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The Quest for Insight and Empathy in Alice Munro's Stories of Dementia

Abstract I: Le storie di malattie da demenza di Alice Munro forniscono strumenti narrativi per illuminare territori cerebrali altrimenti impenetrabili e per comprendere ed empatizzare con la malattia mentale. "The Bear Came over the Mountain" e "In vista del lago" si focalizzano su viaggi di ricerca di una comprensione profonda, nei quali chi legge è direttamente coinvolto/a in un processo di esplorazione narrativa del deterioramento cognitivo da due prospettive differenti (interna ed esterna). In "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" si accede alla 'mente dell'Alzheimer' dal punto di vista di Grant, che porta testimonianza della malattia della moglie; in "In vista del lago" i/le lettori/lettrici sono testimoni del progressivo declino cognitivo della protagonista. Il processo di lettura e comprensione getta una nuova luce sulla mente di chi è affetto dalla sindrome di Alzheimer, e mostra a lettori e lettrici le connessioni fra il guardare e il comprendere, e fra l'aver cura e l'empatia.

Abstract II: Alice Munro's dementia stories provide narrative tools for illuminating otherwise impenetrable brain territories and for gaining insight into and empathising with mental illness. The protagonists of "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" and of "In Sight of the Lake" set out on a quest for insight, involving readers in the process, who can narratively explore cognitive deterioration from two different perspectives (internal and external). In "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" we can access the 'Alzheimer's mind' from the point of view of Grant, who bears witness to his wife's illness; in "In Sight of the Lake" readers witness the protagonist's progressive cognitive decline. The processes of reading and comprehending throw light on the Alzheimer's mind, and show readers the connections between acts of seeing and understanding, and acts of caring and empathy.

Inside the Cathedral of Orvieto (Italy), there is a library – Libreria Albèri – which was built at the end of the fifteenth century. The walls of this study room are decorated with frescoes. One of these is quite incongruous among paintings that represent the major disciplines: it portrays a monkey, which is wearing glasses and a student hat, and is reading a manuscript. On its open pages we can read the Latin motto: "Legere et non intelligere est negligere", that is, reading and not understanding is neglecting, or being careless. If we reverse the maxim, we can say that reading and understanding means caring (Coppola 2015: 382-383).

The present analysis of Alice Munro's dementia¹ short stories is inspired by this aphorism, which equates the act of reading (and by extension, of seeing through words) with the act of gaining new insight, and ultimately, with the act of caring and of empathy.

The medieval Latin motto shows that the connection between insight and empathy (or sympathy, as they would have said before the 20th century) had already been investigated for centuries when, in 1903, Theodor Lipps used the concept of *einfihlung* ('feeling into', later translated in English with 'empathy') in association with the concept of *verstehen* (understanding) "to explain how people experience aesthetic objects and how they come to know other's mental states" (Coplan & Goldie 2014: xii. My emphasis). More recently, Amy Coplan has defined empathy as a complex imaginative phenomenon, comprising both cognitive and affective processes, as it implies observing and simulating another person's psychological states "while maintaining clear self-other differentiation" (Coplan 2014: 5). In this perspective, empathising, that is, taking the perspective of the other and simultaneously perceiving the other as distinct from oneself, is a form of understanding:

To say that it [empathy] is a 'form of understanding' is to say that it provides an observer with knowledge of another's person's thoughts, feeling, and behavior – knowledge that may (though need not) subsequently figure into the explanations, productions, and even actions of the observer (Coplan 2014: 17).

Suzanne Keen has analysed a specific kind of empathetic understanding: narrative empathy. According to Keen, empathy and altruism can be provoked by witnessing another person's emotional state and, in turn, this witnessing experience can be enacted through reading. Fictional characters and narratives can provoke identification, perspective-taking, and affective responses. Thus, reading, viewing, listening to fiction can invoke understanding, 'feeling into' and 'seeing into' the other, empathy and altruist emotions (Keen 2006, 2011).

