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The Literary Potential of Old Age in Simone de Beauvoir, The Stone Angel, and New Canadian Narratives

Sally Chivers, Department of English
McGill University
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Abstract

In an interdisciplinary study, I argue that narrative fiction centred around old women, through its appeal to readers' imaginations, can challenge the ageism which currently governs how old women are scripted and depicted.

Chapter one situates media broadcasts amidst other discourses, such as academic theory, medical language, gerontology, and popular feminism, which confront--or avoid confronting--old women. To counter common, negative cultural depictions, chapter two examines Margaret Lock and Simone de Beauvoir's engagements with narratives of aging. I combine de Beauvoir's constructivist La Vieillesse and midlife fiction with Jean-Paul Sartre's What is Literature?, Martha Nussbaum's Poetic Justice, and Mieke Bal's Narratology to articulate how narrative fiction can compel what I call a committed reader to reimagine social possibilities for old women.

Chapter three foregrounds old age as a new category of analysis for Margaret Laurence's The Stone Angel, sifting through her metaphors of decrepitude to set up a model for studying three potential, late life, female social roles.

Chapter four connects Joan Barfoot's Duet for Three with Hiromi Goto's Chorus of Mushrooms, which both depart from the previous age-as-decrepitude convention, to propose that the role of grandmother offers old women opportunities to give freely and benefit from non-possessive love, in a family context. In chapter five, I examine how gerontological nursing

textbooks theorize institutional care to illuminate how Edna Alford's A Sleep Full of Dreams and Shani Mootoo's Cereus Blooms at Night facilitate an intergenerational bond within nursing homes. Caregivers' communicative strategies in each text exemplify how readers' imaginative engagement could begin to counter negative cultural attitudes. In chapter six, I explore how female friendship, as depicted in Barfoot's Charlotte and Claudia Keeping in Touch and Cynthia Scott's The Company of Strangers, offers old women an interdependence which enables the self sufficiency they often (are considered to) lack, eschewing a old age versus youth binary opposition.

I conclude that narrative fiction provides opportunities to shift cultural meanings of the conventionally negative term old, so that committed reading can transform imagined possibilities and lead to new perceptions of old women.

Résumé

Je soutiens que la fiction narrative axée sur les femmes âgées, en faisant appel à l'imagination du lecteur, peut remettre en cause l'âgisme.

Le premier chapitre situe les émissions de radio et de télévision par rapport à d'autres discours qui reprétent défavorablement les femmes âgées. Le deuxième chapitre examine comment Margaret Lock et Simone de Beauvoir ont combattu les descriptions défavorables. Je puise dans l'ouvrage constructiviste La Vieillesse de Beauvoir et dans sa fiction d'âge mur, ainsi que dans Qu'est-ce que la littérature? de Jean-Paul Sartre, dans Poetic Justice de Martha Nussbaum et dans Narratology de Mieke Bal afin d'expliquer comment la fiction narrative peut inciter ce que j'appelle le «lecteur engagé» à réimaginer les possibilités sociales qui s'offrent aux femmes âgées.

Le troisième chapitre propose la vieillesse comme nouvelle catégorie d'analyse de The Stone Angel de Margaret Laurence, fouillant dans ses métaphores de la décrépitude afin d'établir un modèle d'étude de trois rôles sociaux féminins éventuels en fin de vie. Le quatrième chapitre compare Duet for Three de Joan Barfoot à Chorus of Mushrooms de Hiromi Goto, qui se démarquent de la convention antérieur de l'âge en tant que décrépitude pour proposer que le rôle de grand-mère offre aux femmes âgées l'occasion de donner un amour non possessif et d'en profiter. Le cinquième chapitreexamine d'abord la manière dont les manuels de soins infirmiers en gérontologie théorisent les soins en établissement, afin de me permettre de faire ressortir comment Edna Alford dans A Sleep Full of Dreams et Shani Mootoo dans Cereus Blooms at Night favorisent un lien entre générations

dans le cadre de l'établissement. Dans chaque oeuvre, les stratégies de communication des soignants illustrent comment l'engagement imaginatif du lecteur pourrait commencer à contrecarrer les attitudes culturelles. Le sixième chapitre explore la manière dont l'amitié féminine, telle que décrite par Barfoot dans Charlotte and Claudia Keeping in Touch et par Cynthia Scott dans The Company of Strangers, offre aux femmes âgées une interdépendance qui débouche sur l'autosuffisance qu'elles sont souvent réputées manquer, ce qui permet d'éviter une opposition binaire typique entre la vieillesse et la jeunesse.

Je conclus que la fiction narrative offre l'occasion de transformer la signification culturelle de l'adjectif «vieille», qui a traditionnellement une connotation négative, afin qu'une lecture engagée puisse transformer les possibilités imaginées en nouvelles perceptions des femmes âgées.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to Edith Grace Chivers, who reaches across generational and geographical chasms with love and humour.

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Introduction: The Literary Potential of Old Age

This dissertation arises out of a recurring novelistic structure I detected in Canadian literature by women when researching aging bodies as depicted in fiction. I had set out to write a simple compare and contrast research project which centred around aging bodies in the manner which was current at the time--rewriting the (insert adjective) body[1]. At the age of seventeen, I fortuitously took Margaret Laurence's The Stone Angel off the public library shelf. I was so permanently affected by its characterization from the perspective of an old woman who was both humanised and demonised that I could no longer look at or think about old people in the same way again. I was struck in my reading of 1995 Commonwealth First Book Prize winner Hiromi Goto's Chorus of Mushrooms by a similar form, theme, and effect. After I discovered Joan Barfoot's Duet for Three, which also retrospectively narrates a life from the vantage of old age, the project fell into place.

My research has evolved into a complex consideration of multiple facets of aging and old age which combines numerous cultural depictions, including the literary works which motivated the study. I continually return to the moment at which I originally encountered Hagar Shipley in a manner that formed not only my attitudes towards the old women around me, but also my awe for the power of literary narrative to alter irreversibly my engagement with the social world outside its bounds. It struck me then, and continues to perplex me, that an author writing with almost as much distance from the experience of old age as I had renders convincingly the internal mechanisms of growing old, so that readers can feel newly informed and

aware. I remain sceptical that the novel only reflects a relatively young person's understanding of old age. The Stone Angel may simply match my own hopes and fears of the process of aging and not accurately construct the inner mind of an old woman. Still, whether or not it taps into actual facets of aging, Margaret Laurence's innovative novel makes readers aware of their own thinking about old age and so can change how readers interact with old people they encounter, or at least what they automatically think, subsequent to reading the novel. It is my hope, eventually, to take the novels into a reading group comprised of old women (perhaps at the McGill Institute of Learning in Retirement) and observe the reactions those people have to a literary construction of what is presumed to be their own experience.

In the time that I have been actively researching and writing about old age, I have faced scrutiny and scepticism from those who ask about my work. There are two prevalent responses. The first reaction is to question why such a young scholar would be interested in such a "depressing" topic. Speakers reveal their assumption within that question, and my response is to reveal that assumption. Contrary to pervasive automatic thinking, late life is not depressing or gloomy, nor is its study. I seek to address and eliminate precisely that seemingly automatic, negative association between old age and decrepitude. The second response I frequently encounter is an anecdote about an old person known to or observed by the questioner, most often a grandparent; I am often impressed by the influence older relatives have had on people's lives. Unfortunately, those anecdotes too often fit into the very modes of describing old age that I wish to illuminate and modify through my

work. Out of respect to friends and colleagues, I have not included these stories in my dissertation, though they serve perfectly as examples of the pernicious effect that pervasive modes of discourse, such as media representation, truly have, even on people trained in critical thought. Instead, I consider this dissertation as a response and appeal to anyone who has told me of the sadness of encountering an old person trying to cross the street, who has described the supposed humour of a television advertisement depicting elderly people with sexual desire, and, in particular, to comedians who, so restricted by recent reconfigurations of what is acceptable comic fodder, still feel perfectly comfortable poking fun at the old--ever the convenient symbols of cultural weakness.

Many comedians do make concessions to their audiences out of what they often refer to as political correctness in order to categorise even the attempted elimination of categories. This does not seem to hold true for the "category" of old age. For example, even deaf activist/comedian Kathy Buckley feels perfectly comfortable pulling her pants up above her waist to make fun of an aging porter in a routine designed to increase awareness of America's strange paradoxes in dealing with disabilities. For some reason, aging does not merit the same understanding of stereotypes as other forms of grouping people.

My work attempts to increase awareness of both the stereotyping of the elderly and the reasons recent movements to eliminate discrimination have avoided, or at least left out, old age. I begin in the same place as many current theoretical, and analytical, inquiries. Like race theory, my analysis of old age

seeks to address and deconstruct ill-considered, socially damaging prejudices towards a visible, usually disenfranchised minority. Like feminism (with which I perceive my project to be in direct dialogue), my analysis of old age grapples with a situation which links people directly with their physical manifestations so that they must think by and through the body both to encounter the world and to be encountered by the world. Also like feminist theory, the study of old age, in my opinion, must not overemphasise the body, which, although crucial, can limit the study just as the body is perceived as limiting the experience of senescence. Also like feminism, old age studies affect people of different genders in acutely different ways. Men and women experience aging differently because of how they are constructed to perceive self-worth. Studies of aging currently available concentrate on women and, in some cases, queer men. Like queer studies, old age studies consider bodies and subjects in a position which could be considered abject, and attempt to reimbue that position with a power and authority both necessarily and not necessarily sexual. Unlike race theory, feminist theory, and queer theory, however, the study of old age is available to most critics with equal critical distance and proximity: most scholars both imagine late life as removed from personal experience, but also to be a possible future experience. I am not someone who could presently be considered old, but old age is a stage (stages) of life I hope to experience. Further, my care of older members of my family could be and is crucial. Whereas racial identity is stable for many people (though it can vary geographically and according to myriad cultural contingencies and constructions), and gender or sexual

identity frequently also remains stable, age identity changes continuously for all people who live past childhood.

I resist, with some reluctance, the temptation to begin my analysis as many current analyses of old age begin--with a potent and disturbing image of an old person, usually framed as visual art. Such studies usually describe the moment at which such art was encountered, general reactions perceived to the work of art, and then an amelioration of such misguided readings of elderly flesh. For example, in Aging and its Discontents, Kathleen Woodward's eloquent opening description of a photograph in a Strasbourg gallery draws readers' attention to assumptions about aging. In the photograph, an old man (though perhaps only in his early sixties) is surrounded by empty liquor bottles. Woodward neatly points out that despite the prominently displayed contextual markers, "his surroundings seemed to disappear" because viewers struggle with confronting an aging body. From discussions of the photograph with other academics, she determines that people do not want to look at the photograph. She gleans a crucial point about the denial of aging which she traces within the history of psychoanalysis (1-2). Describing an image in detail is an effective method of shocking readers into paying attention to how aging can confront and startle, through its visual twists and mutations of what the general public is usually permitted and encouraged to view as healthy bodies. Because I seek to mitigate and eliminate that shock by shifting the interpretive meaning of, say, wrinkles and grey hair, I would like to avoid profiting from readers' frequent ambivalent, intensely personal responses.

My own analysis mixes with distinction various modes of depiction, which include the visual. I have worked hard to avoid privileging the visual in my study, though, so as to avoid a trap of making the body once again central to a study of old age. I fear that concentrating on the body would mean that physical restrictions, which could in fact be culturally determined to any number of degrees, would again restrict the extent to which new claims could be made about late life. For example, I have been struck by the many times newspapers describe people living through war in former Yugoslavia as prematurely aged, old before their time, and looking older than their age. Such claims allow me to assume that late life physical change is contingent on experience. There is no necessary physical manifestation of a particular age, and so myriad factors must determine age. Mary Russo, in her "Aging and the Scandal of Anachronism," raises the perplexing and probing question, "Are we ever only the age we are?" (25). She pinpoints the difficulty of determining age through any one means, though we often rely on chronology to allow a relational comfort: "A friend of mine, for instance, always sees herself as seven years younger than her sister, whose hair is thinning" (25). To develop venues of exploration beyond the physical as contained often through the visual, I privilege fictional narrative as a rich and invaluable resource for cultural and theoretical analysis.

I situate my analysis of fiction next to analyses of other modes of depiction--such as media representation, medical textbooks, academic criticism, and feminist theory--in order to demonstrate the progress I claim fiction allows readers to make in understanding stages of late life and in

"reading" the "world" through language. In particular, I argue that narrative fiction makes a specific appeal to readers to situate themselves in connection with characters. The connection forged within an imaginative framework, allowing readers creative leeway, enables and encourages new thinking through all sensory registers about other people. Narrative fiction that centres around old age and aging characters deliberately asks that readers rethink late life and circulating perceptions of it. My work is interdisciplinary in that it yokes together numerous modes of analysis and description, but it always does so to illuminate fiction as a distinct and particular mode. In my study, fiction goes beyond a make-believe construction of a world of possibility and becomes a distinct way of talking about social issues and a way which offers the same kind of conceptual insights as more overtly theoretical modes of discussion, but does so with a wider and more imaginative appeal.

I also make an overt choice here to talk mostly about women's experience with old age. Old women are perceived to experience two-fold cultural loss, since it is not just their utility but also their femininity which is considered to fade[2]. My choice to talk mostly about women, though, is more complex than this familiar, fundamental consideration. Women typically live longer than men and seem to have more concern with the issues of extreme late life I address. I justify my choice by explaining that it is by women and within communities of women that questions of old age have begun to be raised[3], it is by women and within communities of women that the fiction I have discovered as the only means of depicting age differently from the norm

has been written, and it is by women and within communities of women that I expect such activism to continue. Further, women typically have responsibility for older people of both genders in terms of providing care and being sure that care is provided. For example, in her Encounters with Aging: Mythologies of Menopause in Japan and North America, Margaret Lock explains that, in Japan, care for elderly people most frequently occurs at home and that "a recent study by the Ministry of Labor showed that out of nearly five hundred people who were nursing the elderly in their Tokyo homes over 81 percent were women whose average age was fifty-six years" (123). Frequently, women's expected caregiver status requires them to ensure or provide care for elderly relatives and in-laws. The process of growing old and male is distinct from, but related to, the processes I describe here, so that my study does have relevance for on-going cultural analyses of age and gender.

Lastly, I want to clarify that it is late life--latest life--that concerns me here. To a degree, the relevant issues reach back as far as menopause, and I do discuss some depictions of middle age, but both serve only as augers of old age in my study. The characters in the fiction I present are at least seventy-years-old and range into their late nineties. Fiction from the perspective of middle-aged women is still remarkable, though reasonably prevalent. I find particularly marvellous that a set of novels and films created in Canada work together to create a diverse, dialectical, new depiction of female aging from the perspective of extremely old women.

In my first chapter, I situate an analysis of CBC's radio and television

coverage amidst other discourses which confront--or avoid confronting--old people and old bodies, such as academic theory, medical language, gerontology, and popular feminism. In each discipline, old women face a particular set of attitudes because of the double bind their aging supposedly entails--they are supposed to lose simultaneously social utility and femininity. I examine how cultural depictions of old women, and in particular fictional depictions, counter the shortcomings of moral and medical models of the analysis of female late life. The conjunction of disciplinary models in this chapter sets up my reasons for turning to fictional narrative to display the potential inherent to aging which other analytical frameworks continue to ignore.

Chapter two continues to explain how fictional narrative can offer potent examples and insights to a study of a social problem such as negative perceptions of old age. I provide the examples set by Simone de Beauvoir and McGill medical anthropologist Margaret Lock, who both rely on narrative in their studies of late life. I begin by examining how Lock collects personal narratives to explain the cultural specificity of menopause which, like middle age in Beauvoir's fiction, heralds old age in her comparative study. Lock's choice enables me to focus on the cultural specificity of aging which is conveyed via narrative. I then connect Simone de Beauvoir's book-length treatise, Old Age, with her fiction in which middle age also heralds the late life concerns I continue to address. Beauvoir herself draws on various genres of narrative--anthropological, historical, medical and literary--to make claims about aging in her study. I adapt her methodology to make further

claims about both old age and the role fiction has to play in its study. Combining the methodologies of these two scholars allows my work to contrast ubiquitous, negative portrayals of old women with the potential that certain Canadian fictional depictions contain and to begin to make an argument which links the structure of the works of fiction I have chosen with their perceived contribution to an analysis of old age.

Because of its extensive international impact and ensuing influence on the other Canadian texts of my study, chapter three presents The Stone Angel as suggesting three different social possibilities for old women which I elaborate in the following chapters. Laurence offers, from Hagar Shipley's nonagenarian perspective, the possibility for continuation and release via grandmotherhood, the possibility of a positive nursing home experience negated by the fears continually attached to such institutions, and the possible respite of female friendship which Hagar recognises and enacts just prior to what readers assume is her demise. Strangely, studies of this novel evade the pervading old age of its narrator. My study addresses this lack. I argue that Hagar Shipley's continual retrospective narration makes the narrative frame integral to the structure of the book so that readers consider an increasingly shrinking physical world only through her ninety-year-old mind. Thus, the novel, through Hagar's metaphoric self-description, presents a unique, rich conceptual framework which enables and encourages new understandings of late life experience, at the same time as it participates in negative stereotyping through an aged narrator.

This prototype allows me to propose, in chapter four, that the role of

grandmother is not as socially scripted or physically constrained as that of mother, which is bound by cultural expectations and pervasive understandings of female bodies as primarily reproductive. Joan Barfoot and Hiromi Goto invite readers to experience the potential for certain old women to play a significant, new role of grandmother which entails a remarkable and unique possibility of selfless, but not sacrificial, love unavailable to motherhood. I begin by analyzing bench-mark studies of motherhood in terms of what they can offer to a conceptualisation of grandmotherhood. I then turn to fiction to enrich the preliminary model that Adrienne Rich's Of Woman Born, Sara Ruddick's Maternal Thinking, and Marianne Hirsch's Mother / Daughter Plots hint at. I connect Joan Barfoot's Duet for Three with Hiromi Goto's Chorus of Mushrooms because both address the complexity of female generations in Canadian immigrant families and directly expand current discussions of motherhood, and, by extension, grandmotherhood. Whereas Margaret Laurence writes The Stone Angel only from Hagar Shipley's perspective, the two novels in this chapter contain other generations' perspectives and provide the reader insight into the complicated interpersonal (and other types of) negotiations required to solve some recurring dilemmas of old age, especially that of whether to live with the family, in a nursing home, or in an alternative communal framework. These novels mark a shift in self depiction, at the same time as they overtly portray relationships with granddaughters, so that they challenge narratives of decrepitude in a way that The Stone Angel does not.

The fear of nursing home life looms over each of these novels, and so, in

my fifth chapter, I combine an analysis of gerontological nursing textbooks with the study of two works of fiction to argue that new communicative strategies are crucial to ameliorating what is all too frequently dismissed as a bleak and even life-threatening choice (whether to move into an institution). Edna Alford's A Sleep Full of Dreams and Shani Mootoo's Cereus Blooms at Night both provide the perspective of a caregiver who pieces together the individual stories of nursing home residents, modelling the interpretive role of readers, and offering readers a richer understanding of the dynamics of nonfamilial interactions with old women. The identification that emerges enables the question of whether, within an institutional framework, constructive relationships can develop so that depictions of nursing homes could participate in ameliorating attitudes towards late life and late life care.

Having presented the possibility for public and private care facilities to denote more than dependence and loss of self, I offer, in the final chapter, alternate social possibilities for old women which extend beyond familial relations and institutional incarceration (as it is so frequently figured). Filmic depictions, such as Cynthia Scott's The Company of Strangers, provide a model of female friendship and community and can situate the viewer as imaginatively participating in that milieu. Forming crucial interpersonal bonds, however dismissed as inconsequential to human experience, could provide old women with the perfect solution to economic and physical change late in life. Pooling resources provides choices to women who might otherwise not even have the power to choose between living with a family (not an option for all women) and living in an institution (not always

optional).

By linking an argument about narrative voice with an argument about cultural perceptions of old age, I contend that a penchant for centring stories around old women contains the potential to challenge damaging stereotypes which currently govern how old women are scripted and depicted. Narrative has the capacity to both construct and deconstruct, so it can both reinforce and challenge dominant misconceptions of old age. Through my discovery of and engagement with the texts I present, which theorize old age in increasingly constructive and liberating ways, my understanding of late life has transformed from trying to redeem aging bodies' potential to defy limiting and limited cultural understandings into interpreting the meaning of a broad array of signs and symbols of aging as diversely challenging and freeing.

Endnotes

1. Examples of adjectives which precede the body in such studies are "female," "lesbian," "racialised," and "queer."

2. Susan Sontag pinpointed the gender difference in 1978, naming the combination of ageism and sexism faced by women "a double standard of ageing" (title).

3. The Boston Women's Health Collective's 1987 Ourselves, Growing Older (revised in 1994 as The New Ourselves, Growing Older) provides an example of how women's groups have started to address physical, and related social, issues relevant to late life. Kathleen Woodward's recent Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations further demonstrates that women, especially feminists, are working together to raise questions about aging such as how to age well, how to cope with changing roles, and how to combat negative social perceptions of old women.

Chapter One: Situating Old Women: Fields of Inquiry

When the reputed "ice storm of the century" swept Québec, Eastern Ontario, and the NorthEastern United States at the beginning of 1998, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation leapt to help the millions of potential listeners who could only hope to receive information via battery-powered radio. In the CBC's indispensable coverage, paradoxes prevailed: although most people dependent on the broadcast had no electric power in their homes, officials advised them not to venture outside, where sheets of falling ice posed a mortal threat to public welfare, but rather to stay home and watch movies. The same powerless listeners were sternly admonished not to drink the water without boiling it first (an impossibility for those with electric stoves) but, above all, to remain well-hydrated to avoid hypothermia. Such contradictions reveal that announcers and expert guests found it impossible to adjust certain assumptions about their broadcast audience. One reception assumption did become gradually and abundantly clear.

As subzero temperatures persisted, listeners heard that, although children and the elderly do not shiver when they are cold, shivering is a healthy reaction and indicates that the body is working to maintain heat. If you are shivering, listeners were told, you are likely not yet suffering from hypothermia. This you oddly excluded the one segment of the population about which the CBC, in concert with local authorities, expressed the most concern: the so-called elderly. You, the listener, meant somebody roughly between the ages of eighteen and sixty (that is, not children or the elderly). Well-intentioned public announcements constantly urged those listeners capable of shivering to check on elderly neighbours. But all listeners heard human-interest stories of elderly people who did not want to leave their

homes. For example, listeners heard about an eighty-something forgetful woman who, finally giving in to offers of help, left her home without turning off her stove and caused a fire[1]. Not once, however, did a CBC broadcaster say, "If you are over seventy, you may find that your body does not react the same to extreme cold as it used to." Never did broadcasters appeal directly to the segment of the population about which they exhibited such supposed social concern.

The CBC emergency broadcasts are not exceptional in having scapegoated the elderly, but the emergency situation provides a particularly good context for revealing common, late-life stereotypes. What seemed, momentarily, an exciting opportunity for the media spotlight to illuminate numerous positive and negative facets of old age predictably manifested countless popular misconceptions. Despite age-old connections between experience and wisdom, the CBC did not consult one octogenarian for advice on how to function without electricity--a presumed area of expertise for someone who necessarily has lived through at least one world war and the advent of numerous electrical devices now presumed essential. Of particular note, despite their supposed fragility, not one person over the age of sixty was reported to have attempted to heat a home with propane or a Hibachi, whereas a number of people under that age died as the result of uninformed decisions to heat their homes unsafely. One elderly couple in Notre Dame de Grace (an area particularly hard hit by the storm) dug up their old cast iron cooking implements and, with the help of their gas stove, created radiators to maintain heat in a home that otherwise would have been without for 7 days

(Westphal May 14). Despite such available anecdotes, radio announcers constantly referred to old people's "fear" of leaving home. CBC broadcasters attributed this fear to a belief that the same authorities forcing them from their homes would shunt the elderly off to nursing homes, and they would never see their homes again. Although likely a legitimate concern, the fear of infectious diseases (considerably more dire for those elderly people with deteriorating immune systems) superseded that of lost homes, and indeed an influenza epidemic did sweep shelters. Somewhat familiar with managing without electricity, what seventy-year-old woman or man would voluntarily leave his or her home to spend any number of nights in dormitory-style accommodation with young children and countless infectious diseases circulating day and night?

CBC's misguided, yet somehow philanthropic, attempts are atypical only in that, during the storm (people in Montreal lost electrical power on average from two to seven days), battery-powered radio provided the only communication link for most people. Otherwise, the crown corporation participated in a general media tendency to discuss old age only as human interest and as a phenomenon only loosely related to the target audience, instead of within every member's conceivable future experience. The emergency situation simply helped stereotypes take over the broadcasts because of a social need to situate the vulnerability felt by most Montrealers.

The inability to project one's own future onto a reading of an old body, or perhaps more properly the inevitability of doing so, results in continued cultural readings of old age as primarily physical, and necessarily physically

limited. News coverage such as that of the ice storm concentrates on images and language of vulnerability. Further, wrinkles, and other signs of aging, often signify that vulnerability culturally. As a result, although they fulfilled a crucial community function, members of the Canadian media reinforced a detrimental image of aging. The all too common but wrongheaded association of physical deterioration with mental deterioration results in an accompanying refusal to value the necessary experience which accompanies old age. Somehow, a body presaging one's own potential physical decline is read as no longer housing the knowledge and background gained while physically more able.

Old women suffer from this association and overvaluation of the physical to an even greater extent than do old men, probably because of social yearnings to associate the female with the body and the male with the mind. In the CBC News Magazine of January 13, 1998, shamefully titled "Voices of the Vulnerable," women stand in for the incapacity of the elderly, although they lack the voice to express their very capability. The feature deals with the suffering of the elderly during the January ice storm. It fixates on one particular community in Montreal, without specifying this narrow research base. As a result, the report fails to acknowledge the historical specificity of its subjects who live in a Jewish area of Montreal, but are all chosen because of their visual match to cultural notions of the elderly. The additional shared cultural factor, beyond age, suggests at least one logical reason, fear of persecution, for the reluctance of these people to leave their homes and be herded into shelters. Such a connection to community extends beyond the

supposed stubbornness and lack of understanding attributed them and suggests communal belonging.

The feature begins with an image of an elderly woman who well-intentioned citizens have decided to "rescue": the transcript reads, "I got one down here. I'm sure, potentially, we'll have a problem getting her out. Madame Lacote? Madame Lacote?" Although the rescuers do not bother to specify the problem, they willingly offer the impression that Madame Lacote's physical infirmity adds to her mental stubbornness, rendering her a perfect case for an exposé about humanitarian efforts to aid the misguided. The next "Unidentified Elderly Montrealer" on the feature visually matches images of an old woman demonstrating confusion, which a voice-over implies results from the storm-induced trauma. The visual clearly demonstrates that in fact she cannot hear the directions she has been given to get her bags and go into a community room. Authorities make no attempt to find a better, more effective way to communicate with her, possibly because all such efforts have already been directed towards accommodating media crews.

Dr. Howard Bergman, from the Jewish General Hospital, evokes a third image of an old woman as representative of the feeble, baffled elderly:

> Let me just give you one example of a lovely 94-year-old lady who's living in an apartment by herself with her cat, getting a lot of help in normal times from her niece, who would come and help with the shopping etcetera. She didn't want to leave because she didn't want to leave her cats; she didn't want to leave

> her home or possessions. I think the first stress of many of the elderly, besides living through the cold and the uncertainty, was the stress of having to leave their own homes and having to leave sometimes possessions, including a cat.

Not only does Bergman condescend to an old woman here to provide an example of "elderly stress," but, in fact, his example is largely irrelevant because her experience resembles that of many Montrealers during the ice storm, along a continuum of age[2]. Elderly women, however tempting the stereotype may be, were not the only Montrealers reluctant to leave pets, companions, possessions, or homes during the ice storm. The choice to situate such a logical and common reaction in an anecdote about someone who matches prevailing cultural notions of weakness, both in terms of gender and age, demonstrates exactly what age (especially when combined with gender) signifies culturally. The media calls upon Bergman, as an expert, to explain the medical term "elderly stress." Surely, what he in fact describes simply matches the expectations of a listening audience who may not want to recognize their own habits in those of the old woman too attached to her home and cats to venture out into a meteorological disaster.

