

“You were never anything ...you were never born!”

The Role of Memory in Selected Texts by

Eudora Welty and Alice Munro

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El papel de la memoria en una selección de textos de

Eudora Welty and Alice Munro

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Resumen

Inspirándonos en la *Phenomenology of Perception* de Merleau-Ponty, este artículo aborda cómo, en los relatos cortos de Eudora Welty "A Visit of Charity " y en los de Alice Munro, "Asphodel" y "The Bear Came over the Mountain", se utiliza la memoria para socavar el sentido de identidad de un personaje; o cómo el acceso a "nuevos" recuerdos puede fortalecer a los personajes diagnosticados con demencia. Los relatos demuestran no solo cómo el acceso a la memoria permite a los personajes comprometerse en un futuro, sino también cuáles son los peligros si un personaje parece estar bloqueado en el pasado. Estos textos muestran además cómo la negación de las memorias compartidas se emplea de diferentes maneras.

Palabras clave: memoria, tiempo, envejecimiento en literatura, filosofía de la percepción.

Abstract

Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, this paper discusses how in Eudora Welty's short stories "A Visit of Charity" and "Asphodel" and Alice Munro's "The Bear Came over the Mountain" memory is used to undermine a character's sense of self, or

how access to "new" memories can empower characters diagnosed with dementia. The texts demonstrate not only how access to memory enables characters to commit themselves in the future but also what the dangers are if a character appears to be locked in the past. The texts further show how the denial of shared memories is employed in different ways.

Key words: Memory, Time, Aging in Literature, Philosophy of Perception

1. INTRODUCTION

The perception of time, the ability to remember, and to anticipate seem to be necessary for human beings (and other animals) from an evolutionary perspective. Without memory or a sense of time communication, for instance, would not be possible, and dangers and opportunities could not be anticipated. In experiments with humans, neurobiologists have tried to study what the mechanisms of time perception are, how memory is "stored," and what happens when these mechanisms are disrupted or disturbed. In philosophy as well, in particular in phenomenology, the importance of time, the past, present, and future, has been discussed. Time seems to be a dimension of our being and essential for understanding one's self. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2002) and Brough and Blattner (2006) claim that a subject exercising free will must not be locked in past, present, or future. Yet, the subject must be rooted in the present with access to memory. Without access to memory one is not able to commit oneself in the future.

Not only scientists and philosophers (for instance, Dean Buonomano (2018), Lee Smolin (2013), Maurice Merleau Ponty (2002), Barry Dainton (2015), and Peter Mittelstedt (1976)) have investigated the importance of the perception of time, memory, and access to memory. In many literary texts and, in particular, in texts that discuss aging, memory plays an important role. Access to memory is often crucial for characters if they need to evade dangers and find ways to overcome challenges. Access to memory may also be the means of coming to terms with one's ending life. Yet, in other narratives, access to one's own memories is no longer possible or collective memories are denied. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (2002), this paper examines how memory is used in selected texts by Eudora Welty and Alice Munro. While Munro is a contemporary writer whose short stories often discuss aging, Welty is one of the few writers who, already in the 1940s, depicts old and aging women as main characters. Her stories "Asphodel" and "A

Visit of Charity" distinctly demonstrate the danger of being locked in the past, and how the denial of shared memory becomes the desperate means of an old woman to stay sane in a nursing home. Munro, on the other hand, illustrates in "The Bear Came over the Mountain" how a new past with new memories can be created, even if a character suffers from dementia. All three texts make visible the importance of having access to memory, as this enables characters to commit themselves in the future.

2. PERCEPTION OF TIME, ROLE OF MEMORY

The question "What is time?" is difficult to answer. Just when looking up the word *time*, one finds in, for instance, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, fourteen different definitions of this word. In physics, however, time is a fundamental concept to describe change. In 1905, with Einstein's theory of special relativity, the understanding of the absoluteness of time has been profoundly changed. His theory has also influenced the way philosophers like Hans Reichenbach (1958) and Barry Dainton (2015) understand time. Based on Einstein's theory, they have come to the conclusion that present, past, and future exist simultaneously and that there thus can be no free will; Lakoff and Johnson (1999), however, do not consider this conclusion feasible, as this could imply that one of the most promising cosmological theories, the Big Bang theory, is not possible.¹

Generally, however, Einstein's theory does not have an effect on our daily lives. We usually perceive time as a flow; instances of now, things that happen at this moment, recede into the time before now, the past, as we move forward to the future. Time seems to have a (forward) direction. This sense of time appears to be "built-in" not only in humans but also other animals. It makes possible, for instance, communication, the hearing of sounds. Humans are only able to hear words, phrases or sentences, or a melody, if the sounds heard a fraction of a second ago are still remembered and together with the sound of now and the anticipated sounds to come make up a sentence or melody. The heard sounds must be stored in our brain as memory while the brain also must be able to anticipate the sounds to come. Perception of time and the ability to remember and anticipate seems to be necessary from an evolutionary perspective.²

¹ For a lengthy discussion, see George Lakoff's and Mark Johnson's *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999: 160). See also a more detailed discussion in their chapter on time (1999: 137-169).

