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# Masculine Restricted Focalization as a Source of Narrative Ambiguity in "The Bear Came Over the Mountain"

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## Abstract

As the final story in Alice Munro's Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage (2001), "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" is often interpreted as a narrative about Alzheimer's disease, aging, and marital reconciliation. Existing scholarship has mainly examined Fiona's illness from ethical, psychological and symbolic perspectives, while paying less attention to how the restricted narrative perspective shapes readers'understanding of her. This paper considers that the ambiguity surrounding Fiona's illness and the story's open ending arises not merely from the indeterminacy of Alzheimer's disease itself, but more fundamentally from the narrative's exclusive reliance on Grant's masculine restricted focalization. Because the narrative is confined to Grant's internal focalization, Fiona's inner consciousness remains inaccessible, making it difficult to distinguish objective reality from Grant's subjective interpretation. Drawing on James Phelan's three-axis analytical framework, this paper employs close textual analysis to examine how Grant's selective perception, retrospective self-rationalization, and guilt-driven cognitive bias jointly produce narrative ambiguity. It concludes that Munro deliberately concentrates narrative authority in Grant's male perspective, so that the story's ambiguity reflects not only the uncertainty of illness but also the inherent limitations of a masculine focal position in representing the inner experience of others.

## Keywords

Alice Munro; "The Bear Came Over the Mountain"; Narrative Ambiguity; Masculine Restricted Focalization; James Phelan's Three-Axis Framework

## 1. Introduction

Alice Munro is widely regarded as one of the most accomplished contemporary short story writers. Her fiction is noted for its subtle psychological characterization, everyday settings, and sophisticated narrative techniques. Rather than offering definitive explanations, Munro frequently employs limited perspectives in her later career (Shen,2020).

First published in The New Yorker in 1999 and later collected in Hateship,

Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage(2001), "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" exemplifies her unique narrative strategy. The story follows Grant and Fiona, an elderly couple whose long marriage is challenged after Fiona is diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. Following her admission to a nursing home, Fiona gradually forgets Grant and develops an attachment to another resident, Aubrey. As Grant attempts to respond to this unexpected change, he is also forced to confront memories of his own past infidelity. The story ends without resolving whether Fiona truly recognizes Grant again, leaving both her illness and the future of their relationship open to interpretation.

Previous scholarship on this story can be roughly divided into two strands. The first and dominant strand explore the ethical dilemmas of caregiving, the fragility of memory, and the moral complexity of marriage against the backdrop of aging and dementia (Balestra, 2016). The second strand turns to narrative form. Goldman and Powell (2015) note the constitutive ambiguity of the text, and Lecker (2015) analyzes the empowering effect of restricted memory narration. A few studies have systematically examined the masculine dimension of this restricted perspective. These studies have deepened our understanding of the story's humanistic connotation, but seldom treat narrative perspective as a productive factor of meaning. This paper aims to apply Phelan's three-axis model of unreliable narration to explain the generative mechanism of ambiguity, so as to reveal how the monopoly of male restricted focalization constructs the meaning of Fiona's illness and shapes the open ending.

This paper argues that the narrative ambiguity of "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" is primarily produced by Grant's masculine perspective and his unreliable narration rather than by the indeterminacy of Alzheimer's disease itself. Although unreliable narration has traditionally been associated with first-person narratives, later studies have shown that third-person narration may also become unreliable when it remains consistently restricted to a single character's consciousness. In such cases, narrative unreliability results not from grammatical person but from the character's limited knowledge, perception, and judgment. This understanding provides the theoretical basis for examining Grant's narration.

It is necessary to clarify the conceptual boundary between restricted focalization and unreliable narration. As Shen Dan (2006) points out, third-person restricted focalization first means a structural limitation of perceptual scope where readers can only access information within the focal character's field of vision. It results in insufficient information rather than interpretive distortion. Unreliable narration, by contrast, occurs when the focal character's subjective values, psychological defenses and cognitive biases lead to systematic misinterpretation of events and characters. In this story, Grant's restricted focalization provides the structural precondition for narrative ambiguity, while his subjective masculine position and guilt-driven psychological defense constitute the internal cause of unreliable interpretation. The

interaction of these two layers produces the irreducible indeterminacy of the text.