Notably, the CBC News Magazine calls on two old men to perpetuate negative depictions of old women in "Voices of the Vulnerable." Isadore Fogel, speaking of a special shelter for the elderly at the Jewish General Hospital, explains that

> there's a blind woman here, maybe I shouldn't mention it, but she--she is very difficult. She yells at the top of her voice with

> everybody sleeping, and as soon as the people wake up, there's a big lineup of people walking to the bathroom. And occasionally they have to open up the lights, because there is so many people walking, they don't want them to trip over each other in the dark.

This embedded narrative demonstrates a member of the already supposedly vulnerable population perpetuating the very attitudes that have resulted in his own coerced removal from home. An interview with Abraham Bonder furthers this tendency when he explains that although he would not have left his home, "My wife has to go because it's too cold. Much too cold." No one actually interviews old women in the entire piece. As a result, viewers do not even have the opportunity to ascertain whether the tendency to perpetuate pessimistic depictions extends to old women's words. Extending the logic of CBC's title "Voices of the Vulnerable" leads a critical viewer to conclude that the vulnerable during the ice storm were members of the media and the medical community--they were vulnerable to prevailing stereotypes.

Taken in the spirit it was more likely intended, the title encapsulates the paradox of being female and old. Not only did the supposedly vulnerable have no voice in the coverage, the CBC did not address them directly as potential members of a viewing or listening audience. Because the construction of gender difference relies to a large degree on women's physical beauty, the implicit cultural question lingers of whether old women are in fact women at all. This subject position then, rife with internal tension, becomes an ideal stand in for other cultural tensions and comes to represent what younger segments of society fear. At a time when Montrealers felt and

were particularly vulnerable to the result of a devastating weather pattern, the media neatly transferred fear and weakness onto a social group which the remainder of the population could consequently comfort itself by helping. The notion that old women could help not only themselves but also others would entirely threaten a population stabilized through a projected fear.

I cannot, however, entirely condemn media depictions for their problematic and cowardly depictions of old age. And certainly the CBC by no means provides the worst examples of the phenomenon of undervaluing elderly people, especially old women. Mass media is possibly the most pervasive and influential mode of discourse currently, but the influence of the academy should not be underplayed. Television, radio, and print journalism reaches a large audience and influences many people's perspectives. Academic institutions do not have as large an audience, but their formative influence on developing minds makes them a cultural force with which to be reckoned. Many academic disciplines contribute to difficulties old women face if they want to be culturally valued. Those few academic disciplines that do grapple with old age face even more difficulties than they like to characterize old age as facing. A need to generalize and verify frequently leads to uniformity and inadequate emphasis on bodies in studies of late life.

Because late life is so often thought of as a time of physical infirmity, most people likely think of medicine first as a discipline relevant to studies of old age. Itself a theoretical discourse, medical language inevitably classifies in order to diagnose and treat its numerous patients. Because the

predominant scientific tradition is reductionist in that it tends to explore units before a whole (and sometimes in lieu of a whole) and because, during old age, the body is often paramount, medical language frequently limits the imaginative framework available for the depiction of old people by concentrating on the physical to the exclusion of other dimensions of aging. Medical anthropologist Margaret Lock explains that such reductionism

> tends to dismiss cultural influences of all kinds, including subjective experience, as superfluous distorting mirrors that disguise the relevant 'facts' waiting to be revealed in the depths of the body. (370)

Like mass media representations, medical language cannot adequately address the full experience of aging because of its limited understanding of the body as a composite of units. In a standard medical approach, social context obscures rather than creates and interprets physical aging.

Gerontology, of which geriatric medicine is only a branch, examines more than just the physical aspects of late life, but it clusters for the most part around physical and social sciences. Further, the theoretical, methodological, and applied facets of gerontology rely heavily on observed data and thereby, despite Clark Tibitts's development of social gerontology, tend towards a fact-based, body-centred study (Kart 21). As James Birren puts it, "we [gerontologists] are in a phase of being data-rich and theory poor" (qtd. in Achenbaum 20). I will discuss later how literature can fit into a gerontological study to address both the drawbacks of other gerontological disciplines and the lack of gerontological theory. The current obsession with

the body, emerging from a larger scholarly trend, restricts how aging can be figured and imagined.

A recent popular academic field, known as body criticism, implicitly demonstrates problems associated with trying to theorize old bodies in standard academic studies. Psychoanalytic considerations of the body, such as Jane Gallop's Thinking Through the Body and Peter Brooks's Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative; anthropological studies such as Laura Doyle's Bordering on the Body: The Racial Matrix of Modern Fiction and Culture; and even, to an extent, Judith Butler's Bodies That Matter and Mary Russo's The Female Grotesque, tend towards abstract considerations of the body which generalize and unify. To follow any of the models provided by those intriguing studies would be to assume that there is an identifiable process of aging as encapsulated by the old body (or the female body, or the lesbian body, or the Canadian body).

Any discussion of aging bodies, like those of queer bodies, has to counter norms. Because many theoretical studies consider bodies in terms of sexual differentiation, and because sexual differentiation is most simply boiled down to reproductive functions, certain kinds of bodies have, for the most part, eluded theoretical consideration. As Judith Butler's landmark study argues, bodies which are unable to reproduce (lesbian bodies for the purposes of her treatise) can be situated under the rubric abject. Usually, aged bodies do not exercise sexual desire for the societally sanctioned end of procreation, so that any discussion of sexuality and the elderly forces a recognition of sexual desire for its own sake.

In her study of the female grotesque (which aptly chooses elderly men dressed in drag as a cover photograph), Mary Russo explicitly situates old bodies in the position of the abject by qualifying how the female body can be grotesque with a parenthetical list of grotesque female bodies: "(the pregnant body, the aging body, the irregular body)" (55). Russo (although only parenthetically) indicates by extension that aging bodies do not fit into paradigms of classical beauty which is "closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical, and sleek" (8). Although for different reasons, academic criticism (particularly body criticism), like the mass media, has, for the most part, avoided talking about old bodies and thereby avoided adequately addressing old age as a stage or stages of development.

Much current academic criticism in arts and social science disciplines avoids discussing postmenopausal bodies and people. No longer thought of as productive members of society, old women are not thought to contribute to many scholarly spheres. Studies which do target female late life usually address some problem associated with postmenopause, such as empty nest syndrome, poverty, or abuse. Negative stereotypes of old woman construct circumstances that make each of those studies regrettably important. However, without a balance of studies about other subjects, such as late life career changes, female communities, and female role models, the current grouping of studies limits thinking about old age to problem solving.

Those academics who do discuss the elderly typically argue that the body becomes paramount in daily experience during old age. Whatever power the mind may have to influence physical change and whatever cultural

narratives may affect concrete experience, there is currently a decrepitude associated with aging. Since this does usually entail a physical decline, a body who lives to old age is (almost always, at this historical moment) eventually (however briefly) circumscribed by its physicality. In her Aging and Its Discontents, Kathleen Woodward reads this as foreboding mortality:

> The inevitable and literal association of advanced old age with increasing frailty and ultimately death itself presents a limit beyond which we cannot go. The body in advanced old age not only represents death; it is close to death and will in due time be inhabited by death. The facticity of the mortal vulnerability of the body in old age, and the meanings we attach to it, cannot be explained away by insisting that an ideology of youth, with its corresponding semiotics, is responsible for negative representations of old age. (18-19)

Most importantly, she claims that the aging process has a lived reality underscored by bodies' increasing unreliabilities. Indeed, social constructions of the elderly do intensify an already difficult process, but perhaps the physical bedrock of aging itself is shifting to the extent that decline will eventually no longer be a valid model for describing late life. Currently, there is a materiality which cannot be escaped, but there is also a material reality to a vulnerable newborn which, though it denotes frailty, does not connote the same negative representations.

Right now, old bodies do change, but the changes do not need to be figured solely as deterioration. This is not to favour notions of positive aging

which can do their own damage by relentlessly clinging to an impossible, and undesirable, continued youthfulness. Mike Featherstone and Andrew Wernick call such compulsive optimism: "various modes of denial...which, cosmetically or through fashion, clothe the aging body in images of perpetual youth" (12). The cultural theorists thereby reinforce the "facticity" of the older body underlined by Woodward--the body is old and can only disguise itself as young. The physical dimension of old age is presently an important consideration, but it, like numerous other corporeal phenomena, is open to countless cultural interpretations not simply as an indication of imminent death.

Recent scholarly collections of essays published in cultural studies disciplines have begun to address how old bodies are interpreted culturally. Mike Featherstone and Andrew Wernick's Images of Aging: Cultural Representations of Later Life seeks to reimbue thinking about old bodies as thinking about lived bodies, rather than dying bodies. Without denying the importance of the body to late life, they state: "It is a truism to say that aging is about the body, yet in the study of aging we often lose sight of the lived body" (emphasis added 1). They imply that looking at old bodies as bodies which, rather than declining, continue to contribute socially could alter continual negative interpretations of old bodies. Their visual emphasis wavers between metaphorical and literal, so that they leave readers to assume that seeing old bodies as living bodies means both visually interpreting and fully understanding them. A slippage between the metaphorical and literal recurs throughout their introduction to the

collection. They refer to "glimpses of the actual practices and experiences of being old" (2), "This focus on embodied persons relating to each other through the visible body, the body which sees and can be seen" (2), "human beings who are generally preoccupied with the view of the world from their particular juncture in the life course" (2), and "aging began to be seen as a period of decline, weakness and obsolescence" (7). The metaphor of sight as knowledge is increasingly problematic as general readers become aware that not everybody shares the same capacity to see (in either sense of the term). Since it would not be acceptable for me to claim that CBC reporters were clearly "blind" to old age in their coverage, Featherstone and Wernick need to alter their metaphorical framework so that visualising old age translates into understanding in a manner not entirely dependent upon sight.

Besides limiting understanding to the sighted, Featherstone and Wernick's conceptualisation narrows thinking about old age in at least one other crucial way. They state in their introduction:

> for those who are in deep old age, who are weak, frail or disabled, the body is not only a masking device which conceals and distorts the self which others interact with, in addition the lack of mobility and functioning capacity may make the body seem to be a prison. (11)

Seeing old age means looking at bodies, and looking at bodies, to Featherstone and Wernick, means encountering decline. That decline contains experience to the degree that a body demarcates experience. Making the body central to a study of old age can limit that study immoderately,

especially if the study accepts an inevitability of decline as accompanying old age.

In Aging and its Discontents, Kathleen Woodward takes issue with discussing old aging primarily in reference to the body and asks, "What of the psyche?" (20). Her question, however, reflects a move away from the physical because of the decline it necessarily denotes, not an attempt to revalue studies of aging so that bodies can be figured differently. Woodward's later edited volume, Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations, continues Featherstone and Wernick's work on images of aging, and does so following the standards set by body criticism. She chooses to gender her study because she claims that old women have suffered more from invisibility. She hopes that her study "will ...serve as an arena of visibility" for older women (x). Her crucial goal to increase the visibility of aging women, in contrast with Aging and its Discontents' evasion, risks another overemphasis on bodies which are read as changing in damaging and limiting ways. The danger pervades many of the selected essays, so that some authors are preoccupied with their own changing bodies to an uncomfortable point. In Margaret Morganroth Gullette's puzzling examination of how fashion cycles necessarily teach decline, she delineates her scholarly scope: "The zone of my story is clothing, and my story is dense with specificity--I'm a woman of a certain class, historical era, region, and age, with her own family dynamics, personal psychology, access to theory" (36). Her description of her mother buying her clothes makes clear her social position, particularly since she describes Good Will as a place to give clothes to strangers, rather than as a place where many

people, especially renownedly poor, old women, begin the cycle she outlines. Most disturbingly, in her lament about decline as a midlife model, she asks "If the culture must have decline-via-aging, why isn't it getting located ever later in the life course?" (50). This exciting exploration of women's aging is mired in the author's own experience to the extent that a possible solution would be to project the problem away. Now that she knows that middle age is not the repository of discard she had been taught it would be, she would have that repository relocated farther along the continuum of age.

Stephen Katz's "Charcot's Older Women: Bodies of Knowledge at the Interface of Aging Studies and Women's Studies," which obviously does not overly emphasize his own experience as an aging woman, mentions the crucial influence of rhetoric on gerontological fields:

> Innovations in language and critical scrutiny of metaphors can shake up and feminize gerontological conventions. Sarah F. Pearlman's coining of 'Late Mid-Life Astonishment" as a new developmental transition for women between the ages of fifty and sixty is just such a case in point. (114)

When Woodward fully articulates the goal of her collection, she includes more than just bodies in her aim to increase visibility:

> The purpose of this book is to help bring the subject of older women into visibility and to reflect on growing older as women, with our contributions to this project built primarily on the foundation of stories and images, words and visual texts. (xvi)

I suggest that to develop the "new ways of thinking about growing older"

(xvi) Woodward overtly seeks, language and narrative must be central objects of study.

Woodward's anthology, and its overt goal, make an important contribution to cultural studies of aging, especially in offering some crucial terminology to future discussions. In particular, Teresa Brennan's "Social Physics: Inertia, Energy, and Aging" provides an invaluable articulation of why the physical is always social which clearly affects even how the scholarly collection itself can think about old age. As Brennan puts it:

> There is no such thing as an immaterial social factor. Moreover, it is not that the biological determines the social. It is rather that the physicality of the social enters into and even determines biology, and for that matter the environment. It follows that human organisms will have physical differences consequent on their different 'socializations.' (132)

The differentiation between the physical and the biological changes interpretations of Nancy Miller's "coming to terms with a face and body in process" in "The Marks of Time" (4). The difference is particularly poignant and clear in what E. Ann Kaplan, in "Trauma and Aging: Marlene Dietrich, Melanie Klein, and Marguerite Duras," describes as "new digital technologies [which] enable actresses on film to look as they did at twenty" (187) and Vivian Sobchack's devastating "Scary Women," which shocks readers with graphic descriptions of plastic surgery. In a cumulative discussion of aging bodies, the continued interaction between biological, social, and physical, as outlined by Brennan, becomes almost palpable.

The collections edited by Featherstone, Wernick, and Kathleen Woodward perform an extremely important task. Old women are often treated as though invisible, even though their supposedly disturbing visibility pervades mass media. The impossible paradox has to be addressed and unfurled. Depictions of old women are negative virtually without exception, and most seeming exceptions inevitably disappoint. For example, in a recent television commercial, a group of old women eating at a table seem to objectify their female host. Then, viewers learn the women might be discussing a painting (of a female form) hanging behind her. In a final twist, the old women refer to their host's ability to cook well and look so good, proving correct viewers' initial assumptions. The advertisement plays with readers' expectations to hint at possibilities of old age only to remove them; old women are figured as gossips who do not understand that old age eliminates the possibility of attractiveness. In response to such manipulative images, it is absolutely crucial to reinscribe a new visibility in a productive, positive framework. It is equally important to change interpretations of how old age is visible, so that wrinkles can have new meaning. The constant return to the visual in each of these studies is in part an attempt to accomplish that change.

Currently, wrinkles hold a specific cultural stigma which affects how they are read socially even when they are framed as art. I will examine a visual depiction of aging in connection with its linguistic interpretation to explore how stories of growing old can perhaps influence new ways of thinking about old age. The visual cannot be entirely ignored, but it can be

fused to narratives which alter its impact. In the January 1991 edition of Border Crossings, Montréal photographer Donigan Cumming confronts readers with startling images of a naked, seventy-six-year-old female body. As editor Robert Enright pinpoints in his introduction to the portfolio, a stark opposition to standard pop culture representations (and, indeed, high art representations) of female nudes ruthlessly prevails. Enright describes various photographs in the following way: "her body in the bathtub, in repose, standing improbably in a sink, is a topography of loss and misdirection--a breast appears like the ear of an old animal; toes are so arthritic they look maliciously broken"(25). "Pretty Ribbons," a portfolio of photographs of Nettie Harris in various states of undress, confronts societal understandings of female bodies directly and visually. Nettie Harris has an unavoidable visibility which unsettles imaginative stereotypes. Her shocking, naked image confronts viewers with unveiled aged flesh so that they can no longer avoid the stark physical realities of aging. Presented in poses parodically similar to those of young centrefold models, Nettie Harris's images suggest a decrepit sexuality which threatens popular images of what and which bodies are supposed to be sexy.

Perhaps it is not just that elderly bodies in all their disrepair assault aesthetic requirements, but that they speak of what each individual's body could become. Whatever cultural value it could have, Nettie Harris's lived experience is only visible to the extent that it is marked on her body, and those markings will only be read in the context of the ageist viewership the photographs confront. Cumming relies on Harris's wrinkles meaning

something socially. He could presumably have chosen to enact any number of photographic tricks, and, indeed, may well have. Nonetheless, he chooses to present the photographs as if they are exact representations of an old woman. Viewers accordingly come literally face-to-face with their preconceived notions of the grotesque aesthetic of age at the same moment as they must confront what "naked woman" usually means to them. How could a woman agree to display her inappropriate body in this way? What will my body become? Does this woman understand herself to be beautiful?

I seek a mode which allows an analysis and new understanding of various possibilities of late life, especially for women, but which denies, or at least controls the gaze. If the visual could be downplayed, or manipulated to illuminate particular aspects of aging, old people could gain a new value which their physical form could eventually come to represent socially. Ideally, artistic representations and theoretical discussions of elderly women need not adopt cultural pessimism which derives from an association with death, but rather can explore the potential of old age to be a time of liberty and non-possessive love without emulating youth. Old age, especially for women, could present a vast realm of possibility: women are possibly finally free from gender, they no longer are expected to take on the culturally-weighted role of mother, and their very invisibility could result in a freedom and even newfound mobility.

In his anthropological, historical, literary, and sociological study of how people make sense of their physical world, The Practice of Everyday Life, Michel de Certeau suggests that there is something unseemly about a

dying body:

> No doubt the part of death that takes the form of expectation has previously penetrated into social life, but it always has to mask its obscenity. Its message is seen in the faces that are slowly decaying, but they have only lies with which to say what they presage (be quiet, you stories of getting old told by my eyes, my wrinkles, and so many forms of dullness), and we are careful not to let them speak (don't tell us, faces, what we don't want to know). (194)

The "obscenity" of a body presaging death translates into a required (visual) silencing of aged bodies. This is why pictures such as those of Nettie Harris shock viewer expectations--North American society dictates that aged bodies should be covered to allow for a comfortable distancing; they should be prevented from telling "stories of getting old." Too often, the narratives typically and automatically associated with old age are uniform and generally unchallenged. Cumming's photographs make evident the problematic assumptions underlying the social position of age, because they confront the uniformity of those narratives. Because old age is so often limited to physical deterioration, in order to adequately address and reframe old age as having a particular social and even aesthetic value, "the stories of getting old" need to be addressed in a medium which does not overly privilege the visual.

Literary gerontology is a new, vibrant stream of study which seeks to challenge preconceptions about old age via fictional analysis. Such studies

could go some way to fill the theory gap Birren laments. Although fictional depictions of old age are themselves frequently guilty of stereotypical portrayals, I argue that they have unique properties which present an imaginative framework that does not have to overly privilege the visual and are thereby uniquely capable of addressing social problems such as negative portrayals of old age. Some fiction of aging offers new narratives to what is missing in gerontological theory.

To a degree, personal narratives can address the gaps in perception left by inadequate academic and media depictions of aging. The first person accounts in Figuring Age provide examples of such biographical explorations of late life. Nancy Miller tells the story of her own search for an author photograph, Margaret Morganroth Gullette describes her life-long shopping habits, Kathleen Woodward recalls childhood visits with her grandparents, Vivian Sobchack includes emails from a friend who has succumbed to rejuvenating plastic surgery, and Joanna Frueh shares her experiences as a beginning female body builder. Each strikes a chord in readers who also likely grapple with their physical form and imagine aging in connection with their own (potential) experiences.

Three recent popular feminist explorations of aging (though not quite the old age I discuss) emerge directly from feminism's "the personal is the political" credo. As second wave feminists age, they continue a biographical tendency in their writing, and choose to write about menopause. In recent publications, Gloria Steinem, Germaine Greer, and Betty Friedan have each written about late life changes for women. Their works generalize from their

own experiences and draw on a wide range of cultural data to impel further thinking about older women. Notably, all three well-known feminist writers cite a lack of role models for rethinking old age. As Greer puts it in The Change: there are "no signposts to show the way" (12).

Carolyn Heilbrun laments a similar lack in her Writing a Woman's Life:

> What of women friends, of middle age, or of active old age (the years from sixty to seventy-five)? None of these questions has been probed within the context of women's as yet unnarrated lives, lives precisely not those that convention, romance, literature, and drama have, for the most part, given us. (28)

Her pivotal analysis of female-authored biography provides an intriguing framework through which to think of personal narratives of aging. Her own The Last Gift of Time: Life Beyond Sixty follows her final chapter of Writing a Woman's Life by taking up her own challenge from that earlier publication, as articulated above. She chooses not to take her own life at seventy, as she had previously planned, and instead meditates on a series of topics which typically pervade the formulaic plots of which she is so fond in both Writing a Woman's Life and her pseudonymous detective fiction. The Last Gift of Time can practically be divided into the key aspects and themes of narrative: space ("The Small House," "England,"), time ("Time," "Memory"), communication ("E-mail," "Listening to the Young(er)"), love ("Sex and Romance," "Living With Men"), and death ("On Mortality"). The chapters which do not fit this paradigmatic schema, such as "On Not Wearing Dresses" and "Unmet Friends," reveal Heilbrun's innovations in attempting to create

new stories of active old age, as well as adapting existing patterns to describe late life.

Most importantly, Heilbrun, in Writing a Woman's Life, argues for the significance of narrative. She explains:

> What matters is that lives do not serve as models; only stories do that. And it is hard to make up stories to live by. We can only retell and live by the stories we have read or heard. We live our lives through texts. They may be read, or chanted, or experienced electronically, or come to us, like the murmurings of our mothers, telling us what conventions demand. Whatever their form or medium, these stories have formed us all; they are what we must use to make new fictions, new narratives. (37)

The paradigmatic potential of narrative suggests that stories might provide a way to explore old age without privileging the visual. With its unique appeal to the reader, fiction can guide how old age is seen, heard, felt, and understood. I say fiction because, although Heilbrun is primarily occupied with personal narratives in her analysis, fiction provides imaginative leeway necessary to realign a problem she pinpoints in her chapter about late life biography: "Biographers often find little overtly triumphant in the late years of a subject's life, once she has moved beyond the categories our available narratives have provided for women" (131). Fictional narrative provides an opportunity to create new categories for women, so that old women will no longer live beyond available narratives. Fiction can provide the signposts Greer seeks.

Two exciting analyses of literature about old age explore possibilities for late life fiction to recreate categories, and even to eliminate them. Anne Wyatt-Brown and Janice Rossen's Aging and Gender in Literature: Studies in Creativity explores how aging affects creativity. In her introduction, Wyatt-Brown explains, "this volume seeks to show how growing older affects literary creativity and psychological development and to examine how individual writing careers begin to change in middle age" (2). Like other literary gerontologists, she "seek[s] to challenge the preconceptions about aging that influence our thinking about later life" (3). The study combines personal narratives with the creation of fiction to examine how the experience of aging affects the production of literary worlds. I am even more interested in how writers of any age can draw readers into a constructed world in order to reconfigure expectations about both fiction and old age.

Barbara Frey Waxman's From the Hearth to the Open Road: A Feminist Study of Aging in Contemporary Literature groups together American, British, and Canadian female-authored fiction about aging and articulates a new genre which she calls Reifungsroman (novel of ripening). The name celebrates stages of life too frequently thought of as decay. In particular, Waxman's exciting, innovative, and unmatched study concentrates on popular journalism and novels (including short stories) about three late life stages (40-60; 60-84; 85-on). Her particular concern is with how the works affect readers: she argues that they "create a receptive readership for more complex fictions of aging" (12). In her analysis, Waxman pinpoints the three facets of literature and old age I find most significant: fiction's unique

capacity, readers' engagement, and cultural effect.

I will examine fiction's particular role in addressing the social problem not of old age, but of negative perceptions of old age. I am especially interested in the specific appeal that narrative fiction makes to readers, so that they develop a new understanding of the possibilities inherent both in fiction and in old age. I situate my analysis in my own cultural context since I am best positioned to witness the constant bombardment of images and descriptions within Canada. I argue that a group of innovative narrative works of fiction published here in the second half of the twentieth century address old age in a way that gives readers new vantage points that do not privilege the visual. All of the works are female-authored, with most written by women much younger than their subjects.

In particular, I will analyze structural elements of selected Canadian fictional works in connection with their perceived and potential social effects. My work examines how these works of fiction adapt key conventional literary devices to their ends in order to play on and counter mainstream representations of aging, and how they thus reconstrue the potential social roles for old women. It is my contention and hope that readers can thereby reimagine the limited social roles currently available to the elderly. I by no means argue that fiction <u>necessarily</u> has a particular or salutary social effect, nor do I suggest that fiction, especially the novels I study, are widely read. My dissertation explores the imaginative potential of literary narrative and seeks to claim that fictional narrative presents the possibility of profound social reconfiguration.

Endnotes

1. The CBC did not save recordings of its ice storm coverage, so I have not been able to obtain a transcript. Some of the radio citations are from my very vivid memories and personal transcriptions of the broadcasts. Because of the emergency circumstances (eg. candlelight), I was not able to keep as accurate a record of the dates and times of the particular quotations as I would have liked. References to "Voices of the Vulnerable" refer to the transcript.

2. I am grateful to Barbara Frey Waxman's postulation of a continuum of age to avoid a damaging young / old dichotomy (From the Hearth 8).

Chapter Two: Narrativity and Old Age

In her introduction to Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations, a recent anthology on cultural depictions of female old age (and aging), Kathleen Woodward asks a question crucial to age studies: "how could Simone de Beauvoir's huge book on aging go unremarked?" (xi). Nonetheless, in her own compilation of scholarly articles about women aging, only two articles even mention Simone de Beauvoir's treatise La Vieillesse (1970) (The Coming of Age / Old Age 1972), and they do so only briefly. In Woodward's own contribution to the edited volume, "Inventing Generational Models: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, Literature," she refers to the American translation of de Beauvoir's contribution as presenting a "moving model of imagining old age" (156). In that same section, however, she rejects de Beauvoir's work on the basis that it assumes a young readership and supports two abhorrent assumptions: that being old is physically revolting and that the elderly are powerless economically.

These are important problems in de Beauvoir's lengthy analysis which evokes an emotion dangerously akin to pity towards what de Beauvoir could have figured as a vibrant, powerful social group. They are not adequate reasons to reject de Beauvoir as a model, however. De Beauvoir's work is innovative both in taking on new subject matter, and also in her manner of study. I too turn to de Beauvoir as a "model of imagining old age," but her work provides me methodological inspiration and justification. Woodward herself, without always acknowledging it, follows de Beauvoir's example and consistently turns to narrative to make her introductory points, recounting

three stories (one about the accidental death of eighty-six-year-old Anna Gerbner, one about an abused eighty-seven-year-old widow, and one about activist Maggie Kuhn's meeting with Gerald Ford) in the first four pages of her introduction. De Beauvoir pioneers a crucial research paradigm in her interdisciplinary study of old age, and, in particular, she explicitly and implicitly privileges narratives throughout. In this chapter, I will explore how narratives contribute to a study of aging and why theorists of age continually turn to narratives to explain and enrich their points. Counter to James Birren's claim (cited in the previous chapter) about the wealth of data and paucity of theory in studies of aging, I argue that narratives have to be examined not as data but as theory. The theory which Birren suggests the field lacks is in fact as rich as the data, but it takes the form of narratives, personal and fictional.

