involves a “sense of physical insideness, of being almost physiologically melded into the environment, [that] results from an intimacy with its physical configuration stemming from the rhythm and routine of using the space over many years” (1984: 146).

However, as Nancy has been displaced from her lifelong home, she does not know how to manage in the new, unfamiliar space. The objects around her become redundant and fail to accomplish their function. For instance, doors cannot be opened and windows do not allow her to see through them: “[s]he goes up to one of these possibly accessible doors and knocks, then tries the knob and cannot budge it. Locked. She cannot see through the window properly, either. Close up the glass is all wavy and distorted” (“ISL”: 231). Hence, the nursing home becomes an uncanny space due to the uselessness of its objects:

[t]hese mocking objects reflect the lack of agency given to the individual in the nursing home environment; the narrative emphasises her fears over elderly ‘Otherness’, where older people are represented as ‘redundant objects’ (Spruce, 2015: 35).

Nancy finds herself in an unfamiliar space; she is unable to manage the environment and cannot work out how objects operate. In the end, she feels completely lost and unsure of what is she doing in the nursing home. The contact with caretakers reawakens her sense of identity and enables her to establish connections between her past and present, regaining consciousness of self. Nancy’s encounter with Sandy puts an end to her panic attack. As it is disclosed by the omniscient narrator, the protagonist recognizes the caretaker: “[t]here is a woman here whose name is Sandy. It says so on the brooch she wears, and Nancy knows her anyway” (“ISL”: 232). The conversation with this nurse propitiates her recovery of memory: “‘You have a nice car?’ ‘Volvo’ ‘See? You’re sharp as a tack’” (“ISL”: 232). Nursing homes may become unfamiliar spaces that otherize patients, but, as Munro shows, the attention and help received by caretakers can help older people to overcome the uncanniness of the space.

4.4. Conclusion

In Munro’s stories, care homes are usually associated with an imprisoning space that parallels the Western mediatic discourse about these institutions (Miller et al., 2017). Although the writer’s perspective on residential homes does not seem to evolve during her literary trajectory, she always counterbalances their negative aspects by enhancing some of their favourable features. In “Sp”, residential homes are depicted as a threat to one’s identity –residents lose the autonomy they had at home– and evoke associations with the poorhouse, as it was not until the mid-twentieth century when poorhouses were transformed into old age homes in Canada (Katz, 1996). Creative activities improve not only residents’ sociability and cognitive skills, but also their health and quality of life (Klimczuk, 2015). Indeed, in “Sp”, caregivers potentiate the wellbeing of the inmates by inviting them to take part in a wide range of communicative activities. In “TBCM” Munro criticises the depersonalising way in which caregivers address older people (both patients and visitors) but, ironically, Meadowlake becomes the place where Fiona turns into “a free woman”. Contrary to this, in “ISL” the writer emphasises the valuable job of carers, who help residents to recover their identity and counterbalance the uncanniness of the unfamiliar space of the care home. Alice Munro shows both the pros and cons of the care home, depicting this institution through a non-biased perspective.

5. IDENTITY AND LOSS OF MEMORY

Dementia is a group of symptoms that affects memory, thinking and social abilities severely enough to interfere with one's daily routines and personhood. Identity is strongly connected to the notion of performativity, a term coined by Judith Butler that can be defined as the "reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains" (1993: 2). In other words, identity is generated through language and action. Suffering from dementia generally affects the capability of speaking and performing and, therefore, identity becomes highly jeopardised. In the words of Richard Ward and Elizabeth Prince:

if our sense of self, and the identities that inevitably attach to it, is constituted through both the language and action used to construct and maintain it, then a question must be raised as to how socially constructed and enacted identities pertain when the possibilities for semantic, linguistic and public performance are, at the very least, interrupted or obscured (2016: 66).