Through close reading, this paper explores how Grant's restricted perspective shapes readers' understanding of Fiona and contributes to the story's open ending. It argues that the uncertainty surrounding Fiona's illness is only one manifestation of a broader narrative strategy. The discussion is organized into three chapters, examining Grant's limited focalization, the unreliability of his narration, and the relationship between narrative perspective and the story's ambiguity.

## 2. Grant's Limited Perspective and Narrative Mediation

### 2.1. Third-Person Restricted Focalization

"The Bear Came Over the Mountain" employs third-person narration restricted to Grant's perceptual field rather than traditional omniscience. The narrator consistently follows Grant's observations, memories, and interpretations, limiting readers' access to Fiona's consciousness. As a result, third-person narration does not guarantee objectivity or reliability; persistent attachment to a single character's consciousness can produce informational constraints that contribute to narrative unreliability (Wang, 2021). Grant thus becomes the primary mediator through whom readers understand Fiona.

This restriction is established in the account of Fiona's Alzheimer's diagnosis: "Over a year ago Grant had started noticing ... touching in its precision" (Munro, 2001, p. 276). Grant interprets Fiona's memory lapses as symptoms of the disease, organizing past incidents into a pattern of deterioration. His conversation with the doctor reveals this process. When Grant claims, "She's always been a bit like this" (Munro, 2001, p. 277), he retrospectively frames Fiona's behavior as evidence of her condition. He then recalls her leaving a fur coat in a storage closet, which Fiona explains as "unintentionally on purpose" and "like a sin she was leaving behind" (Munro, 2001, p. 277). While Grant interprets the incident as forgetfulness, Fiona gives it symbolic meaning. Nevertheless, Grant's account dominates the diagnostic discussion. Although the doctor remains cautious, noting that "It might be selective at first" (Munro, 2001, p. 278) and that "We don't know ... until we see the pattern of the deterioration" (Munro, 2001, p. 278), readers are already guided toward accepting the diagnosis. Fiona's experience is therefore filtered through Grant's interpretation rather than presented directly.

The same narrative restriction shapes readers' understanding of Fiona's decision to enter the care home. She tells Grant, "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. Shallowlake?" (Munro, 2001, p. 278). Yet the narrative never clarifies whether she fully recognizes her condition, fears the future, or wishes to ease Grant's burden. Readers can only follow Grant's observations and speculations.

Third-person restricted focalization thus determines both the information available to readers and their understanding of Fiona. Because her consciousness remains

inaccessible, she is represented primarily through Grant's observations and interpretations. This deliberate narrative strategy establishes the structural conditions for the story's ambiguity.

### 2.2. The Absence of Fiona's Subjective Experience and Information Filtering

Restricted focalization not only limits the source of information but also consistently deprives Fiona of the opportunity to directly express her own experience. Although she is present throughout the story, readers can scarcely enter her inner world, nor do they often receive her direct explanations regarding her illness, marriage or emotions. She exists primarily as an object of Grant's observation and interpretation, rather than as a subject capable of autonomously narrating her own experience.

In terms of textual presentation, all complete mental processes, chains of memory, and emotional flows belong exclusively to Grant. Readers are granted full access to Grant's inner world, witnessing his guilt over past infidelities, his self-reproach for his wife's illness, as well as his self-justifications and psychological defenses. Fiona's outward appearance and familial background are shaped through Grant's gaze or recollection, yet Fiona's inner self remains an invisible black box, forever hidden from view.