I Margaret Lock and Personal Narrative

I begin my exploration of how narrative contributes to studies of aging by investigating the methodology of Margaret Lock's expansive, innovative, and provocative investigation of the supposed universality of menopause, Encounters with Aging : Mythologies of Menopause in Japan and North America. Although her comparative analysis does not itself deal directly with old age, old age haunts middle age for the subjects in Lock's study. As I will demonstrate, old age also haunts de Beauvoir's fiction about middle age. Konenki, a Japanese word roughly--though not at all exactly--analogous to menopause, is an unwelcome phase not so much because of what it threatens in itself but as "an augury for the future, as a sign of an aging and weakening

physical body" (14). Lock claims, "Several Japanese women state explicitly that konenki is the beginning of old age (roka gensho) and, although having little significance as such, can be a potent sign for the future" (44). The period of middle age usually marked by konenki represents a new relationship with old age in that, rather than sentimentally longing for a golden past, Japanese women

> choose to focus much more on human relationships, and the way in which in middle age, a woman turns from being concerned primarily with children and their care to enjoy a brief spell of relative freedom ('mother's time of rebellion'), before she becomes fully occupied with the care of aged people for a good number of years. (45)

The impending care of old people at the moment of a partly physical transition--konenki--underscores the aging process as central to these narratives of Japanese women currently of the showa hitokawa generation (born in the first decade of the Showa reign which spanned 1926-1988). Women are responsible for the care of the elderly in traditional Japanese culture, in which most women of this generation continue to participate. Even in the brief period of time when they are not responsible for caring for others, konenki often makes them aware of the old age they will experience both second and first hand. This awareness pervades their personal narratives.

Lock writes about women between 45 and 55 years of age (at the time of her study) in terms of their placement in a Japanese temporal schema related

to empires (eg. Meiji, Showa). She implicitly demonstrates the historical specificity of aging and, at the same time, explicitly explores its cultural specificity. The showa hitokawa women whom she interviews lived through the second world war and thereby take pride in having survived that difficult time. Those in traditional situations and married to eldest sons usually adjusted to household lives under the scrutiny and control of a meiji (1868-1912) mother-in-law. Though the showa hitokawa women have found such domestic adjustment difficult, repetition throughout the narratives indicates that they generally believe their lives to be easier than those of their mothers, they still expect to take care of their elderly parents-in-law, and yet they do not expect the same care from their own offspring or offspring's spouses. Different women of the same generation often express and emphasize these three key points. Despite such shared specific cultural and historical experience, the individual narratives of such women, when interviewed about konenki, vary dramatically.

Even more than Lock's decision to study menopause as a culturally specific phenomenon, I am fascinated by her decision to employ personal narratives and to present them cumulatively so that they reinforce the cultural dimension they are meant to illustrate. Lock solidly grounds her study in sceptical scrutiny of pervasive Western medical discourse and the historical progression of misogynist paradigms of female midlife. To justify her criticism of such dominant viewpoints, she presents preview excerpts and then entire interviews with Japanese women. The initial excerpts highlight passages in the later entire narratives, which are grouped by subjects

suggested by the preceding selections, so that an overall trajectory develops from themes arising out of the (necessarily translated) words of Japanese women rather than from a preset research agenda (though it is clear that a large amount of research, preparation, and care went into the entire project).

Lock provides an explicit theoretical grounding for her decision to incorporate personal narratives. She suggests that medical language neglects key aspects of human experience: "What people experience and report in connection with their bodies is not in essence the same kind of information produced through observation, measurement and abstraction" (xxiii). Because neither medical language nor any other discourse, according to Lock, sufficiently describes experiences of human bodies, "human beings create narratives to express the relations between biology, individual sentience, culture and history" (373). For her study, narratives reflect human experience, and so personal narratives necessarily differ and resist the sweeping generalisations which the biological emphasis of medical language makes possible and even necessary:

> Narratives of subjectivity do not permit broad generalizations and abstractions but encourage instead a contextualisation of specific pieces of the puzzle and provide a very important constraint on the way in which we obtain and interpret biological and statistical information. (xxxix-xl)

Personal narratives not only enable and enforce individuality in the study of physical processes, they impose order on how other types of information, or data, are received and understood. First person descriptions of experience

can influence how other individuals receive and understand their own bodies.

If experience were entirely individual, there would be no reason to conduct so broad a survey as Lock's in order to examine the cultural specificity of a phenomenon such as midlife. Lock articulates a pervasive myth of konenki which (like nineteenth-century British notions of leisurely bourgeois women with too much time on their hands for reading fiction) figures as lazy housewives middle-aged women who succumb (or admit) to the physical symptoms of konenki. Traditionally, Japanese society perceives physical complaints as excuses for not conforming to standards of discipline and continual work. Lock shows how even though none of the people she interviewed showed even glimmers of matching that circulating denigration of physical and other changes at midlife (i.e. none were lazy housewives), women experiencing middle age in Japan still become aware of a generally applied story that works as an ideological tool and influences their own descriptions of personal experiences:

> the rhetoric thus becomes a yardstick against which women measure and from which they dissociate themselves but also produces a stereotyped specter of the archetypal disciplined Japanese woman fallen from grace, a specter that helps to keep Japanese women divided among themselves and insensitive to the reality of one another's lives. (106)

The false tale of the lazy housewife controls, in that it gives order to, how women describe their own experiences of konenki in relation to the lazy

housewife figure. Even if one woman knows that her physical experience does not result from a desire to shirk responsibility, she will likely be reluctant to admit to anyone what will probably be perceived as a shortcoming. As a result, the chances of women discovering other narratives of konenki (besides the lazy housewife myth) is drastically reduced. Any sign of succumbing to physical change, of not continuing to work hard or feel good, signals failure because it matches the lazy housewife story. As a result, a feeling of inadequacy in the face of any acknowledgement of midlife change prevents women from gathering together and learning that the archetype is only that and does not have to pose a threat to individual experience.

To develop her own more accurate, full picture of konenki and its myths, Lock examines biological, statistical, historical, anthropological and personal narratives together. These narratives do not each work in the same way since each has its distinct focus:

> However, because the experience of subjectivity, and the language that describes it is a cultural product, personal narratives are inevitably circumscribed in specific ways; as Scarry and others suggest, the narratives emphasize certain features while leaving others unrecognized or unspoken. (xl)

Narratives enact choices--what to express and what to deny expression--all of which are significant in their analysis. The repetitions which emerge in Lock's layering of personal analyses show a common tendency among Japanese women to speak about certain elements of konenki while remaining silent about others. Lock's fascinating methodology allows her to apply the literary

device of theme to a broad survey of disciplines so that she can pick out the relevant threads, according to the repetitions, and weave them together to demonstrate a significant cultural specificity in a phenomenon previously considered universal. She can then counter recent research about biological reasons for women from different geographic regions experiencing menopause differently and suggest that diet is only one of many complex and highly interrelated factors which govern physical and social experiences of aging.

I take this methodology of analyzing narrative by theme back to its root discipline, that of literary study, but to the same end as Lock--to illustrate the cultural and historical specificity of old age. Lock explains that "we cannot measure subjective experiences but must narrate them. This kind of information allows us to enter vicariously into the life world of individuals" (xxxix). To my mind, an imaginative, deliberately constructed depiction of old age can also offer, and enrich, that vicarious experience to readers who, never having been born old, always have within their purview the possibility of becoming old. Thus, combining the analysis of a crucial literary theme (and set of subthemes)--old age--with the analysis of a literary form--narrative fiction--allows me to make solid assertions about how readers of fiction can be situated and implicated in a process of creation which can have momentous impact on a larger social world than solely the fictional.

II Simone de Beauvoir and <u>La Vieillesse</u>

In my explicit and deliberate turn to the analysis of fictional narrative, I will begin by examining Simone de Beauvoir's secondary contributions in

the realm of narrative and continue to lay the groundwork for a close analysis of certain fictional narratives of age, beginning with de Beauvoir's narrative fiction, which I suggest present richer and stronger theoretical insights into old age than any secondary material possibly could. My argument relies heavily on how fiction can connect with readers' imaginations uniquely and constructively and how an analysis of fiction can tap into that connection to make new and exciting claims about a social world illuminated and transformed through art.

In her lengthy treatise on old age, La Vieillesse, de Beauvoir eloquently articulates both the essence and the effect of her constructionist view (foreshadowed in Le Deuxième Sexe (1949) (The Second Sex (1953))). When she claims, "by the way in which a society behaves towards its old people it uncovers the naked, and often carefully hidden, truth about its real principles and aims," she claims that how a society views old age says more about the society than it does about old age (99). The imbrication of the social with the individual in de Beauvoir's writing makes particularly poignant how a seeming terror of old age pervades virtually all her work (with the exception perhaps of Pour une morale de l'ambiguité (1947) (The Ethics of Ambiguity (1948))): her fiction, autobiographical works, and essays. As T.H. Adamowski states in his 1970 review of La Vieillesse:

> Since the appearance of Le Deuxième Sexe, in such works as Les Mandarins, La Force des Choses, and Une Mort Très Douce, her readers have seen Mme. De Beauvoir increasingly concerned with another 'destiny.' Now, in her latest work, La Vieillesse, she

> has kept a promise made in La Force des Choses and given us a work on a topic that some of her readers have considered to be her particular obsession. (394)

De Beauvoir's obsession extends from her critical work into her construction of fictional characters. Since Le Deuxième Sexe's chapter "From Maturity to Old Age" was published in 1948, de Beauvoir innovatively portrayed central fictional characters obsessed with their changing female bodies and explored her own and her mother's later life in autobiography. That she finds middle-aged women viable topics for fiction and that she chooses to "elevate her mother's drama and death to the role of a worthy literary subject" itself merits discussion (Kadish 636). That she also makes old age and particularly its social construction and ramifications the topic of a book-length academic study confirms her status as intellectual pioneer.

De Beauvoir's lesser known book-length study of old age echoes and transforms the argument of her most popular treatise, Le Deuxième Sexe, which famously argues that women are made, not born. La Vieillesse makes the same argument for senescence which she calls "not solely a biological, but also a cultural fact" (20). De Beauvoir's decision that old age merited her lengthy consideration makes her an innovator in cultural studies of the phenomenon which is only now beginning to garner serious and sizeable critical attention, and so her methodology acts as a model for current studies which attempt to follow her interdisciplinary example[1]. As she does gender in Le Deuxième Sexe, de Beauvoir defines old age as otherness, and her textual attempt to "break the conspiracy of silence" about old age, through

anthropological, historical, medical, and literary analyses, evaluates various cultural milieux as constitutive of the experience which denigrates old age (8).

Like Lock's decision to incorporate personal narrative, de Beauvoir explicitly defends her decision to analyze literary narrative. De Beauvoir turns to literary data to support her overall claim in the third chapter of La Vieillesse through necessity. She explains that there is very little available information about old age at certain historical moments and that what little is available comes through the culturally determined form of literary creation. Implicitly, though, de Beauvoir turns to literary data throughout her treatise because she perceives that it, and particularly its investment in narrative, offers distinct and important insights which enhance studies of old age. Her own mining of literary among other cultural artifacts to support numerous claims about age and society motivates the continued study of the contribution (potential and actual) of narrative to studies and processes of aging.

When de Beauvoir sets out to explain the situation of "Old Age in Historical Societies," she explains that "written evidence" tends to categorise old people under the larger rubric of adult, but that "in mythology, in literature and in representative art," a picture of old age which "varies according to the century and to the place" emerges (99). When she continues her chronological study into an analysis of contemporary social norms, she claims that literature is no longer a necessary source: "Because of the mass of documentary evidence that we have on the present state of the aged, that

provided by literature is only of minor interest; and in any case it does not amount to much" (237). She claims to draw on literature when other sources are not largely available and feels comfortable doing so because literary texts participate in a cultural context which de Beauvoir claims governs the construction of old age.

Although she refers continually to myth in her "Ethnological Data" chapter and continues to refer to literary texts in "Old Age in Present-day Society" and even in Part II, de Beauvoir only overtly justifies her reliance on fiction as source in "Old Age in Historical Societies." She feels able, in that chapter, to divine "the attitudes of historic societies towards old people and the relevant images that they have worked out for themselves" (240). She cautions that since the poets and lawgivers upon whom she frequently relies come from privileged backgrounds, since "the picture [of old age they provide] is blurred, uncertain and contradictory," and since "they never say anything but part-truths and very often they lie" (99), she cannot rely on them to provide her a fully-rounded perspective on the experience of aging. Accordingly, she necessitates interpretation as a strategy for teasing out the full or implied truths proffered by the poets who, at least, "are the more sincere, however, since they express themselves more spontaneously" (99-100). She admits that she does not offer a "general outline of the history of old age," but she does not otherwise apologize for relying solely on literary sources in her historical overview (240).

Since she argues about how cultural factors construct elderly experience, and since she has previously detailed carefully how cultural

factors determine old age differently according to societal context, she is well justified in turning to literature as an example of just such a cultural factor. In comparison to animal groupings, de Beauvoir explains that old men can maintain a certain social power even after they lose physical strength because of the high standing they may gain culturally:

> in human societies old age, that natural curse, is an integral part of a civilization that always has something of the character of an antiphysis, however slight, and that is therefore capable of altering the meaning of old age to a very great extent. (46)

Old age participates in civilised society to the extent that it is precisely the type of cultural factor which alters its own meaning. Further, as de Beauvoir sweepingly concludes La Vieillesse, culture could have a resounding influence were it treated as she treats it in her book:

> If culture were not a mere inactive mass of information, acquired once and for all and then forgotten, if it were effectual and living, and if it meant that the individual had a grasp upon his environment that would fulfil and renew itself as the years go by, then he would be an active, useful citizen at every age. (603)

By turning to literary texts with a brief overt explanation, de Beauvoir incorporates a cultural factor which can also alter the meaning of old age and treats that cultural factor in a way that assumes that culture is active, remembered, effectual, and therefore offers individuals the potential she claims for them in her conclusion.

De Beauvoir's unabashed pairing of ethnographic and more

traditionally historical data with literature juxtaposes sources which complement each other's analytical contributions to an extent that she can effectively demonstrate the culturally determined (that is, literally delineated by cultural artifacts) historical specificity of old age. An enormous range of literary texts following different Western European traditions, as well as one Chinese example, and genres from antiquity until the nineteenth century demonstrate the various interpretations, understandings, and valuations of old age historically. Hence, she can claim to chart a progression of how Western and Chinese societies regard old age. She includes China simply because of its unique regard for old men. Like her inclusion of literature in a list of sources for information, because it has something to offer, she includes China in her geographical scope, because it too offers particularly rich data.

An example of de Beauvoir's methodology occurs when Renaissance literature's treatment of old age stands as evidence of how old people are not deemed worthy subjects of study and how Renaissance society usually dismissed them as unchangeably decrepit. De Beauvoir claims that during the Renaissance, "Literature, whether it glorified or disparaged old age, always buried it under a heap of preconceived ideas, hiding it instead of making it apparent" (183). She speculates on Shakespeare's motivations for countering the prevailing tendency in Renaissance literature and instead situating tragic struggle within an aged male character in King Lear:

> Many people have asked what reasons Shakespeare can have had for writing King Lear, that is to say for incarnating humanity in an aged man. Perhaps he was moved to do so by the tragic lot of

> the aged in the English towns and countryside--the fate to which they had been reduced. When the manorial system broke down under the Tudors and unemployment played havoc in the towns, beggary spread everywhere, although--except under Edward VI--it was forbidden. It is not impossible that the wretchedness of these old, bewildered, penniless, destitute wanderers may have been the inspiration for the aged king. (187)

She offers historical data to support her literary interpretation in a manner typical to how she amasses evidence for her claim that old age varies according to cultural constraints. More importantly, she yet again turns to anomaly to support her overall analysis, an odd technique which becomes more clear in a deeper examination of how literature can contribute to a study of this kind.

De Beauvoir's reliance on literature to support her claims lends literary writing an additional implicit value which she does not dare overtly claim. Although she never states it, she clearly merits literature as having a distinct and sizeable contribution both to the actual construction of the phenomenon she studies and to its study. She continually returns to literary endeavours even when she has dismissed them as no longer necessary, and she concerns herself not only with the reading of literature as source material, but also with the type of literary production old people should attempt. For de Beauvoir, literature offers rich support to large, complicated, and controversial claims about an underdeveloped area of cultural understanding. As in the case of her decision to devote sustained interdisciplinary attention to the situation of

women in Le Deuxième Sexe, de Beauvoir's choice to unravel some problems and potentials of aging is ground-breaking and vital. In yet another anomalous study, de Beauvoir quietly turns to anomalous sources.

La Vieillesse itself is composed of many narratives: some de Beauvoir's, some literary, some scientific, and some descriptive. As Catherine Clément puts it in "Peelings of the Real":

> Old Age is made of multiple stories. Stories by ethnographers, by historians, by philosophers: stories in any case, stories intertwined, marvellously told, small works of art in detailed writing. (170)

One of de Beauvoir's greatest (and mostly overlooked) accomplishments is her ability (which Clément labels art) to inhabit different discourses in order to explode them. Those who criticize her for favouring the masculine or scientific miss the impact of her technique of deliberately and critically speaking from within a problematic mode of expression. Linda Zerilli explains in reference to Le Deuxiéme Sexe:

> Beauvoir does not uncritically adopt but subversively inhabits the putatively impartial male voice that deduces the reproductive function of the woman from that of the female, the passivity of the female from that of the egg. Mimicking the language of reproductive biology, Beauvoir exposes a comic absurdity that signals a lack of scientific certitude. (118)

Of the numerous narrative modes she presents, de Beauvoir's questioning of the scientific continues and extends beyond mimicry in La Vieillesse where

she states: "That is why laboratory results should not always be trusted. It is only in the field work that valid comparisons are to be found" (259). Explicitly and implicitly situating herself counter to the laboratory-based, medical model of geriatric study, de Beauvoir valorises lived experience in the study of old age so that the larger field now known as gerontology can include culture as a legitimate factor.

De Beauvoir combines the biological with the cultural in a crucial argument about the difference between the internal and external experience of old age:

> Yet our private, inward experience does not tell us the number of our years; no fresh perception comes into being to show us the decline of age...Old age is more apparent to others than to the subject himself: it is a new state of biological equilibrium, and if the ageing individual adapts himself to it smoothly he does not notice the change. (316)

She claims that as a body inevitably enters into a period of biological decline, various cultural assumptions become ascribed to it whether or not its person acknowledges or even notices the physical changes: "In our society the elderly person is pointed out as such by custom, by the behaviour of others and by the vocabulary itself: he is required to take this reality upon himself" (324). The "fresh perception" of old age comes from an internalisation of cultural assumptions resulting from people's visual interaction. The external dimension of late life takes into account physical change only. From cultural readings of that physical change comes the adoption of the established

customs and a particular vocabulary. De Beauvoir tracks this progression from biological exteriority to mental interiority to cultural exteriority in her argument that a culture's understanding of old age directly affects the cultural perception of people of a certain age and in her midlife fiction. She can then attribute problems faced by the elderly to the nature of culture as she does in her conclusion, quoted above.

De Beauvoir figures culture, "a mere inactive mass of information," as static, and she implies the necessity of dynamism, for culture to be "effectual and living," to an acceptable conceptualisation of late life. Recent contributions to a relatively current, if somewhat "tired," debate about constructionism versus essentialism conjure up de Beauvoir's innovative discussion of culture (Butler 6). Diana Fuss's Essentially Speaking, and in particular its deconstruction of the binary opposition between essentialism and constructionism, makes a point similar to de Beauvoir's about the potential fixity of cultural narratives. Fuss argues:

> If we are to intervene effectively in the impasse created by the essentialist / constructionist divide, it might be necessary to begin questioning the constructionist assumption that nature and fixity go together (naturally) just as sociality and change go together (naturally). In other words, it may be time to ask whether essences can change and whether constructions can be normative. (6)

As is the case with much of de Beauvoir's thinking, she anticipates late twentieth-century academic debates about nature and culture and provides

significant groundwork for their legitimacy as such. Fuss's suggested intervention in a debate originally sparked by de Beauvoir's 1948 Le Deuxième Sexe rearticulates de Beauvoir's own original position: that culture can be normative.

The purported influence of culture on the nature of old age (or the necessary imbrication of the biological and the interpretive) allows de Beauvoir to glean many of her examples from literature. She claims that in the event of a paucity of other evidence, literary texts become valid (and sometimes the only) touchstones for cultural attitudes towards old age. As I have already mentioned, she tries to claim that, at times when vast textual evidence about age exists, literature fades in importance for her study, but this does not stop her from citing Proust, Gide, Vailland, Ionescu, and Beckett heavily and continually, drawing on literary examples throughout her Part II "The-Being-in-the-World," Since she has clearly argued that old age is imposed from without, even in contradicting herself by turning to literary examples when she has claimed that strategy to be unnecessary, she maintains her hidden position that cultural modes, and especially literary expression, offer their own specific and valuable perspectives towards old age.

IV Simone de Beauvoir's Midlife Fiction

In her own narrative fiction of aging, de Beauvoir does not offer a particularly positive or even feminist perspective, particularly of the physical aspects of growing old. Although she never takes on old age as a central literary topic, late life looms over her midlife fiction. Les Mandarins (1954) (transl. The Mandarins (1956)), La Femme Rompue (1968) (transl. The Woman

Destroyed (1969)) and Les Belles Images (1966) (transl. Les Belles Images (1968)) prepare and expand on crucial techniques and theories laid out philosophically in La Vieillesse. Intriguingly, the same criticism, of masculine and scientific language, can be levelled at her fiction, and it can be answered in the same way. De Beauvoir inhabits literary language to explode its capacity to limit women to decrepitude. In so doing, she furthers La Vieillesse's postulations, especially about the internalization of narratives of decline, and she works from within the cultural context which defines her.

De Beauvoir's fiction directly addresses social issues and subtly presents previously and continually underrepresented subject positions (particularly those of middle-aged women) so that it offers readers the possibilities to engage anew with unfamiliar perspectives. Current critical attention focusses mainly on De Beauvoir's memoirs and essays, but her fiction develops many of the same themes more fully and effectively, and, since she herself draws on fiction prolifically to prove her theses in both Le Deuxième Sexe and La Vieillesse, her own novels merit close scrutiny. Despite differences in genre and narrative technique, De Beauvoir's Les Mandarins, La Femme Rompue, and Les Belles Images contain a common thread. Each narrative presents a middle-aged woman who, because of some interaction with a man in her life (son, husband, or new lover), becomes newly preoccupied with approaching old age.

The combined rejections of Anne Dubreuilh by Lewis Brogan and Paula Mareuil by Henri Perron in Les Mandarins as well as the caricature of Lucie Belhomme's middle-aged supposed lack of charms do not exactly add

up to what Margaret Gullette has named the mid-life women's progress novel, "a splendid new liberatory genre" which she claims emerged in the late twentieth century. Those novels make "change and choice and enlightenment seem accessible via--not in spite of--aging" (emphasis original 90). Such literary works could very well be said to counter the stasis pervading cultural notions of old age. De Beauvoir's own grappling with middle and old age stops short of such a challenge, but her novels do lay the groundwork for more "progressive" novels simply by making middle-aged women the objects and subjects of sexual desire and eschewing (sometimes from within) conventions of youthful literary sex in Les Mandarins.

Participating in cultural assumptions of decrepitude, Dubreuilh initially considers her first sexual experience in the novel as unseemly, although she is only thirty-nine years old: "to think of myself naked in his arms was as incongruous as imagining him embracing my old mother" (96). Scriassine's persistent desire convinces her of her own desirability, but she can only find that credible if it means she is not old: "His impatience seemed to assure me that, after all, I wasn't my old mother. Since he desired me, I was forced to believe I was desirable, if only for an hour" (96). Because of a typical association of sex with youth, the sexual act compels Dubreuilh to evaluate her changing body: "He threw off the sheet, and at the same moment it occurred to me that the room was poorly heated and that I no longer had the belly of a young girl. The mutilated flower burst suddenly into bloom, and lost its petals" (98). And the entire experience leads her to resign herself to approaching old age: "Old age is awaiting me; there's no escaping it.

Even now I can see its beginnings in the depths of the mirror...But there's no way in the world to halt the infirmities of age" (103). Rather than giving her a new lease on life or denoting progress in the way that Gullette, who does not mention de Beauvoir, claims a new Anglo-American genre of fiction can, Dubreuilh's experience simply alerts her to the necessity to carry on despite what she perceives as inevitable vicissitudes and makes her compare her middle-aged self to her former youth and her mother's old age.

Dubreuilh's subsequent obsession with the young American Lewis Brogan nearly robs her of this resolve to "keep going" (103). Her first encounter with him is mostly positive except that it makes her compare herself to younger women in terms of appearance: "What, after all, did he and I have in common? The women seated opposite him were young and pretty. Did they please him? I realised that there must certainly have been young, pretty women in his life" (420). Like her interaction with Scriassine, her contact with Brogan makes her further aware of encroaching old age: "Lewis remained as far from me as ever, but each day brought me closer to old age. Our love was ageing; it would die one day without ever having lived" (526). On renewed contact with Brogan, and again in the same way Scriassine's desire made her at least acknowledge her own desirability, Dubreuilh manages to reconcile her aging body with her new passion: "With my frayed life, my skin no longer brand-new, I was creating happiness for the man I loved" (559). Momentarily, she accepts her sexuality alongside her increasing age. Despite this brief invigoration, she cannot, because of her age, fathom changing her life: "But at my age, you can't throw your whole life overboard;

it's too late. We met each other too late" (574) and wishes simply for a few years of sexual happiness: "That was all I wanted--a few years. I was too old for pledges of eternal love" (594). Yet again, Dubreuilh's renewed sexual desire, though it does not reorient her life course, renews her resolve to continue as she is. Disturbingly and perhaps deliberately, the encounters between Dubreuilh and these two male characters initially reduce aging to an examination of how women appear to men and to themselves as sexual objects.

Having left Brogan after their second encounter, Dubreuilh indulges in feelings of youthfulness:

> Freshened by a new coat of make-up, my reflection in the mirror was satisfying. 'No, six months from now, I shan't have aged much; I'll see Lewis again and he'll still love me.' and when I entered Claudie's salon, I wasn't far from thinking, 'After all, I'm still young!' (665)

Gone, momentarily, are her feelings of incongruity, but only because she feels momentary youth which cosmetics help her to perform, no longer because she accepts her middle-aged sexual agency. Separated from Brogan's physical desire, a reckoning with imagined decrepitude quickly dissolves her mask of youth, and she tries to reconcile once more her current physical condition with her renewed physical passion:

> That little spark of youth which had dazzled me for a moment fizzled out all too quickly. Glass mirrors are too indulgent; the faces of these women of my own age, that flabby skin, those

> blurred features, those drooping mouths, those bodies so obviously bulging under their corsets--these were the true mirrors. 'They're old, worn-out hags,' I thought, 'And I'm the same age as they.' (666-67)

As de Beauvoir outlines the process of internalisation in La Vieillesse, Dubreuilh encounters the biological appearance of her age, engages with that mentally, and adheres to its cultural meaning. Unable to reconcile what she considers to be realistic middle age with sexual passion, Dubreuilh once again tries to resign herself to what she perceives as inevitably approaching old age, this time explaining her reasons for doing so:

> I hasten to tell myself, 'I'm finished, I'm old.' In that way, I cancel out those thirty or forty years when I will live, old and finished, grieving over a lost past; I'll be deprived of nothing since I've already renounced everything. There's more caution than pride in my sternness, and fundamentally it covers up a huge lie: by rejecting the compromises of old age, I deny its very existence. (669)

By hurrying to embrace the decrepitude she associates with ageing, Dubreuilh relieves herself of the responsibilities associated with youthful passion, refuses the process of growing old in favour of what she perceives of as the product, and, accordingly, sabotages her love relationship.

Indeed, Dubreuilh's next encounter with Brogan is devastating and seals her abrupt, premature acceptance of old age. She subsequently contemplates a suicide which she cannot carry out because of consideration

for her daughter and her daughter's expectations of her with relation to her granddaughter: "I can't impose my corpse and everything that would come after that on their hearts" (761). Despite an internal, and somewhat forced, acceptance of encroaching old age, she chooses not to avoid it via suicide because of a social, in particular familial, role. Nonetheless, as Yolanda Patterson points out in "Simone de Beauvoir and the Demystification of Motherhood": "In her newborn granddaughter she sees the inevitability of her own decline and demise, of the oblivion which eventually awaits us all" (101). Reading old age into the features of an infant emphasises the disproportionate reaction Dubreuilh has to realisations of her own eventual demise: "On her inscrutable little face I again see my death. One day she'll be as old as I am, and I'll no longer be here" (759). Rather than transferring lost hopes onto a removed generation (as certain, later Canadian novels do), Dubreuilh recognises the equal inevitability of her granddaughter Maria's eventual decline, nearly kills herself because of the futility of existence it implies, and yet ultimately chooses not to because of her responsibility to that grandchild.