² See Dean Buonomano's *Your Brain Is a Time Machine. The Neuroscience and Physics of Time* (2017).

In *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999), George Lakoff and Mark Johnson also discuss time. They too claim that time seems to be "built-in" in our bodies and that we have a biological clock. Since our mind is embodied, they maintain, it is impossible for us to "observe time itself- if time even exists as a thing-in-itself" (1999: 138). Only by observing and comparing events or noticing changes can we experience time. "[O]ur experience of time is dependent on our embodied conceptualization of time in terms of events" (1999: 139). For them time is a concept created by humans, "via our bodies and brains," and structures of our-temporal-experiences that help us understand our world. They ground their discussion on how we construct and make use of metaphors in the claim that the mind is embodied, that "there is no transcendent, disembodied, literal reason that is fully accessible to consciousness" (1999: 539-548).³ As Margaret H. Freeman points out in "Crossing the Boundaries of Time: Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and cognitive linguistic theories," it is the structure of our brains and our experiences of being-in-the-world that make possible to create concepts of time, understand our *self*⁴, and think the way we do (2004: 654).⁵ One of the many cognitive operations that facilitate an understanding of our *self* and the way we think, Lakoff and Johnson argue, is having access to memory. This cognitive operation is important to make sense of present and future (1999: 10).

Similar to Lakoff and Johnson, Merleau-Ponty states in *Phenomenology of Perception*, first published in 1945, that we are temporal beings, or, as William Wilkerson puts it, "being a body means being in time" (2010: 225). This implies that "[t]ime is subject and subject is time" (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 490). For the subject the present is never new or neutral; the present is anticipated future that has become the present that then is to become the past. All past or acquired moments contribute to one's sense of the present and the anticipated future. Wilkerson emphasizes that "the acquired past and projected future determine the sense of the present" (2010: 225), or, as Merleau-Ponty claims, "[w]hat is past or future for me is present in the world" (2002: 478). The body-subject is always situated, also in time. Only when the subject is a situation in a situation, Brough and Blattner point out, that is, it has acquired a past that contributes to the sense of the present, can the subject commit itself in its future (2006: 134). "There is, therefore, never determinism and never absolute

³ This is similar to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy.

⁴ *Self* is used here in a philosophical sense and italicized, also further on in the text, to distinguish it from the suffix "self" as in the reflexive pronoun "herself."

⁵ Freeman criticizes Lakoff and Johnson for only mentioning Merleau-Ponty's philosophy once on page 565 although their arguments are very much related to his philosophy of the flesh (2004: 644).

choice," Merleau-Ponty argues, and he further maintains: "I am never a thing and never bare consciousness" (2002: 527). This situatedness of the subject does not, as critics argue,⁶ limit the subject's freedom but makes possible a commitment in one's future. Thus, in order to commit oneself in one's future, it is necessary to be rooted in the present with access to the acquired past.

It is this unity of acquired past, present, and anticipated future that for so many suffering from dementia is disrupted or destroyed. For them there is no access to the past, and they are no longer situated in time, as Merleau-Ponty would have it. They have lost their memory, and a commitment in one's future is thus extremely difficult or impossible. In the three stories that are discussed in this paper, I demonstrate how important the rootedness in the present with access to the acquired past is to make free will possible. Eudora Welty's short story "Asphodel" also highlights the danger of being locked in the past.

3. "ASPHODEL"-USES OF MEMORY

In Eudora Welty's short story "Asphodel" (Asp), published in 1942 and little discussed, access to the past is an important means of making sense of the present and enabling commitment. Furthermore, this story, a saga of sorts, illustrates that only having access to the past is not sufficient for a subject to become "a being in time." The danger of being locked in the past is also highlighted in this story.