In "The Bear Came Over the Mountain"² and in "In Sight of the Lake", Alice Munro portrays cognitive deficits associated with dementia, even though this syndrome is not explicitly mentioned³. The protagonists of "The Bear" and "In Sight of the Lake" set out on a quest for insight and empathy, involving readers, who can narratively explore cognitive deterioration from two different perspectives (internal and external). Reading "The Bear" readers can access the Alzheimer's mind from the outside, that is, from the standpoint of a retired college professor, Grant, whose wife Fiona suffers from an unspecified form of progressive cognitive impairment. In "In Sight of the Lake", readers are immersed in the mind of a woman, Nancy, whose visual perception, spatial orientation and cognitive functioning are deteriorating. Both stories provide narrative tools for exploring and illumina-

¹ Dementia is an umbrella term to describe a group of symptoms that impair mental cognitive functions. Alzheimer's disease is the most common type of dementia. For the sake of brevity, I will use 'dementia', 'Alzheimer's disease' or 'Alzheimer's' as synonyms.

² From now on, I will refer to this short story as "The Bear".

³ Munro's short story "Spelling" (first published in *Who Do You Think You Are?*, 1978) focuses on a woman who exhibits signs of dementia and on her step-daughter. The quest theme is not a key feature; for such reason, this story is not taken into consideration in this paper.

ting otherwise impenetrable brain territories and, ultimately, for gaining insight into and empathising with mental illness.

To the Other Side of the Mountain

“The Bear” focuses on a couple – Grant and Fiona – as they are trying to come to terms with the consequences of Fiona’s cognitive decline (whose symptoms are consistent with dementia syndrome). The first paragraphs describe the onset of mental illness and readers witness Grant’s quest for insight, as he strives to make sense of their past life together, of his wife’s illness, and of his role of caregiver, which implies adopting a relational empathetic stance. Like the bear in the folk song the title refers to, Grant strives to overcome the barrier that Fiona’s cognitive deficits are building between them, but also the barriers of his own personhood, and to follow his wife to “the other side of the mountain”.

Before analysing the milestones in this quest, it is important to point out that an exceptional kind of relationship is established between patient and caregiver from the moment when the first signs of Alzheimer’s appear, and that this relationship changes radically as illness progresses. Dementia syndrome hugely impacts the ability to communicate, establish meaningful relationships, reason, remember life events, or even recognise close relatives. As patients inexorably lose these key identity and relational traits, they are isolated from their social and family environment, and they regress to a stage of total childlike dependence on others, usually their spouses or next of kin. While the cognitive distance between the sick and the primary caregiver increases, demands and dependency augment. Then, the caregiver’s subjectivity becomes relational (Hartung 2016: 176-180), since he/she is the one who negotiates between the outer world and the dementia sufferer, who is retreating into his/her unreachable inner world. The impossibility to communicate on equal terms enlarges the gulf between the shutting-in subject and the healthy one, and eventually the latter can no longer read the thoughts and feelings of the other. Ultimately, Alzheimer’s disease builds an insuperable wall, and the sufferer’s mind becomes impenetrable and inexplicable.

Grant and Fiona epitomise these relational turns. The third-person narration takes readers across several time-shifts, which are mainly focalised through Grant, a retired professor of Nordic literature. The enigmatic title comprises the core themes of Munro’s story. Critics (Ventura 2010: 2-3; Francesconi 2015: 47-48; 2009: 349) have noted that it refers to the North American folk song “The Bear Went Over the Mountain”. I would define both the song and the short story as quest tales, whose final destinations are insight and empathy. The quest theme is anticipated by the only verb in the titles: the song’s ‘went’ is turned into ‘came’ in Munro’s narrative version. In both cases, it is a verb of motion: the perspective from which the movement is observed differs, but the focus of narration – the action of moving – does not change. Then, reading the song’s first lines, it is evident that it tells the story of a quest: the bear is in search for vision – “The bear went over the mountain, [...] / To see what he could see”. In Munro’s story, what the bear represents (Grant? Fiona? illness?) is not explicitly stated, but this title foresees a similar quest narrative.

Moreover, if we focus on the song’s opening lines, we can note that the lyrics revolve around two verbs – the afore-mentioned motion verb ‘to go’ and the verb of perception ‘to

see'. I would argue that the bear embarks on a journey towards the top of the mountain not to obtain something, but to find a place from which to *see* something. Similarly, Munro's quest story features many acts of seeing and understanding (which are semantically related in the English language).

The title is the starting point of the journey Fiona and Grant embark on, whose direction is signposted by the progression of illness, Fiona's hospitalisation, the first thirty days in the nursing home, and the following period. At first, Grant's quest for insight seems doomed to fail: to him, Fiona, a free and unpredictable spirit, has always been somehow unreachable. When the first signs of cognitive decline appear, in Grant's eyes she remains "direct and vague...sweet and ironic" (Munro 2001: 277). He does not notice either the small changes of healthy aging or the signs of much more dramatic changes. In fact, he often refers to Fiona's dementia as a sort of "charade" she is putting on (Munro 2001: 274).