The articulation of aging as suggested through Dubreuilh is grim and supports pervasive cultural understandings that old age amounts to the loss of sexual desirability and that the loss is completely devastating, even life threatening. Like she inhabits language in La Vieillesse however, de Beauvoir works from within the literary discourse of aging as depressing and unredeemable to draw the reader into a difficult imaginative engagement. Dubreuilh's is only one narrative voice in the novel, which alternates between

two major plots and narrations. Since readers have a fuller understanding of Dubreuilh's overall role in the world of the novel, they can better understand, through their access to the limited reckoning Dubreuilh has with her physical aging in combination with their broader purview of her set of relationships, that cultural constructions of aging can be completely damaging and debilitating, more so than any actual physical change. The juxtaposition of the male political plot, which explores the question of an intellectual's personal commitment, and the female aging plot, which explores questions of how women age and handle aging, forms a complex address to the reader who is left to recompose perspectives with regards to both questions which are treated out of proportion within the confines of the novel. Each plot line is revealed to be overblown by the other.

Patterson describes two types of female characters in De Beauvoir's writing:

> the perfectionistic protagonists of Simone de Beauvoir's fiction who are striving to be successful as wives, mothers and career women share feelings of responsibility and guilt with the martyred women who do not try to extend their sphere of influence beyond their own homes. (103 emphasis added)

Dubreuilh is an ideal example of a perfectionist protagonist and her sense of familial responsibility both contrasts and reflects that of Paula Mareuil who fits into the martyred woman category outlined by Patterson. Whereas Dubreuilh acts according to responsibilities with connection to her familial, and particularly maternal, ties as well as those created through her career as a

psychologist, Mareuil martyrs herself solely out of romantic love. In a stubborn attempt to deny the futility of continuing to live for Perron, Mareuil refuses to acknowledge the passage of time:

> 'There's a Rimbaud, a Baudelaire, a Stendhal [*un Rimbaud, un Baudelaire, un Stendhal*] . They were older, younger, but their whole lives are contained in a single picture. There's only one Henri, and I shall always be I. Time is powerless to change it; it's we who betray ourselves, not time.' (239)

Her refusal to acknowledge the passage of time reflects her desperate attempt to cling to the time when her relationship with Perron was viable and to refuse to acknowledge its development and decline. Mareuil's reaction, although necessarily implicit, resembles Dubreuilh's explicit resigned acceptance of the approach of old age in that both are motivated by a desire/need to preserve domestic sanctity. Accordingly, aside from her futile attempts to negate the inevitable changes wrought by time, de Beauvoir represents Mareuil's aging only from without, which is necessarily outside the domestic sphere she has to protect. Because she carefully guards her domestic space--it contains only Perron and herself--no new changed vantage points of her late life can violate it from within.

In both La Vieillesse and her fiction, de Beauvoir presents a strict division between the interiority and the exteriority of ageing. De Beauvoir claims, in La Vieillesse, "since it is the Other within us who is old, it is natural that the revelation of our age should come to us from outside--from others" (320). Whereas Dubreuilh fails to see her own physical change despite her

internal acceptance,"and as for me, I hadn't aged, I wasn't disfigured" (702), Perron reads her internal struggles as physical change: "Anne had aged markedly" (722). Similarly, Mareuil's denial of the passage of time stands in stark contrast to Dubreuilh's brutal acceptance of it particularly when Dubreuilh points it out to her:

> 'You're confusing things,' I said. 'When you're seventy you'll still be you, but you'll have a different relationship with people, with things.' I paused briefly and added. 'With your mirror.' (239)

Dubreuilh directly confronts Mareuil's entire motivation for refusing to acknowledge her own aging, and, yet, Mareuil refuses to accept what Dubreuilh tells her.

Dubreuilh further comments on Mareuil's changing physical appearance: "Instead of artfully engraving itself, time had brutally marked that noble, baroque mask which still well-deserved admiration, but which would have been more in place in a museum than a salon" (451). Her statement partly honours Mareuil's stance since museums house static artifacts which are appraised to be valuable, but Dubreuilh clearly does not ignore the effect time has on Mareuil's body:

> Paula had been so beautiful that it never occurred to me she could one day cease completely to be so--there was something in her face that would resist everything. And suddenly, you could see: like everyone else's, it was made of spongy flesh--more than eighty per cent water. (536)

Beauty had been a distinguishing marker for Mareuil, and age takes that distinction from her. The physical changes Dubreuilh reads in Mareuil's face and Dubreuilh's interpretation of them make age an equalizer and diminish physical individuality in the manner of many theories of aging. De Beauvoir has Dubreuilh once again present age as the loss of youth, signalled by desirability to men. A disturbing connection continues from that signification: acceding to negative cultural notions of aging, notions which relate women to men and condemn late life as a time of physical decline which changes potential relationships between women and men, means surrendering individuality. De Beauvoir, by offering readers Dubreuilh's culturally-sanctioned perspective on Mareuil's physical form, allows them access to a new understanding of how particular social notions about aging and physical change can damage.

Mareuil's own interpretation, or lack thereof, of her physical frame further supports the connection de Beauvoir encourages readers to make. Mareuil's rigid denial of her aging is markedly thwarted by Perron's new lover who, not knowing of Mareuil's claim to Perron, sees and describes Mareuil as a "fat old woman" (487). Mareuil's value to Perron had entirely been her exquisite beauty and as Perron's love for her subsides, so too does that beauty. Readers cannot judge whether Mareuil's youth faded and Perron's desire (masquerading as love) faded in return, or whether Perron's desire (sincerely channelled into love) diminished, leaving Mareuil undesired and therefore figured by others as finally aging in order to emphasize her failed relationship. Mareuil's own refusal to admit to the

passage of time (coinciding with her refusal to acknowledge Perron's disenchantment) may serve her well internally, but she cannot prevent others from perceiving (or constructing) her physical transformation. Sshe refuses to face the changes perceived by others as wrought by time, and her refusal eventually results in paranoid delusion. In this literary world (a strict contrast to contemporary North American culture), ignoring age signals pathology. An appropriate investment in social relationships means accepting age because forging relationships and examining attitudes, reactions, and physical transformations of others forces an acknowledgement of age. De Beauvoir draws readers into an imaginative construct that shows the narrowness of a fatalistic attitude about aging, such as Dubreuilh's, and shows the pathology of an avoidance of aging, such as Mareuil's. She does not articulate or provide an explicit touchstone character possessing an appropriate attitude towards aging, but de Beauvoir structures a gap, or silence, which she has situated readers well, through disclosure and appeal, to fill.

Elaine Marks claims that "In her [de Beauvoir's] novel Les Belles Images (1966) and in the collection of novellas, La Femme Rompue (1967), the social and psychological problems associated with aging play a central role in the lives of the female protagonists" (184). Though not immediately remarkable, compared to typical novel subject matter of young romance and masculine achievement, de Beauvoir's choice to foreground old age deserves note. She shows what could follow the unconvincing happy ending of typical romance narratives. Admittedly, de Beauvoir does not explicitly alter or play

with novelistic expectation to the same extent as the Canadian novels I will discuss, but she does foreground their innovation by subverting the expected passivity and domesticity of the subject matter. Further, she centres psychological plots around middle aged women who feel and act on intense physical desire (female physical desire presents a unique and rare topic for even contemporary fiction) even though they strangely and disturbingly lament the loss of youth because they perceive their age as eliminating them as the object of sexual desire. The three novellas, "The Age of Discretion," "Monologue," and "The Woman Destroyed," work well together precisely because of a subversive thematic unity with respect to approaching old age and changing female social roles. Each central character displays disappointment in offspring and a need to seek fulfilment elsewhere, in marriage, in work, in insanity; constructing female protagonists who desire and expect fulfilment of desire further demonstrates de Beauvoir's breaking of new ground.

The protagonist of "Age of Discretion" accepts that she has, in her eyes, failed to bring up her son as she would have liked and resignedly renews her commitment to her aging husband and former pupils. Her changing recognition of old people around her, especially her husband, as well as her changing relationship with new groups of pupils who work as touchstones with which to compare her ever changing age enable her to accept her own aging: "In earlier days I never used to worry about old people: I looked upon them as the dead whose legs still kept moving. Now I see them--men and women: only a little older than myself" (10). For de Beauvoir, old age is

not realizable even though it is livable, so only seeing the effects of old age on someone else can coerce people into accepting their own demise. De Beauvoir depicts the protagonist of "Age of Discretion" as actively seeking out the "realities" of the old age she faces.

The character in question, who is never named, resents the perceived need to maintain a youthful approach and what giving that up supposedly entails losing:

> Remaining young means retaining lively energy, cheerfulness and vitality of mind. So the fate of old age is the dull daily round, gloom and dotage. I am not young: I am well preserved, which is quite different. Well preserved; and maybe finished and done with. (60)

External illusions of youth do not necessarily entail the exhausting energy of youth. By accepting her own aging, the narrator of this story simultaneously eschews the vitality of youth and thereby turns to the supposedly inevitable opposite--the languor of old age. The protagonist's eighty-four-year-old mother-in-law provides an alternate example since, for her, old age means no longer having the burdens of helping others. As the protagonist's husband puts it, "'Certainly. It's one of those cases in which old age is a happy period--old age after a hard life, one that has been more or less eaten up by others'" (69). Where youth has itself entailed countless burdens alleviated by senescence, the languor of late life is figured as entirely desirable. It is fascinating, and in keeping with de Beauvoir's general strategy in these narratives, that the alternate view of age, as respite from a worse previous

state, is voiced by a male character. The narrator grapples with crucial anxieties which prevent her from exploring hints that late life leisure could be a boon. Because of how femininity is constructed, she cannot separate herself from how she has been manipulated to derive value from herself and her life.

The central character of "Age of Discretion" grapples with her fears of old age as ruin (as figured in the bodies of her husband and mother-in-law) and the gradual acceptance of the death of those around her in order to come to terms with her own demise:

> What nonsense, this intoxicating notion of progress, or upward movement, that I had cherished, for now the moment of collapse was at hand! It had already begun. And now it would be very fast and very slow: we were going to turn into really old people. (70)

Like in the case of Anne Dubreuilh, there is an element of defeat when she accepts that in the face of approaching old age one must simply carry on without too much future vision:

> Would the dread of ageing take hold of me again? Do not look too far ahead. Ahead there were the horror of death and farewells: it was false teeth, sciatica, infirmity, intellectual barrenness, loneliness in a strange world that we would no longer understand and that would carry on without us. (82)

The future no longer holds promise, but the present does still have limited meaning. Although de Beauvoir does not depict her as achieving the fulfilment she seeks, she at least allows this protagonist to express resentment

of the restrictions placed on her because of her age--restrictions which de Beauvoir could have presented as "natural." Readers are in a better situation to judge the fatalism of her approach and perhaps postulate alternate configurations of late life.

De Beauvoir pinpoints the double bind which women face when growing old by arguing that women who rely most heavily on their femininity are those affected most by the external transformation which accompanies aging. In La Vieillesse, she describes certain women who are thereby more reluctant to accept the other which aging turns them into:

> There is nothing that obliges us in our hearts to recognize ourselves in the frightening image that others provide us with. That is why it is possible to reject that image verbally and to refuse it by means of our behaviour, the refusal itself being a form of assumption. This is a usual choice with some women who have staked everything on their femininity and for whom age means being entirely out of the running. They try to deceive the rest of the world by means of their clothes, make-up and behaviour; but above all they make a hysterical attempt at convincing themselves that they are not affected by the universal law. (328)

Dominique of de Beauvoir's Les Belles Images aptly represents a woman who has staked much on the external trappings of femininity. The initial description of Dominique is of someone who could be mistaken for thirty although she is in fact fifty-one years old. Throughout the novel, she

gradually accepts (albeit to a very small degree) that she is in fact growing older, saying to her daughter: "'I can't believe that one day I'll be seventy'" (14) and pointing out the signs on her neck and face. As she later weeps, Laurence (her daughter) realizes: "There was a flesh and blood woman with a heart under all those disguises, a woman who felt age coming on and who was terrified by loneliness: she [Dominique] whispered 'A woman without a man is a woman entirely alone'" (97). Dominique reconciles herself to her age by finding acceptable social roles to play: "Dominique was very much 'family party,' she was dressed in the character of 'youthful grandmother' in a discreet honey-coloured jersey dress, her hair nearer white than blonde" (119) and a suitable solution for her social plight: "'A married couple who come together again after a long separation so as to face old age together--people may be surprised, but they won't snigger'" (149). In order not to be a woman entirely alone, she reacts to her age by adapting to the only socially-sanctioned option of companionship available to her. Even Dominique's interior struggles with aging concern themselves with maintaining a certain external persona which can be socially acceptable and old simultaneously. Once clothes and make-up can no longer mask her age, Dominique changes her behaviour to match others' changing perceptions of her.

De Beauvoir does not portray extreme old age as central in any of her fiction. Her preoccupation is mostly with middle-aged women who are obsessively aware of the approach of old age. Nonetheless, this is innovative subject matter which lays substantial ground work both for later fiction about middle age and for the logical extension to fiction which foregrounds old age.

De Beauvoir does not provide her protagonists with multiple libratory possibilities, nor does she sugarcoat the devastating effects of physical change on women who are in fact relatively young. She does, however, fictionally address the problem of self-perceived deterioration and its particular effect on women whose projects, as her existentialist credo would put it, are necessarily different, and more tied to physical beauty, than those of men. De Beauvoir situates readers in direct relation to middle-aged narrators who guide their imaginative connection with that stage of life. Her fiction furthers the project of her non-fiction in fully articulating problems and possibilities of late life.

V Committed Reading

In La Vieillesse, de Beauvoir elucidates the exact role she conceives literature, and specifically fiction, of playing in depictions of old age, particularly in relation to the aging writer (perhaps because she herself shifted from writing fiction to solely autobiographical writing late in life). She initially differentiates between the texts produced by nonfiction writers from those by fiction writers in terms of the type of data they offer to a study of old age:

> it is important to realize that the expression 'old age' has two very different meanings through the various pieces of evidence that we possess. It is either a certain social category which has greater or lesser value according to circumstances. Or for each person it is one particular fate: his own. The first point of view is that of the lawgivers and moralists; the second that of the poets;

> and for the most part they are radically opposed. (99)

She uses poets as an extremely general term mostly for the purposes of making a distinction as well as underlining the historical scope of her study which begins at a time when poetry was a central mode of literary expression. Having distinguished literature (produced by poets) as a distinct, individualised textual mode, she continues her content-based examination and further delineates genre boundaries saying that the novel is "the least suitable form of literature for the elderly writer" (449). She argues that, within the literary realm which she has already delineated as dedicated to and reliant on individual experience,

> More than any other literary form, the novel requires that the present should be shattered in favour of an unreal world; and that world has life and colour only if it is rooted in very early fantasies. Daily happenings and the immediate world may provide the novelist with support or with a starting-point: but he has to transcend them, and he can only do so well by drawing from his own depths. (450)

Rather than being better able to write fiction because of increased life experience, de Beauvoir argues that, since novels rely on imaginative extensions of inner convictions, elderly novelists risk simply repeating themselves.

De Beauvoir restricts appropriate literary production by the elderly to memoirs likely because, according to her, such writings are meant to express a "fundamental and still unchanging attitude towards the world" (450) and

thus do not suffer from the repetition which could mar novel production. However, novels about aging and old age (as opposed to by old authors) can still draw readers (young and old) into an alternate reality--what de Beauvoir calls an imaginary realm--which presents them with new possibilities for the stages of life too often dismissed as banal. De Beauvoir argues that

> the reader of a literary work enters a world that is <u>other</u>; he becomes part of a subject other than himself. This implies that he denies reality in order to plunge into the imaginary. (emphasis original 445)

Readers considered old can plunge themselves into the imaginary reality presented by fiction about old age and so be mentally and momentarily freed of the physical fetters which bind what de Beauvoir calls reality. Further, de Beauvoir implies that all readers (i.e. of any age) can enter an imaginary realm where ideally old age departs from the cultural constructions which bind it in a concrete world.

If to read is possibly to alter one's subjectivity and adopt an alternate identity (somewhat like current virtual reality projects)[2], then to write is to offer a vast imaginative realm populated by potentialities which de Beauvoir's companion, Jean Paul Sartre, labels freedom. If one chooses, as de Beauvoir herself does frequently, to write explicitly about social problems, one incurs a certain responsibility to do so in such a way as to offer readers an imaginary world which accords with one's social views. De Beauvoir's distinction between lawgivers who offer a certain social perspective and poets who explore individual experience is collapsed in a literary work which

makes such an appeal to imaginations. Hence, novelists could be said to have a certain social responsibility to depict old age in a specific way, perhaps counter to pervasive cultural images. Doing so would reconnect fictional writing to old age as a social category which de Beauvoir says is the province of moralists and lawgivers. Novelists, however concerned they may be with individual fate, by the very nature of the project of writing (which necessarily involves a connection to readers), undertake a social responsibility, thus traversing the divide between the "social" and the "particular." Because, as de Beauvoir argues, culture can be normative, and writing fiction is a specific engagement in culture, writers and readers have a responsibility to collaborate in the creation of a particular imaginary world of possibility when experiencing fiction.

De Beauvoir and Sartre's well-known personal connection leads to an important implicit dialogue about the role of the reader. I am especially interested in their joint postulation of reading as an active engagement which situates an imaginative intellect in connection with a constructed social world. The new possibilities available to readers, for de Beauvoir, through an engagement with an imagined world, are available to readers, for Sartre, through a calculated and careful commitment. Reading, for Sartre, is "directed creation" (53). It is up to the reader to go beyond what is offered on the page to create the literary world which accords with Sartre's littérature engagée. The writer provides an opening and/or pathway in connection to which the reader collaborates in developing a piece of art that connects both to the lived world and to its imaginary counterpart: "It is the joint effort of

author and reader which brings upon the scene that concrete and imaginary object which is the work of the mind" (51-52). As in de Beauvoir's thinking, writing requires an active involvement, even a responsibility, of readers and that engagement includes a controlled foray into imaginative freedom. I expand Sartre's terminology la littérature engagée, translated by Stephen Ungar as committed writing, and call that deliberate interaction between readers and writers through texts committed reading.

Sartre's contributions in What is Literature? are important to my work because of how he situates readers in the process of a literary appeal. In particular he expands the social responsibility of both writers and readers in a larger process, he makes the reader largely accountable for how writing impacts a social world, and he articulates the role the imagination plays in interactions between writers, readers, and fiction (and other writing).

It may seem strange to invoke Sartre's writings for a contemporary feminist study, particularly a study of aging since he famously denies that there is experience associated with late life: "So since I don't believe that I possess experience, I am the same at close on seventy as I was at thirty, as long as my body functions" (qtd in Marks 183). By addressing Sartre's writings about the social value of literature through his postulation of la littérature engagée, I have no intention of fully involving the lengthy debate among a long line of male theorists such as Roland Barthes and Theodor Adorno, though I share many of their reservations about Sartre's easy postulation of freedom and choice. In addition to his exploration of readership, Sartre's What is Literature is relevant to my study mostly because of his close

relationship with and influence on Simone de Beauvoir. As Jacques Ehrmann points out in his "Simone de Beauvoir and the Related Destinies of Woman and Intellectual,"

> The Mandarins pondered over (and one must still ponder) the inevitable overlapping of politics and literature, and contained a full-dress debate of the question (which Sartre's What is Literature? had examined in the domain of literary criticism) of the intellectual's personal commitment. (92)

As is typical, de Beauvoir enriches her secondary writing by articulating, in her fiction, issues crucial to the couple's intellectual lives.

Sartre explains the reader's role in connection with writing as a social choice and supports my assertion that fiction can ameliorate social problems such as negative perceptions of old age. Sartre's views on fiction in What is Literature outline writing precisely in terms of social responsibility and implicate readers in that responsibility. In his defense of la littérature engagée, he says,

> I am an author, first of all, by my free intention to write. But at once it follows that I become a man whom other men consider as a writer, that is, who has to respond to a certain demand and who has been invested, whether he likes it or not, with a certain social function. (77)

Accordingly, because writing is by its very nature social, since it involves readers and reader opinion, writers operate within a social realm and thereby must accept the associated social responsibility. Authors of fiction about old

age can thereby consider a constructive articulation of late life part of their social function.

Still, like de Beauvoir, Sartre does not leave the sole interpretive responsibility with the writer, but rather implicates readers in the creative process and presents part of the "moral imperative" that he claims is at the heart of the "aesthetic imperative" as the reader's responsibility. As he puts it, "You are perfectly free to leave that book on the table. But if you open it, you assume responsibility for it" (56). Both writer and reader, who collaborate in "directed creation," have a social responsibility for the imaginative freedom they take from any literary project (53). I argue that the social function of literary production can change the social factors which construct late life experiences by increasing the responsibility of readers. Readers can demand of writers new and constructive depictions of elderly characters which evoke new social responsibility in readers.

Because, for Sartre, writers cannot play the same role with their own works, as other readers can, readers are even more accountable for the social function of literary production. Readers

> are always ahead of the sentence they are reading in a merely probable future which partly collapses and partly comes together in proportion as they progress, which withdraws from one page to the next and forms the moving horizon of the literary object. (50)

Accordingly, writers do not guess or predict possible futures, they "project" them in connection presumably with their own experiences in life and with

literature, and readers have to evaluate these possibilities in view of their own freedom and expectations (50). Sartre's articulation of la littérature engagée pushes beyond the descriptive to examine the potential inherent to literature and makes readers most responsible for realising that potential. Drawing readers into an imaginatively constructed world can provide those readers an enhanced capacity for imagining probable literary horizons.

Imagination, for Sartre, plays a specific and controlling role in the "directed creation" in which the reader participates:

> the imagination of the spectator has not only a regulating function, but a constitutive one. It does not play; it is called upon to recompose the beautiful object beyond the traces left by the artist. The imagination cannot revel in itself any more than can the other functions of the mind; it is always on the outside, always engaged in an enterprise. (55)

The work of the imagination is crucial to the freedom required by the book and to the readers' connection to fiction's potential. The reader collaborates through the imagination in reconfiguring the textual object offered by the committed writer to recreate its entire aesthetic and social power. Thus, the same responsibility involved in picking up a book governs the imagination. Imaginative freedom constrains and is constrained by social need.

When Sartre discusses committed writing, he does not confine his argument to fictional narrative by any means. He is referring, in What is Literature, to prose writing more generally and its "universe of meanings" (38). When he does specifically speak of narrative fiction, in the form of the

novel, he further stresses the importance of imagination in the collaboration between reader and writer:

> we may say that in order for it [the world of the novel] to offer its maximum density the disclosure-creation by which the reader discovers it must also be an imaginary participation in the action; in other words, the more disposed one is to change it, the more alive it will be. (65-66)

The committed reader has a specific role in applying imagination to the process by which the writing (in the form of a novel) comes alive. Committed reading engages in "the action" to create a desire for change which affects both a larger social world and the fictional world simultaneously. More than simply writing against passive reading, Sartre provides an articulation that supports writing as an act that expands the possibilities readers can imagine. He makes readers' imaginations so important to the creation of fiction, that the work of committed reading becomes completely interdependent. Reading The Stone Angel expands my ability to imagine old people's mental world, so, as the result of Margaret Laurence's committed writing and my subsequent engagement, my interaction with Duet for Three can be even more expansive.

By building on Sartre's discussion of reading, I can articulate how novels (and other narrative forms) make an appeal, especially through narrative voice, to readers and connect them to topics related to a larger social world in a deliberate and transformative way. Murray Smith's "Altered States: Character and Emotional Response in the Cinema" helps me to

delineate the role of imagination in such an appeal, and Martha Nussbaum's Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life helps me to spell out the facets of narrative fiction which deliberately situate the reader.

Smith, speaking of fiction (though not precisely novels), clearly differentiates the role of the imagination in a process of creation shared between narrative text (as opposed to writer in Sartre) and viewer (his discussion is of fiction film). Smith clarifies the role of the imagination in connection with fiction specifically:

> Our experience of fiction is unlike imagination in other contexts (such as daydreaming) in that it is enabled and constrained by texts which determine, at the very least, some features of our imagining. Of course, every imaginative act is 'constrained' in the sense that it depends on the resources provided for the subject by his or her experiences within a particular culture, but our experience of fiction is peculiar, in the context of imagination in general, in the degree to which, and the ways in which, it is guided. (36)

Fiction plays a dual role in Smith's articulation: encouraging imagination at the same time as directing it towards specific topics and perspectives. In supporting Sartre's assertion of guided creation, almost explicitly, Smith offers two crucial and important concepts to a discussion of the particular imaginative engagement involved with fiction--narration and the beholder's share: "Having outlined the concept of narration, the force which guides and constrains the spectator, let us consider further 'the beholder's share'--the

imaginative activity of the viewer" (36). Before more fully articulating how each participates in the process of directed creation, however, and how they relate specifically to a study of literature of aging, it is crucial to understand where exactly narrative fiction, as a literary form, can fit into this discussion.

Nussbaum's exploration of the novel as a viable forum for her analysis of judgment and social responsibility adds narrative voice to my argument about committed reading. In particular, she articulates how narrative fiction makes a specific address to the reader, through what I call narration, and how recurring narrative themes can expand social thought in the readers to whom the narrative voice appeals.

Nussbaum argues, as Sartre and de Beauvoir do about reading more generally, that narrative fiction situates the reader socially through a direct appeal. Like de Beauvoir, Sartre, and Smith, she articulates the precise role of imagination in the process of readerly responsibility, which for her connects with narrative voice. She claims, "My central subject is the ability to imagine what it is like to live the life of another person who might, given changes in circumstance, be oneself or one of one's loved ones" (5). To her, narrative fiction and, although she does not discuss it extensively, narrative film, enable imagining the life of another person. Building on Aristotle's well-known catharsis argument, Nussbaum delineates readers as actively engaged with fiction to the degree that the interaction has a formidable personal and, by extension, social effect.

Nussbaum claims that how novels are voiced, or narrated, deliberately situates the reader in connection with the themes of novelistic production,

and so narrative voice evokes the social effect. The address to the reader, which I argue can also be called narration--how a text organises information to have a specific effect on the audience--situates the reader in a way that evokes identification or sympathy:

> Novels ... in general construct and speak to an implicit reader who shares with the characters certain hopes, fears, and general human concerns, and who for that reason is able to form bonds of identification and sympathy with them, but who is also situated elsewhere and needs to be informed about the concrete situation of the characters. (7)

The reader, then, being deliberately situated in connection with particular themes, informed about details of a new concrete world, and exposed to a normative world view, still has enough distance to wrestle with the personal and, by extension, social impact of reading a novel. Reading The Stone Angel connects me with Hagar Shipley's central concerns and physical challenges, but I remain myself reading and so am in position to contemplate Hagar's situation in connection to a larger, lived reality.

Nussbaum's reasons for studying novels in particular relate primarily to their themes and structures. She describes a general novelistic theme:

> the novel is concrete to an extent generally unparalleled in other narrative genres. It takes as its theme, we might say, the interaction between general human aspiration and particular forms of social life that either enable or impede those aspirations, shaping them powerfully in the process. (7)

Novels typically make a connection between a possible concrete lived world and readers' imaginative reconstruction of that world, and in doing so they encapsulate human struggles with transformative adversity and fortune. Poised as a meditation on human aspiration in connection to social life, the novel offers a particularly powerful mode for exploring certain topics often ignored by fiction, such as old age.