The story begins with the depiction of Cora, Phoebe, and Irene, three old maids, who are on their way to the ruined mansion named Asphodel to have an opulent picnic the day after Miss Sabina's funeral. Reclining "before their food" (Asp 201), the three old women, still with "identical looks of fresh mourning on their faces" (Asp 200), almost in one voice, tell each other of Miss Sabina's beginning and "her pitiful end" (Asp 201). As scholar Audrey Hodgins suggests, the three old maids and their telling of the story of Miss Sabina in one voice resemble a chorus in a Greek tragedy (1956: 210). The old women begin with Miss Sabina's legendary beauty, her marriage to Don McInnis, the death of her three children, her unfaithful husband she had driven out of her mansion to Asphodel, her ruling of the entire community until her death in the post office. While the old women "cried their eyes dry" at Miss Sabina's funeral, they now, by retelling her life, are able to free themselves from Miss Sabina's power. The fact that they, shortly after Miss Sabina's death, choose to have their picnic at the ruins of Asphodel, a place that was earlier forbidden to

⁶ See William Wilkerson's discussion on the concept of free will in Merleau-Ponty and Sartre (2010).

visit, suggests not only the power Miss Sabina had but also the old women's need to free themselves from her.

Miss Sabina, the old maids let us know, once lived in a mansion that was dark and lifeless. Since Sabina "was no longer young for suitors," her father forced her to marry "profane" Don McInnis (Asp 202). As Hodgins also points out, Miss Sabina's name alludes to the abduction and rape of the Sabine women (1956: 218). Indeed, the fact that Miss Sabina was forced to marry may suggest that this act was rape. Whether or not the marriage was happy is not mentioned, but all three children died when reaching maturity, and there had been rumors about Don McInnis's unfaithfulness. When Cora, Phoebe, and Irene then revealed to Miss Sabina that McInnis wanted to run away to Asphodel and take with him his woman, she was overcome by anger and drove him out of the mansion with a whip. After the destruction of Asphodel by a fire that night, Miss Sabina seemed to have gained control over the "whole population—white and black, men and women, children, idiots, and animals—even strangers" (Asp 204).

Indeed, everybody was afraid of her. She was the law; she knew what happened and could foresee what was going to happen. The extent of her power was so great that she could determine the time a child was going to be born. The fact that she knew past, present, and future and thus affected the people's lives suggests that she herself had become time; she embodied her time, the past. The dress and the wig Miss Sabina wears before her death indicate too that she embodies the past. Her wig that covers the loss of her hair is of a youthful "jet-black" and "of great size", and she is draped "in the heavy brocades from the family trunk" (Asp 204). Indeed, being locked in the past makes it impossible for her to commit herself in the future. The weight of her dress hampers her progress. When applying Merleau-Ponty's statement "[w]e must understand time as the subject and subject as time" (2002: 490), one could claim the people [subjects] are situated in Miss Sabina [time].

There is, however, one location Miss Sabina had always avoided, except on the day of her death: the post office. The post office connects the community with others not living under Miss Sabina's power. It is the place where the people receive and send letters, exchange news, experience a different time not determined by Miss Sabina. Phoebe tells us that "[Sabina] acted as if the post office had no existence in the world." She hated it "for there we might still be apart in a dream and she did not know what it was" (Asp 205). Miss Sabina knew that the post office offers the possibility to gain access to a different past, not

her past, that influences the present of the village people and thus opens up a different commitment in their future. Realizing the threat the post office posed to her power, the time she forced the community to live by and that she embodied, she finally entered the building and sought to destroy everything in it. Yet, after a frenzy of tearing "all the letters to pieces and even put[ting] bits in her mouth," she choked and died (Asp 206). Her terrible death illustrates what is at stake if one is locked in the past, as it destroys the unity of past, present, and future.

The lives of the three old maids had been affected by Miss Sabina as well; they had been in great fear of her. Yet, although they initially have a mournful look on their faces when they first approach Asphodel, they slowly free themselves from Miss Sabina, even before they retell Miss Sabina's life story, something that is indicated in the text. At first, they seem timid and modest, but then they gradually begin to look forward to enjoying their feast, and Cora even cries ardently: "This is the kind of day I could just *eat!*" (Asp 200, emphasis in original). Their gray and scanty hair is loosened by the wind and before crossing a little stream they take off their shoes, free their feet from constraints, so that their "narrow maiden feet h[a]ng trembling in the rippling water" (Asp 201). Phoebe says that she "used to be scared . . . [that] something, something wild, would come and carry me off," and they all "laugh freely at once" (Asp 201). Already they feel no longer inhibited by Miss Sabina. But to free themselves entirely from the oppressive past, Miss Sabina, they must "*tell over Miss Sabina's story*" (Asp 201, emphasis mine). One can surely assume that they have told each other the story several times; it is thus not a surprise that each one knows exactly how to continue with the narrative when the other paused. The fact that they tell over her story yet again, the maids do this in "serene and alike" voices (Asp 201), emphasizes their need to complete it once and for all. After the first part of the narrative, they pause and are already in "peaceful silence" (Asp 202) and when Phoebe continues with the narrative, it appears as if the burden of the past has become lighter, since "the beginning and its end seem mingled and freed in the blue air of the hill" (Asp 202). When the maids finally reach the end of the narrative, Miss Sabina's death, they are no longer under Miss Sabina's spell; Miss Sabina is powerless. Her story is now "an old story, closed and complete . . . [the maids] recited it and came to the end . . . little smiles forming on their mouths" (Asp 208).⁷