Undeniably, dementia is inscribed in the biomedical field, but it is also a socially constructed concept. Hannah Zeilig claims that the popular metaphorical framing of dementia operates on two levels: "it is generalized as a vast, natural or monstrous force that we must fight, and it is also located as a very specific condition that affects individuals in extreme ways. In both cases, the effect is to make us feel both terrified and powerless" (2014: 261). The cultural framing of dementia has resulted in a negativist and frightening image, associating it with crisis, death, uncontrollable disasters and a sense of calamity. Nevertheless, more positive representations of people with dementia are appearing nowadays. For instance, the study of Eva-Marie Kessler and Clemens Schwender on German news magazines revealed a preponderance of positive representations of dementia (2012). In the case of Munro, dementia is portrayed without hiding the negative impact it has on the identity of older protagonists, who feel forced to adapt to the demands of memory loss. Munro's narratives depict old age as a troubling stage that compromises narratives of a 'core' self: encounters with the disappearing, or far too present past, stage a confrontation between fixed notions of selfhood and indeterminacy of self (Spruce, 2015). Still, characters are able to cope with dementia once they accept the non-fixity of their identity.

5.1. Identity and loss of memory in “Spelling”

Rose has been warned by Flo’s neighbours that her mother might be suffering from dementia. Flo’s loss of identity is accompanied by an absence of past memories: none of the objects that she has in her home is related to her family. Hence, the long periods of time she spends observing the possessions displayed in the porch of her house, do not shed light on her past identity:

A calendar with a picture of a puppy and a kitten on it. Faces turned toward each other so that the noses touched, and the space between the two bodies made a heart. A photograph, in color, of Princess Anne as a child. A Blue Mountain pottery vase, gift from Brian and Phoebe, with three yellow plastic roses in it, vase and roses bearing several seasons' sifting of dust. Six shells from the Pacific coast, sent home by Rose but not gathered by her, as Flo believed, or had once believed. Bought on a vacation in the state of Washington. They were an impulse item in a plastic bag by the cashier's desk in a tourist restaurant. THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD, in black cutout scroll with a sprinkling of glitter. Free gift from a dairy. Newspaper photograph of seven coffins in a row. Two large and five small (“Sp”: 180).

A study carried out by Dena Shenk et al. shows that older women’s positive memories are usually reflected in their possessions, most typically, in family photographs (2004, 165). Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi et al. affirm that “more than any other object in the home, photos serve the purpose of preserving the memory of personal ties. In their ability to arouse emotion there is no other type of object that can surpass them” (1981: 69). These authors found that, as people age, the "special" possessions tend increasingly to be those that symbolize other people, such as gifts or pictures of people that appear in the pictures (ibid). According to Russell W. Belk, these findings may suggest that “possessions are regarded not only as a part of self, but also as instrumental to the development of self” (1988: 141). Moreover, as prized possessions reflect one’s identity, they help to comprehend how people define themselves (Csikszentmihalyi and Halton, 1981). The problem with Flo’s pictures is that all of them are of strangers, and they do not establish any connection with her past nor with her family. Consequently, Flo’s identity seems to be void: a mere construction based on fragments of foreigners’ experiences.

After being diagnosed with dementia, Flo changes some of her personal preferences, especially her food habits: “She loved sweet things now, craved them. Brown sugar by the spoonful, maple syrup, tinned puddings, jelly, globs of sweetness to slide down her throat” (“Sp”: 179). Alissa Sauer describes how appetite changes as a result of dementia:

Many people who have dementia experience sudden changes in appetite which can lead to appetite loss, weight loss or increased cravings of sugary foods and weight gain. Often people with dementia don’t taste food and experience flavor like they once did, which can change appetite preferences.

Because taste buds are diminished as people age, people with dementia opt for heavy foods or foods with a lot of flavor, like sugary sweets (2014).

In a study about eating disorders in dementia, Pauline Cullen et al. proved that an increased preference for sweet food shows a connection with a diagnosis of AD (1997).