The novel is not the only form of narrative with the transformative power Nussbaum claims for it. Other narrative fiction makes similar appeals in relation to similar themes through similar narrative voices. Nussbaum extends her argument to a larger spectrum of narrative forms, exploring:

> not only how the characters feel and imagine, but what sort of feeling and imagining is enacted in the telling of the story itself, in the shape and texture of the sentences, the pattern of the narrative, the sense of life that animates the text as a whole. (4)

Nuanced transparent sentences, cause and effect relationships, and a "sense of life" make narrative fiction a potent method of connecting with readers' imaginations and possibly enacting a social transformation through them. Whereas poetry has often celebrated and refigured old age from a particular distance afforded by its larger investment in densely figurative, rather than transparent, language, realist narrative fiction usually relies heavily on a simpler mode of signification and so has more difficulty idealising or condemning at the level of language a social problem without also taking into consideration its intricate links to a lived social world. Because of an investment in a particular form of expression, narrative fiction offers a more

concrete possibility of new engagement with social worlds.

The literary potential of old age relies on committed reading. Narrative fiction's possible engagement with readers, or more properly readers' possible engagement with narrative fiction, can create conditions for a constructive depiction of late life. The interaction between narration and readers' imaginations can expand the horizon of fiction's possibilities at the same time as it expands the horizon of old age's possibilities. The guided creation of a specifically fictional narrative can constrain and encourage imaginations to conceive of specific themes, such as late life, in new and exciting ways.

V Narrativity and Old Age

De Beauvoir's literary narratives certainly differ from the personal narratives offered in Lock's study in the degree to which they participate in a fictional realm which is deliberately constructed. Other types of narratives, including the personal narratives which Lock explores, are almost certainly constructed or adapted to a specific set of circumstances, but their existence as narrative is founded on a principle of truth through representation. Perspective more than creativity colours each personal narrative version. Writers still offer readers possibilities for imaginative engagement, but not necessarily accompanied by the imaginative freedom necessary to a literary construction. There is not the same kind of appeal to the reader's freedom, constrained by literary technique. Rather, in the personal narratives, the limits of personal experience as presented by the narrator bind readers' engagement.

Peter LaMarque's argument about the distinctiveness of fictional narrative, "Narrative and Invention: The Limits of Fictionality," makes a simple but crucial distinction: "An audience is invited by a storyteller not so much to *believe* the propositions presented in a narrative as to *make-believe* them" (148). As well as participating in basic principles of narrative, such as temporality, point of view, structure, and voice, fictional stories operate in an imaginative realm which may or may not intersect with a factual world but which sets up a relationship between at least one imaginary voice and an audience. Readers engage with de Beauvoir's fiction understanding that the narrator constrains their imaginative activity only in connection with a constructed world, whereas readers of her personal narratives realize they are constrained by events that de Beauvoir narrates from her own perspective. The question of how fiction sets up a distinct relationship with readers is crucial to studies of narrative which frequently, under the aegis of narratology, dissect the various mechanisms of a literary work to examine how a writer can make an appeal to a reader.

Narrative fiction does not have to be experimental or challenge linguistic expectations to affect drastically readers' perceptions of a larger social world. Jay Clayton's "The Narrative Turn in Minority Fiction" discusses incorporating folk elements such as storytelling so that, although works are not strictly experimental in form, they challenge existing literary structures by means of incorporation (as Lock's work challenges medical anthropological structures with her incorporation of personal narratives). Clayton's argument reinforces the potential subversiveness of traditional

forms of writing (like novels and short stories) a return to which is frequently (and often mistakenly) associated with a right wing agenda. In the way that de Beauvoir writes within masculinist and scientific language, novelists can work from within conventional forms, including relatively transparent writing, to innovate and alter literary effect.

Some novels tell a chronological story in an easily comprehensible voice and transparent language, without necessarily reinforcing or furthering a conservative or restrictive agenda. All of the works I have chosen for my study are traditional in that they operate in a strictly narrative realm no matter how many and how subversive the voices which speak. The impetus towards narrative, and the structure this mode imposes onto the speaker and the reader, is at least partially explained by the intergenerational relationships implied. Further, the necessary temporal mode implied by the use of narrative is the only one available to the octogenarian (and older) protagonists of these novels--space is no longer a viable terrain for many of the narrators constructed as old in these works of fiction. At a time when their spatial world is so strictly curtailed by physical decline, the refuge for each becomes a mental perambulation, though not necessarily chronological, which necessarily jumps back and forth temporally--spatial relationships are established, for the most part, retrospectively.

Numerous narratologists have rigorously laid out, labelled, and examined the key elements of narrative, such as space and time, and such studies are often now dismissed as limiting because of their structuralism (and consequent reliance on binary oppositions) and over-categorising. Since

I chose the novels for my study based primarily on their subversiveness simultaneously of stereotypical/archetypal constructions of old age and of certain, potentially dangerous, normative narrative devices, a contextualised, culturally-inflected narratology illuminates their formal innovations. Mieke Bal's clear-headed and updated Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative offers a helpful framework for the discussion of the formal elements which enable the social impact of these novels and films. Bal defends and explains her own continued engagement with narratology saying,

> What I propose we are best off with in the age of cultural studies is a conception of narratology that implicates text and reading, subject and object, production and analysis, in the act of understanding...A theory, that is, which defines and describes narrativity, not narrative; not a genre or object but a cultural mode of expression. (222)

Narrativity neatly encompasses the two terms laid out earlier by Murray Smith: the narration and the beholder's share. Escaping the binaries of other narratological studies, narrativity changes the coordinating conjunction of exclusivity--or, to that of inclusivity--and. It is precisely within that conjunction that I situate my study, so that I offer an examination of how the writer of fiction about old age makes an appeal to the reader who engages or commits to that piece of art. The question for me is not whether to privilege the author, the text, or the reading, but how to link the three in an examination of two cultural phenomena: narrativity and old age.

Because each of the narratives I discuss, regardless of its medium or

narrative structure, relies upon tales told by an elderly character, each work offers numerous narrative layers. The relationship between these layers could symbolize communicative strategies in relation to old age. The layers and ways of telling replicate societal receptivity to old age itself as a phenomenon. To establish common, intergenerational ground, a story must be told. There must be a move backwards temporally and a narration of events from a specific subjective position. Failing and changing memory in connection with physical infirmity often intervene in a typical chronological narrative and obscure effective communication. As Bal explains, "when the embedded text presents a complete story with an elaborate fabula, we gradually forget the fabula of the primary narrative" (53). Not only does this engagement in an attempted reconstruction of the past entail forgetting the supposed pains, restrictions, and tribulations of a present time narrative, it helps to develop sympathy with the protagonist of a primary narrative without focussing on potentially alienating factors (such as the infirm body). The reader can concentrate on the embedded story, usually one of youth, and almost forget the aged voice which guides the telling. Alienating factors associated with typical constructions of aging inevitably intervene, however, and this is where misunderstandings and misconceptions can obscure communication, or telling. It becomes increasingly crucial to overcome such an obstruction however. Bal provides two potent examples when "narrative produces life" (53): the Scheherazade in the Arabian Nights and Toni Morrison's Beloved. Bal explains that "Beloved's existence as a subject must be 'created' by story-telling" (53). In the case of extreme old age accompanied by physical

infirmity, narrative could become the function of life: a means of mimicking and constructing diminishing processes.

Bal explains that "the first question which arises [in the study of the structure of a narrative on the page] is that of the identity and status of the narrative agent" (16). This very textual element is crucial to the study of old age fiction since identity and status are precisely what is called into question at the point of old age. The texts I present vary in how they position the reader in relation to old age precisely via the identity and status of the narrative agent. I choose to adopt Bal's term narrator over focalizor because I am most interested in the textual presentation of the story, and the narrator controls that presentation. Further, I am uncomfortable with the emphasis on vision contained within Bal's description of focalization. I agree with Bal that "'narration' has always implied focalization" because "language shapes vision and world-view, rather than the other way around" (19), but I am not comfortable with the degree to which she adapts a visual metaphor to explain narrative voice. She defines focalization: "Focalization is, then, the relation between the vision and that which is 'seen,' perceived" (142). She knowingly adopts a standard association of sight with knowledge, which inevitably privileges visual registers over other sensory aspects of fiction, and so following her terminology in my study would risk foregrounding bodies yet again. To preserve a full sensual register in my study, I prefer the terms narration, which I have defined as a narrative's control over the reader, and perspective, which Bal explains as covering "both the physical and the psychological points of perception" (143).

Margaret Laurence's Hagar Shipley offers the only conduit to knowledge for readers of The Stone Angel. Concentrating on the narration of that novel shifts how the present tense story, through which the past is refracted, frames not only the fiction, but also its criticism. Joan Barfoot's Aggie alternates her late life narration with daughter June. The conflicting perspectives of the two women force readers of Duet for Three to evaluate familial relationships complexly and repeatedly. In Chorus of Mushrooms, the narrative voice is intricately shared so that readers can no longer definitively relate to one particular perspective, but must understand how perspective is always constructed and unreliable. The third person voice of Edna Alford's A Sleep Full of Dreams encourages readers to evaluate a young caregiver at the same time as they reckon with elderly, nursing home residents, through her continually shifting understanding of them. Shani Mootoo's Cereus Blooms at Night also presents an elderly nursing home resident through a caregiver's mind, but this time the young caregiver speaks in the first person forcing an association onto readers. In Cynthia Scott's The Company of Strangers, narration is more difficult to pinpoint since the semi-fictional genre offers some talking heads style interviews, but the interviewer and interviewees change roles throughout the film. No voice-over guides the telling, and no particular character constrains viewers' imaginative connections. Scott offers viewers varying levels of information about the different characters, in the way that the characters gradually have to draw information out of each other. To a degree, the shifting narration allows viewers to participate in the formation of a community and thereby share the

identity and status of the narrative agents.

Fictional narratives offer myriad possibilities for the recasting of old age because they can situate readers in each subject position (inside and outside the construction of old age) to broaden perspectives, encourage imaginations, and compel thought about the different challenges and rewards of late life. In these works, readers are offered grandmotherhood from the perspective of old age, nursing homes from the perspective of caregivers, and female friendship from within. By examining the narrativity of these works, I will demonstrate how they theorize late life and harbour the potential to alter drastically how readers make sense of the world.

Endnotes

1. See Woodward, Kathleen, ed. Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999; Featherstone, Mike and Andrew Wernick, eds. Images of Aging: Cultural Representations of Later Life. London: Routledge, 1995; Wyatt-Brown, Anne and Janice Rossen, eds. Aging and Gender in Literature: Studies in Creativity. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1993; and Waxman, Barbara Frey. From the Hearth to the Open Road: A Feminist Study of Aging in Contemporary Literature. New York: Greenwood P, 1990 for examples of recent studies which combine disciplines to analyze cultural representations of aging.

2. See Featherstone, Mike. "Post-bodies, Aging and Virtual Reality." Featherstone and Wernick 227 - 44 for an argument about how virtual reality offers aging participants emancipation from physical changes.

Chapter Three: "No Seductions. No Rapes. No Murders": The Stone Angel and Old Age

It is no compliment to a novel as a work of art to say that it might well be used as a textbook in geriatrics; or that its last pages are a perfect casebook on both the sad reassurances and the maddening frustrations of a patient in hospital. (Thomas 74)

I do not know, anywhere in literature, a more convincing or moving account of old age; of the anger and fear and the humiliation, coupled with a completely unsentimental recognition of the manipulation and the craziness and meanness of a dangerous old woman. (Maitland 44).

I am tempted to concur with Clara Thomas's 1975 muted praise of Margaret Laurence's The Stone Angel since, as I have argued in chapter two, literature is best viewed not as data, supporting textbook analyses of geriatric medical problems, but as theory, which enriches current attempts to understand late life, precisely because, as Sara Maitland puts it, a novel can be both convincing and moving. Nonetheless, Laurence's 1964 novel offers a startling new perspective on old age, seemingly as faithful as it is unique, so that Thomas's double-edged praise should be taken seriously. Whether or not she faithfully portrays old age, which always remained outside her experience, Laurence's accomplishment in the gritty construction of Hagar Shipley presents a devastating challenge and circuitous pathway to committed readers. The intense irony that Laurence took her own life to

avoid a fate similar to that of her eerily convincing, oldest heroine supports Sartre's assertion that writers cannot be readers of their own work in the same way as readers can. The opportunity Laurence offers readers to engage in a remarkable literary world and so embark on a new understanding of late life experience was not available to Laurence when she tragically chose suicide and wrote in her journal: "I would rather let go now, then [sic] go on to be one of those old old [sic] ladies in the hospital. I don't want to be Hagar" (qtd in King 382).

Readers willing to take on mutual responsibility for Laurence's disclosure must engage directly with Hagar and reorient numerous relationships with the concrete world, including (at certain points) physical mobility, to come to terms with the future Laurence projects through her. Laurence's biography devastatingly contradicts the fictional narrative she presented two decades earlier, but the possibilities harboured within that earlier, careful construction of a difficult late life continue a potent connection with readers committed to countering the ageism which, in effect, killed Laurence. Because of its complex and innovative narrative structure and extensive critical history, The Stone Angel provides an ideal starting point for an analysis of how Canadian fiction theorises female late life. Hagar Shipley's intense and memorable voicing of past and present struggles demonstrates the principles of narrativity and old age outlined in Chapter two, as well as continuing the depiction of decrepitude adopted by de Beauvoir.

In 1964, The Stone Angel was immediately published internationally, in

Canada, the United States, and Britain, and has since attracted international critical attention to the extent that the 1996 American-published New Perspectives on Margaret Laurence has to state explicitly with some surprise (humorous to a Canadian reader) that studies of Laurence's work have been published elsewhere: "Several books on Margaret Laurence's writing (by Canadians and a Scot) are published outside of America" (Coger xix). Laurence's influence within Canada, and especially her literary influence, is itself vast and the implicit subject of this dissertation. Her choice to present a female nonagenarian protagonist confronted contemporaneous literary standards and reader expectations to the extent that she questioned her own sanity in having done so: "No seductions. No rapes. No murders...It is the work of a lunatic, I think. It has hardly anything to recommend it to the general public" (qtd in King ix-xx). Having offered readers what continues to be praised as a remarkably compelling, in the literal sense of drawing people in, character who occupies a subject position not traditionally considered interesting generally, let alone artistically, Margaret Laurence created possibilities for later female writers in Canada to project similar alternate realities and thereby further her ends of examining the possibilities for female independence and power fascinatingly situated in her grandfather's generation (Taylor 162). The Stone Angel because of its longstanding influence provides a paradigm for my literary analysis.

Literary criticism of The Stone Angel often elides Hagar Shipley's old age with other concerns so that it rarely captures the structure of the novel within its own approach. Although, since the entire novel is narrated by

nonagenarian Hagar, it seems that it would be impossible to consider The Stone Angel through any conduit but that of extreme old age, studies typically shy away from adopting or even admitting that subject position. Instead, the general impetus recently is to attempt to unify the novel from some other paradigmatic angle: theme, genre, political status. Doing so encourages a recapitulation of Hagar Shipley's biography which forgets that Laurence offers the entire fabula from the perspective of a particular, extremely old woman.

Studies abound which find coherence in the novel because of its biblical or literary imagery, because of its status as a confessional novel, or because of its impact as a feminist novel[1]. The Stone Angel is a coherent novel from all of these perspectives and many others, but the most obvious and necessary way to examine that coherence is via old age. The narrativity of the novel, the relationship set up between the narration and readers' imaginations, demands such a committed reading. Laurence herself points out that the very structure of the novel, which provides critics the biographical recap they examine, deliberately mirrors the mental processes of the very old: "In a sense, I think this method ["present tense, with flashbacks in the past tense"] works not too badly in The Stone Angel simply because Hagar is so old, is living largely in her past, does--like so many old people--remember the distant past better than the present" (emphasis original, qtd in Thomas 66). Laurence explains why readers of all ages are able to consider her portrait of Hagar faithful--the controlled rambling of the narration matches cultural understandings of elderly thought patterns. Oddly, despite

the deliberate and successful seemingly doddering narration, few studies of The Stone Angel directly address the extent to which the novel is governed by old age and thereby comments on the process of aging. Critics usually acknowledge Hagar's old age only in order to describe the "crazy," "mean," "dangerous" old woman (Maitland 44) in connection with her physical decline: "At ninety, when the book begins, she is grotesque with the fat ugliness of her old age" (Thomas 61). Disappointingly, one recent study which does tackle the depiction of the elderly in Laurence's fiction offers the most negative reading of Hagar Shipley I have yet uncovered and, further, does not adequately take into account the narrative elements which construct her.

Rosalie Murphy Baum in her "Self-alienation of the Elderly in Margaret Laurence's Fiction" concludes that Hagar Shipley conforms to two types of neuroses as outlined by Karen Horney in a psychological study which considerably predates the novel. Baum's description of Hagar not only adopts the condescending terminology of earlier criticism, for example calling her a "grand dame" (190), but also weaves similar regressive language together to produce an utterly offensive portrait:

> At the opening of The Stone Angel, Hagar Shipley is about ninety, an outrageous, difficult woman being cared for by her son Marvin and daughter-in-law, Doris. She has difficulty remembering what happens from one minute to the next and sometimes confuses events of the past with those of the present; she cries easily, screeches at her daughter-in-law with little or no

> cause, and is churlish or combative much of the time. In addition, she wets the bed and insists upon smoking in bed even though she frequently falls asleep with a burning cigarette; her arthritis makes her clumsy; and she suffers pain under her ribs, which is later diagnosed as cancer. (157)

None of this description is factually inaccurate, but it pieces together the narration offered by an ill nonagenarian in a particularly ungenerous and peculiar way which does not reflect the novel's structure. Baum strangely twists the reading of Hagar as though the novel highlights, rather than merely hints at, the perspective of the apparently unfortunate offspring on whom Hagar "inflict[s]" the "humiliations of old age," "without gratitude" (157). Baum's article does not even acknowledge the actual narrative structure which is absolutely crucial to reading The Stone Angel in terms of old age and so, I would argue, to reading The Stone Angel at all.

Baum's article concludes that certain of Laurence's works (she includes A Jest of God and Bird in the House) support Horney's postulation that the children of neurotic people end up even more neurotic (interestingly, all the guilty parents figured in the article are mothers). This argument, one would imagine, could allow Baum also to characterize these offspring negatively, but she instead portrays Hagar's son Marvin as martyr to the women who surround him:

> Her son Marvin, with his wife, has devoted the last seventeen years of his life caring for his elderly mother. He has served her in every way he could, cringing from the bickering and

> recriminations between her and his wife, feeling guilty about the great burden that his wife has to bear from both the physical needs and attitude of his mother. (158)

This article's narrowness eliminates the possibility that Marvin could bear more of the supposed burden presented by his infirm, unregenerate mother, rather than fretting about his ever dutiful wife. I cannot imagine what further conclusion to draw from Baum's article beyond that Laurence presents such a slice of life that it is possible to analyze her characters in connection with models which work with live people. Thus, the innovative interpretive strategies provided by some psychoanalytic approaches which could perhaps ameliorate my own fictional analyses are entirely absent from Baum's particular article. As an example of literary criticism which discusses Hagar Shipley's old age, Baum's article disappoints and even damages the potential inherent within The Stone Angel.

Certain feminist approaches do at least consider Hagar's old age as part of a larger study of the novel, and, as a result, these studies adequately and accurately discuss the novel's narrative configuration. Constance Rooke's "A Feminist Reading of The Stone Angel" asserts that, in support of the narrative structure of the novel, "we are made to sense the physically decrepit Hagar as a mask behind which the true Hagar continues to reside" (26). Although it is difficult to consider the "physically decrepit" Hagar as merely façade, at least Rooke willingly acknowledges both the narrative situation of the novel and its connection to late life experience. Rooke also associates Hagar with Keats's Meg Merrilies, "an old gypsy woman" (37) from an earlier literary tradition.

Stephanie Demetrakopoulos's "Laurence's Fiction: A Revisioning of Feminine Archetypes" explains Laurence's entire fictional project as very much in line with that of de Beauvoir in that "she is making a radical change in the whole literary tradition by re-telling from a woman's point of view traditional and archetypal feminine life patterns that have been portrayed hitherto by male authors only" (42). Accordingly, Demetrakopoulos distinguishes Laurence's depiction of an old woman from characteristic male depictions in which "older women have often been seen as revoltingly lecherous, spending their days and nights plotting how sexually to entrap various men. Male authors depict the women as feeling great sadness over losing their sexual charms" (51). Demetrakopoulos directly contrasts Laurence's Hagar with Chaucer's Wyf of Bath and Joyce Cary's Sarah Monday saying:

> Laurence shows an old woman interested in metaphysics, younger women, her children, the meaning of the past. Cary's Sarah Monday dumps her children behind like Defoe's Moll Flanders. Chaucer's Wyf sees life only in terms of male / female relationships. This is not how women imagine old age for themselves. (51)

Demetrakopoulous instead associates Hagar with a series of old women and female-constructed old female characters such as Lillian Hellman, May Sarton's Hilary Stevens, Tillie Olsen's protagonist in "Tell Me a Riddle," and Mary Daly's self-proclaimed Crone (52). She situates Laurence's protagonist in a feminist lineage of self-expression and new understandings of aging, and

removes her from a simple association with less progressive predecessors.

Barbara Frey Waxman combine feminism with literary gerontology to describe The Stone Angel as a reifungsroman because of the novel's adoption of certain common elements of that genre. "The alienating effect of anger" (159), "the fall" as "common event of Reifungsromane" (160), the mirror (164),"remembrance of sex past" (168), confessional narrative (175), and an "emphasis...on the physical body and illness" (178) provide Waxman elements through which to examine Hagar's remarkable narration. As a result, Waxman accurately captures and describes the narrative situation of the novel, in contrast to much Laurence criticism: "by urging readers to see both perspectives, as, for example, through Hagar's interior monologues and Doris's dialogue with her, Laurence is weakening the binary opposition between younger and older and encouraging mutual tolerance" (160). Waxman's consideration of Hagar's gender in connection with her age allows her to pinpoint the narrative structure of the novel and its potential effect on readers. In doing so, she recognizes the danger of a strict binary opposition between youth and age because of how it guides the painful confrontations in the novel.

Recognising Hagar's age and making it a point of analysis render Rooke, Demetrakopoulous, and Waxman's work more effective in terms of articulating Laurence's narrative strategies. According to each critic, readers must acknowledge Hagar's extreme age to some degree and decide how to situate it in relation to the history she narrates. My analysis differs from other Laurence (and particularly Stone Angel) criticism because it concentrates on

the effect that an aging narrator has on linguistic expression, and so it includes, and even prioritizes, a close reading of the present tense narrative rather than focussing on the favourite retrospective moments of past studies[2]. I argue that the supposed vicissitudes of late life and the gradual reckoning with the changes wrought by time imbue each scene (past and present) of the novel with surprising disclosures about late life that readers have to negotiate constantly. I realize that by revealing a failure in Laurence criticism to come to terms adequately with Hagar's age, my work could be considered to suggest that avoiding Hagar's age is simple, possible, and usual. I think the critical tendency to ignore, underplay, or denigrate her age is more complex, and that it, in fact, replicates the kinds of evasions Laurence situates in Hagar's own discourse about her aging body.

Laurence presents an elderly narrator who tries to manipulate essential and socially-constructed images of the elderly by mentally escaping her present plight through reminiscences which explore past and underline present attempts at physical and social escape. Hagar speaks in the first person making readers privy only to her particular and unreliable perspectives not just of her physical present and the accompanying vicissitudes of age, but also of her past which reaches readers via an especially focussed and filtered lens[3]. Hagar's retelling cumulatively amounts to a conglomeration of self evaluation which occurs both through judgment of others and fear of her own physical transformation. Sara Maitland discusses The Stone Angel's first person narration saying, "the problem with first-person present-tense narrative is that it gives the writer

very little room for manoeuvre; there is no place for distance or judgement" (44). Maitland explains, though, that the first person narration succeeds in the case of The Stone Angel because

> in the creation of Hagar Shipley, [Laurence] has given us a character with exactly the right degree of self-knowledge to make this form work--a character who is not, by her nature, either self-indulgent or easily fooled, not even by herself, but who is also not so self-knowing that the reader has to take her every observation as the ultimate and perfect truth. (44)

I argue that, in fact, the cracks into sharper perception are also and more so available to the reader within and through the metaphoric evasions Hagar continually presents. Unable to grapple literally with both perceived failure in each person from her past and incomprehensible physical unreliability, Hagar distances her first person narration from herself (and by extension from the reader) through metaphor. Readers do not have to gaze directly at her aged flesh (and the lacks and absences it stands in for) but rather reach an understanding by means of varied fetid vehicles. Those vehicles operate as a mask, so that Hagar's metaphors make visible the negative assumptions about old age and hide the potential.

Repeated mirror gazing[4] scenes poignantly underscore Hagar Shipley's constant battle for self-knowledge. Her struggles with the mirror demonstrate that her physicality binds and mediates the subjectivity from which she speaks and which she offers to readers to share. Hagar recognises quite early that, with the exception of her eyes, her body is growing old:

> I am past ninety, and this figure seems somehow arbitrary and impossible, for when I look in my mirror and beyond the changing shell that houses me, I see the eyes of Hagar Currie, the same dark eyes as when I first began to remember and to notice myself. I have never worn glasses. My eyes are still quite strong. The eyes change least of all. (38)

Nonetheless, she later clings to a body image which ignores this metamorphosis:

> "Yet now," she says long after she has left Manawaka, "I feel that if I were to walk carefully up to my room, approach the mirror softly, take it by surprise, I would see there again that Hagar with the shining hair, the dark-maned colt off to the training ring." (42)

Just as Hagar's eyes refuse to change, so too does her "I" upon which readers wholly rely--she will not internalise her fleshly manifestation because to do so would be to accept the social pity she has so long disdained and to incorporate a representational framework which limits her body to decrepitude. To reconcile with the biological changes wrought by time would be to succumb to the cultural meaning that old age incurs.

In keeping with the dual nature of aging presented by de Beauvoir wherein an exteriority would have to be internalised for a person to equate self with old self, Hagar presents herself as having a mind at odds with her body, reflecting the metaphoric separation embedded in her linguistic expression. Faced with the possibility of exile to a nursing home, she

describes herself as divided:

> I am overcome with fear, the feeling one has when the ether mask goes on, when the mind cries out to the limbs, "flail against the thing," but the limbs are already touched with lethargy, bound and lost. (95)

Hagar has trouble unifying even her own subjectivity: "Yet I glance down at myself all the same, thinking she may be right, and see with surprise and unfamiliarity the great swathed hips. My waist was twenty inches when I wed" (56). Hagar presents herself as unable to reconcile her mental strength with her perceived physical diminishment to the extent that her understanding of her body does not match its physical manifestation. She still expects to see a dark haired, ambitious young woman in the mirror because she has not yet associated the changing shell presented her by the mirror with herself. Accordingly, she relies on a figure of speech which infinitely defers that recognition so that she can always be and not be the vehicles she chooses for self-description. The clash between images accordingly is no longer a clash between young Hagar and old Hagar but instead a disjunction between filly and "mare" (31); the metaphors offer readers a distance from aging human flesh and a new visual emphasis. Like Hagar gradually adjusting to myriad physical changes, readers must constantly renegotiate the complex metaphorical terrain as it shifts from present to past (as viewed through the present) and, in the process of that negotiation, they can develop a new understanding of the physical, mental, emotional, and social processes experienced by someone at Hagar's stage of

life.

Despite the supposedly deep-seated belief that she is in fact still the young, striking Hagar whose "good bones don't change" (283), Laurence's carefully constructed character continually describes herself by means of bestial cow, crustacean, and fish metaphors which shield her from accepting her "changing shell" while they reinforce how she is mired within it. Hagar's bestial self-representation bathetically foregrounds her body at a time when it is most unreliable. Trying to translate her body into a linguistic reality, which could somehow signal a mental acceptance accompanied by a resistance to change, instead results in a constant distancing--to accept her horrifying flesh as her own would be to acknowledge her own mortality. Remaining in a metaphoric realm, however, implies an acceptance of the self's invisibility and absence (in that other terms continually stand in for it). Further, the indignity associated with the betrayal of Hagar's body signals and even symbolises a broader loss of control, not just linguistically but in terms of her mobility which denotes freedom. Ultimately, she cannot escape physically because what she wants to leave behind is the decay and unreliability of her body and, also, the entire social construction (which she continues to play into) that considers aged flesh useless. Ironically, the very unreliability of her body sabotages her escape attempt. Readers cannot follow Hagar on the expected road trip because they learn from the constant bathos and contradictory self-descriptions that limits will be imposed. Like Hagar, readers must restrict triumphs to mental reconstructions and seemingly minuscule physical victories, like remembering not to drink that late night

cup of potentially treacherous tea.

