

Alice Munro, 'The Bear Came Over the Mountain'

Tess Maginess

Alice Munro was born in Ontario in 1931. 'The Bear Came over the Mountain' was first published in the *New Yorker* in 1999-2000 and then in book form the following year. So what is the story about, and what might 'about' mean?

At a literal level, **the story is about a couple**, Grant and Fiona. Fiona appears to succumb to some form of dementia and enters a Residential Home. Her husband appears to miss her. She develops a relationship with a younger man, Aubrey. Her husband is excluded. Aubrey is taken home by his wife, Marian, mainly because she does not want to sell the house to pay for his long-term care. Fiona is disconsolate. In an attempt to restore her happiness, Grant persuades Marian to allow him to return to the Home. It is hinted that part of the bargain is that Marian and Grant have an affair, at her instigation. Aubrey returns or is returned to the Home. Or does he?

Well, that is an incredible enough story, is it not? And there are, of course, a couple of problems with it. One difficulty is that if Aubrey is restored to Fiona, then Marian will have to sell her house. Another is that I am not sure that Aubrey does return and who Fiona is speaking to in the very last section – is it Aubrey or her husband?

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Before we delve any deeper, into some of the more subtle bargains of the story, it might be an idea to have a look at **the title**. As has been pointed out, it derives from a **North American folk song cum nursery rhyme**. As Heliane Ventura (2010) has pointed out, the rhyme belongs to the tradition of **nonsense poetry**. What the bear sees is the other side of the mountain, which seems potentially quite exciting, but for the lethally qualifying 'was all'. This implies that what the bear sees is either the same as the first side (everything turns out to be the same as everything else, i.e. isomorphic) or at least what he sees is disappointing. The next verses, except for the last, suggest that the bear repeats this process; he goes over a river, he goes over a meadow, but all he sees is the other side. However, the final verse suggests some kind of radical change, some **break-out from what threatens to become an endless and even isomorphic routine**. The bear meets another bear 'who could have been' his twin. Twin reinforces the negative implications of the earlier verses; the bear just sees what he has already seen, an image, a replication of what he has already seen. But the bear is not necessarily his twin, but, similar but different from himself and the two bears go off to play. 'Happy Days', as Beckett, has it, in a context not entirely dissimilar to the story that is going to unfold.

The rhyme or song delivers a happy ending, suitable for children. But, of course, the shape of the song or rhyme is well-known to us, for it is the same shape as a **traditional joke**. Think of the old-fashioned jokes about the Englishman, the Scotsman and the Irishman. The shape is triadic; we have two scenarios followed by a third which involves the ironic triumph of the Irishman, usually through some nonsense response, dependent upon pun or a play on words. The bear rhyme is a slightly extended version of this, as there are, in fact, four parts to it.

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I will have more to say shortly about why Munro chose her title, but for the moment I would fleetingly observe that many experts on the short story have also noted that its form is **triadic in structure**. I think it could be argued that Munro's story is also triadic or tri-partite. The first part deals with Fiona's 'descent' into some form of dementia and her removal from her home to the Residential Home. The second part has, as its focus, the surprising development of her 'relationship' with Aubrey, another resident, and the third part tells the story of how that relationship, threatened by external forces, is saved by Fiona's husband, Grant and how the lovers are reunited, or, if you will, how the two bears go off to play. Well, maybe. Short stories do not generally have happy endings. And they also, often have '**epiphanies**' which was Joyce's term for the self-revelation which the central character arrives at, often painfully, towards the end. **Truth** has the merit of being truthful, but it does not bring beauty and it does not bring happiness, merely greater consciousness of how things really are and how they will never change.

Time, now for a closer analysis of Munro's story. We may note, for a start, the subtle change which Munro makes to the title of the folk song. Her story uses '**came**' rather than '**went**'. What is the effect of this? Perhaps there is no great difference, except that 'went' conveys a sense of the bear being separate from ourselves on his own adventures. To put this another way, he recedes incrementally from us. However, 'came' implies something or someone coming towards us, as in a visit. So we might say, Fiona went away and Grant came to visit. There is some sense in the verb 'came' of the object or person coming towards us, facing, so to speak, in our direction. We are, then, as readers, the 'other side of the mountain' And, to return to the rhyme, we are 'all he could see'. Perhaps, an unappetizing prospect? Until the end, of course.