Apart from signifying a change in preferences, dementia supposes a threat to Flo's personality since, at some points, she adopts a past identity that is no longer valid in the present. In one of the visits in the care home, Rose shows Flo a wig she used to wear and, then, Flo goes back to the time when her children were young: "Are you and Brian behaving yourselves? Don't fight, it gets on your father's nerves" ("Sp": 192). Patients with AD tend to recall past events better than the newest ones, because recent memories are disrupted whereas older ones are better preserved. As Fay Risner explains, "[t]hey remember their distant past better than they remember yesterday and enjoy looking at old pictures of themselves and others in their family since in their mind the pictures may seem recent. Those faces are more familiar than the ones they see around the in the present" (2008: 68). Benjamin Mast suggests a medical reason for this phenomenon:

the initial damage is to the temporal lobes, an area of the brain involved in storage of memory, these recent memories are not effectively stored. For the person, it's as if the events never happened [...] In addition, these older memories have been rehearsed and retold many times, making them more accessible" (2014: 123).

Flo feels herself lost in a wide and undefined past. In the following passage, she places herself some years forward, at the time when Rose got married (but does not remember that she has divorced): "Rose is away, [...] Rose got married" ("Sp": 179). From Flo's position, the past is a non-defined period that englobes a considerable amount of years.

Flo's personality is heavily conditioned by her dementia. Firstly, her mental condition supposes a change in her eating habits. Secondly, she behaves as if she was living in the past, so her adopted identity is not suitable in the present. Probably, she is unable to construct a proper identity because she lacks material objects that awake memories of her past experiences as mother, friend, wife or worker. Therefore, she has to rely only on her damaged memories, which do not help her to build a proper identity.

5.2. Identity and loss of memory in "The Bear Came over the Mountain"

A month after Fiona moved to the nursing home, Grant is allowed to visit her for the first time. When they meet, Fiona does not seem to recognize his husband and treats him as a stranger: "Can I get you anything? A cup of tea? I'm afraid the coffee isn't up to

much here'. Grant never drank tea" ("TBCM": 290). As Marie Maxime Lavallee et al. expose, patients suffering from dementia have problems remembering faces:

one of the most striking symptoms of AD is the failure to recognize familiar people, a function that relies heavily on visual inputs, especially the persons' faces, rather than auditory inputs (i.e., voices). In AD, the impaired ability to recognize familiar persons has typically been attributed to the underlying memory impairment (2016: 1225)

The neurological reason that accounts for the difficulties in face perception in AD patients is that "regions specifically associated with face perception may be affected during the course of the disease" (ibid: 1233). According to this theory, Fiona might not recognize the face of her husband, but Grant puts into question her attitudes thinking she could be playing a sick joke on him: "I wonder whether she isn't putting on some kind of a charade" ("TBCM": 294). Grant is filled with remorse for his past infidelities, and now he feels Fiona is taking revenge on him.

Grant's suspicion is reinforced by the love affair that Fiona has started with Aubrey, another resident of Meadowlake. She does not hide the affection she feels for him and even manifests to Grant her interest in Aubrey: "Take care. He's here. My love" ("TBCM": 296). Her relationship with Aubrey counterbalances the extramarital affairs Grant had with his students in the past. In this way, dementia becomes an opportunity for Fiona "to 'perform' remembrance and oblivion at her own convenience [...] she is able to re-construct her own self-esteem by finally responding to Grant's undeclared unfaithfulness, thereby unsettling his empowered, self-defined position as the 'philanderer' in their relationship" (Casado, 2015: 395). Attachments usually take place between residents and, as Fill Hubbard et al. comment, displays of affection between residents that involve intimacy and flirtation are positive and meaningful ways of communication that may support and cement relationships with people with dementia (2003). The nurse tries to recomfort Grant assuring him that Fiona is a "real lady" ("TBCM": 294) meaning that she would not be unfaithful to him. However, Fiona's prudish nature becomes more unrestrained, which, as Richard Ward and Elizabeth Prince state, is a common behavioural change among people that suffer from dementia:

The loosening of the customary ties to social convention that can sometimes accompany the experience of dementia might, ironically constitute a freeing of some of the shackles of identity that bind us increasingly tightly as we age. Instead, then, rather than being required and expected to maintain a particular identity, generated through the use of customary language and taken-for-granted behaviours, preferences and expectations, the experience of dementia may actually generate an emancipatory space in which to explore, hidden, forgotten, or quite new aspects of self and identity in ways that may not previously have been possible (2016: 67).