In the first stages of illness, Fiona and Grant's relationship turns upside down the typical dementia sufferer-caregiver relation: Fiona is responsible for pivotal decisions (such as negotiating the terms of hospitalisation), whereas Grant demands attention and support. These dynamics have always characterised their life together, with Fiona being a relational subject and Grant a self-centered person who had always filtered the world around him through Fiona's gaze. He was the passive observer and she was interpreter, that is, the one who read and comprehended the world for him.

Eventually, Alzheimer's disrupts these taken-for-granted roles. The first change in Fiona and Grant's manner of relating to each other occurs when the two can finally reunite after the thirty-day separation. Following the nursing home rules, they spend this time away from each other – Grant in their old farmhouse, and Fiona in the long-term-care facility. Their experience of the passage of time is different: for Grant these are days of memories, loneliness, and longing; Fiona adjusts herself to the new context and establishes meaningful ties. So, when they meet each other again, he feels like "a hopeless lover or a guilty husband in a cartoon" (Munro 2001: 288), whereas she welcomes him with courtesy and detachment, and soon devotes all her attention to another man, Aubrey. When Grant senses that there is something unfamiliar in Fiona, he starts his quest for vision: he determines to observe her day after day, in order to see whether she is playing one of her charades, and to comprehend her 'true' feelings. At first Grant is a static observer, watching Fiona and Aubrey compulsively, but from a distance, so that he perceives himself as "stalking and prowling" (Munro 2001: 295). Then he diverts his attention to other people (a nurse, visitors, other residents), and he also decides to explore the care facility. Like the bear, aiming at the top of the mountain "to see what he could see", Grant sets out on a quest – both outer (in the rest home) and inner (to access his wife's mind) – and he keeps observing and moving, but he fails to gain insight. Grant's obsessive acts of observation and his search for a deeper understanding of Fiona's feelings seem to be unsuccessful, just as his attempts to find a way out of the nursing home maze are often a failure: "The more he explored this place, the more corridors and seating places and ramps he discovered, and in his wanderings, he was still apt to get lost" (Munro 2001: 298-299). Grant observes Fiona's mind and actions, but he cannot see clearly.

Moreover, Grant's inability to see is not confined to the nursing-home days. The inac-

cessibility of Fiona's mind, together with her inability to account for it, change this observer-interpreter dynamic. As DeFalco puts it, Munro's fictional narratives "posit an evolution of the role of witnesses, transformed from observers to participants, forced to grapple with new modes of meaning and being" (2014: 221). Likewise, Grant is forced into bearing witness to Fiona's thoughts, and to speak to and for her (Felman & Laub 1992: 3), since Fiona's cognitive and linguistic abilities are so severely impaired that she cannot communicate her own experience of illness and of love. Playing his new role of relational subject and caregiver, Grant takes on responsibility for his wife: he tries to come to terms with Fiona's attachment to Aubrey, and then he resolves that he will speak to Aubrey's wife, for Fiona's sake, even though this involves acknowledging and giving expression to his spouse's feelings for another man. Grant's shift from passive observer to active and empathetic witness takes place when Fiona and Aubrey are divided (after a temporary hospitalisation, his wife, Marian, takes him back home). Away from Aubrey, Fiona's dementia worsens, and she is on the verge of being moved to the long-term bed care on the second floor. At this point, Grant is forced out of his passive and egoistic attitude, and sets out on a new quest, with the purpose of taking Aubrey back to Fiona. So, dementia forces Grant out of his self-centred stance and ignites his quest for empathy: Grant bears the responsibility of observing and recognising Fiona's feelings. Quoting from the song, we could say that Grant starts his quest "to see what he could see", then he ceases to be the passive spectator and moves towards "the other side of the mountain". For this reason, from my point of view, "The Bear" tells the story of a pursuit for seeing and for insight.