Great short stories tend to pack a major but subtle punch in the first sentence or two, like an overture. The story opens with Fiona and Grant enters

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shortly after. As you all know, **Fiona** is a Gaelic name (Scots and Irish) meaning fair or whiteheaded, and by extension, beautiful and favoured or privileged (as in the 'White-headed boy' of the old mythologies). Fionn, Fiona, belong to noble lineages, old orders. We will be returning to this particular Gaelic/Celtic business later. What about '**Grant**'? It seems a word associated particularly with universities, we get a grant to go, we apply for grants. The associations are rather different, then – grants are based on merit and people who do not come from privileged backgrounds could get an odd one. Of course, the name is derived from Scots and behind that Anglo-Norman, meaning grand or tall or large. In Old English the meaning is 'snarler'. There was also a Canadian hockey goalie called Grant Fuhr (b 1962) mixed race and adopted by white people. Any resonances there? Is our grant a keeper of goals in some respect and could be thought to have been adopted? Hmm. Well, we will come back to that shortly.

The story opens with the information that Fiona lived in her parents' house, in the town where she and Grant went to university. The sentence seems simple enough, even a bit banal. But immediately we can infer, beneath the level of the information, that somehow a **connection with family**, and the world of **childhood** is going to be an important theme. Her connection with Grant is also foregrounded and the **longevity of that connection**. We learn something about **social class** here too, with the detail that both of them went to university, and also possibly about **intelligence**. This is, in fact, to assume quite an importance towards the end of the story as there is a kind of 'retour'; to issues of class and education in the disquieting clash between Marian and Grant. We may also, read the first sentence as suggesting that there is a generational stability and continuity about the lives of Fiona and Grant. But, as we are to discover, there have been discontinuities and Fiona and Grant have not always lived in this house and their return to it is not without its complexities. And, it seems, the point of view of the story, the angle of vision,

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shifts from Fiona to Grant. We see the luxurious and disorderly house through *his eyes*, a slightly detached and not altogether approbatory perspective.

Through Grant's viewpoint, we learn about **Fiona's parents and their conjugal relationship**. The father, revered in world of the hospital, happily submissive at home, his wife, Icelandic, with her forth of white hair and 'indignant' politics, a rather majestic and even grim heroic sort of figure dominating the world of the house. Yet it is an open house where all sorts of people come and go, quite unlike the kind of house that Fiona and Grant 'retire' to, where they seem to have little company and no need of any. But how does Grant know about what the house was like, but from his wife, so there is a sense that her viewpoint has influenced his, perhaps.

Grant then turns his thoughts to **another past**, the time of the **romance with Fiona**. She is presented as something of a joker, a tease, popular with the chaps. And it is she who proposes to him, suggesting that getting married might be fun. The *mise en scene* of the proposal is, I think, prophetically significant. It is a cold bright day on the beach at Port Stanley, the sand is stinging. The site of Port Stanley was part of an important early route from Lake Erie to other inland waterways for a succession of explorers and travellers of the 17th and 18th centuries. Canadian readers would, doubtless, get this straight away, and so might be quicker than us to realise that **the site of the proposal is associated historically with daring and adventure**; a setting out point for an exciting journey. Is this what Fiona and Grant reconstitute in agreeing to marry? While Fiona might be joking, there is a kind of astringent clarity in the 'weather' around her. And, I might add, there is a common Canadian saying, 'you take your weather with you'. In this weather Grant regards her as a person who has 'the spark of life'. A subtle opposition is set up now too, which complicates the pathetic fallacy; suggesting that Fiona is no Icelandic icemaiden, but a person of passion, warmth, heat. Of course, the

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phrase is also a cliché! Does this imply that Grant is a mite lacking in imagination and poetic ability?

As we return to the present, we see, through Grant's eyes, Fiona rubbing the mark left on the floor by her 'cheap black house shoes'. The mark looks as if it was made by a greasy crayon – we have the allusion to the world of a child again. A little later, Fiona replaces the rag on a rack under the sink. This tiny domestic detail suggests a woman who is both houseproud, thrifty and does not wish to leave unpleasant things lying about, concealing them. What she wears outside the house is in stark contrast; her look is expensive and classy. There is another contrast, then set up, between **internal and external**, between **the 'look' presented to the world and the look permitted in the privacy of the home**. As we will see, clothes are very important signifiers in this story allowing Munro to register a great deal about individuals but also social mores and class differences.