⁷ The experience of Miss Sabina's life and power has similarities with a trauma that appears unwanted and is frightening. The old maids have now succeeded in dealing with this trauma and it can now recede into a "normal" past. See also Siri Hustved's discussion on trauma in "Trauma Talk" (2015).

From now on, not bound by Miss Sabina's time, each old woman has her own access to the past that contributes to her sense of the present. This affects, of course, the way each one of them makes decisions. While they earlier spoke in one voice as if they were one person, they now act very differently when they discover a naked old man, perhaps Don McInnis, standing near the columns. Shocked, yet nonetheless almost hesitantly, they flee back to safer terrain but still without taking with them their shoes. Each one of them has achieved a sense of self and the old women "re-enter society visibly changed, without their shoes," as Linda B Cohoon puts it. (2011: 37). Then, after their successful escape, Irene thinks of what Miss Sabina would have said, and Cora wants to inform the authorities about this indecent man. Phoebe, however, just laughs and seems "to be in a tender dream" (Asp 208). Cohoon finds that the three different reactions "include the three spheres of existence women must negotiate when they encounter the sexual: family, community, and individual" (2011: 38). While it may be questioned whether Miss Sabina represents the sphere of the family, it is significant that after having completed the "tyrant's" life story, Phoebe, Irene, and Cora are finally able to be and act as individuals. Each one has her own access to the past and can commit herself in her own future. Freed from the constraints, Miss Sabina, and no longer locked in the past, in Miss Sabina's memory, each one is now truly situated in time and able to exercise free will.

4. DENYING THE PAST: "A VISIT OF CHARITY"

While in "Asphodel" the dangers of being locked in the past, living in memories only, and the need for the unity of past, present, and future are apparent, in "A Visit of Charity" (Visit), another story by Welty published in 1941, denial of the past becomes the desperate means of an old woman to stay sane in a nursing home.

The narrator depicts a fourteen-year-old campfire girl, Marian, who pays a visit to an "Old Ladies' Home" (Visit 113) to earn at least three points. For this purpose, she tells the nurse at the desk, "any of them will do" (Visit 113). As scholars William B. Toole (1966) and Ralph M. Cline (1999) have pointed out, this visit is clearly not a visit of charity. The story is a "satire," William B. Toole maintains, that criticizes a system that is "to a large extent, responsible for the misery and unpleasant personalities of the old ladies on the one hand, and the shallow immaturity of young girls like Marian on the other" (1966-67: 43-44). In fact, the visit turns into "horror" caused by the old, as scholar Ralph M. Cline argues, since "the old act childishly in the presence of a child" (1999: 171). However, their "childish"

behavior is an expression of desperation and makes visible the conditions in which old women (and men) had to live in the South in the 1940s.

Right from the beginning the narrator juxtaposes the bright cold day, Marian's red coat, and her long yellow hair with the dark interior of the home with its "loose, bulging linoleum on the floor . . . and the smell in the hall like the interior of a clock" (Visit 113). The bright colors of Marian's hair and coat emphasize her young age. Furthermore, since historically women and girls with blond hair have been considered less competent and intelligent (Manning 2010), Marian's yellow hair may further indicate her lack of understanding. In contrast to Marian, the nursing home appears sterile, life- and colorless, and there is the distinct atmosphere of confinement. The nurse, acting more like a prison guard, walks with Marian down a hall where all doors are closed. Not one resident can be seen outside their rooms. Not a sound can be heard until finally, behind a door, an old woman clears "her throat like a sheep bleating" (Visit 113). Indeed, the old women are reduced to animals bleating like sheep, or, somewhat less threatening, a lamb with hands that are "quick as bird claws" (Visit 114). When hearing this "bleating" sound behind a door, the nurse briefly knocks on the door while telling the girl that "there are two in each room". This piece of news confuses Marian. "Two what?" she wonders (Visit 114). Her confusion accentuates the feeling that in this building inmates or animals and not old women are kept.