When Grant reunites with Fiona at the care home, she recalls for him her youthful acquaintance with Aubrey and explains the origin of their connection: "It's just Aubrey ... Visiting my grandparents—they lived on the farm" (Munro, 2001, p. 289). However, Grant interprets this old friendship as a long-buried affection. He catches "a blush spotting her newly fattened face" (Munro, 2001, p. 290). This physical description leaves no room for an explanation of Fiona's emotions. Readers, along with Grant, are inclined to interpret her flushed cheeks as shyness in Aubrey's presence, and further to ascribe this physiological reaction to an ambiguous fondness for the other elderly man. When Fiona forgot his habit of not drinking tea, occupied with her card-playing companion and can only temporarily neglect him, this registers in Grant's perception as deliberate distancing and coldness on his wife's part. In recording the physical interactions between Fiona and Aubrey, the text unfolds entirely through Grant's line of sight: "Fiona shuffled and dealt for him ... seemed to be slipping from his grasp" (Munro, 2001, p. 293), "He could see Aubrey's husbandly frown ... cheek" (Munro, 2001, p. 293). Gentle physical gestures such as Fiona shuffling cards, supporting the cards, and patting the back of a hand tend, from Grant's perspective, to be construed as affectionate overtures charged with intimacy. At times, Grant even hallucinates the actions and words of Fiona and Aubrey together, for instance: "...Take care. He is here. My love." The narrative provides insufficient evidence to determine whether Fiona's behavior reflects romantic attachment or Grant's subjective interpretation. Nowhere in the entire text is there a single interior monologue that fully belongs to Fiona, nor is there any

passage that directly presents her mental activities of solitary reflection, remembrance, grief, or joy.

Grant himself once doubts: "He could not decide ... If that was what she was pretending. If it was a pretense. " (Munro, 2001, p. 291). He wonders whether Fiona's detachment is a deliberate pretense or forgetting caused by the disease, yet the text never shifts the narrative perspective to provide an answer, never inserts Fiona's authentic inner thoughts to corroborate or refute Grant's speculation.

Therefore, the Grant-led information framework constructed in this story leads to the absence of Fiona's subjective experience. Although Fiona drives the plot, readers cannot bypass Grant to access Fiona directly. They can only accept the observations and interpretations he provides. This narrative mediation determines that all understanding of Fiona's illness, the marital relationship, and the open-ended conclusion must be constructed upon the limited foundation of Grant's cognition. More importantly, Fiona's indirect representation should not be seen merely as a result of Grant's limited perspective, but as Munro's deliberate narrative strategy. This withholding prevents her from becoming a fully autonomous subject and turns her silence into a device that sustains interpretive openness and narrative ambiguity.

## 3. Grant's Subjectivity and Narrative Unreliability

James Phelan expands Booth's theory of unreliable narration into a three-axis framework: facts/events, values/judgment, and knowledge/perception. Grant's unreliability primarily operates on the latter two axes. On the values/judgment axis, he reconstructs past memories to preserve his moral self-image; on the knowledge/perception axis, his suppressed guilt creates cognitive blind spots, leading him to interpret Fiona's behavior primarily through the lens of illness. Although not intentionally deceptive, his narration is shaped by self-justification and lingering guilt, making it persistently unreliable.

### 3.1. Retrospective Memory and Self-Rationalization

All accounts of Grant's past marriage are retrospective memories, with his recollections of youthful infidelity most clearly revealing value-based unreliability. In Phelan's three-axis framework, this occurs when a narrator's ethical judgments are shaped by self-interest rather than factual distortion, allowing him to rationalize his conduct and preserve his moral self-image (Phelan, 2007).

Grant minimizes his infidelity by resisting the label of "philanderer" and portraying his behavior in terms of "kindness and generosity and even sacrifice"(Munro, 2001, p. 285). By comparing himself with a more promiscuous colleague, he presents his own betrayals as relatively harmless. He similarly claims to have protected his younger lovers' feelings, arguing that he had

"catered to a woman's pride, to her fragility" (Munro, 2001, p. 285), thereby recasting himself as a considerate benefactor rather than someone who exploited women. This framing obscures the fundamental betrayal underlying these relationships.

Grant further justifies himself by comparing his conduct with the supposedly worse choice of abandoning Fiona: would it have been better if he had done as others had done with their wives and left her?" (Munro, 2001, p. 285). He emphasizes that he "had never stopped making love to Fiona" and "had not stayed away from her for a single night" (Munro, 2001, p. 285), using continued marital intimacy and personal stability to mitigate his infidelity. Such comparisons allow him to substitute a lower moral standard for genuine accountability. By minimizing his transgressions, he sustains the image of himself as a responsible husband. This value-based bias also reflects the privilege of his masculine perspective, which treats male infidelity as a forgivable lapse whose emotional consequences can be downplayed. His self-serving judgments therefore undermine the neutrality of his narration.