What she wears outside seems to **connect her with the world of animals**. Her golden brown fur jacket is teamed with a turtle necked sweater and tailored fawn slacks. We are then offered a description of Fiona herself, tall, narrow-shouldered, seventy but still upright, with her hair down to her shoulders and it snow white. We are reminded of her mother and yet unreminded of her, because, while her mother's hair is a froth, hers is milkweed fluff, suggesting a much calmer, even delicate personality. But all is not what it seems here. Milkweed exudes a sticky juice, suggestive of sexual activity, the plant itself is very bitter, but the head, a fluffy parachute, is very delicate. I wonder if Milkweed is not also a sly allusion to that other Celt, Dylan Thomas, and his famous work, *Under Milkwood*. The play has an omniscient narrator who listens to the dreams of a collection of people in a Welsh village. Is this the role that Grant occupies, or perhaps, in reality, it is Fiona who is to become the listener. By a curious coincidence – it may be only that, there is a

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company in England called Milkwood, who operate residential care homes for the elderly in converted Victorian houses. I do not know when they were established, but I would not put it past a writer like Munro, as we will see, so wide-ranging in her allusions, to have come on this. **Ambiguity** – word we will have recourse to many times is going to be the name of the game here, and what a game it will turn out to be.

Let us go back to the **hair**. While the mother resembles an older, epic sort of heroine, Fiona looks remarkably like a **medieval heroine**, the lady of the castle, aristocratic, asexual, though we know she has had her younger, more passionate moments.

And how Fiona looks, it appears to Grant, is how and who she is. How can Fiona be both sweet and ironic? Who and how is she really? Another gap starts to open between **appearance and reality**, between the external and the internal, for why is she dressed up to go to somewhere that will be like a hotel? Grant reveals that she remembers some things very well, even short-term details, but in other respects, she does seem to be displaying the signs of **early dementia**. Fiona's own attitude is stoical, even flippant. But, Grant suspects, and he does suspect his own wife of playing a deeper game that she hopes he will tune to.

He cannot quite read her. And there is something else, Fiona's uncanny mimicry of women's voices that he has known. Has she been aware, all along, of his peccadilloes or is it simply his guilty conscience? And there is further ambiguity – who is **control** here? The couple cannot have children but Fiona takes on two dogs on a whim. We learn shortly after that it is Fiona's father's money which has somehow eased his passage into his university job, though there is a political taint to it. Like the dogs, Grant imagines that he may too be a whim, a sort of joke.

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Both Grant and Fiona like **games** – Grant's affairs are a game; he does not get emotionally involved with any of the women, one mountain after another, so to speak. He returns always to Fiona. But should he be given some kind of credit for this? Are we to admire him merely for returning while ignoring his repeated betrayals? Is it somehow gauche of us as sophisticated readers to condemn him? But is Fiona also playing games, lady games? Another ambiguity is the **blurring between childhood and old age**. Children play games and we accept this as normal, but older people? Surely not. But may not games also what may fend off the ravages of old age, like the grandmother in Jansson's *The Summer Book*. Are we in Beckett territory here, laughing because that is one of the few alternatives which might temporarily redeem the 'limit situation'; the existential crisis that the characters are facing. Who and what and how are they?

And, of course, behind this, we must also acknowledge that **Munro is playing games** – as all writers do. Her **tricksiness** as a writer is much more subtle than the pyrotechnics of the so-called experimental writers of the 70s and 80s like Sorrentino and Calvino and Nabakov, but, as we have seen, even a couple of pages into the story, Munro is laying down a texture under the story which is both literary and allusive and forbids any easy reading, which problematises the reader's response on a number of levels. **Assumptions about class, about relationships about gender politics** are all quietly **called into question**.

Fiona struggles with or plays with words. We are not sure which. The name of the 'Home' what is it, shallowlake, sillylake? Meadowlake. Is this dementia or Fiona playing herself? And it is also child's play – children often get words slightly wrong. But the '**mistakes**' she makes are not only **comic**, they also reflect back both her **fragile grip on reality** (shallow lake for a skier is

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a dangerous ground), sillylake, suggests either that the name of the home is daft or she is a bit daft herself, a shallow, hollowed out, silly lake.