Alice Bell, in her "Hagar Shipley's Rage for Life: Narrative Technique in The Stone Angel," pinpoints how incontinence signals all the betrayals of Hagar's body:

> 'The incontinent wetness of the infirm' becomes painfully significant in Chapter 2 when Hagar learns that she has been wetting her sheets every night without being aware of it. When Marvin and Doris suggest that she needs professional nursing care, her reaction is to 'betray' herself 'in shameful tears'. With these deft verbal echoes Laurence depicts the anguish of a strong, stubborn woman who in her old age can no longer control her bodily functions or conceal her emotions as she did when she was young. (52-53)

Constipation and incontinence are the closest to literal descriptions of Hagar's body the reader receives from her narration, but, in fact, each bodily function acts as a metaphor for equally unsuccessful and distressing emotional strategies. When Doris informs Hagar that she has been wetting the bed and that they lack an electric machine to wash the sheets, Hagar is mortified not just by the utter loss of control perhaps newly obvious to her, but by the fear that she did not realize the extent to which she had lost physical control. The final scenes, set in a hospital, centre around urinary function and the ability to gain a bedpan independently. Hagar's ultimate triumph results from her escaping a strait jacket in order to offer bladder relief to a younger generation. Because readers have learned Hagar's metaphoric lexicon, they can

understand her physical incontinence to signify a similar loss of narrative control, so that Hagar is in fact almost predictable in her unreliability as a narrator.

The constant threat of falling best exemplifies how Hagar's body thwarts her design and ultimately confines her. Although Hagar's desire for physical, mental, bodily, and social escape runs throughout narratives of both past and present, almost every time she tries to stand up (in the present), she risks falling. Trying to flee Silverthreads, Hagar worries about her ability: "Down the steps I go, hoping my legs won't let me down. I grip the railing with both hands, feeling my way ahead, testing each step with a cautious foot like someone wading into a cold sea" (105). Early in the present tense narrative, Doris and/or Marvin come to her aid each time she tries to stand on her cramped feet, but when she finally achieves, however briefly, the physical distance she craves, her fear of falling nonetheless confines her to her bed:

> My feet, still shod, are clenched with cramp. I should rise and stand, work the muscles straight. I daren't, though. What if I fall? Who'd tote me up? I'm reluctant, in any case, to leave the bed, as though it were some sort of stronghold where nothing could touch me. (161)

Her final stance, rising to give a co-patient a bedpan so that the young woman might be spared the indignity which Hagar experiences as a matter of aged course, doubly (if only momentarily) conquers the bodily limits, metaphorical and actual, to which she gradually succumbs. Not only does she stand without falling, but her aged bodily presence offers control to a

younger manifestation. Hagar feels helpless, yet offers help, underscoring that although her increasingly diminished mobility highlights her need for escape, the mental landscape she refurbishes throughout the novel provides the strength no longer afforded her body. Readers are still left to question the degree to which the falls are metaphoric indications of failed narrative strategies.

The only control Hagar can even try to maintain is linguistic so that she chooses a bodily metaphor (which ends in an additional simile) to describe the tenuous hold she maintains on expression: "But when I try to think what it is I'd impart, it's gone, it's only been wind that swelled me for an instant with my accumulated wisdom and burst like a belch" (234). At the very moments when her lack of mobility makes communication imperative, the increasing unreliability of her mind (accompanied and expressed by the unreliability of her body) hampers verbal exchanges. All she can do is evoke figuratively the changes which she cannot control. Similarly, Hagar's own heart becomes a figure for her own reckless need for escape which, even if it could possibly succeed, could only end in self-destruction since she, like her heart, tries to flee what sustains her. Hagar's constant struggle for control plays out within her ribcage as she fights to contain what, like her, is determined to escape: "My heart is pulsing too fast, beating like a berserk bird. I try to calm it. I must, I must, or it will damage itself against the cage of bones. But still it lurches and flutters, in a frenzy to get out" (95).

Hagar can only escape linguistically, even then at such a seemingly small level as choosing to operate figuratively rather than literally to avoid

accepting a changing physicality. Her desire and increasing need for escape thematically unifies the novel in the way that critics argue biblical references and feminism do. Hagar's specific investment in figurative language results from her experience of aging flesh, and so the various events and vignettes which comprise the novel are unified by means of a specific mode of representation which directly results from the protagonist being old. The metaphors of aging enacted by Laurence, through Hagar, continue the negative depictions offered by de Beauvoir. The vehicles are bestial and derogatory, and the tenor continually shifts and evades readers. Laurence tackles crucial issues of late life by adopting a densely figurative register that illuminates the problematic assumptions which too frequently undergird depictions of old women.

The remainder of my study of Canadian fictional constructions of aging is divided into three topics crucial to female old age: grandmotherhood, nursing homes and the potential for female community. Reading The Stone Angel from the perspective of old age to explore those three aspects of late life enables a critical study which examines passages other than those perennially offered by Laurence criticism, in which an almost separate critical version of The Stone Angel emerges (see endnote 2), and which shows how Laurence's instrumental novel sets up a crucial Canadian model.

Although Laurence presents a typical intergenerational conflict, Hagar does not transfer her conflicts with Doris and Marvin onto her granddaughter Tina. She has not anticipated that the offspring of her own disappointment

will play the role in her life that she does: "I couldn't have guessed then that my granddaughter Tina would become so dear to me" (183). The glimpses Hagar offers readers of her relationship with Tina further reflect, even in their brevity, the thwarted desire for escape she faces throughout the novel. The person in her life who could enact the escape she longs for remains slightly out of reach. As a result, readers (and possibly Hagar) do not have enough information to determine whether Tina's imminent wedding will differ significantly from Hagar's or not. Readers and Hagar learn from Steven, Hagar's grandson, that Tina is remaining out east to marry which at least indicates that she has enacted some kind of escape from her childhood home. Readers cannot determine, however, whether that escape simply resembles Hagar's own misguided self-imposed exile to the Shipley farm, or whether it is more considered. That the youngest female generation is just barely outside of the purview of the novel does suggest some form of escape. Readers are left to determine what kind of continuation the absent character of Tina might provide and further to speculate on what kind of unique benefits could be reaped from a grandmother - granddaughter connection.

Hagar, in this one case, has managed to avoid her usual controlling role in the life of the one person who could actualise her dreams. In Le Deuxième Sexe, de Beauvoir offers a best case scenario for grandmotherhood:

> Recognizing neither rights nor responsibilities, she loves them in pure generosity; she does not indulge in narcissistic dreams through them, she demands nothing of them, she does not sacrifice to them a future she is never to see. (556)

Hagar presents herself as relinquishing her stranglehold on proper appearances in connection with her granddaughter, and she even admonishes Doris for trying to play the role that she herself has attempted in so many people's lives. Feeling at a loss for words, Hagar surprises her son and daughter-in-law with the gesture of passing on her own mother's ring: "I haven't a word to send her, my granddaughter. Instead, I tug at my right hand, pull and shake, and finally wrench off the ring" (279). Finally, in relation to her granddaughter, Hagar can be read as emotionally generous.

The passing on of her mother's ring is frequently read as an acceptance on Hagar's part of a matriarchal lineage. Constance Rooke most appropriately reads it as linking four generations of women (41). The key here is that it is a marker of cross-generational connection and not connection between immediate generations. Hagar was not able to give the ring to Doris as would have been appropriate (and appropriate because it is her own mother's ring, and so that would itself have marked a skipping of a generation), she can only confer the gift on her granddaughter to affirm an intuitive tie. Helen Buss argues that Hagar's "gentle feelings toward Tina signal a new stage in her life, one that is to bring her closer to the mother and the values represented by that figure" (12). I suggest that although perhaps the giving of the ring does indicate a reconciliation with Hagar's own mother (not exactly, as Taylor and Buss argue, a reconciliation with the archetypal mother image which I cannot quite accept as being Hagar's ultimate model), the archetype she best matches in her action is that of a grandmother capable of love without possession and without expectation of return. When Taylor

explains that "Hagar comes to realize that she has been wandering in the wilderness, and her gift of the ring is her attempt to pass on the love, confirmation, and example which she lacked," then, she pinpoints a crucial aspect of the role of grandmother which Hagar accepts (169). Hagar's interaction with her other grandchild in the hospital room proves that the passing of the ring does not simply indicate an acceptance of matriarchal lineage.

When Hagar's grandson actually enters the novel in his final hospital visit, he also relates Hagar to generosity. He reminds her that she used to give him money for candy prompting her to recognize yet another disjunction in her old persona: "That's what I am to him--a grandmother who gave him money for candy. What does he know of me? Not a blessed thing" (296). She played a beneficent grandmother role without investing it with her own particular agency, and she perceives this as a lack. She tries to bridge the gap by asking an uncharacteristic question about Steven's current happiness, but is met with an unsatisfactory response. She can only content herself with his professional success by means of which she can partially acquit her son and daughter-in-law for their other perceived failings. The depiction of an unsatisfactory meeting between Hagar and the generation which could offer her an outlet and continuation underlines the sad lack of interpersonal connection readers have gleaned from her retrospective narration and highlights an obvious place for that lack to be remedied. Readers accordingly can develop a new understanding of the possibilities inherent in grandmotherhood, possibilities which are typically undermined in

motherhood because of intergenerational clashes.

The conflict between Hagar and the immediately younger generation centres around or culminates in a perceived need to place her in special care. Silverthreads looms large over the novel as a threat to Hagar's currently comfortable dependence. Hagar learns of plans to move her by finding a pamphlet rather than by means of a viable communication strategy which might have resulted in a consensus and avoided her eventual possible demise. Similarly, she claims that Marvin and Doris trick her into a visit, and she figures herself as an egg packed carefully into a crate on the journey to the home:

> After supper they baggage me into the car and off we go. I ride in the back seat alone. Bundled around with a packing of puffy pillows, I am held securely like an egg in a crate. (93)

The control Hagar maintains over readers' perspectives has a double edge in this metaphoric moment since she both captures the ignominy of being forced to travel against her will and reinforces a physical fragility which suggests the necessity of her move.

Later, Hagar outlines the potential freedom afforded by a move:

> To move to a new place--that's the greatest excitement. For a while you believe you carry nothing with you--all is canceled from before, or cauterized, and you begin again and nothing will go wrong this time. (155)

That revelation is sandwiched between her finding shelter in her final escape attempt and a description of her move to Mr. Oatley's, so it describes moves

she has made at her own motivation and organization, in strict contrast to being confined against her will in an institution. In further contrast, she figures herself as solidly attached to the home she has been able to buy as a result of the work she did for Mr. Oatley:

> I can think of only one thing--the house is mine. I bought it with the money I worked for, in this city which has served as a kind of home ever since I left the prairies...My shreds and remnants of years are scattered through it visibly in lamps and vases, the needle-point fire bench, the heavy oak chair from the Shipley place, the china cabinet and walnut sideboard from my father's house...If I am not somehow contained in them and in this house, something of all change caught and fixed here, eternal enough for my purposes, then I do not know where I am to be found at all. (36)

By associating the house with her own identity, Hagar leaves no solution for Marvin and Doris but to continue to care for her or to move her against her will. Since she has mired herself in the objects which comprise her home, she can no longer embrace the excitement and potential of a move, but can only perceive dislocation as antagonism. Again her lack of control not only over narration but over plot events makes her appeal a difficult positioning for readers who have to try to understand numerous perspectives all through her evasive lens. They recognize her metaphoric filling of the house with her physical presence as an attempt to counter the physical treachery previously presented, at the same time as they are aware of her offspring's legitimate

concerns.

Hagar's reaction to Silverthreads, after the initial shock of being taken for a visit against her will, is typical of how nursing homes are figured in the media and many novels. She reacts strongly to the anonymity and uniformity conferred upon the inmates. She regrets praising the pane windows since her admiration situates her with the other "unanimous old ewes" (98) who inhabit this "mausoleum" (96). She is sent into another institutional memory by an encounter wherein a nurse elides her with other inmates: "A young high-bosomed nurse flips open the main door, nods without seeing me, crosses the porch, goes out and down the steps" (99). By virtue of her age and accompanying physical appearance, a staff member cannot differentiate Hagar from inmates she should know personally. Laurence figures Silverthreads as a place where individuality disappears alongside the more obvious loss of independence.

Hagar undercuts this uniformity, however, by immediately and intricately individuating the various inmates she encounters. She instantly dislikes Miss Tyrrwhit who "pats at her hair with a claw yellow as a kite's foot" mostly because of the picture she paints of living at Silverthreads (101). Despite her own distaste, Hagar does not wish to face vivid descriptions of the meals and ways of her potential residence. In spite of herself, she is much more amenable to Mrs. Steiner who fits another stereotype of old women--the photograph wielder. Hagar's conversation with Mrs. Steiner hints at a community strength at Silverthreads which could perhaps offer Hagar something she does not have at her present home. Still, when Mrs. Steiner

verbalises the connection she feels with Hagar and suggests the two of them could benefit from living at Silverthreads together-- "'Well, you and I would get on pretty good...I hope we see you here'" (104)-- Hagar cannot accept the possibility and determines the necessity of an escape attempt which both actualizes and prevents her eventual participation in a female community like the one hinted at in her visit to Silverthreads.

When Hagar is hospitalised as the result of her attempt to escape the threat of exile to a nursing home, she again encounters women in a similar situation to herself, but this time she is unable to flee and reconciles herself to a degree to the strengths they collectively offer her. The relativity found within the hospital community enables Hagar to help at a time when she could have been figured most helpless. Her final acceptance of the strength harboured by community and connections enables her to defy her previous overriding superiority and desperate self-containment. Now that her world is reduced and reduced again so that she truly is physically contained--"Lord how the world has shrunk"; "The world is even smaller now. It's shrinking so quickly now" (254, 282)--she surpasses her previous circumspection to connect with fellow patients. As Michel Fabre, in "The Angel and the Living Water: Metaphorical Networks and Structural Opposition in The Stone Angel," argues,

> Gradually, through the slow but inevitable ripening of her flesh and her heart, she is led to accept things as they are, to appreciate and accept those elements that she had before considered as scornful, even intolerable, in her own personality. (27)

Succumbing to a distasteful weakness of flesh allows Hagar to make interpersonal connections she has also previously considered to result from weakness. Although she never actually reconciles herself with bodily change to the extent of a literal description, her relations with fellow patients represent a physical acceptance differently from the bathetic metaphors which continue.

Hagar's initial reluctance to share the public hospital ward reflects the disdain she presents herself as having held throughout her life. The "barracks" are "bedlam" where she is forced to sleep "cheek-by-jowl with heaven knows who all" (255). The anonymity of the "mewling nursery of old ladies" gradually dissipates as Hagar listens to them sleep (265): "some snore raspingly. Some whimper in their sleep. Some neigh a little, with whatever pain or discomfort is their particular portion" (256). She can no longer separate herself from these women when she discovers that she too contributed to the nighttime din. Further, when Marvin is unable to stay at the hospital, he leaves Hagar in the company of the other patients who she witnesses helping each other to attract the nurse's attention. When she discovers that she and Elva Jardine both come from rural Manitoba and even know some people in common, she can accept a connection between herself and the others: "Our eyes meet. There's an amiability about this woman" (272). Her prairie farmer connection allows her once again to be called by her proper name, Hagar.

The night obliterates the connections between the women-- "talk between bed and bed is extinguished. Each of us lives in our own night"

(273)-- but Hagar is able to comfort herself by thinking of the women she has begun to know throughout the day. When she forgets herself and tries to walk alone, she is better able to accept the help which eventually arrives because she is accepting the importance and validity of community. Her acceptance allows her to take Elva Jardine's advice and ask for a hypodermic needle from the doctor, so that her pain is lessened as the result of a female friendship. When Marvin finally finds the semi-private his mother has demanded, she appears not to have changed in his eyes since she is still simply unhappy with everything he is able to achieve for her. Readers are, of course, better situated than him to understand Hagar's personal growth which, they have learned from her retrospective narration, is long overdue.

Within the semi-private, the change within Hagar which allows her to appreciate female community is reinforced. Hagar is so intent on making connections that she offends her young roommate by implying similarity since their fathers share an occupation: "But that's the wrong thing to say. So much distance lies between us, she doesn't want any such similarity" (288). When Sandra Wong faces the physical indignity which Hagar feels should be the sole domain of the old, the old woman heroically risks her own physical comfort to offer the needed bedpan. The two are momentarily united when Hagar shares the language of the young woman's generation: "I have to smile at myself. I've never used that word before in my life. Okay" (emphasis original 301).

The three central aspects of Hagar's present existence within the narration of The Stone Angel --her relationship with future generations, her

potential incarceration in Silverthreads, and her hospitalisation--coalesce to provide a coherent vision of how an aging, ill woman's world is circumscribed by physical limitations and mental struggles. Her remarkable, and momentarily successful, escape attempt literally and metaphorically enacts a journey she has always desired and never been free enough to attempt. The distance between the Egyptian princess Hagar with emerald jewels in her hair and the old woman Hagar with squished June bugs on her head narrows because she has hopes for her granddaughter and so can to a degree accept the old body she has become and thereby turn to others who mirror the physical change which so alarms her.

By taking on the role of storyteller, Hagar attempts to make order of her life. Readers are compelled to connect with carefully chosen moments from her past, but they do so by means of the bridge that her elderly body and mind provide. The layers of narrative relate in the way that the generations relate within the novel so that the reader can connect more easily with the distant, past Hagar being reconstructed than with the more immediate, present Hagar offering the story. More than a case study, as implied by Clara Thomas, The Stone Angel offers a construction of female late life that deliberately situates readers' imaginations so that they have to take on Hagar's struggles and understand her physical limitations to participate fully in the collaboration they have agreed to. Not only do the careful layering of narrative and deliberate metaphoric evasions expand readers' cultural understanding of late life, but the distinct narrative voice also compels readers to recognize Hagar Shipley not only as old (which should not be

ignored), but as a particular, historically situated, culturally determined individual in late life. Readers are not likely to continue their engagement with The Stone Angel by presuming all old women to be similar to Hagar, but rather the process of committed reading should present them with the vast, little studied, and rarely understood interior negotiations associated with each and every aging body.

Endnotes

1. For examples, see Baxter, John. "The Stone Angel: Shakespearian Bearings. The Provincial Review 1(1977): 3-19; Osachoff, Margaret Gail. "Moral Vision in The Stone Angel." Studies in Canadian Literature. 4.1 (1979): 139-53; Rooke, Constance. "A Feminist Reading of The Stone Angel." Canadian Literature 93 (1982): 26-41; Koster, Patricia. "Hagar 'the Egyptian': Allusions and Illusions in The Stone Angel" Ariel: A Review of International English Literature. 16.3 (1985): 41-52; Potvin, Elizabeth. "A Mystery at the Core of Life: Margaret Laurence and Women's Spirituality." Canadian Literature. 128(1991): 25-38; Comeau, Paul. "Hagar in Hell: Margaret Laurence's Fallen Angel" Canadian Literature 128 (1991): 11-22.

2. Certain moments in The Stone Angel dominate criticism of the novel to the extent that there is almost a separate critical version which emerges. Notably, most of the frequently chosen passages relate to Hagar and motherhood. Almost all articles discuss the opening of the novel in great detail, linking Hagar with the statue erected for her mother's grave. Also, most studies devote a considerable passage to the moment at which Hagar refuse to impersonate her mother by wearing a shawl at her brother's death bed. These continual overlapping references surely gradually influence critical readings of the novel in their repetition of chosen key passages in favour of others. Few refer to the Silverthreads visit, which is the central conflict of the present tense narrative.

3. I choose a visual metaphor here consciously, because so much of Hagar's narration strives at a new understanding of a changing physical form, especially of how her body looks in the mirror.

4. Barbara Frey Waxman explains in From the Hearth to the Open Road that such scenes are typical to reifungsromane, of which she considers The Stone Angel to be an example.

Chapter Four: Generation Gaps: Non-Possessive Love and the Potential of Grandmotherhood

"O the cultural labyrinth of our inheritance, mother to daughter to mother..." (Marlatt Ana Historic 24)

Hagar Shipley briefly, but notably, plays a familial role when she passes on her mother's ring to Tina in the hospital. This chapter examines two novels which build on Laurence's model to theorize more fully the possible extent of the late life female role of grandmother. The main elderly characters in Joan Barfoot's Duet for Three and Hiromi Goto's Chorus of Mushrooms develop the foregrounding of age found in Simone de Beauvoir's midlife fiction and Laurence's fiction of old age. However, marking a chronological development in the potential of fiction to alter attitudes towards aging, Aggie, of Duet for Three, and Naoe, of Chorus of Mushrooms, do not internalize negative constructions of aging in the way that Simone de Beauvoir's heroines and Hagar Shipley do, and so readers gain a new perspective on the possibilities of late life through a new descriptive schema.

Considerations of motherhood as institution and experience pervade scholarly feminism of the past two decades to the extent that I am reluctant to invoke them for a chapter not primarily concerned with their contributions. They are, however, a crucial takeoff point for a discussion of the key familial relationship within the texts I study: grandmotherhood. Most existing studies on grandmotherhood come from cultural backgrounds wherein grandmothers are typically not old women (black America) and from First Nations cultures whose conceptions of grandmotherhood do not bear on the

relationships I discuss. I am reluctant to draw on a First Nations influence because to claim that these cultural conceptions pervade other North American social groups to any large extent would be inaccurate. To pretend otherwise, I fear, would be to appropriate the positive aspects of a particular complex and misunderstood storytelling legacy and even belief system (since the elderly are deified by some First Nations groups).

Nonetheless, I am interested in storytelling here, though the examples I explore are inflected by a different set of cultural influences. In the novels I discuss, and in much of the Canadian non-native context, culture, love, knowledge, and potential freedom is transmitted between female relatives within the existing and confining framework of the nuclear family. My project concerns itself precisely with what Marlatt so elegantly evokes: "the cultural labyrinth of our inheritance, mother to daughter to mother." I explore here how convoluted and complex interfemale relationships become, especially when a daughter becomes a mother and has to play both social roles. Whereas cultural standards and other pressures restrict motherhood, grandmotherhood does not usually suffer the same fate and so presents an alternate conceptualisation for female-female love.

Much feminist writing about motherhood and female family relationships hints at the type of conceptualisation I will outline, but it is only fully elaborated in certain works of fiction. As a result, I will begin with an analysis of three bench-mark studies of motherhood which set up some key issues that could extend into studies of grandmotherhood as well. My analyses of fiction illuminate the potential for grandmotherhood to offer a

new social role. In the fiction, uniquely mediated narrative voices echo and expand the carefully outlined theoretical insights offered by Adrienne Rich, Sara Ruddick, and Marianne Hirsch, who frequently rely on personal narrative.

As I have discussed in chapter three, when Simone de Beauvoir describes the transition "From Maturity to Old Age," she outlines certain reactions to a grandmother role and generalizes about a best case scenario (see page 115). De Beauvoir suggests that once elderly women relinquish their own battles with circumstances, they can perhaps accept that the liberty they have not been able to achieve may to some extent be embodied by a subsequent generation (if that generation exists within their families). They are free from the cultural restraints that bind motherhood, and so they can offer unselfish devotion to their grandchildren. As evoked in two fictional portrayals of this complex family structure, emotional generosity to a distant generation can reinforce the tension between an old woman and the middle generation. The middle generation often not only harbours some resentment at not having received such devotion from the now grandmother but also at the interference in parental roles. Mothers do not have the same opportunity to relinquish "rights and responsibilities," and so frequently lack the "pure generosity" de Beauvoir attributes to grandmothers. Mothers, of course, provide a crucial link in the transmission of cultural heritage which extends their role beyond biological and social to one that is specifically historical. The cultural labyrinth skips over them and doubles back to include them in the stories and connections which join grandmothers to granddaughters.

I turn first to three key writings on motherhood: Adrienne Rich's Of Woman Born which concentrates mainly on the social significance and interpretations of giving birth; Sara Ruddick's Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace which describes mothering as work in an attempt at a new social valuation; and Marianne Hirsch's Mother / Daughter Plots which turns to literature for an articulation of maternal value. In each case, from significant statements about motherhood, I extrapolate a potential social and cultural significance for grandmotherhood. Old women are so consistently undervalued that to conceive of a crucial familial role for them requires a systematic change to what is even imaginable.

Extraordinarily negative depictions of old women as relentless, matriarchal family heads (ultimately undermined) or doting, witless grandmothers and great aunts who are treated nicely out of a politeness born of condescension more than any real respect pervade fiction and film[1]. Wide spread denigration of old women and a general lack of academic studies of their social, and especially familial, influence indicate that such objectionable characterisations not only reflect general negative opinions and fear but also dictate them. Narrative's normative influence affects how old women can be portrayed because to alter their depiction would be to bestow upon them a social power which threatens established cultural dynamics.

It is my hope, then, that turning to certain refreshing, recent depictions of grandmothers playing a crucial family role will both provide me with new ways to conceptualize grandmothers and also influence their cultural value by prompting a systematic change to what it is possible to imagine. Even

more than the works of Rich, Ruddick, and Hirsch, Joan Barfoot's Duet for Three and Hiromi Goto's Chorus of Mushrooms provide significant insights into motherhood. They carefully depict from multiple perspectives the complexities of growing up in relation to women in a family and offer readers both the theoretical vantage offered by Rich, Ruddick, and Hirsch and a concrete set of examples upon which to enact abstract concepts. Beyond that contribution to understanding maternity, each novel reconfigures grandmotherhood explicitly making the extrapolation, necessary to my earlier analysis (of overtly theoretical texts), unnecessary. The novels theorize grandmotherhood as a unique, freeing relationship which builds on the potential of motherhood and escapes its many pitfalls. Barfoot and Goto characterize grandmothers as offering cultural and historical knowledge through an unconditional, loving connection with granddaughters.

Adrienne Rich's 1976 Of Woman Born discusses motherhood as institution which is distinct from what she calls "the potential relationship" many women could have to their reproductive capacity and to their children (13). Patriarchy restricts the latter (potential) within the former (institution) so that reproduction and any power that could be associated with it remains firmly within male control. Much of the treatise centres on the act of giving birth as symbolic of how the institution of motherhood is situated socially. Women as mothers are expected to efface themselves to the extent that even if they do not die giving birth, their physical death in labour can be replaced by a figurative one:

> Yet, even in a place and time where maternal mortality is low, a

> woman's fantasies of her own death in childbirth have the accuracy of metaphor. Typically, under patriarchy, the mother's life is exchanged for the child; her autonomy as a separate being seems fated to conflict with the infant she will bear. (166)

Motherhood, in this view, means elimination of womanhood, if it is possible to think of women as anything other than mothers. In giving birth, a mother risks cultural erasure as a woman and yet visibly takes on the role which patriarchal society typically requires of women.

To extend Rich's thinking, such erasure is not expected nor particularly possible in the case of grandmother - grandchild relationships, since sacrifice is not the primary mode in which old women are expected to operate. Oddly, perhaps because old people, and especially women, are not thought to possess much social value, they are not expected to relinquish anything in order to love grandchildren. Accordingly, grandmothers can maintain what autonomy they have been able to gain and still play a formative role in the lives of children by passing on a cultural heritage in the form of stories, lessons, and love. My ensuing analysis of Hiromi Goto's Chorus of Mushrooms will make more clear how this culture can be transmitted, but it does often occur despite or even because of acrimony between mothers and daughters (discussed by Rich, Ruddick, and Hirsch).