### 3.2. Guilt psychology and perception bias

Grant is both a witness to his marriage and a retrospective narrator burdened by guilt. As Fiona's symptoms become more apparent, his accumulated guilt interferes with his perception of her behavior, producing unreliability along the knowledge/perception axis. His psychological defenses lead him to favor interpretations that ease his guilt while overlooking alternative explanations. This explanation not only fits the symptoms but also distances him from responsibility for her suffering. If her behavior results entirely from illness, her emotional pain need not be connected to his past infidelity. The same bias shapes his interpretation of Fiona's relationship with Aubrey. He views their closeness as an attachment caused by the disease, overlooking the possibility that Aubrey offers the companionship and understanding Fiona lacked in her marriage, or that her distance from Grant reflects past emotional injuries rather than memory loss. Filtered through guilt, details that challenge his assumptions are diminished and absorbed into a single medical explanation.

Grant's unreliability thus stems not from deliberate deception but from self-justification and guilt-driven perceptual bias. Combined with the restricted focalization discussed in the previous chapter, these subjective distortions form a central source of the story's narrative ambiguity.

## 4. Narrative Ambiguity and the Significance of Fiona's Illness

The central ambiguity of the story is an inevitable consequence of the restricted narrative perspective. The meaning of the disease, the direction of the outcome, the true thoughts of the characters, all of these unresolved issues are essentially the

product of the single focusing perspective's monopoly on narrative interpretation.

### 4.1. Alzheimer's Disease as Narrative Construction

This discussion does not deny the possibility that Fiona suffers from Alzheimer's disease. Many details in the text including her memory lapses and spatial disorientation are consistent with typical symptoms of the disease. However, it hints that the "illness" presented to readers in the story is not necessarily an objective medical fact, but is likely to be the product of Grant's narrative construction. For Grant, "Alzheimer's disease" functions less as a straightforward physiological diagnosis than as a complete explanatory rhetoric. He uses the disease to interpret all of Fiona's abnormal behavior as symptoms. Her closeness to Aubrey, her amnesia regarding her husband, and her coldness toward him can all be attributed to the subsequent effects of the illness. When every anomaly can be accounted for by the disease, there is no need to confront more unsettling possibilities, such as the wife's emotional transformation or the preexisting distance that had long been embedded in the marriage. In this sense, Fiona's illness serves simultaneously as a description of her condition and as a psychological instrument of Grant's self-defense.

### 4.2. The Perspective Roots of Open Ending

The reunion between Grant and Fiona at the story's close serves as an instance of the open ending, and it provides the most compelling demonstration of how the restricted perspective molds the story's meaning. Some readers might interpret this reunion as a warm conclusion where Fiona's memory briefly returns and the couple arrives at an emotional reconciliation. Yet this interpretation is essentially still an extension of Grant's viewpoint. Every judgment about "recognition" and "reconciliation" amounts to nothing more than a secondary extrapolation from the results of Grant's perception.

Grant entered the room to find Fiona sitting by the window, wearing a dress unlike those she would normally choose, with a book about Iceland open on her lap. She first complained that the residents' clothes had been mixed up at the care facility, then casually asked, "You've been gone a long time. Are we all checked out now?"(Munro, 2001, p. 321). This seemingly ordinary question can be interpreted either as a sign of identity confusion caused by memory loss or as carrying a trace of irony. Yet neither interpretation is supported by any objective representation of Fiona's inner consciousness. When Grant deliberately mentioned Aubrey's name, the narrative once again remained confined to his perspective: "She stared at him for a moment ... pulling everything to rags" (Munro, 2001, p. 322). This striking image of destruction does not represent Fiona's inner experience. Rather, it is Grant's subjective interpretation of her facial expression. The remark that follows, " 'Names elude me,' she said harshly," can establish only that she was unable, at that moment, to connect a name with a person. It cannot demonstrate that she had

completely forgotten the past, nor can it confirm whether her inability to remember names deliberately included Grant himself.