In reality, the lake turns out to be a frozen hollow, for it is in December that they go to the Home. A **frozen hollow** is one way to describe a lake in winter, but also, metaphorically, to describe a person whose emotions or intelligence have been frozen, atrophied and so identity has become hollow. The hollow lake they must pass has trees growing near it; throwing their shadows like bars – suggesting some kind of marshy imprisonment, the too soft and the too hard combining. This is a most poignant poetic expansion which, I think, encourages the reader to look forward to the Home as a disorienting place of entrapment, and we think again of the white hair of Fiona, now with the black shadows of dementia or institutionalisation across it.

This evokes, in both Grant and Fiona, their shared early memory of skiing under moonlight. But, interestingly, that scene too is a chiaroscuro of black and white. The snow is striped with black by the shadows between the moonlight. But the image is disquieting suggesting also a prison uniform of olden days. Or have we here a sense of their own **future being shadowed, barred, made uniform**. And adding to this, there is a kind of **instability** in the scene. They hear the branches moving, cracking. This could connote both excitement and something ominous, menacing. Grant appears to be deeply affected and struggles not to turn and drive home.

Immediately following this 'flashback', Munro shunts us both forward and backwards with the little vignette about Grant and Fiona visiting their neighbour, Mr Farharr in Meadowlake. It is clear that this once expansive man has become diminished, he can talk now only of the routines of the place, not his former *reading* enthusiasms– Polar expeditions, the Crimean war, the history of firearms. Note the heroic, militaristic character of his former

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interests. Now he has become, as it were, feminised, domesticated, no longer a reader. And the memory of the place itself evokes **sensory disgust** – the mix of urine and bleach, the perfunctory bouquets of flowers, the low-ceilinged corridors. But, in a note of hope, the old building is gone. And Mr Farqhar's house is gone, replaced by a gimcrack sort of castle which is the weekend home of some people from Toronto – surely a wry *boutade* from the small town to the big city and a nip at their inauthenticity – so different from Mr Farqhar's earnest and serious study of the materiel of heroism; or is it? And, of course, this apparently insignificant little vignette also gets the reader thinking about different conceptions and notions of 'home'. The new 'home' is high-vaulted (like a proper castle), pine-scented, evoking the bracing forests in which Icelandic and Norse adventures could occur and boasts profuse and genuine greenery. But what a turn Munroe makes on that word 'genuine'. The greenery is real, not plastic, but is completely out of place in Canada in December; it is exotic, other, tropical, Edenic even, so not genuine either! That same greenery is to reappear, and Munro cleverly prepares us for it here.

What follows is another 'Under Milkwood' sort of reverie from Grant. We go back with him to the time when everything changes; **affairs become impossible, are considered exploitative**. He is cast out of that Eden where he had the pick of women young and not so young. And what does Grant feel? Shameful that he has been duped. It is always, somehow, about him. The world has changed really rather disobligingly and he cannot play his own games any more. He congratulates himself for not leaving Fiona, but just about acknowledges that he has got out just in time as his shenanigans may have cost him Fiona – as they have more or less cost him his job, a fact he does not present. And again, **his focus is entirely egotistic**; he is concerned only with what the cost is to *him*, not to Fiona.

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Fiona is deposited, or signs herself in – we do not know. And he is obliged to say away for a month. This marks, I think, the end of the first part of phase of the story. We may express this by saying that the story up to this point has tended towards a kind of inexorability; Fiona and Grant are parted and she declines into dementia. So the **parabolic curve is downward**.

But, as is often the case in the short story, the second part offers the reader a **new set of possibilities** for the central character. This is a bit raddled here, because Munro does not let us quite decide who the central character is. Perhaps she nudges us a little past her 'unreliable narrator' so that we can see Fiona, so to speak on her own terms, rather than through the narcissistic lens of her husband. And, in the Home, Fiona not only settles but finds a new friend, indeed perhaps a bit more than a friend, an amour. Grant also goes on a quest. His first visit to her is characterised by uncharacteristic lack of poise.