Along with the effacement required of mothers, Rich argues that an antagonism between immediate generations as dictated by patriarchal control of motherhood discourages women from desiring maternity (251). Matrophobia, the fear of becoming one's own mother, further reflects the

conflict that can develop between mother and daughter. Particularly in the twentieth century, because of rapid developments within feminist thought and activism, daughters often become frustrated with the limitations they see their mothers accepting and increasingly unable "to see beyond her to the forces acting upon her" (235). Further, even though patriarchal constraints supposedly dictate motherhood structurally, if the practice fails, the mother herself takes the blame and the patriarchal limitations placed upon her role evade it. Women, though often generalised beyond distinction, are expected to stand in as individual examples of failure to adhere to an impossible ideology. As Rich puts it, "Under the institution of motherhood, the mother is the first to blame if theory proves unworkable in practice, or if anything whatsoever goes wrong" (222). This blame comes both from daughters and from external agents such as co-parents, a mother's own parents, and teachers.

In contrast, it is possible to extrapolate from Rich's assertions that since no generally accepted standards exist for grandmotherhood in North American society, old women are not held responsible for what are perceived as social, moral, or physical failures on the part of grandchildren. Instead, grandmothers can take credit for any benefit reaped from deviance. As a result, grandmothers do not typically have the reasons to resent grandchildren that mothers have to resent offspring. Granddaughters do not have to fear becoming their grandmothers, since external forces and historical factors more clearly and openly enforce crucial differences. Cultural difference is particularly tangible at the end of the twentieth century, when young women have benefitted from a feminism barely nascent in their

grandmothers' youths.

Rich recognises the social separation of motherhood from the physical when she states, "But before we were mothers, we have been, first of all, women, with actual bodies and actual minds" (192). Nonetheless, however ideological motherhood as an institution may become, women continually have to battle perceptions of their physical beings because of a longstanding association of women with the body. As Rich's own study reinforces, becoming a mother reinscribes the body since it is the physical process of giving birth that undeniably cannot be completely usurped by male power. Rich asserts:

> I know no woman--virgin, mother, lesbian, married, celibate--whether she earns her keep as a housewife, a cocktail waitress, or a scanner of brain waves--for whom her body is not a fundamental problem: its clouded meaning, its fertility, its desire, its so-called frigidity, its bloody speech, its silences, its changes and mutilations, its rapes and ripenings. (285)

Motherhood creates its own specific problems with bodies because of its very signification of fertility, desire, changes and what is frequently read as ripening, all of which challenge the sleek, contained form classically deemed beautiful. The fact of having given birth, or being pregnant, has visible physicality which forces others to understand (and frequently repress acknowledging) women who become mothers as sexual and mutable.

Again, it is possible to expand Rich's thinking and claim that grandmotherhood does not in itself signify fertility the way that motherhood

does. And, although old women so frequently confront countless discouraging cultural readings of physical change, no physical changes are directly related to the role of grandmother. Becoming a grandmother does not signify sexuality as becoming a mother can, partly because of a social reluctance to conceive of old people as sexual. Still, though old women may battle numerous physical problems, actual and those projected upon them, none appear as the result of their new familial role as grandmother. Despite the frequently brutal effects (socially and physically) of physical change on old women, grandmotherhood typically does not intensify struggles with body image as motherhood does.

By discussing potential roles for older women, Rich hints that grandmotherhood could provide an escape route from the confining and problematic pressures enforced by maternity. She explains,

> My mother lives today as an independent woman, which she was always meant to be. She is a much-loved, much-admired grandmother, an explorer in new realms; she lives in the present and future, not the past. (224)

The role of grandmother has much of the potential which has been sapped from that of mother. This is not to deny the considerable scholarly work which reinscribes motherhood so that it no longer denotes a compliance with a patriarchal authority structure, but rather to explore an as yet underconsidered alternate model for female relations. Rich, in describing her mother, implies that becoming and being a grandmother offers the potential for being loved and admired in a manner which is not limited, within Rich's

conceptualisation, by the inability of children and grandchildren to see beyond the forces which work upon mothers. It is much easier, by virtue of physical and temporal distance, to recognize forces acting on grandmothers as external and appreciate difference and similarity across the boundaries of family divisiveness. Further, in the absence of a general social tendency to require grandparenthood from women, there is greater freedom in shaping the role so that it can encompass a variety of emotional and cultural possibilities, perhaps even outside the patriarchal constraints which dominate Rich's configuration of motherhood. I would argue, though, that it is possible for grandmothers to live in the past, present, and future, and that doing so will better enable them to play a crucial role in connecting grandchildren to a cultural heritage which is part of their expertise simply by virtue of their historical experience, and not because old people remain overly attached to the past. Rather than fixed emotional and cultural expectations, grandmothers face many options in their acceptance of a new familial role.

The emotional and cultural possibilities expected of maternity are enormous and usually untenable. Rich cites how certain Jungian critics explain that even women who are not biologically or adoptively mothers are expected to mother those around them (213). Sara Ruddick's exploration of maternal thinking as a possible model for nonviolence places an oddly large burden on mothers despite its reflexivity about the problems associated with increasing mothers' responsibilities in such a way. Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace does emphasize living as a mother more than Of Woman Born, which concentrates on pregnancy and labour, but Ruddick's

extension of the work of motherhood into a realm of peace politics places such a high value on a maternal perspective that she leaves little room for women (or men who choose to mother) to have other occupations or preoccupations. Whereas Rich presents poetry as offering her a space (as she figures it) separate from motherhood--"For me, poetry was where I lived as no-one's mother, where I existed as myself" (31)--Ruddick's valuation of the maternal leaves no such role-free space. The danger of being continually expected to mother, regardless of actual relationship, increases rather than decreases if a world view (such as pacifism) entirely depends on the values of motherhood, whether or not they are drastically rewritten.

Ruddick reiterates in her 1996 introduction the importance of maternal work which she claims can be performed by anyone regardless of biological function. Like Rich's distinction between the institution of motherhood and the potential inherent in women, Ruddick distinguishes an oppressive "motherhood" from maternity, which does not have to entail the kinds of sacrifices generally associated with the "consuming identity" usually required of mothers (emphasis original 29). For Ruddick, a mother absolutely must be centrally preoccupied by working for "preservation, growth, and social acceptability" on the part of a child (emphasis original 17). In a sense, she speaks of motherhood as an occupation like any other wherein there is room for failure, evaluation, and anger. However, making mothering an ideological occupation and never quite relinquishing a certain idealism means that Ruddick generalizes mothering to the extent that it stands in her study as a symbol or goal rather than the practice she tries to make it.

The intergenerational conflict between mothers and daughters prefigured by Rich haunts Ruddick's consideration, particularly because she (Ruddick) fully articulates the extent to which mothers are held responsible for the work they do, as determined by children's behaviour and well-being. As Ruddick puts it, "many mothers find that the central challenge of mothering lies in training a child to be the kind of person whom others accept and whom the mothers themselves can actively appreciate" (104). Mothers are judged for their success in preserving, nurturing, and moulding their children. Sometimes they take the role of judge onto themselves: "the more personally invested a mother is in her children's acceptable behaviour, and therefore the more rewards she expects from her maternal work, the more angry and ashamed she will be when her influence does not have the desirable effects" (106). According to Ruddick, mothers work with an eye to extravagant blame or praise from grandparents, fathers, and even passers-by (111). Further, as with Rich's conceptualisation, even when this external praise may be present, there is potential conflict from within the parent-child relationship. Ruddick explains that "daughters are not likely to give up a hard-won, hard-held critical stance" (40). To extend Ruddick's thinking, the tendency of daughters to hold their mothers in ambivalent contempt obviously affects a grandmother in a family setting since she is at once mother and grandmother, but she has another generation to direct her attention to and that generation does not have to battle her in the same way to maintain identity. A conflict across generations is not as necessary to child development as conflict between immediate generations is. In other words,

though mothers and daughters often fight, grandmothers and granddaughters can become allies in larger battles.

According to Ruddick, mothers are defined as such by the work that they do and leave themselves open to judgment according to how well they are perceived to have achieved the goals of "preservative love, nurturance, and training" (17). Ruddick offers a cursory discussion of Abuelas in a specific historical context but not as a philosophical model. Besides that brief analysis, the only role that grandmothers play explicitly in her study is that of potential critic. They frequently fall into the list of outsiders who will inevitably evaluate the work of the mother. Failing that, they may have actually taken on the maternal work of raising a child in which case, by Ruddick's rubric, they would be included in her use of the term mother. I suggest that grandmothers do not have to play the role of mother entirely or centrally in order to have a potentially profound connection with a particular child or children. Moreover, they can pursue such a relationship without being perceived as morally responsible for the child's demeanour. Because it is not necessary to reinscribe the role of grandmother in terms of work to give it value, the criteria of evaluation can be less severe.

Marianne Hirsch's Mother / Daughter Plots talks about the problem of female intergenerational conflict by drawing on literature. She works within a psychoanalytic paradigm to tackle the problem of maternal subjectivity (and its lack in literature), particularly in literary convention. In exploring the unspeakability of maternal plots, she suggests the possibility of dual narration to enable a maternal subjectivity to emerge from within what she

considers a repression in literary tradition. A dialogue between mothers and daughters would allow both parties in a conflictual relation to develop agency and potentially grow to share a voice. She explains,

> The multiplicity of 'women' is nowhere more obvious than for the figure of the mother, who is always both mother and daughter. Her representation is controlled by her object status, but her discourse, when it is voiced, moves her from object to subject. But, as long as she speaks as mother, she must always remain the object in her child's process of subject-formation; she is never fully a subject. (12)

Ruddick proposes that daughters should begin by listening to mothers without adopting the oppressive conditions which sometimes dictate their roles. Hirsch formulates a narrative strategy by which female characters can begin to be constructed as subjects in maternal stories and suggests a similar starting point to Ruddick: "Feminism might begin by listening to the stories that mothers have to tell, and by creating the space in which mothers might articulate those stories" (167). Having played a daughterly role and been a subject within that role, feminists, according to Hirsch, stand to benefit from a resituation in relation to mothers. The new positioning could allow a multiplicity of narrative voices in the story she considers motherhood and daughterhood to be.

All the reasons for conflict between mother and daughter outlined by Rich, Ruddick, and Hirsch suggest that a shared voice (a first person meant to include both a mother and daughter's perspectives) would contradict itself.

Since the implication of Hirsch's object - subject paradigm is that each (mother and daughter) has to oppose the other to establish identity, it is difficult to imagine a harmonious shared voice. On the other hand, a grandmother and granddaughter do not have to cancel each other out to have agency, and a narrative voice shared by those female relatives is more likely to present a constructive world view which encompasses greater possibility for female mobility and achievement.

Hirsch expresses the painful conflict between immediate generations:

> The greatest tragedy that can occur between mother and daughter is when they cease being able to speak and to listen to one another. But what if they inhabit the same body, what if they are the same person, speaking with two voices? (199)

I want to examine this assertion in connection with narrative situations wherein certain characters are simultaneously mothers and daughters. A problem is posed in each case because these mother-daughter characters are trapped, within the narrative, between the two generations (granddaughter and grandmother). The grandmother and granddaughters in each case create a meaningful dialogue rather than the conflicting communication that occurs between each of those two generations and the middle generation (between the two sets of mother and daughter). Perhaps the potential for resolution through grandmotherhood, without motherhood's contradictory possessiveness and loss of identity, mitigates Hirsch's tragedy to some degree--if a mother cannot speak or listen to her daughter, perhaps that daughter will bear a daughter who remedies the generation gap. The conflict which Hirsch

pinpoints through close readings of key Victorian female-authored fiction is possibly ameliorated in a similar close reading of recent Canadian female-authored fiction. Significantly, Hirsch's turn to literature differs from mine and de Beauvoir's in its psychoanalytic motivation, so that the conclusions she is able to draw about the connections between literature and life (female characters and female relationships) risk a slippage which other analyses avoid by better articulating the exact role of fiction in such a study.

Joan Barfoot's Duet for Three and Hiromi Goto's Chorus of Mushrooms theorize grandmother-mother-daughter relationships by carefully juxtaposing narrative voices which constantly renegotiate communicative strategies because of differences in physical, social, linguistic, and figurative location. In Duet for Three, though mostly third person, the chapters alternate between the perspectives of Aggie, an obese, eighty-something, nontraditional grandmother -mother, and June, Aggie's thin, sixty-something conservative daughter who is herself mother to Frances (daughter-granddaughter). Readers must continually resituate themselves in relation to the dilemma of the novel, whether to place Aggie in an institution, because of how Barfoot structures a narrative voice to make a certain appeal only to undermine it with an opposing appeal. Readers alternately side with June and Aggie and eventually understand that mediation is necessary. In Chorus of Mushrooms, a bizarre layered narration (in at least two languages and including a grocery list) forces readers to evaluate the role of imagination in restructuring late life. Readers cannot assume reliability in the novel which, though often written in a realist

style, is presented openly as a granddaughter's fictional reconstruction of the experiences of a grandmother with whom she did not even share a language. Goto continually reminds readers of the narrative's fictionality. The attempt to narrate a grandmother's life through a granddaughter evokes a crucial connection which can be forged even in the absence of shared culture (and key cultural tools such as language and food). Each novel portrays rich and fruitful relationships between grandmothers and granddaughters which can serve as models for further feminist studies of female familial relationships. Duet for Three hints at the potential harboured in a grandmother-granddaughter connection, and Chorus of Mushrooms is a testament to that potential.

Collectively these novels challenge the supposed dependence implied by moving in with relatives to combat changes associated with aging. Grandmotherhood provides old woman an opportunity to contribute to and benefit from generation gaps. The physical care they may indeed require when they live with offspring does not have to mark their subsequent ultimate decline and diminishment. Barfoot and Goto pull readers into other possibilities and opportunities.

Whereas The Stone Angel offers readers only one perspective through which to view extreme old age, limiting them to a carefully constructed lens of experience, Joan Barfoot's Duet for Three is set up as a conflictual dialogue (or lack thereof) between a mother and a daughter, who is also a mother in turn. Readers discover through the alternating perspectives of both June and Aggie's thought patterns that Hirsch's greatest tragedy rules the novel. As

Aggie and June reveal themselves and each other from first person and third person perspectives, readers become aware of the disjunction between their thinking and of the degree to which the characters are unable to communicate past that difference. The narration of many incidents first from one woman's point of view and then from another's makes readers configure the extent to which interpretation and standpoint affect family history. A committed reading mitigates the tragedy of non-communication because it forces an imaginative opening within the tightly confined world of the novel.

An overheard narration perfectly encapsulates the relationships between the three generations, Aggie as grandmother-mother, June as daughter-mother, and Frances as daughter-granddaughter. Aggie is explaining the problems she encountered with her husband (June's father), a grandfather Frances never knew. Barfoot places the entire exchange in parentheses to indicate how the granddaughter and grandmother understand each other to the exclusion of June (mother-daughter):

> ('He was,' she said another time when Frances asked, 'a man who arranged all his books in alphabetical order. By author.'
> ('Yeah,' Frances nodded, 'I see.'
> ('What's that supposed to mean?' asked June. 'What's wrong with that?') (80)

From her middle position, June is unable to make a crucial connection with either her mother or her daughter, and the lack of understanding stands out in sharp relief against the silent sympathy shared by Aggie and Frances. There is no need for the layers of interpretation Aggie would have to offer June in

order for any such shared understanding with Frances to occur. The arrangement of books signals a specific commitment to precisely the order June craves which Aggie, and Frances in turn, abhors. Throughout the novel, Frances rejects her mother's desire for propriety and containment in favour of Aggie's continued search for freedom and knowledge.

Aggie's relationship with her granddaughter Frances is the only familial connection for the older woman which does not centre on control. Duet for Three expands the motif of control and fear of losing it which permeates The Stone Angel. By giving two generations a voice in a struggle over aging, Joan Barfoot further illuminates the battle for control at a time when it is slipping from the oldest character. Barfoot specifically positions readers to change alliances continually and expand imaginative engagement with the two main characters. The alternation of voices diminishes for Aggie the control Hagar Shipley has at least over the version through which readers must deduce other perspectives. Joan Barfoot creates a narrative situation which evokes the frightening loss of control also signified through descriptions of physical change and unreliability.

Beginning in media res, at a moment of utter loss of control when Aggie awakes amidst the results of her incontinence, Duet for Three continually highlights the threat of freedom which, in Laurence's novel, results in the incarceration of Hagar Shipley. There is a danger associated with abandonment, in both senses of the word. Aggie vaguely remembers letting go:

> Less sensible is a recollection of warmth, release, relief, a brief

> steamy kind of comfort, a pungent but not unpleasant smell, lulling her back to sleep. It seemed simple at the time, pleasing to have solved a difficulty, without effort, in the dark. (4)

The momentary solution, which leads to embarrassment and possible eviction, gives Aggie fleeting pleasure. Aggie has similarly embraced obesity, also a symbol of physical control--and loss of it--in the novel. However, her attempt, in defiance of social scrutiny, to make her body a site of perceived power backfires because her immense frame increases her eventual lack of mobility and bodily control and thereby threatens to land her in a nursing home. As Aggie's changing form becomes the terrain upon and about which June and Aggie fight their mother-daughter battles, readers put together how bodies can be signs of danger, change, and conflict. What Aggie hoped would be a locus of control and freedom signifies unmanageable late life to June.

The conflicting perspectives Aggie and June have of Aggie's body encapsulate the two characters' incompatibility. Aggie describes her all-encompassing weight gain with pride: "Her slim belly became plump, then rolling. Her thighs began to ripple, her chin sagged and doubled. Her features, and her feet and hands, came to look tiny against the bulk of the rest of her. She became imposing" (107). June describes her mother as a "fat, old, greedy woman" (20) and extends this as a description of her both physically and mentally: "This greedy old woman eats up a life the same way she consumes a pie" (46). Rather than understanding her mother's weight gain as an attempted appropriation of control, she sees it very much as a decline:

"Her mother seemed--unleashed, somehow. More sprawling, as if she'd taken off a girdle, and less capable than before of order and moderation" (123). Indeed, the incontinence which creates the urgent time frame of the novel operates as the flip side of magnitude, in that, having deliberately achieved a giant physical status, Aggie can no longer take care of her giant bodily needs. Aggie has so clearly defined herself by her flesh that its metaphorical and literal expansion contains her.

Aggie is the daughter of immigrant farmers in rural Ontario. She leaves a comfortable, strongly united community to move to a town with her husband, a teacher with whom she never finds fulfilment. Based on what her mother has told her ("'What you have to remember, ' her mother explained, 'is that men are made differently. They get their pleasure with their wives, and a woman's pleasure is in her children'" (37)), she expects fulfilment from motherhood, but is sorely disappointed in her daughter, June, from birth. Aggie's subsequent emotional rejection of her child mirrors Hagar's similar feeling about her first born: "I almost felt as though Marvin weren't my own son" (The Stone Angel 62). In Duet for Three, readers witness through June's own testimony the pain of such a breach. We hear about Aggie's shortcomings directly from June: "Even a child could tell that her own mother lacked certain of these qualities: that she was not a person with a tender heart, and had no real gift for sadness, regret, or sacrifice" (50). June's pain at the lack of her mother's love, (especially since it is not a total incapacity for the emotion on Aggie's part as proven by her feelings for her granddaughter Frances), makes more poignant the connection between granddaughter and

grandmother. Their bond offers a viable escape hatch and possibility for overcoming many supposed vicissitudes of old age and generation gaps. Aggie finds, in Frances, the emotional satisfaction she has desired all along.

After marriage fails to bring Aggie the emotional fulfilment she seeks and before the birth of her granddaughter, she tries to fill the generation gap with her body; she seeks a largeness to compensate for the dissatisfaction she feels about June. Initially, she revels in her pregnancy as a chance to rectify her disappointing marriage. As a result, she holds extremely high hopes for her daughter's role in her life:

> 'I hear you're expecting,' women said, meeting her in stores and later dropping in for tea and trading stories. Oh yes, indeed she was expecting. Love, she was expecting love again, although of a different sort. She was expecting someone to whom she could give love, and who would return it. A tiny body at her breasts, and then small arms around her neck. (91)

The triumph of pregnancy, which signifies imminent emotional satisfaction, is figured in terms of physical size. "All this," she says of her pregnancy, "seemed like an initiation into a secret society, her badge of membership in her distended body" (92).

Rich, in her treatise on motherhood, expresses a similar emotion in connection with her body's change from what, at other stages of a woman's life, is considered admirable:

> As soon as I was visibly and clearly pregnant, I felt, for the first time in my adolescent and adult life, not-guilty. The atmosphere

> of approval in which I was bathed--even by strangers on the street, it seemed--was like an aura I carried with me, in which doubts, fears, misgivings, met with absolute denial. This is what women have always done." (25-6)

In contrast with an obese or old body, a pregnant body is sometimes praised for mutating a "normal" image of beauty because regeneration fulfils societal purpose, though it does imply a threatening sexuality. Not recognising the disjunction between the admiration for a pregnant, useful body and the disgust for an obese, burdensome body, Aggie begins a deliberate physical transformation during her pregnancy: "She ate and ate; eating, as the women said, for two. She imagined how healthy this child would be, already so well fed" (93). Because readers are connected to Aggie through a precise narrative strategy and careful fictional address, they understand and imaginatively engage with her relationship to her body in a way they cannot in Rich's work, despite her attempt to make a similar point. Readers' imaginative engagement with Aggie's continued struggle and desire for acceptance and belonging make especially poignant her choice to emulate physically the state which she mistakenly believed held such promise.

Even after the birth of Frances who finally offers her some emotional relief, Aggie's subsequent and continual dissatisfaction with June highlights her continued obesity as a quest not just for the enormity which signifies, to her, power, but also an attempt to maintain the "badge of membership" she wore in pregnancy and the signified hope for fulfilment:

> She got bigger and bigger. She felt, sometimes, as if her strong

> and rolling body might contain whole towns and cities, countries and continents, or characters: her own and others that she learned about. Memories as well: the child she had dreamed of still inside her, and a tiny figure of the teacher [her husband]. (158)

Through her body, she holds on to the hope she felt when expecting resolution through motherhood: "She would have her own children. Her life would be her own" (28). To her, power and control could still manifest themselves through her consumption of food and fact. Readers are in position to recognize Aggie's determination to grow as enormous as possible as an attempt at the satisfaction Rich ascribes to doing "what women have always done" which fails because it misreads the plumpness of pregnancy.

The power and control Aggie expected out of motherly love is immediately unavailable to her when she realises her daughter does not match her vision and instead looks like her husband: "She was a little puzzled that this small creature didn't much resemble the child in whom she'd been confiding. She'd thought of someone larger, darker, more fully formed." (94). Aggie continually sets up unreasonable expectations which subsequently are not met. She recognises that her immediate maternal feeling is not what she had expected: "Was it odd to have become so heavy and cumbersome, and then to have produced such a light result? Certainly it was peculiar to feel that the real child was still to come" (94). Even at the moment of June's birth, she reads smallness as inadequacy, foreshadowing her choice with respect to her own body. Moreover, Aggie's choice to become physically cumbersome

suggests figuratively her choice to play a difficult role in June's life.

Prior to the physical and emotional disappointments which lead to Aggie's enormity, Aggie had expected the joy of pregnancy, symbolized by her largeness, and its accompanying social acceptance to extend into how she would be treated as the mother of a young child:

> She could see how it would continue afterward. 'This is my daughter,' she would say to people, these women, or 'This is my son.' The child would be laughing, pink and healthy. People would stop on the street and smile. (93)

The love Aggie was expecting to receive from her daughter would also occur in a larger social setting, so that the shared stories and understanding that was part of her pregnancy would also be part of her life as mother. The chasm between desire and actuality overwhelms Aggie when she discovers that her tiny baby will not provide her the social or emotional tools she had hoped for.

Even sixty years later, the disjunction between hope and fulfilment for Aggie in connection with June remains. Having been so completely disappointed for the second time in the novel, following the surprising coldness and prudery of her husband, Aggie cannot reconcile herself to the continuation of that perceived inadequacy in her own offspring. She continues through the conflict of the novel to express openly her disappointment in June:

> But did she love June? An obedient child, yes. When they went out together, people said, 'She's so like your husband, isn't she? And such a good little girl.' Not at all what Aggie had had in

> mind, not a daughter who resembled him, or one who was good. This quiet obedience merely showed a lack of imagination, as far as Aggie could see. (102)

The social acceptance Aggie had sought is in fact present and generously offered. Since it does not match what Aggie herself had envisioned, just as June does not, Aggie can only interpret the remarks of others as further signs of defeat. Because of the significant and sometimes damaging role the imagination plays in Aggie's constant hope and failure pattern (she typically has too precise an expectation for it possibly to be met), readers understand that what Aggie calls June's lack of imagination could in fact be June's failure to match Aggie's imaginative dreams.

In keeping with her stranglehold on her own perceptions, Aggie is unable, even after decades, to view even June's strengths as anything but flaws:

> There was a time when Aggie had in mind a daughter with gumption. Should she be pleased that June is showing some although perhaps in a somewhat sly and underhanded form?
>
> Maybe, like a disgruntled old sow, Aggie should have rolled over on her unsatisfactory offspring at birth. (57-8)

When June finally does match, or slightly echo, Aggie's imaginative vision for her, it, too, is inadequate. Although they do not communicate effectively about numerous crucial issues, June is well aware of her mother's dissatisfaction with her and expresses a similar dissatisfaction with her own daughter in turn. The alternating narration allows Barfoot to explore how

each character is affected by Aggie's continual disappointment.

Readers learn that, even as a child, June is aware of having let her mother down in some inexplicable way. June recalls how Aggie reacted to a childhood mishap with an ice cream cone and a depression era, fancy party dress:

> What she couldn't make out was what she'd done that was so bad. Certainly she'd been clumsy, but that didn't warrant a look like that. It must have been something from long before a ruined dress. What did her mother blame her for?" (101)

The sense of blame, of being a larger disappointment, pervades June's childhood recollections so that, having sided with Aggie because of her precise and active imagination, readers must reevaluate, since Aggie took her sense of failure out on a small child.

June understands, as an adult, that even what could be considered virtues are, to her mother, failings. As June perceives it, her mother has failed in her role, and she resolves to provide Aggie with a model for motherhood when she too turns to maternity for the fulfilment she lacks: "Also, she would show Aggie how a real mother behaved. She would bring her child up with care. Her child would not be reared in any slapdash, irregular way" (147). Sadly, she faces the same disjunction as Aggie, and is unable to reconcile herself with the daughter she produces, despite her belief that "A child would make resolution possible" (146).

Aggie recognizes June's failed attempt and its connection to her own experiences with motherhood and wonders:

> Just what did June feel for Frances? Did she love her, the way Aggie meant the word now, or had she caught somewhere along the line Aggie's own sort of detachment from a child of immediate flesh? Surely that wasn't something passed on, though, like blue eyes or broad shoulders. (176)

Aggie has discovered a new meaning of love because of her granddaughter's birth, but she remains sceptical that June shares that emotion. Though the distaste for her own immediate offspring is likely not meant to be thought of as genetic, June's incapacity to relate to her own daughter provides a poignant elaboration of the mother-daughter conflicts outlined by Rich, Ruddick, and Hirsch.

June is unable to attach herself to a daughter who does not share her vision of propriety and success. She resents Aggie's influence on Frances, which she perceives as deliberate and pernicious. As a result, she presents some seemingly unmaternal sentiments about Frances's future:

> Did Aggie set out to achieve a granddaughter who thinks only of her own convenience, who refuses difficulties and makes frivolous choices? Probably. But some day Frances will crash, and what will her grandmother have to say to her then? Events even out. Or so June hopes. (67-8)

Her daughter's constant flaunting of decorum so exasperates her that she experiences what could be called an unmotherly hope for daughterly failure. In contrast, Aggie is proud of how Frances is able to extend limitations and make personal decisions resulting in a mobility and self assurance new to

female members of the family and threatening to the desire for propriety June espouses. The power and control that Aggie tries to exert upon her own body, and which ultimately backfires, exhibits itself in Frances to June's chagrin and Aggie's satisfaction.

Barfoot's narrative enacts and comments upon Hirsch's tragedy in that two sets of mother and daughter fail to communicate, resulting in an everlasting debt of love (136) which cannot be paid regardless of the countless other sacrifices the women make for each other. The lack of genuine communication is, however, only one facet of the ultimate breakdown of maternal relationships in the novel. Because she works within the temporal, spatial, and causal mechanisms of narrative, Barfoot manages to illustrate and enhance multiple associations which explain and explore the complicated negotiations associated with growing old in a culture that does not adequately value women or age.