Immediately after this abrupt response, Fiona's attitude softened noticeably. With some effort, she seemed to recover her characteristic playfulness. She pulled his earlobes and then said "You could have just driven away, ... Forsooken me. Forsaken.(Munro, 2001, p. 322)" This sequence of affectionate yet reproachful words can easily be taken as evidence that Fiona has regained her memory and is expressing her genuine feelings. Nevertheless, the text never enters Fiona's consciousness to confirm whether she truly recognizes her husband. Her display of intimacy may reflect a brief recovery of memory and emotion. It may instead be an instinctive attachment to a familiar presence in the midst of cognitive decline. Alternatively, it may simply be a habitual expression of politeness developed within the social environment of the nursing home.

The reader's inability to arrive at a single, definitive interpretation arises from the limitations of the narrative perspective itself. Throughout the story, Grant's masculine consciousness functions as the sole channel of perception. Consequently, the ending cannot transcend this perspective to provide an objective truth beyond the limits of his understanding. What readers believe they witness as the ending is, in fact, only the ending as Grant perceives it. What appears to be Fiona's reconciliation may instead be nothing more than Grant reading into her words and actions the forgiveness he desperately wishes to receive. Hence, the open ending of the story is not merely an instance of narrative indeterminacy or authorial withholding. Instead, it is the inevitable outcome of a narrative consistently restricted to a male perspective. As long as interpretive authority remains entirely in the hands of a single observer, the suspension of truth ceases to be an authorial choice and becomes a structural necessity.

### 4.3. Irreducible Narrative Ambiguity

Precisely because readers can never break through the limits of Grant's perception to access Fiona's true consciousness directly, a series of questions in the story will forever resist a singular answer. Is Fiona's closeness to Aubrey a dependency induced by Alzheimer's disease, or an active emotional choice she makes once freed from the constraints of her marital identity? Is her growing estrangement from Grant a natural consequence of memory decline, or a covert form of retaliation and punishment for his earlier betrayal? Are the embrace and reproaches during the final reunion a heartfelt expression of revived memory, or merely a confused reaction shaped by her dementia? Even Grant's final decision to stay with Fiona invites no definitive conclusion.

From Grant's self-rationalization of his past infidelities, to his partial interpretation of Fiona's condition, and on to the multiple possible readings of their final reunion, the narrative ambiguity in "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" pervades the entire

text. The nature of this ambiguity is not medical uncertainty about the disease but a fundamental indeterminacy at the level of meaning. It is rooted in Grant's monopoly over the power of narrative interpretation and in the complete absence of Fiona's subjective experience under the single focalized perspective.

Munro fundamentally transforms what appears to be a story about illness and aging into a narrative experiment concerning the limits of cognition. By sealing off the female inner voice and restricting the reader's perceptual access, she compels readers to experience firsthand the existential predicament of never being able to fully understand another person. In trying to piece together a true portrait of Fiona from scattered details, readers inevitably fall into Grant's interpretive framework and are made to feel the constraints of a single perspective. In this sense, the irreducible narrative ambiguity constitutes the very core of the story's appeal and thematic value. It serves as a reminder that any interpretation or definition of another person is inescapably entangled with the observer's own desires, guilt, expectations, and prejudices.

## 5. Conclusion

Drawing on the theory of third-person unreliable narration, this study takes Alice Munro's short story "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" as its object and explores the intrinsic connection between the single male focalized perspective and the narrative ambiguity of the story. The study does not deny the possibility of Fiona suffering from Alzheimer's disease, but tries to explain that all the unsolved problems in the story are not the blank of facts in essence, but the result of narration.

As the only core focus character in the full text, Grant monopolizes the entire power of interpreting his wife. Everything readers come to know about Fiona passes through the filter of his perception and the framework of his meaning-making. He defines the Fiona readers see. Through this limited narrative design, Monroe further transforms a daily story about aging and disease into a deep narrative about the limitations of human cognition. She does not give a standard answer about marriage, disease and redemption, but reminds us that any understanding of another person is inevitably entangled with the observer's own experiences, emotions, and value positions. Even a lifelong companionship can never grant us full possession of another person's truth. Without the pursuit of certain truth, Munro precisely renders the most authentic cognitive predicament within intimate relationships.

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