At the end of the story, Fiona seems to recover her past identity. This restoration has its roots at a particular object: the book about Iceland that Grant brought her to the care home. When Fiona finally pays attention to this book, she recovers part of her past identity, including the interest in his husband and Iceland: “Look at this beautiful book I found, it’s about Iceland. You wouldn’t think they’d leave valuable books lying around in the rooms” and: “‘I’m happy to see you,’ she said, and pulled his earlobes” (“TBCM”: 323). Laura Kamptner et al. highlight the importance of objects, and more specifically, gifts, which can evoke past relationships: “objects may also be symbols of social integration by signifying enduring bonds, ties, and relations with others”; gifts, for example, “symbolize containers for the being of the donor” (1989: 74). While Fiona regains some traits of her past identity, she seems to lose all interest in Aubrey -who was not part of her past life and, hence, represents a threat to her previous identity-: “she stared at him for a moment, as if waves of wind had come beating into her face. Into her face, into her head, pulling everything to rags. ‘Names elude me’ she said harshly” (“TBCM”: 323). Her position is ambiguous once more: readers cannot know whether she has truly forgotten Aubrey, or if she is just pretending so.

Fiona’s enigmatical attitude is also found in her speaking. She commits some mistakes and invents new words: “‘You could have just driven away,’ she said. ‘Just driven away without a care in the world and forsook. Forsooken me. Forsaken’” (“TBCM”: 323). This way of speaking establishes an analogy with her past ability to play with words: “‘Shallowlake, Shillylake,’ she said, as if they were engaged in a playful competition. ‘Sillylake, Sillylake it is’” (“TBCM”: 280). The same applies to her forgetfulness; in the past she used to forget things, but her lapses of memory did not seem a problem: “‘She’s always been a bit like this,’ Grant said to the doctor. ‘Once she left her fur coat in storage and just forgot about it [...] she said it was unintentionally on purpose, she said it was like a sin she was leaving behind’” (“TBCM”: 278). Even the doctor concludes that her loss of memory “might be selective at first”. Regardless if her mistakes are made on purpose or not, Fiona’s “overt use of irony reinforces a connection between her younger and older Selves that contests inferiorising attitudes generated by chauvinistic and ageist viewpoints” (Casado, 2015: 398).

Dementia allows Fiona to explore new shades of her identity and to readjust her marriage by compensating Grant’s past infidelities. At the same time, suffering from a cognitive disease does not impede her from sustaining some traits of her past identity, such as her playful temperament and the fact of never taking things seriously. Once she

pays attention to a valuable object of the past (the book that Grant brought her), she engages again with her previous interests: her husband and Iceland. At the same time, she dispels Aubrey from her life, since his recent incorporation in her life menaces her past identity. Fiona's progression of dementia is quite ambiguous: readers cannot know to what extent is she playing to have forgotten things, or if she is acting sincerely.

5.3. Identity and loss of memory in “In Sight of the Lake”

The protagonist of this short story, Nancy, is an older woman who suffers from dementia. The story is narrated from the point of view of an omniscient narrator that has access to the thoughts of the protagonist: “Nancy knows her anyway” (“ISL”: 232). Still, the narrative voice has a limited perception of Nancy's feelings and thoughts and, at some points, the narrator is unable to depict what the protagonist feels. Then, the narrative voice focuses only in Nancy's external actions, describing how she acts: “She does not give up, however. She tries the doors again in the same order, and this time she shakes both knobs as well as she can and also calls out, ‘Hello?’ in a voice that sounds at first trivial and silly, then aggrieved, but not more hopeful” (“ISL”: 231). By employing a limited extradiegetic third person narrator focalised through Nancy, Munro uses a restricted perspective that is crucial in constructing a narrative space that mirrors the alarming and uncanny interiority of AD (Spruce, 2015).