What is more, the residents are not treated like individual adults who can act responsibly, or, as Merleau-Ponty would have it, who "by being unrestrictedly and unreservedly what I am at present . . . have a chance to move forward" (2002: 529). This is evidenced by the "strange smile" that forces the old woman's face "dangerously awry" (Visit 114) when she sees the nurse at her door. Indeed, the nurse does not even bother to ask the old woman whether she wants to receive a visitor. When she opens the door, Marian is almost pushed into the room. After just briefly announcing "Visitor," the nurse gives Marian "one more shove" and leaves. An old woman treated in this manner hardly has "a chance to move forward."

In the room, Marian feels "like being caught in a robber's cave, just before one was murdered" (Visit 114). Marian clearly lacks experience, is overwhelmed by fear, and is almost paralyzed. Because of her lack of experience she does not have access to a past that could help her cope with the old women's behavior. Her young age and inexperience make it impossible for her to understand this situation. There are two old women in this room

that appears too small to contain the two beds, a washstand, chair, rocking chair, and wardrobe. It has only one window with the shade down so that it is very dark. Everything smells damp. The flowers Marian had taken with her to earn an extra point are snatched away from the first old woman. As William B. Toole states, "[p]ut the point-hungry campfire girls, the mechanical nurse, and the beautified Home together and what have got? Two of the most miserable and unpleasant specimens of old age that you can imagine" (1966-67: 44). It is then the "childish" behavior of the two old women commences, and, during their dialog, Addie, the second old woman, so desperately seeks to deny her roommate's existence, or, at least, access to Addie's past.

As soon as the first old woman comments on Marian's gift "[f]lowers! . . . [p]retty flowers" (Visit 114), Addie contradicts her: "They are not pretty," and when the first old woman insists and praises the flowers again, Addie goes even further and characterizes them as "[s]tinkweeds" (Visit 115). Indeed, whatever her roommate says, a visit they had received and supposedly enjoyed a month earlier, the claim that she appears to be unwell, Addie vehemently opposes. The first old woman laments this as well but accuses Marian, or all other visitors, to be the reason for Addie's behavior: "That's only the contrary way she [Addie] talks when *you all* come" (Visit 116, emphasis in original). Addie, however, just wants her to "hush" and clearly wishes for privacy and to be left alone.

The moment the first old woman intends to tell Marian about the time she went to school, Addie harshly interrupts her: "Hush! . . . You never went to school. You never came and you never went. You were never anything—*only here*. You were never born!" (Visit 116, emphasis mine). Addie seeks to undo the first old woman's existence; she was never born. But Addie cannot quite succeed in this; the first old woman is still something. In fact, it seems that only Addie's presence in this room in the nursing home, "only here," allows her to be. This is the reason that, although the first old woman, nameless in this story, is nothing and empty like her purse and her little box, she can talk and talk until Addie thinks she is "losing [her] mind" (Visit 116).

Marian, who obviously does not understand Addie's behavior or her desperation, stupidly asks the first old woman: "What's the matter with her?" (Visit 117). The first old woman, evidently pleased with her insight, tells Marian that Addie is "mad because it's her birthday" (Visit 117). Her answer angers Addie and her furious response elucidates that she tries to deny the old woman access to her past. She screams: "It is not, it is not! . . . It is not my birthday, no one knows when that is but *myself*" (Visit 117, emphasis mine). Her

outrage emphasizes the degree to which Addie seeks to have control of her *self*, her past, her being situated in time. Furthermore, by not allowing the nameless old woman access to her past, refusing to share collective memory, Addie makes an effort to disrupt her roommate's "being in time." Having no longer access, the old woman cannot commit herself in her future with Addie together. Addie emphasizes this by telling her: "Who are you? You're a stranger—a perfect stranger! Don't you know you're a stranger?" (Visit 116). Marian is, of course, a stranger as well, one who almost during the entire visit has shown a disturbing lack of understanding and empathy. However, when she, after Addie's outburst, bends over Addie, she sees her "very closely and plainly . . . She wonder[s] about her—she wonder[s] for a moment as though there [is] nothing else in the world to wonder about" (Visit 117). This is the first time Marian expresses such a concern for someone else. Despite her signs of interest in her, Addie rejects Marian, just like the first old woman. When Marian asks Addie about her age, Addie tells her: "I won't tell!" (Visit 117). Addie's response and her whimpers elucidate her despair and need to keep her selfhood by excluding others from her past.

Addie's utter loneliness is apparent. Her roommate's spiteful comment—"[t]hat's Addie for you"—on Marian's remark that Addie is crying highlights her complete lack of empathy. As Toole points out, it may be "obvious that none of the three is to blame for what happened. They were caught in a vicious system" (1966-67: 46). It seems, however, equally apparent how important it is to have control of one's past. In an environment such as the Old Ladies' Home, Addie can only gain a true sense of her *self* and her past by denying others access to her past.