However, Munro's short stories often defy closure. In this case too, it is difficult to say whether Grant's quest is successful or not. Likewise, we cannot determine whether the bear of the folk song reaches its goal. With Héliane Ventura, we could say that the verse "to see what he could see" opens up to expectations, which are eventually frustrated in the concluding lines of the song: "The bear went over the mountain, / To see what he could see. / And what do you think he saw? / [...] The other side of the mountain, / Was all that he could see". As in nonsense poems, the song and the quest end with a tautology (Ventura 2010: 3). In a circular movement, the bear's journey to the mountain top, searching for new horizons, merely takes the bear to the mountain top, where all he can see is a mirror reflection of the same landscape. In Munro's story, Grant's and readers' expectations seem to be directed towards the same dead end, as Fiona's increasing psychological detachment is paralleled by Grant's physical distance from her (in the attempt to find a sort of agreement with Aubrey's wife)⁴.

Reading for In-Sight

"In Sight of the Lake" offers means for plunging into the Alzheimer's mind. The story is told by an unspecified narrator, and it is presented mainly through a woman – Nancy – whose cognitive abilities are deteriorating. Nancy is the sole focus of attention for the narrator / reader. If in "The Bear" Grant is the observer-witness of the Alzheimer's brain, in "In Sight of

⁴ The theme of the sufferer-caregiver distance is also represented in the filmic version of "The Bear" (directed by Sarah Polley in 2006), as exemplified by the title, *Away from Her*.

the Lake" this role is played by readers. Moreover, this story accounts for a quest or, better, for two quests: Nancy's search for a doctor, and the readers' search for grasping what Nancy cannot understand, for seeing what she cannot see.

The title condenses the key themes of the story. On the one hand, the first three words – 'in sight of' – refer to the concepts of seeing (being 'within the range of vision') and of awareness ('within one's awareness'). To support this idea, we should consider the first two words together: gaining 'insight' means 'to see with the eyes of the mind', or, literally, to see inward. It indicates the concept of shedding light and understanding the hidden nature of a problem. However, 'in sight of' also implies the motion of a subject to reach a point from where a target spot is within the range of vision. In this case, the in-sight place is a lake and a nearby care facility. The referent 'lake' hints at muddy, dense and opaque water, which can only hinder, rather than facilitate, vision, and it also recalls images of stillness, illness or death (Simal 2014: 77). As anticipated by the title, the semantic fields of seeing and understanding are thoroughly explored in this short story, mainly from the perspective of readers.

The first sentence of "In Sight of the Lake" immediately draws readers in: "A woman goes to her doctor to have her prescription renewed" (Munro 2013: 217). The narrator introduces the protagonist, and the likeable theme of the story: a woman and her health. This sentence portrays a routine action: going to the doctor and renewing a prescription. Thus, Munro aptly exploits the suspense effect: this line raises questions and expectations (who is this woman? what is going to happen next?), which are not directly and explicitly answered. As a matter of fact, this suspense effect persists till the concluding section.

The second sentence introduces the first interruption of the routine: "But the doctor is not there" (Munro 2013: 217). The coordinating conjunction 'but' joins the first and second clause by establishing a fracture and a contrast, between the woman's intention and what is happening. From this moment, the story of this woman, Nancy, unravels on two levels: what Nancy sees, and what readers see. This idea is supported in the following lines: "It's her day off. In fact, the woman has got the day wrong, she has mixed up Monday with Tuesday" (Munro 2013: 217). The narrator introduces Nancy's slip of the mind by employing the discourse marker 'in fact', which also informs that more details are coming, and possibly more slips.

As we go on reading, we are given few biographical details about Nancy (her husband is swiftly mentioned), and we follow her driving to a nearby town in search for another doctor's office – the "Elderly doctor", who then becomes "the crazy-doctor" (Munro 2013: 218, 220). Instead of providing insight into the questions that have been raised, more doubts surface, specifically regarding the reliability of Nancy's version of her own story: is she a widow? retired? does her search for a doctor last one day or more? and is this town unknown to her or forgotten? Munro intersperses her narration with references to the unreliability of Nancy's account: the doctor speaking about an unspecified "mind problem" (Munro 2013: 217), Nancy's own fears and doubts, as well as her incoherent stream of thoughts, her blending of memories, dreams and real events, her spatial and temporal disorientation, her forgetting names or even the reason why she is walking on the streets of a mysterious town. Sentence after sentence we trace Nancy's descent into the darkest areas of her brain, whose functioning

is inexorably declining. Nancy's journey is mirrored by the reader's journey within her brain. She travels in space (Simal 2014: 71), while readers move along words and into her mind.