Nancy uses her body to recover her identity when memory fails her: “she is shaking all over and no matter how she tries she cannot get her breath down into her lungs. It is as if she has a blotter in her throat. Suffocation. She knows that she has to behave differently” (“ISL”: 232). In her theory of embodiment, Pia Kontos states that the body can be used as a tool to empower people with dementia: “the body is a site for the inscription of discourse and the making of particular subjectivities” (2015: 174). Maurice Merleau-Ponty introduced the concept of “body-subject” (1945) to expose that humans consist of these two inseparable elements (body and subject) and they express ‘subjective’ thoughts in bodily forms. Following this line, Eric Matthews defends that some aspects of personhood are sedimented in habits of the body and, thus, persist despite severe cognitive impairment (2006).

This is, in fact, Nancy's case, as she tries to recover her temperament by focusing on a physical task. The body has an important role when shaping one's identity: “[w]e obviously exist first as biological organisms before we can even begin to think, so the

'body' element of the 'body-subject' clearly has priority in a certain sense over the 'subject' element. This is what makes it inadequate to think of personhood exclusively in terms of thought or consciousness" (Matthews, 2006: 174). Consequently, people suffering from dementia preserve their individuality even when they fail to recall memories. According to Amelia DeFalco, Nancy's acknowledgement that she must behave differently and act more calmly reveals "some recognizable consistency of identity in the midst of alarming strangeness" (2010: 76). Nancy asks herself some clipped demands: "Calm. Calm. Breathe. Breathe" ("ISL": 232); her attempt to regain control and anchor herself within the demented body reveals glimpses of her identity (Spruce, 2015).

Munro takes advantage of two narrative strategies to parallel the protagonist's sense of displacement caused by her dementia condition. Firstly, the use of the light establishes an analogy with the mental state of Nancy: "there are no artificial lights on in here. The place will get dark. Already in spite of the lingering light outside, it seems to be getting dark" ("ISL": 231). As Begoña Simal states, the use of light, particularly a lingering one in the dark, parallels her state of mind where her dementia is not progressed enough to enable her to lose a concept of a 'core' self" (2014: 72).

Secondly, the mixture of past and present approaches the reader to the way Nancy perceives the reality. Almost the whole short story is a large flashback that narrates the protagonist's visit to the care home: the first fifteen pages are situated in the past time, whereas the sixteenth (and last) one turns to the present, taking the reader by surprise. The fluidity between temporal frontiers simulates Nancy's loss of consciousness regarding the passing of time: "she doesn't know if the panic has taken a long time or a short time" ("ISL", 232). With dementia, the boundary that separates periods of time becomes unsteady and blurred (Mitchell et al. 2013). As Mohamad El Haj and Dimitrios Kapogiannis explain—

the relationship between time distortions and memory decline in AD can be jointly attributed to hippocampus involvement, as this brain area supports both time perception and memory and is preferentially targeted by the neuropathological processes of AD (2016: 1).

The combination of past and present gives insight into the dislocating experience of dementia, in which time operates in a misleading manner not offering any reliable location (Spruce, 2015).

Nancy finds herself in an advanced state of dementia. She has severe difficulties in situating herself in the temporal order, and such an overwhelming sense of

disorientation becomes the trigger for her panic attack. However, she is able to keep her nerves under control by commanding the breath and she achieves to calm herself down by focusing on this physical task. Establishing control over her body helps Nancy to sustain her individuality. Hence, her dementia has not completely annihilated her personality. The gradual recognition of the nursing home surrounding –including the identification of the caretaker– and the control over her body enable Nancy to regain consciousness of herself and recover her identity.