The 'worst' cases, he notes, have been 'weeded out'. What compassion. And as he approaches his wife, he begins to realise that all of the Bridge players resent him, even the coffee woman. Fiona seems to be guarding the players, he is now the enemy in the camp and **she is no longer the passive, ironic heroine, but an active, hero, a warrior** you might say. What spell has been cast here? For this is truly marvellous, a miracle. But it is, of course, shocking, transgressive, because **Fiona's metamorphosis** (so common a device in epic tales and romances), closes Grant out. Is this **payback time**? Is Fiona now going to have fair her fling as revenge for all his infidelities, or is this just **demential 'disinhibition'** where the most perfect ladies are reported to go cursing like troopers and get a bit frisky?

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There are changes at a deeper level; Fiona is no longer the traditionally feminine heroine. As contingently, the **power relations** between Fiona and Grant are challenged; he is no longer master, she no longer servant. Aubrey may be frail, but he presents to Grant not a look of supplication but command, so Grant, previously monarch of all he surveyed and had his pick of, is now the losing rival. He is commanded by Fiona to get to know everybody; he who as a university professor was known by everybody is now the stranger, the one who must make the effort. Fiona knew Aubrey before she knew Grant, recalling that he came to her grandfather's house. What she sees when she comes over the mountain is the other side – in this case part of her past - but she cannot or will not remember that she and Grant have been living in that very house. We may say that is how older people with dementia are – they have good long-term memory and poor short term recall. But **has she dementia?**

The **reader is challenged by these tectonic shifts**. Do we really feel comfortable with older women taking the lead in romances? Do we feel comfortable with older people, especially those who are demented, having sexual relationships?

Animal imagery reappears. Aubrey's long face is dignified and melancholy and he resembles an elderly horse, beautiful and discouraged both. Fiona does not turn into a harridan or vamp, she blushes, but why, because of her sexual excitement and maybe guilt in front of Grant or/and because as she says, she hardly knows the game anymore, though Aubrey thinks he can't play without her? Again, Munro evokes a double perspective where **the world of the child and the world of the older person elide**. The trope of the old person returning to the world of childhood is, of course, so common as to be verging on cliché. We think of Shakespeare's representation of Lear by his less than grateful daughters as a foolish child. And in another sense, the trope has observational and medical accuracy, for in terms of the issue of memory, the relationship

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between past and present, we all know that **older people's memories of their childhood and youth are more vivid and detailed than their short-term recall**. Why is this? Is it mere **neurological malfunction and a marker of dementia**, or is it a kind of **natural reflex** in which the mind and the heart and maybe even the soul, retreats to a space more imaginative, more delicate, more fun? Look at the tenderness of the friendship, expressed not in words, but in gestures; childlike but far from childish.

Grant is displaced, disoriented. He cannot solve the ambiguities of the situation. He questions whether Fiona even knows who he is or whether she is playing a joke on him. Beneath the top layer of this questioning lies a deeper, existential set of questions about who they both are. For while he has presented himself as a faithful husband to his wife, the reality is that the true Grant is a philanderer. So did his wife know all along and is now playing him at his own game and even making a joke of it? How well did he ever know her? But Grant always assesses the situation in terms of how it affects himself; Grant fails to see the **irony**, but the reader does not. Grant has repeatedly returned to the game of his affairs, pretending to forget about her. And the word '**game**' takes on an increasing connotation of the **predatory**. Grant's affairs are viewed by the changed university world as exploitative. But he takes no responsibility, thinking that it is he who has been duped. And all the while he has been duping his wife, or thinks he has. Thus, while Fiona's amour may be the result of her dementia and in that sense, involuntary, it may also be a game over which she exerts complete control, an example of **immense sang froid**. But then the game can only be played in an **artificial, closed world**; she cannot play this game 'at home'. Is this not a bit like the world of fiction? The writer and reader transact their 'relationship' in a kind of sealed universe; a *prison* in one sense, a place of safety (an **asylum**), even liberation?