The alternation of the narrator's and Nancy's perspective, along with the use of present tenses, the interplay of direct and indirect speech, and also of story-time and discourse-time, slow-downs and ellipsis: these devices contribute to drawing readers into a chaotic mind, but also to establishing two levels of 'im-possible' comprehension of the deteriorating brain – Nancy's and readers'. Readers proceed along a narrative track that parallels Nancy's and yet diverges from it (Coppola 2015: 385-386): Nancy is searching for the rest home by the lake (the "sight" in the title), while readers observe as she gets lost, and in so doing see inside her mind problem. Nancy shuts herself into her private world and is progressively incapable of communicating with the outside, as readers see and comprehend what is happening to her: she is suffering from a form of progressive cognitive impairment. Nancy's mind eyes cannot see, while readers' vision is clearer and clearer. As a consequence, also perspective taking, identification with the character's suffering, and narrative empathy grow stronger. Nancy's journey can be visualised as a spiral down into the darkest depth of the mind. From the main street, to side streets of a seemingly desert town (or is she shutting others out?), she wanders in space and time, forgetting direction and purpose. She starts the last lap of her quest by looking at a medical building, and then she goes back to the same medical building. By now Nancy's vision is compromised:

She has an absurd but alarming notion that the sight of the medical building has provoked. What if the right name, the name that she said she could not find, has been waiting there all along. She moves more quickly, she finds that she is shaky, and then, having quite good eyesight she reads the two useless names just as before (Munro 2013: 226-227).

Along her quest, Nancy shows great interest in buildings and houses, describing in detail their design and history, and often imagining the stories behind their doors. At this stage, she (ironically) has "quite good eyesight" but she is not able to frame what she sees into known interpretative categories.

Unsurprisingly, Nancy's quest ends in a claustrophobic and dim building. In Nancy's perception, its hall is big, cavernous and hides secret compartments, the doors are all locked, the floor is slippery, the bell is nowhere to be seen and no one is behind the desk. As a matter of fact, in the narrator's words, the hall of Lakeview Rest Home is spacious and bright, with an easily accessible sliding main door, many secondary doors, glass panels, a shiny silvery floor, a bell to call the person on duty, and a reception desk. The contrast between Nancy's and readers' perception is dramatic. Nancy feels trapped inside the building, and readers are trapped inside her mind: "She 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" (Munro 2013: 232). This image of Nancy's altered vision through the glass panel is the reverse match of readers' insight. The action climaxes when Nancy realises that she is irremediably shut in and unable to call for help:

It is as if she has a blotter in her throat. Suffocation. She knows that she has to behave differently, and more than that, she has to believe differently. Calm. Calm. Breathe. Breathe.

She doesn't know if the panic has taken a long time or a short time. Her heart is pounding but she is nearly safe (Munro 2013: 232).

For a brief, breath-taking moment, Nancy knows, but soon she sinks back into her spatial, temporal and cognitive disorientation. The two narrative strings cross each other, and then diverge. The dramatic switch of the dual quest into the mind of a cognitive impaired woman is marked on the page: like a crack, a blank space breaks the insistent rhythm of the story and introduces the final section.

Closures and Openings on Empathy

"There is a crack in everything/ that's how the light gets in": these verses from Leonard Cohen's song "Anthem" (1992) recall the philosophy underlying our quest into Alice Munro's dementia stories: fractures (*i.e.* mental illness) can be transformed into something useful and beautiful, as they allow for the light to come through, reveal hidden 'in-sights', and open new perspectives on caring and empathy.

With the concluding passages of "The Bear", Munro lightens one of these revelatory cracks. Having given up the role of passive and self-centered observer, Grant speaks to Marian for the sake of Fiona, and manages to take Aubrey back to the care facility. When Grant enters his wife's room, he notices that Fiona is holding the book of Icelandic literature he has given her, which she has ignored up to this moment. Though Fiona's interest in his present might be the signal of a renewed connection with him, Grant pursues the objective of his quest:

"Fiona, I've brought a surprise for you. Do you remember Aubrey?"
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 (Munro 2001: 323).

Thoughts, feelings and memories fall into Fiona's mind, "beating" like wind. Then Fiona – who on their first meeting in the nursing home denied Grant an embrace – puts her arms around him:

"I'm happy to see you", she said, and pulled his earlobes.
"You could have just driven away", she said. "Just driven away without a care in the world and forsook me. Forsooken me. Forsaken".
He kept his face against her white hair, her pink scalp, her sweetly shaped skull. He said, "Not a chance" (Munro 2001: 323).