5.4. Conclusion

The loss of memory is highly linked to female characters –Fiona, Flo and Nancy– whereas retirement, to male characters –Austin, Grant and Nancy’s husband–. This indicates that Munro follows a traditional conception of ageing in terms of gender: as women were considered to work at the domestic space, retirement has generally been regarded as a male phenomenon (Arber and Ginn, 1991). Women’s identity is not so negatively influenced by retirement but by dementia, and their cognitive condition forces them to reconsider who they are. In later stories, the female protagonists that suffer from dementia are able to better adapt to their new condition. The effects of dementia allow patients to escape from the moral constrictions that previously conditioned how they behaved (Ward and Prince, 2016). This can be seen in “TBCM”, in which Fiona explores new shades of her identity as an older woman with dementia. Kontos defends that the body can become a means to empower oneself (2015: 174) and, in fact, the protagonist of “ISL” regains self-consciousness by establishing control over her breath and, hence, her body becomes a tool to legitimize her power. On the other hand, Flo was not able to recover her past identity and, although she finally recognized her daughter, she could not manage to situate herself in the temporal order. Through these details Munro’s later stories offer a more complex vision of old age, in which a more positive vision of dementia is portrayed. In these later works, she signals less negative aspects of the disease and defends that identity is not completely annihilated through it.

6. CONCLUSION

In our progressively ageing society, there has been a proliferation of the image of old age and a social growing interest in the ageing population (Oró, 2013). The process of ageing is closely interconnected with identity, a core pillar of human personality. As identity is the result of a dynamic process bound to be in constant evolution, it necessarily undergoes some changes during later life. Older people find it difficult to adopt a suitable identity, because they are frequently subordinated to the dictations and expectations of external agents (Chaney, 1995). Indeed, Western culture has expanded a simplistic and dichotomic representation of old age based on two opposing poles: as a period of self-reliance and vitality or as a phase of sickness and dependency (Cole, 1992). Neither of these two representations provides a plausible model of identity to follow in old age. These two paradigms are also represented in contemporary literature: narratives of decline portray old age as a period of decay and veil its productive side (Randall and Khurshid, 2016), whereas images of positive ageing associate later life with growth and renewal (Gullette, 1988). Munro depicts the multiple faces of old age, including both its 'perils' and 'pleasures' (Segal, 2013). Hence, her work escapes from the current dichotomic representation of ageing, and offers an alternative discourse that achieves to portray a more realistic image of later life.

The corpus of analysed works includes a considerable diversity of older characters in terms of gender, socioeconomic background and also with regard to their biological ageing. There is an equal balance between the number of masculine and feminine characters, too. However, Munro seems to depict later life as a gendered space: whereas men are who suffer retirement the most, women are usually the ones who develop cognitive diseases. Munro's characters usually belong to the working class, but they do not belong to the same social position: Grant and Fiona come from an upper-middle class, whereas Rose and Flo seem to have a lower status. Finally, characters reflect a heterogeneity of health and mental conditions. Cognitive diseases might affect patients in multiple forms; this is seen through Fiona, Nancy and Flo, as dementia provokes different reactions in each one of them. Munro's wide range of older characters evidences the rich portrayal of ageing within her extensive corpus of short stories.

Retirement has a relevant impact on older character's identity and its effect is usually represented through masculine characters (Grant, Nancy's husband and Austin), who adopt feminine features when abandoning the workplace to enter the domestic space, where they become newcomers (Hearn, 1995). Furthermore, retired men suffer from

physical decline that connects their body with supposedly feminine qualities, such as weakness and passivity (Hearn, 1995).

The internment in residential homes also affects one's identity. Munro's characters do not resist moving into a care home, and their collaborative attitude allows them to enjoy some advantages of these institutions. For instance, Fiona fosters new relationships and discovers a hidden side of her identity in Meadowlake, the residents of "Sp" engage in a wide range of socializing and creative activities and Nancy recovers her identity after being treated warmly by one caretaker. Nevertheless, characters need to confront adverse circumstances in the nursing home. For example, they must face the unpleasant feeling of being otherized: Fiona is alienated by the depersonalising treatment of the carers and Nancy, by the unfamiliarity and uncanniness of the nursing home. Moreover, Flo is ashamed about moving to a care home, since she still keeps in mind that the origins of this institution are to be found in the Victorian poorhouse (Struthers, 2017).