Alice Munro also depicts life in a residential home in the short story "The Bear Came Over the Mountain." In contrast to Welty's miserable Old Ladies' Home, however, Munro's Meadowlake offers a different kind of life. Having access to one's past is equally important in this narrative, particularly for someone suffering from dementia. As in Welty, denial of access to one's past is used to disrupt the other's understanding of *self*. But in contrast to Welty's Addie who is isolated and not allowed to commit her *self* in her future in a nursing home, in "The Bear Came over the Mountain," Fiona appears to be able to create a "new" past, a past that situates her in time.

5. DENYING ACCESS TO THE PAST AND CREATING A NEW PAST

Alice Munro's "The Bear Came over the Mountain" (Bear), first published in 1999 and

much discussed, depicts how Fiona's disease unsettles her husband Grant. As Amelia DeFalco points out, Fiona used to be stable and "benign," traits that "reinforced Grant's own selfhood," but now her instability "disrupts [his] selfhood" (2014: 217).⁸ Fiona's inability of recognizing her husband, after having spent a month at Meadowlake, severely disturbs Grant and causes him to reflect on his life with Fiona but also on the many affairs he had with other women during their marriage.

Meadowlake differs very much from the nursing home in Welty's story. It is airy, offers space and privacy for its residents.⁹ It appears to be a warm home and lacks the sterile atmosphere depicted in Welty's story. Its residents are not "caught in a vicious system," as Toole noted in Welty's text (1966-67: 46).¹⁰ Instead Meadowlake wants to facilitate for its new residents an untroubled transition from living in one's own home to life at Meadowlake, and for this reason visitors are not allowed during the first month. It is after this time that Fiona apparently has forgotten her husband. Not only does she not recognize him any longer but she has also become intimate with another resident, Aubrey.

It was Fiona's decision to move to Meadowland, and critic Patricia Life even suggests that Fiona chooses to live in a nursing home in order to escape from an oppressive marriage (2014: 246). Earlier she had shown signs of memory deficiency, such as getting lost and confused about past events. The day after disappearing from a supermarket and then found walking in the middle of a street looking for her dogs that had died a long time ago, she tells her husband: "You know what you're going to have to do with me, don't you? You're going to have to put me in that place. Shallowland?" (Bear 279). Yet, just before they finally leave for Meadowlake, Fiona seems to be her "old," healthy self, does not show any signs of dementia, and clearly knows what she is doing. She remarks: "I guess I'll be dressed up all the time . . . [o]r semi dressed up. It'll be sort of like in a hotel" (Bear 276). She behaves normally, "direct and vague as in fact she [is], sweet and ironic" (Bear 277).

It is this vagueness that Fiona expresses more explicitly at Meadowlake, a trait her husband finds increasingly unsettling. He is no longer certain, if Fiona has, indeed, forgotten him, or if she is "putting on some kind of charade" (Bear 294). There is a great

⁸ See also Sara Jamieson (2017), Begoña Simal (2014), and Robert McGill (2008).

⁹ This seems to be case, at least, on the ground floor. It is unclear what the situation is like on the second floor for residents who "ha[ve] really lost it" (Bear 299).

¹⁰ Fiona and her husband Grant compare the "old" Meadowlake when they visited a neighbor in the 50s to the "new" Meadowlake that was completely rebuilt. The "old" Meadowlake shows similarities to Welty's Old Ladies' Home.

extent of ambiguity in her responses to Grant that disrupts his understanding of himself.¹¹ On his first visit, he finds her sitting with other residents at the card table, looking slightly changed, a little puffy in the face. When he then approaches the table, she greets him politely but not in the manner he would have expected. Although she seems to be like always, there is something in her attitude, her voice and smile, that makes his hugging her, throwing "his arms around her," impossible for him (Bear 290).

This uncertainty denies him access to the past they had acquired together. Fiona's responses often contain parts of past events she still remembers well, but she does not remember that Grant also knows about these. When she recollects having played bridge with friends at college and mentions a friend of hers, Phoebe, Grant remembers Phoebe's last name. Fiona's question "You knew her too?" illustrates how she excludes him from her past. Further on in their dialog, she tells him that her grandparents had lived on a farm, something that unnerves Grant, because he and Fiona have lived on this farm together for many years until Fiona's move to Meadowlake. When he explains this to Fiona, she simply says: "Really?" (Bear 291).¹²

It is evident that Fiona, like Addie in "A Visit of Charity," denies a person access to their shared past. It seems necessary for both Fiona and Addie to have control of their past. Yet, while Addie desperately tries to exclude her roommate from her past to stay sane, Fiona may actually use the exclusion as a punishment, or as a means to make her husband Grant realize what he has done to her during their marriage.