In this conclusion we can see that a new mode of communication is established between Grant and Fiona. Munro throws light on Fiona's and Grant's elusive language by employing devices that are typical of lyrics, such as metaphors, repetitions, and alliterations

(Ventura 2010: 3). The incorrect conjugation of the verb 'to forsake' in the sequence "forsook me. Forsooken me. Forsaken" also contributes to shaping these lines into a pattern that resembles a poem. It is noteworthy that these poignant verses are uttered by Fiona, who suffers from a deficit of expressive language related to dementia. Munro shows a revelatory crack in ordinary patterns of communication via her most unintelligible character in this story. Consciously or not, Fiona fully exploits the richness and depth of language, and creates new words, which replace the ones she is losing ("names elude me") and serve the communicative purpose. In fact, Grant seems to be finally able to understand Fiona's language, beyond literal meanings, and readily replies: "Not a chance". In my opinion, Grant's response should be interpreted beyond its literal meaning. His prompt reply and determination, more than his actual words, show that Grant can now grasp the meaning of Fiona's nonsensical language. At the end of this lap of the quest for insight, Grant's final tender remark suggests (with the ambiguousness typical of Munro's closures) that he might have abandoned his self-centred stance in order to relate empathetically with Fiona.

The ending of "In Sight of the Lake" represents a similar quest for insight into and empathy with dementia. As Corinne Bigot (2015) points out, Munro often disrupts the narrative flow with devices (such as parenthetical structures and dashes) that crack the text surface and prevent closure. In my opinion, in the case of "In Sight of the Lake", a blank space serves this purpose. An empty line separates the moment when Nancy feels trapped in the hall and readers are trapped in her mind, from the concluding paragraph, which foreshadows a new, untold story. In the space of this blank line, words are absent, but more questions are raised: was it all a dream? how long is the temporal shift that separates the two stories? Where is Nancy and where has she been? Also, the effect is disorienting from a temporal point of view: it is not clear whether it represents a slow-down or a speed-up of the relation between story-time and discourse-time.

The informative void of the blank line takes readers backwards, urging us to reconsider the first tale, and to embark on another narrative quest. This is shaped like a spiral, as the beginning of this last section is similar to the short story incipit; it generically mentions a woman – "There is a woman here whose name is Sandy. It says so on the brooch she wears, and Nancy knows her anyway. 'What are we going to do with you?' says Sandy" (Munro 2013: 232). Readers observe Nancy in an unspecified place ("here"), and from the caregiver's perspective. They can understand that Nancy is in a care facility (the narrator refers to a brooch and, afterwards, to a nightie; and Nancy needs help for the seemingly simple act of getting dressed). Patronising attitude and childish language often characterise the caregiver's interaction with an Alzheimer's patient. This is also the case in this brief dialogue, particularly when Sandy says "All we want is to get you into your nightie. And you go and carry on like a chicken that's scared of being et for dinner" (Munro 2013: 232). Sandy's use of the incorrect form "et" instead of 'eaten' mirrors Fiona neologisms in "The Bear". In the case of "In Sight of the Lake", the grammatical mistake is not made by the sufferer. Still, Nancy is not puzzled by Sandy's unconventional language:

"You must have had a dream", she says. "What did you dream about now?"

"Nothing", says Nancy. "It was back when my husband was alive and when I was

still driving the car".
 "You have a nice car?"
 "Volvo".
 "See? You're sharp as a tack" (Munro 2013: 232).

Even though Nancy seems to be able to respond sensibly to Sandy's simple question, by now readers have gained enough insight to be suspicious of her mnemonic reliability. Eventually, Sandy's ironic comment reinforces the idea that all Sandy and readers can make out of Nancy's mental sharpness is cracking a joke. In so doing, Nancy's disease is not ridiculed, nor dismissed. On the contrary, witticism reveals an amusing, unexpected and enlightening way of dealing with Alzheimer's. By ending the short story with a prank, Munro plays with readers (Simal 2014: 71) and shows how fiction can be used for re-valuing and re-reading the stories of dementia.

In conclusion, the revelatory narrative cracks in Alice Munro's dementia stories open new 'in-sights' on the Alzheimer's mind and encourage readers to trace the connections between acts of seeing and understanding, and acts of caring and empathy.

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