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The second part of the story deepens the sense of uncertainty in another way. The nurse, Kirsty accepts this as a natural state of affairs within the Home. Her perspective is medical; people with dementia change all the time; she might know him, tomorrow you never know. But, of course, **dementia** here is also a **trope or metaphor for the situation in the outside world – the post-modern condition**. Grant, who never thought anything would change – that he could go on playing his game, is deeply disturbed by this Brave New World, primarily because he is excluded, marginalised, and powerless. He is Gogol's Little Man, typical hero of the classic short story. Grant does not get used to **this world of flux and change**, but Fiona does. Grant resents the fact that Aubrey comes from a lower class and indeed that he is younger than Fiona. The **irony** again quite escapes him – his affairs have been with women of lower social status or less power since they are students and with younger women.

Class issues surface also in the misunderstanding between Kirsty and Grant; she does not understand the word 'charade'. Even in Ontario where every product is labelled in French and English, the word charade is unlikely to appear for it is a literary word and thus, beyond her ken. In using the word, Grant displays his almost incorrigible insouciance. It is not surprising then, that Grant then tries to impose responsibility for restoring the world to his order upon Fiona. It is clear that she does nothing. She completely fails to oblige him and ups the ante, either because she is playing the joke up or because she is quite unaware of what she is doing after she has done it as her short-term memory is gone.

The scene in the **Conservatory** is gently comic and also poignant. Aubrey and Fiona retreat into this inner retreat. It is an **Edenic, tropical paradise, quite artificial, yet a kind of plenum**. Munro crowns the irony by referring to it, through Grant, as a bower. This is a literary word, but specifically, a word

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associated with medieval Romance. So the effect is to confer upon the scene a kind of **literary sanctity**. The medieval heroine is chaste but undoubtedly magnetic – knights go off on quests to please her. And of course, the archaic literary quality is reinforced with other antique words like 'chortle'. And does Grant can only imagine that Aubrey whispers to Fiona. Munro thus presents the reader as well as Grant, with conflicting 'readings' of the scene – is it **transgressive and inappropriate, scandalous** even, or a **delightful and magical translation from literature to life of medieval Courtly Love** – itself a highly stylised and codified literary 'game'? And the game takes place in a Conservatory – what exactly is being conserved here, literature or life? And have not Fiona and Aubrey a right to conserve their spark of life or is this just as much a betrayal as Grant's? Two (or several) wrongs do not make a right, though they make a rite or write. Munro is at her most wicked as she describes Grant's response as he stands, voyeur to the scene. Her use of the word penetrating is playfully ironic so obviously evoking male sexuality and power and reminds us both of Grant's past but of the contrast between past and present. There are coins at the bottom of the fountain. Grant ruminates on whether they are glued on for how could wishes come true in a place like this? After all, the inmates are in their dotage, they do not know what they are doing, or do they? And why could not wishes come true here, and maybe only here?

Grant retreats – for he has no choice – Into his own reverie about his early passion with Fiona and sententiously reflects that it is not like now when the man would probably seduce the woman on the first date; this from the serially philandering husband. But what the passage does reveal, tenderly, lyrically, is Fiona's capacity for the **sensual**. She is **beyond game**.

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And for Grant, time becomes obsessive, as he aches for a tomorrow when the world will have returned to how it was. This is writing of a very rich order indeed.

On his next visit, Grant, now reduced (or elevated) to the **status of observer**, enables us to see what others see when they come into the Home. The women keep the conversation *afloat*, the men try to escape, the teenagers are affronted, disgusted, killed with it. But Grant's perspective is not so far from that of the crass teenagers. And **Fiona keeps on changing – even and especially her clothes** – the code of what she is. Now she wheels Aubrey round in a silly woollen hat and a jacket with swirls of blue and purple. The carnivalesque 'trumpery', the bright colours signify a breaking out of barred, striped institutional uniforms. The lack of style, of class, in Fiona's new 'costume' is not lost on Grant who surmises that this is the sort of clothes that would be seen on local women at the supermarket; very *de trop*. Fiona's angelic hair has also been cut – and she does not appear to notice.

And Fiona seems, now, more **open to wishes and dreams**. She returns to her ancestral origins in Iceland. This concert a number of themes; Fiona's new openness to childlike adventures, her re-connection to the most ancient of her pasts – and with that a sense of return, of *retour* which brings her back, imaginatively, to a Home, lodged inside her but never seen. And, of course, all true to the life of some older people with dementia, wandering out on the road to try and get back Home; a home they are long separated from physically but utterly connected to in memory, in imagination. And **perhaps, this is what literature does, it allows us all to go 'Home' to ourselves, to others**. And set against this rich quest is the threadbare recollections of Grant, his patronising memory of his earlier quests or rather conquests. He remembers the older

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Jacqui and then the ironic parade of young girls with long hair and sandalled feet.