Older characters' identity is also affected by dementia, as it damages the ability to speak and act and, consequently, they have trouble sustaining their socially constructed self (Ward and Prince, 2016). Munro shows how cognitive decline has a negative impact on the lives of older people and impedes them to identify people surrounding them (Fiona fails to recognize her husband, and Flo her daughter) or situate in the temporal order (Flo and Nancy believe they live in the past). However, dementia can also be a possibility to discover new things about oneself and learn strategies to overcome memory gaps. For instance, Nancy regains self-consciousness by controlling the breathing, which reveals the body's capacity for empowerment (Kontos, 2015). On the other hand, Fiona becomes interested again in her husband once she pays attention to a book Grant gave her. This proves the outstanding value of personal objects and, specially, gifts, because they help to establish bonds with past experiences and relationships (Kamptner et al., 1989).

In general, Munro's vision of old age becomes less negative as her literary career progresses. The male protagonists of her later short stories –"TBCM" and "ISL"– enjoy an active and comfortable retirement, but this is not the case of Austin from "PI", an earlier short story. Munro's perception of the care home does not apparently change through her literary trajectory. The writer offers a neutral image of the nursing home, for its drawbacks are compensated by other positive points that, in some cases, make this institution a preferable place than home. Finally, dementia has a less negative impact on the protagonists from later stories –Fiona and Nancy– who still preserve some aspects of their previous identity, but this cannot be said of Flo, from the earlier story "Sp", who suffers the most tragic effects of cognitive decline.

I think I have achieved to properly analyze how Munro portrays old age in four of her short stories, and to examine how identity is affected by old age in these narratives. Moreover, I have contrasted the results from the literary analysis with a wide theoretical framework that has been of crucial importance to situate Munro's work in relation to contemporary representations of old age. However, I have not been able to fully develop the third line of the research: namely, to observe whether the portrayal of ageing has changed throughout the writer's long-standing career. The earliest short story included in this dissertation is "Spelling", from *The Beggar Maid* (1977). Consequently, her previous works have not been considered and, hence, the origins of her career are not depicted in this dissertation. This third line of research has become a complement to the first and second ones and, consequently, less space has been devoted to it. A second weak point is that, due to the length limitation, only four short stories have been analyzed. Taking into account the vast quantity of stories written by Munro, a sample of four narratives cannot be considered representative enough to extract how she portrays old age in her work.

In the future, this project could be expanded with the analysis of other Munro's narrations to validate and enrich the conclusions reached in the present dissertation. Moreover, it would also be interesting to analyze some stories from one of the first collections of the author, such as *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) or *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) to complement the longitudinal study of the work of Munro. In this way, it would be possible to overcome the abovementioned weak points of this dissertation.

Conducting research on ageing through the short fiction of Munro has allowed me to gain insight into a field that I had not explored before, and this has contributed significantly to broadening my educational background. Moreover, I have realized that literary works can be analyzed from many different points of view and present multiple intersections with other fields of study. In the present dissertation, literature has been studied alongside other social disciplines, essentially cultural gerontology and, to a smaller extent, sociology, psychology and gender studies. I have realized that, in our contemporary society, there still persist deep-seated prejudices towards later life. The discriminatory treatment older people suffer has a negative impact on their lives and, most specifically, on their identity. But more than this, I have come to understand that ageing studies are beneficial for all ages, not exclusively for older people. The reason is that all of us are susceptible of being discriminated for our age in some period of our lives. More particularly, we are bound to become victims of ageism when we get older, which is, in theory, a goal that everyone wishes to reach. Ageing studies increases our critical capacity to react towards ageism, either inflicted by others or ourselves, throughout the life course; and literature, as shown through this study of Munro's stories, is an ideal form to gain insight into the complexities and richness of the ageing process.

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