Indeed, Fiona succeeds in having Grant reflect on his behavior. What is more, her ambiguous manner undermines Grant's identity and it seems as if it is Grant who suffers from dementia.¹³ The fact that Fiona has an intimate relationship with Aubrey could also be seen as a punishment for Grant's many affairs. In her discussion of the film adaption *Away from Her*, Sally Chivers argues that Fiona's attachment to Aubrey could be a "coy yet manipulative way to make Grant reassess, regret, or at least suffer for his own past

¹¹ See also Begoña Simal's discussion on Munro's handling of narrative time with back and forth movements and linguistic ambiguity (2014).

¹² When Grant looks for Fiona in her room, he finds it empty. There is nothing personal in her room that could remind her—or him—of their past; there's "not a single photograph or picture of any kind" (Bear 288). Patricia Life finds that the "emptiness of her room can be interpreted to represent the erasure of their past" (2014: 248).

¹³ In the many flashbacks in the narrative, the narrator lets the reader know that Grant has had many affairs and was forced to retire early. Grant is certain that Fiona has no knowledge of these affairs, but her refusal to acknowledge their past together could also be seen as a demonstration that she did know. Grant admits that Fiona could mimic "uncannily" the voices of his women, although she had never met these women (Bear 278).

treachery" (2003: 90). As he cannot decide whether or not Fiona has forgotten him, he doesn't dare to ask his wife whether she remembers him as "her husband of nearly fifty years" (Bear 293). The more frequently he visits her, the more he is questioning himself. He feels like a stalker (Bear 296) who is getting increasingly confused. When exploring Meadowlake, he is "still apt to get lost. He would take a certain picture or chair as a landmark, and the next week whatever he had chosen seemed to have been placed somewhere else" (Bear 299). He even finds it difficult to recognize Fiona because she wears unfamiliar clothes (Bear 299). On one of his visits, he fails to recognize another woman, a resident probably suffering from dementia like Fiona. In contrast to Grant, however, she remembers him and is able to tell him that Fiona is sick (Bear 299).

Yet, not only does Fiona exclude Grant from her past, she also created a "new" past. Having access to an, albeit, new past, she is rooted in the present at Meadowlake and can move forward. She is situated in time and thus able to lead a meaningful life. When Fiona tells Grant on his first visit that she, in fact, had met Aubrey, a man with whom she has a close relationship at Meadowlake, many years ago at a hardware shop "where [her] grandpa used to shop" (Bear 291), she creates a new past—to make sense of her present now. As Aubrey's wife later reveals, it is doubtful if Aubrey ever had worked in this shop (Bear 317).¹⁴ Since Fiona does not appear to have access to the past she acquired together with Grant, she has lost an important part that would enable her to commit herself in her future; she would be utterly confused. Yet, by creating a different past that both Fiona and Aubrey have access to, she succeeds in creating a unity of past, present and future.

The extent to which this new past has become an important part in Fiona's life, more important than the past with Grant one could argue, can also be discerned when Aubrey returns home. He was only a temporary resident of Meadowlake during the time his wife was on vacation from taking care of him. Both Aubrey and Fiona are devastated when they part from another, and Fiona's health deteriorates quickly. She refuses to eat, becomes very weak, and is in danger of being moved to the ominous second floor. Despite the initial refusal of Aubrey's wife, Grant succeeds in taking Aubrey to Meadowland and he hopes that seeing Aubrey again may improve Fiona's health.¹⁵

Yet, unexpectedly, at the end of the story, Fiona seems to have regained access to her past

¹⁴ However, this is not clear. Aubrey's wife also adds that she wasn't raised in the same area. Although it is unlikely that a spouse would not know about his or her spouse's past, it may be possible. This is yet again another example of ambiguity in the text.

¹⁵ Grant prides himself in convincing Aubrey's wife Marian to let him take Aubrey to visit Fiona. It remains unclear whether or not he achieved this by seducing Marian.

with Grant. She shows Grant a book on Iceland he had bought her when he first visited her, a book she then had not shown any interest in. For the first time she says: "I'm happy to see you" (Bear 323). Yet, again, her behavior is undermined by ambiguity. She is dressed for the season, but her dress is "oddly short and bright" (Bear 322) and probably not a dress she would usually have worn. When Grant asks her if she remembers Aubrey whom he had taken with him, she "stares at him for a moment, as if waves of wind ha[ve] come beating into her face. Into her face, into her head, pulling everything into rags" (Bear 323). Her stare makes painfully visible her disease, how her memory is pulled "into rags." Yet, after a moment the look passes away and she regains her *self* again. She then gets up to embrace "him," but, as Begoña Simal points out, it is not evident whom she intends to embrace, Grant or Aubrey (2014: 71). When she says that Grant could have left without her, "[j]ust driven away without a care in the world and *forsook me. Forsooken me. Forsaken*" (Bear 323, emphasis mine), her linguistic uncertainty indicates that her regaining of the old past is not at all reliable and that she may lose this past and perhaps gain or create access to another "new" past.