In part three we are, ironically, presented with **developments that are radical but not necessarily dazzling**. Aubrey is to be returned home. Fiona is grief-stricken and, like a medieval heroine, goes into a decline. Or perhaps she would have declined anyhow, without a broken heart as the dementia encroaches upon her. Grant then changes. Perhaps it is only to conserve Fiona for himself, but with consummate irony, he commences on a quest to return Aubrey to her. Maybe he has changed and for the first time realises that she too has wishes and that he must serve her not himself. It is a sort of **epiphany**.

To do this, he must go down into the world – he must lower himself to the less affluent, less tasteful world of Aubrey and Marian. How skilfully Munro registers the class and social differences. Marian is vulgar, aggressive, but Marian is not to be so easily persuaded to comply with the Knight's quest. She is not shocked by the prospect of Aubrey's infidelity – she does not want to lose her house, which she will do if he goes back into Meadowlake. For Grant, no such worries occur. But as Grant and Marian talk, Grant is also pulled back to his own past, when he too, would have had to think about survival. And, of course, we cannot but be reminded of the political taint attaching to Grant's own elevation to the refined university world. Marian gives him a run for his money and he seems to concede that privileged people are out of touch with the world, have the luxury of focusing on fine ideas. It is a sharp passage not entirely undercut by the further irony that Aubrey, like Grant and like Grant's father-in-law, seems to have some taint about him, some dubious business has forced him to retire.

And we note a **change in the landscape**. Spring is coming and the swamp hollow, now filed with skunk lilies, 'lighted up' and distinctly erectile. The **force**

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of nature – to regenerate, to be born again, to mate. And in Spring it is, as it turns out, **an old woman's fancy which turns to thoughts of love, or well, lust.** For it is Marian who initiates the affair with Grant, just as Fiona, the lady of Meadowlake has initiated the affair with Aubrey. Ah, how different and how similar. But what do we make of this? Is this just Grant up to his old game again? Is it different because the women are in control and taking the lead? And how does Grant and Marian having an affair affect the genuine chivalry of his attempt to restore Aubrey to Fiona? If there is **symmetry** it is **fearful** enough and most definitely **ironic**.

Is the concluding paragraph of the story read it as a redemption for Grant and Fiona. This depends on 'seeing' the last scene as occurring between Grant and Fiona rather than Grant and Aubrey. Now, I read the 'he' as Aubrey so that the man who she embraces is not Grant. But I may be wrong. After all, we never have access to Aubrey's direct perception and the man notices the smell Fiona has. Perhaps we are meant not to know for certain – the **ultimate ambiguity**. One thing is for sure, at least for the moment, Fiona breaks through to some clear space. It may be that the child has become a woman, she has progressed to the right word, the correct word and form, forsaken. But this is a '*mot juste*' in an ironic sense, for the word is decidedly literary and specifically from the language of medieval romance. Earlier in the book, Grant had alluded contemptuously to mature students who forsook the harder fields like Icelandic and Old Norse for the prettier disciplines of Celtic. Recall Fiona's name – Celtic. The **Icelandic epic world** is thus replaced by a *medieval world* in which the key feature is **romance**; an idealised romance in which **men serve women and women are in control**, the whiteheaded ones, the fair ones. But then, we must remember too, the slightly earlier comments of Fiona and her longing for the Icelandic world, harsher, more epic. Is she home? Or is it that Fiona is over her crush on Aubrey and, ironic as it is, is so relieved that he has not forsaken her for her one transgression? And what about Grant? Where and

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who is he now? Has he left nothing to chance by dedicating himself, for the first time, to his wife? But then there is the little dalliance with Marian? Or, has Grant finally lost Fiona? Is she now in a world quite beyond him? Her breath smells of decay. **She is declining.** The scene is both **immensely literary and absolutely ordinary.** Its meaning, a mystery. Maybe life is like that, or is it literature?