Critic Patricia Life maintains that Fiona "may be surfacing from a severe phase in her dementia, or she may have determined—consciously or otherwise—that he had been punished sufficiently" (2014: 247). Since the text is ambiguous and invites many readings, it remains unclear if Fiona intends to punish Grant, if she escapes into dementia to free herself from an oppressive marriage, as Patricia Life argues (2014: 246), or if it is simply the disease that causes Fiona's forgetfulness and behavior. As Amelia DeFalco points out, "Fiona's subjectivity remains unclear to the reader" (2014: 225), since Grant is the focalizer and his knowledge "of his wife is significantly limited" (2014: 226). However, this text also offers a different, more positive understanding of what it may mean to suffer from dementia. There is certainly the horror of losing one's memory, when the wind pulls "everything into rags." But Fiona's ability to create a new past and build on it to have a new intimate relationship in a nursing home¹⁶ illustrates that she can lead a meaningful life, however painful it may be for relatives and friends who are no longer able to share and have access to the same past.¹⁷ Fiona is, despite her disease, a being in time, with

¹⁶ See also Sara Jamieson's discussion on the comparison of the old and new Meadowlake (3).

¹⁷ DeFalco argues that Fiona's dementia "forces Grant to a new model of relating that provides the potential for ethical witnessing, for empathy and the appreciation of another's needs" (2014: 230). Like Grant who is forced to "listen and observe", relatives and friends of a sufferer from dementia have to assume the difficult role, what DeFalco names "ethical witnessing," even without having access to their shared past.

access to *some* past that contributes to the sense of her present and thus to her anticipated future.

6. CONCLUSION

The three texts, Welty's "Asphodel," "A Visit of Charity," and Munro's "A Bear Came over the Mountain," distinctly demonstrate the importance of the past for a "being in time" (Lakoff 1999), the ways the past is used but also its dangers. In "Asphodel," it becomes apparent that being locked in the past does not allow situatedness in time, as Merleau-Ponty would have it, and makes impossible a commitment in one's future. One must be rooted in the present. The three old maids, Cora, Irene, and Phoebe, can only make a commitment in their future as individuals when they free themselves from the past, embodied by Miss Sabina.

Having control of one's past, even if this means excluding others from it, can become the only means to sustain one's identity and sanity. Being placed in a nursing home, like Addie in "A Visit of Charity," that robs its residents of their individuality, access to one's own past becomes extremely important in order to be "unrestrictedly and unreservedly what I am at present . . . [and to] have a chance to move forward" (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 529). Addie's desperate efforts of excluding her nameless roommate from her past foreground the "vicious system" of nursing homes in the South in the 1940s.

As in "A Visit of Charity," the exclusion of others from one's past can be discerned in Munro's "A Bear Came over the Mountain." Yet, in contrast to Addie, Fiona does not use the means of exclusion to stay sane. Whether or not she excludes her husband consciously to punish him for his many affairs remains unclear. However, although usually persons suffering from dementia are considered to have lost an important part of their identity, Fiona's ability to create a "new" past renders a more positive understanding of sufferers from dementia. This more positive picture of dementia requires empathy and "the appreciation of another's needs" (DeFalco 2014: 230). In this story, Grant finds it very unsettling not to be able to share their acquired past, and he needs to develop the appreciation of Fiona's needs. Fiona may have lost access to the past she shared with her husband, but she is still a being in time. She has created a different "new" past that allows her to "have a chance to move forward," a meaningful relationship in a nursing home.

All three stories show how memory is used in various ways. However, there is a striking difference in the way life is depicted in Welty's *Old Ladies Home* and Munro's

Meadowlake. Earlier nursing homes seemed sterile and often gloomy institutions. Today, it appears to be possible to have a meaningful life, situated in time, even in such institutions. This indicates how much nursing homes and life in these homes have changed. While Welty criticizes the terrible conditions of these homes in the 1940s, Munro renders a positive description of such a home. Furthermore, Munro also offers new ways of understanding dementia, ways that still make it possible to be situated in time. This may exclude partners, family members, and friends from sharing this new past. But, to some extent, this new past may allow a patient suffering from dementia to have a meaningful life.

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