The extremely short time frame of the novel accentuates the excruciatingly delicate and methodical processes of aging and the accompanying decision-making processes. The plot spans a few days wherein June and Aggie struggle over the new insistence of Aggie's body to be central: bedwetting. The story spills back much further and speculatively forward through Frances, but it is always narrated and remembered because of specific events and moments triggered by Aggie's home and the nursing home June evaluates. The space of the plot is limited to those two locations, whereas, again, the story reaches a slightly larger geographical region since it begins (if reconstructed chronologically) in Aggie's hometown and is also

partly located in the town surrounding the house to which she moves. Incontinence, which provides the causal relationships in the plot, partly explains the tightly contained and controlled space and time of the narrative. Aggie's decision to eat until she fills the house means the novel itself fills the house and centres around whether or not she can be moved from that location. As a result, when Aggie concedes that she may have to give in to some other solution, like moving to a nursing home, the novel ends. The control she has exercised over her body, which is mirrored in the plot structure, is over.

The careful containment of narrative elements also mirrors the relationships between the two narrators of the novel. There is no hope for fulfilment for either Aggie or June in the world of Duet for Three, because each woman so completely controls and contain her thoughts that she cannot possibly expand to the extent that they could adapt to the other's ways of thinking. The tight narration offers an almost microscopic view that reflects how neither character can withdraw far enough to develop the understanding crucial to an emotional resolution for each.

There is however an emotional release in the cross-generational love which forms between Aggie and Frances. Here, Aggie is able to see the possibilities for fulfilment she has sought since she is freed from responsibility for Frances, since she is not socially accountable for her, and since Frances grows up at a historical moment where there are simply more opportunities for women to act out the self-fulfilling lives Aggie has so desired. In keeping with the carefully controlled plot structure, the freedom

and release offered by Frances keeps her out of the plot entirely so that, although her arrival is a key turning point for both June and Aggie, once she arrives (from an outside world that could offer both older women the larger perspective they need to relate better), the novel ends.

The love Aggie feels for Frances surpasses even her expectations, exceeds the narrative frame, and reveals a new emotional register to her:

> The new creature turned out to be Frances; struggling so hard to be free that June, for whom, Aggie sighed, nothing went smoothly, had to be opened with a knife.
>
> And Aggie discovered love, an abrupt and puzzling emotion. (158)

The love that she had hoped to find with the teacher and then with June is finally available to her, perhaps precisely because she is finally connected to someone in a role that is not socially scripted to the same degree as marriage and motherhood:

> Was this not what Aggie should have felt, looking down at her own daughter at her breast? She might claim to have loved June then, but she couldn't deny it was nothing like this. And, further back, when she had thought she might love the strange and knowing teacher, it had only been a shadow, something hunched in the dark. This love, now, was in full light, a clear, distinct, distinguishable form, piercing, sharp, and occasionally painful. (159)

Precisely the kind of communication lacking between Aggie and June is, if

readers are to believe Aggie, present between Aggie and Frances so that even when Frances is young, Aggie is able to express and delineate her love to her granddaughter:

> 'Does that mean,' with a child's inexorable logic, 'you might not love me some day?' Unimaginable. She put her arms around Frances--what a gift, a child who responded to embraces--and said, 'Oh no, pudding, of course not. That's a different kind of love, it doesn't change.' (181)

The different kind of love that Aggie feels for Frances is transformative in that it gives Aggie a hope for fulfilment which she had given up on having. From being described as self-serving, she becomes a woman who can accept continuation as the completion of her own happiness.

June is left out of this powerful, encompassing love, and she understands that something is bestowed that she lacks. She is unable to continue to believe that it had been Aggie's incapacity to love which made her an inappropriate mother:

> Aggie made a proper fool of herself when she came to babysit, lumbering happily along the five blocks of sidewalk between their houses. She didn't exactly talk baby-talk, but her voice rose. June, watching in amazement and something else that she didn't identify but that wasn't quite nice, saw her mother actually cuddling this child. (149)

Her jealousy enables her to use Aggie's fierce devotion to Frances against her in the struggle about the nursing home. June warns Aggie, in connection to

her bedwetting:

> 'Be serious, Mother. We have to do something. I think,' and here is inspiration, 'even Frances would agree with me there.'
>
> It seems to work. For once, Aggie is short of words, a little shrunken. Had she not thought of that, of Frances finding out? Had she not considered her admiring granddaughter knowing she has accidents in her bed at night? (45)

Aggie fears no longer playing the role she has created in connection with Frances and lapsing into the more typical position reserved for old women:

> Imagine being frightened of Frances. Or not of Frances, exactly, but of having Frances look at her, knowing she is seeing not her beloved, understanding, helpful, hopeful grandmother, but an appalling fat old woman who has taken to wetting the bed. (225)

Her complete pride in Frances is not at risk, but the reciprocity, in light of her increasing, self-inflicted infirmity, is at peril. Aggie, having projected herself onto Frances for the fulfilment of her desires, places herself in Frances's position and is able, very briefly, to see herself from without. The power and control of her body diminishes into a typical social reading of obesity, hinting at what lies outside the carefully controlled world of the novel.

Although Aggie sees enough of a similarity between herself and her granddaughter to transfer her hopes onto the younger generation, their potential differences allow her to revel in her granddaughters' possibilities. As she puts it,

> She wanted not only different circumstances for Frances, freer

> than her own and with a universe of choices, but also that Frances herself should be different: more refined and alert, braver and lighter. (159)

In contrast to her desire to see June more like her, with "gumption" and a thirst for freedom, Aggie is comfortable hoping for a continuation which includes development when projecting her granddaughter's future. Aggie pinpoints the desired difference as partly historical and influenced by external factors ("different circumstances"):

> In her day, Aggie could not have seen a way to break the pattern, to say no, and Frances can. That seems a greater journey than a mere journey from, say, the earth to the moon. Travelling between continents and planets, that's just a matter of technology, wires in the right places and certain calculations. But being able to say no as well as yes, that is progress, that is revolution. (16)

Even June who, like Aggie, also faces oppressive expectations and an excessive social pressure for women to be amenable recognises the difference between how she and Aggie are able to approach Frances: "Aggie seemed to have a point about the influence of simply living in different times. Except she said, 'Take advantage,' while June had to warn, 'Take care'" (193). The distinction between how June and Aggie are able to comprehend and act upon the historical factors which govern Frances's opportunities seems to exceed the historical differences. Aggie, as grandmother, is in a position to influence Frances to exhaust the limitations of her world since the

octogenarian will not face the social consequences of the younger woman's actions. It is June, as mother, who will be judged for Frances's failures, which she perceives to be many.

Evidence of Aggie's freedom in connection with Frances can be found in the types of conversations they are able to have. Although they do not actually converse at all in the present tense narrative, Aggie's reminiscences contain clues as to the nature of their communication. Frances, for example, has been able to be honest with Aggie about a past abortion, which Aggie is proud of her for having the confidence to choose to enact, and about searching for her father. She tells June of neither. Aggie has deliberately taught Frances to take risks and their relationship has reached a point where now Frances can teach her in return. Their frank discussions of sex are an example of a connection they share, a connection which neither of them shares with June:

> Surely she had more feeling down there once? Lucky Frances, who says, 'I'm sorry, Grandma, I don't really know how to describe it. It's kind of a heat that all gets concentrated in one place and everything's just there. And then it fades.' (54)

Although readers never have direct access to Frances's constructed consciousness, there is evidence in both Aggie and June's narration that a connection exists between grandmother and granddaughter and that the connection manifests itself through dialogue, as well as an extralingual understanding. Aggie and Frances are able to communicate effectively in a way that Aggie cannot communicate with June and June cannot communicate

with Frances. The lack of dialogue between the two sets of immediate generations results in an inability to understand the alternate and usually opposing perspectives. Hirsch's tragedy of non-communication between daughter and mother, which manifests itself doubly within Barfoot's novel, is somewhat mitigated by Frances and Aggie's ability to speak to, listen to, and understand each other, so that Aggie's maternal and grandmaternal plots become speakable. The generation gap is closed because the cultural labyrinth sharply turns back to skip over a generation and trace a convoluted path to resolve an old woman's yearning for adventure.

Duet for Three, more than elaborating on Rich, Ruddick, and Hirsch, poses new possibilities for grandmotherhood by enticing and guiding readers to reimagine female relationships within a carefully controlled household. The dual narration and other narrative devices combine to bring the readers into a world which encourages a new imaginative framework for late life choices. Within that world, Barfoot shows rigid imagination, such as Aggie's, to lead only to disappointment, so that readers develop an understanding that all perspectives, however conclusive, must remain open to other imaginative possibilities. The generation gaps draw readers into complex negotiations and subtle solutions which can only be understood after an attempt to imagine the world of the novel from within.

Roy Kiyooka's transcription of his mother's biography, Mothertalk: Life Stories of Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka, makes poignant a generation gap between mother and child because of the linguistic challenges which frequently pervade immigrant families. Kiyooka had his mother dictate her memoirs

which he then had to have translated by someone with a more extensive knowledge of Japanese than his own. He was in the process, at the time of his death, of recasting the English translation into an English which reflected the type of dated, colloquial Japanese his mother actually spoke. The frustration of language difference, not between herself and co-workers or any other Canadians she encounters, but between herself and her children and grandchildren seeps through this doubly-filtered (triply once Daphne Marlatt's editorship is taken into account) process.

Kiyooka explains why she and her husband chose not to teach her younger children her language:

> It's really too bad but given the fact that we lived entirely in a whiteman's world Papa and I didn't have the time or inclination to teach them. Besides the desire to rid ourselves of our immigrant status was very strong. (151)

The cultural marker of language would intensify the difference already signified by skin colour. The difference was particularly potent at the historical moment when Kiyooka made her choice since it signified being on the wrong side of the war. Still, whatever the perceived benefits of eschewing the Japanese language, Kiyooka regrets that "My kids will never know all that befell their Mom because she never learned to speak English well and they didn't learn enough Nihongo" (14-5). Her regret extends into her inability to communicate with her granddaughter which almost prevents her from passing cultural knowledge through any kind of cultural labyrinth of inheritance, however convoluted:

> With my broken English I couldn't tell my granddaughter much about my early years there so I kept it to myself as both of us walked along ... O I wanted to tell my granddaughter I didn't have any idea what I was letting myself in for when I was her age. And even though I couldn't put words to all that went on in my head and she was speechless because it was all new, we had a good time. (61-2)

The agony of linguistic difference is mitigated slightly because the two women are simultaneously rendered silent by awe and lack of language. Somehow, the distanced generations of women are able to converge in an experience though they cannot do so via language.

Hiromi Goto's cover blurb describes Kiyooka's work: "Breathing the generations with a remarkable simplicity, Mothertalk speaks with enduring strength and beauty. Roy Kiyooka's biography of his mother is an incredible moment of history, love and survival." Her own novel, Chorus of Mushrooms, published earlier by the same press, addresses the exact issue of a linguistic chasm between grandmother and granddaughter. Goto's novel is filtered through a granddaughter, Murasaki or Muriel, depending where the reader is aligned, but it explores numerous subject positions so that the narrative situation is most accurately described as polyphonic. Readers thereby examine and reexamine from myriad perspectives the same dilemmas of old age as are present in The Stone Angel and Duet for Three and hopefully develop an understanding that any possible situation is contingent upon the needs and abilities of a large number of people. Further, Goto's evocation of

a Japanese immigrant experience poignantly foregrounds the cultural and historically-determined factors which influence generational relationships.

Painfully, Murasaki, or Muriel as her parents are only able to call her, grows up not sharing her grandmother's language, and her grandmother has not learned enough English to make conversation possible. The narrative situation of Chorus of Mushrooms replicates that of the Kiyooka biography to a degree; but the translator, in this case, is the imagination. Murasaki creates a history to tell her lover and appropriates numerous subject positions in order to do so. She imagines the various perspectives, particularly that of her grandmother, surrounding her childhood and turns them into stories for her lover. As a result, alternate perspective continually haunts the narrative, forcing the reader to imagine both from within and from without the different characters involved in the cultural and generational struggle. Even the storytelling process is explicit within the novel, so that readers must take into account that Murasaki's voices are designed for the audience of a young Japanese man, and readers are merely allowed to overhear them (strangely, in translation).

The middle generation of the Tonkatsu family (Murasaki's parents) decides to unlearn Japanese, with the hopes that doing so will diminish the perceived racial gulf between their family and other people in Nanton. Goto's strategically and playfully layered narration make clear the pain and complications wrought by that choice. For example, adopting the voice of the local newspaper, Murasaki presents the stories told by each generation of women in her family. With respect to Japanese language and culture, her

mother Kay (née Keiko) claims, "It is too confusing for a child to juggle two cultures. Two sets of ideals. If you want a child to have a normal and accepted lifestyle, you have to live like everyone else" (189). Murasaki complains,

> I had a grandmother who could only speak Japanese, but I never spoke with her because I never learned the language. I wasn't given the chance to choose.
>
> I feel a lot of bitterness about how I was raised, how I was taught to behave. I had a lot of questions about my heritage, but they were never answered. (189)

Murasaki's grandmother Naoe adds, "Jitto mimi o sumashite kiite goran, ironna koe ga kikoeru kara. Kokoro no-mimi o mottetara ne" (190). Since Goto presumably targets a largely non-Japanese(-Canadian) audience with her Canadian publication, her inclusion of Japanese phonetically transcribed into English characters further emphasizes the gulf imposed by Murasaki's parents' difficult choice. Most readers, like Kay and young Murasaki, cannot make the same connection with Naoe as with other characters unless they have a mediator, like adult Murasaki.

Even when she adopts a supposedly neutral and, at the very least, supposedly consistent journalistic voice, Goto, through Murasaki, reinforces how different subject positions battle with cultural heritage. In Duet for Three, the continual negotiations between Aggie and June, and the relative position of Frances, illustrate and comment upon how a conflict between immediate generations might be resolved or at least mitigated by a

connection across generations. Taking on the same issue as Rich, Ruddick, and Hirsch do in their respective feminist analyses of mother-daughter relationships, Barfoot is better positioned to investigate a solution because she makes a literary appeal to readers' imaginations and deliberately situates them so that they speculate, having connected with two possible subject positions, about how to solve social problems such as mother-daughter conflict and late life care. In Chorus of Mushrooms, the multivocal appeal to readers provides an even more satisfying potential resolution in the link between grandmothers and granddaughters. Also, in the complex fictional world set up by Goto, cultural markers, such as language and food, stand in for communication so that the middle generation is not entirely excluded from the newly configured female relationships in Chorus of Mushrooms. Kay's rejection is necessary to Murasaki's ultimate commitment to learning Japanese culture. In Goto's novel, as opposed to in Ruddick's model, Naoe's criticism of Kay's parenting choices are resolved even at the moment they are expressed in the novel because the fact of Murasaki's narration demonstrates that the cultural gulf imposed by Kay is being bridged.

Naoe manages to evade exile to the ever-threatening nursing home, Silver Springs in this particular case, by escaping through the storytelling legacy which Murasaki inherits (a legacy which skips a generation due to her daughter Kay's linguistic denial). The threat of the nursing home looms in the embedded narrative of Goto's novel, rather than in the frame, as in Laurence and Barfoot's works. Because Goto imbues Chorus of Mushrooms with the possibilities inherent in folk tale and magic realism alongside those of

realistic narrative, Naoe's old body is not mired in a specific construction of reality or restricted to a narrow cot like Hagar's. Murasaki offers a fantastic present tense situation for her grandmother which figures both women as free spirits, not threatened by any form of confinement (physical, social, or cultural). Naoe escapes the buried threat of confinement because of her granddaughter's acceptance of her grandmother's devotion and will for freedom.

Murasaki takes advantage of and simultaneously demonstrates narrative freedom when she sarcastically relates her caustic masking of adolescent pain:

> 'What happened to your grandma?'
>
> 'She went back to Japan. She got sick of all this snow and dust and up and left. I don't blame her.'
>
> 'What happened to your grandma?'
>
> 'She went ape-shit and was raving, frothing at the mouth and she ran naked from the house screaming like the pagan she is.'
>
> 'What happened to your grandma?'
>
> 'She started to grow fur all over her body and at first we thought it was a symptom of illness or something like she wasn't eating enough so her body was compensating with fur to keep her warm but we found she was actually a tanuki who had assumed the form of a woman so she could marry my grandfather because he had set her free from a trap and she wanted to thank him by becoming his wife, but now, she wanted

to return to the wilds whence she came.' (88-89)

By once again repeating a story with incremental variations, Goto demonstrates how Murasaki deliberately misleads listener(s) in an attempt to evoke a new, full understanding of her grandmother's quest. The method, and this example, also provide clues as to how both Murasaki and Goto are fully capable and willing to play on, and thereby expose as ridiculous and untenable, the racist assumptions of their audience. Further, the free adaptation of story details to fit circumstances and reader expectations enables Murasaki to be free in her description of Naoe's improbable escape. Murasaki promises to "[make] up the truth as [she] goes along" and, in doing so, releases her grandmother's body from a representational language that would contain and restrict it to one of "non"-reproductive value (12). Because, in her relation of adolescent playground defensiveness, Murasaki has demonstrated her tendency to adapt a story to readers' assumptions, her choice to narrate Naoe's unlikely career as an octogenarian rodeo star also comments on readers' expectations. Readers are set up to accept such late life freedom and excitement as possible. Murasaki not only traverses a cultural divide, ironically imposed by her parents, she also proves capable of controlling narrative in two languages and for (at least) two generations. Her depiction of what she perceives as Naoe's own fixation on the potential of language rather than the restrictions imposed by and on her decrepit body enables her to figure the women telling together the stories of their escapes.

Kay's decision to unlearn Japanese for the sake of her daughter, and in spite of Obachan (Naoe), translates not only into her own inability, but also

Murasaki's. Murasaki, or Muriel as her parents are only able to call her, feels an inherent lack in her loss of Japanese culture, and it is this loss that she seeks to compensate through her reconstruction of her grandmother's story. She has never understood the words her Obachan speaks, but she depicts the two as able to communicate anyway so that the young girl learns that language is multivalent--rich in its sound beyond meaning:

> I never understood the words she said, but I watched and learned. And I begin my understanding now. Obachan took another route, something more harmonious. Showed me that words take form and live and breathe among us. Language a living beast. (98-9)

The cultural gulf Kay willingly imposes on her daughter in the name of assimilation should increase the generational gaps between Murasaki and Naoe, but ultimately it actually intensifies their connection. When Murasaki does learn Japanese as an adult, she uses it to tell her lover her grandmother's story, in defiance of her mother's terrified hopes for her.

Kay desperately wants to assimilate into white Canadian society, so much so that she is incapable of openly recognising the racism that dictates her choice. When Murasaki is chosen to play Alice in Wonderland because of her singing voice, Kay happily agrees to dye her daughter's hair blond so that she will look suitable for the part. Although her mother attributes the desired change to how theatre is supposed to create illusion, Murasaki, even as a child, recognises the inherent racism:

> "'Mom!' I hissed. 'Mom, I changed my mind. I don't want to be

> Alice anymore. I'll be the Mad Hatter, that way, I can just wear a hat. Or the Cheshire Cat! Cats have slanted eyes. That would work out. Mom?'" (177)

The final question at the end of Murasaki's slightly vicious capitulation indicates that Kay understands the problems faced by Murasaki better than she is willing to let on. Her lack of reaction which prompts Murasaki's childish insistence on attention and response continues her constant refusal to acknowledge culture. To acknowledge her own deliberate avoidance of any identification (or even recognition) of Japanese culture (or depictions of Japanese culture) would be to acknowledge that racism defines and circumscribes Kay's parenting. Further, to fully recognize the choice might lead to having to face Kay's internalisation of that racism, as constantly indicated by her stubborn insistence on assimilation, without acknowledgment of how that process (performing whiteness) is culturally determined.

Kay's struggle pits her against Naoe and Murasaki in such a way that the outer generations connect because of the ridiculous lengths to which she takes her enculturation. The pugnacious assimilation injects Hirsch's tragic situation of non-communication between mother and daughter with humour. Like in Duet for Three, when Aggie and Frances mutually understand the shortcomings of Aggie's husband while June is unable to participate, Murasaki and Naoe connect instinctively (and supposedly without complete linguistic understanding). When Murasaki explains to Kay her reason for breaking up with white boyfriend Hank, her mother misperceives the offense

taken: "'Mom, he wanted to have Oriental sex with me.' 'Oh, well, the Bible says we should wait, ummmm...' she trailed away. Obachan and I, our eyes collided, and we began to laugh" (124). Whereas the mother cannot relinquish her commitment to specific cultural ideals enough to understand her daughter's perspective in the slightest, granddaughter and grandmother understand without elaboration what mother-daughter entirely fails to comprehend.

Murasaki figures Naoe as lamenting the loss her daughter chooses to inflict on herself and her family. The old woman's voice demonstrates a clear understanding of the cultural divide in her condemnation of Kay's attempted assimilation: "My daughter who has forsaken identity. Forsaken! So biblical, but it suits her, my little convert" (13). She also understands better than Keiko, as she calls Kay, that although denying Murasaki knowledge of Japanese culture removes her from her heritage, learning and speaking Canadian English will not provide access to a cultural heritage because of the complicating factor of race:

> "A child from my heart, a child from my body, but not from my mouth. The language she forms on her tongue is there for the wrong reasons. You cannot move into a foreign land and call that place home because you parrot the words around you" (48).

Language can be and is formative and influential within the novel, but Murasaki through Naoe explains that a specific engagement with language is necessary to enact change, and merely mimicking words does not suffice.

Naoe craves the dialogue that Murasaki imagines for her, saying, "I

mutter and mutter and no one to listen. I speak my words in Japanese and my daughter will not hear them. The words that come from our ears, our mouths, they collide in the space between us" (4). Kay misinterprets her mother's stubborn refusal to conform to the Canadian plan, ascribing her choice as contempt:

> 'You sit there and mutter and taunt me in Japanese just for spite,' Keiko hisses from the crack between the kitchen door and frame, one eye stabbing me through the tiny space. It is not so, Keiko, but the door has already clicked shut before I can explain. (21)

When she leaves, Naoe's absence is marked by silence, even though none of her family members share her language any longer. The connection that Naoe maintains for the entire family to a cultural heritage not easily elided does not become evident or crucial until an eery and unexpected silence marks her absence from the transplanted home (not only have the Tonkatsus been transplanted, but the house they live in has been physically transported, and damaged in the process). There are no more Japanese words after Naoe leaves, until Murasaki takes on her role.

Because of her desperation to assimilate into white Canadian society, once her mother leaves home, Kay's only remaining link to Japanese culture disappears. Unable to escape her racialized body and also unable to free her daughter from the same construction, she has chosen to abandon the Japanese language almost entirely, in an attempt to sever her own daughter from a derogatory association. Nevertheless, while keeping her mother in her house despite her relentless torrents of Japanese words, Kay manages to maintain

some hold on what she has rejected--Naoe represents a channel to a collective past not just because her body connected her physically to an abandoned culture, but also because of its incorporation of that culture's language. As Murasaki puts it, "You couldn't have a bridge party if you had an immigrant mother who sat muttering beside the door" (97). Kay feels restricted by the cultural indicator her mother insists on remaining. But rather than taking the opportunity for perceived cultural neutrality presented her by Naoe's departure, a supposed relief of the burden of caring for an old woman with increasingly threatening strange behaviour, Kay ceases to function and suffers a complete mental breakdown.

Murasaki, who has been so carefully protected from Japanese culture with the exception of the "vegetable blind spot" presented by the "Jap oranges" which almost turn her yellow (91-92), understands intuitively how to address the lack which stymies her mother. Obachan, the happy recipient of mysterious, secret packages of Osenbei and sake, laments, before her escape, the rejection of Japanese food that has changed her daughter entirely: "My daughter, you were raised on fish cakes and pickled plums. This Western food has changed you and you've grown more opaque even as your heart has brittled" (13). Murasaki senses through an imaginary conversation with her escaped grandmother what sustenance her mother needs and fills the cultural gap by learning to cook traditional Japanese food. She provides a connection to the Japanese culture she has only glimpsed in boxes sent from her great uncle and snuck upstairs by night. Though still bereft of the language, Murasaki brings back some of the cultural sustenance which stands in for the

influence her grandmother had maintained over the home without the knowledge, or at least understanding, of its other inhabitants.

The boundaries between grandmother and granddaughter blur and practically dissolve through the cacophonous narration of Chorus of Mushrooms. The final chapters of the book show such a synchronicity of action that it is difficult to tell whether a passage about a man and woman who have sex in a bathtub is relating Murasaki's experience or that of Naoe. The possibility that Naoe could be sexually desirous and desirable certainly jars readerly expectations (188). When the scene is made clear pages later (readers envision Naoe with "bathwrinkled fingers" sitting with a cigarette-smoking companion), readers fully witness the gradual dissolve between granddaughter and grandmother (193). Readers are forced to confront their assumptions about old women in a way that expands conceptual possibilities.

Continuing their connection and elision, Murasaki and Naoe practically simultaneously (re)discover Asian food (Chinese food from Chinatown in Naoe's case). Further, both Murasaki and Naoe have the experience of not realising when they are speaking Japanese or English to their male companions. Murasaki talks with her lover:

> "It occurred to me. That I've known you since you arrived at the airport, but you've never taken an English class at the Y or anything. And you're so fluent, I don't even notice an accent when we're talking together."
>
> He looked incredulously at me.
>
> "But when I speak with you, I only speak in Japanese.

Jibun de wakaranai no? Itsumo Nighongo de hanashiteiru noni..."

Oh. (187)

Naoe asks her companion, Tengu,

"You keep changing, you know, " she said. "Or how I translate you. I don't know who you are from one moment to the next. Are you still the same person who can sukoshi speak Japanese or was that something I made up on my own?"

He looked at her in amazement, his eyebrows raised, and eyes wide open.

"What do you mean? Eigo Hitotsu mo hanashitenai to omou kedo. Haven't we been talking Japanese all along?"

Oh. (197)

Although they cannot communicate for lack of a shared language, and at this point, shared space, they meld through experience to highlight the imaginative connection Murasaki feels with her grandmother and does not feel with her mother.

The union of Naoe, or Obachan as her family calls her, and Murasaki culminates in Murasaki's temporary inhabitation of Naoe's chair, the old woman's spatial stake prior to her escape:

She felt her body mold into the shape, the contour of the chair. Her legs shrinking to swing above the floor, her fingers curling into bulging bone. Her buttocks curved into the hollow carved out of the seat...[she sat] for moments or decades without

knowing or caring.

Looked up with a start. Her silent mother, looming in the darkness. She stood at the top of the stairway, so dark the girl couldn't make out her eyes, her lips. Only the cotton pale gleam of her grandmother's nemaki.

'Obachan, you'll ruin your eyes, sitting in the dark like this. If you're going to insist on sitting in the hall, at least turn on the lights....'

'Denki nanka iranai yo. Yokei na osewa,' the young woman said, and shuddered. (168)

Naoe marks her own territory within the house by making small grooves into a chair with her buttocks. Naoe's chair, which is her one territorial claim within an otherwise inhospitable house, similarly represents her body in that both are stark and weathered: "It had a flat back with no ornamentation and no armrests to offer meagre comfort. A simple chair with only a hint of a concave the old woman's buttocks had worn away over two decades of perseverance" (166-7). Described as an "extension of [her] body," Naoe's chair becomes a refuge, a stronghold (housing her as "sentinel" or "protectress" (175)), and eventually a possible hindrance to her freedom (14): "The chair had lent her stability in the midst of prairie dust and wind, but she could easily let it become her prison" (80). Speaking of "my chair of incubation," Naoe decides, "I must leave this chair like a husk, leave like a newly formed cicada" (77). Naoe needs to free herself from the only physical object with which she identifies herself in order to flee, so she metaphorically

transforms it into a body part she must leave behind (signalling a new stage of development in her release from a cocoon). The transformation she has wrought is so effective that the chair itself becomes the vehicle of transformation and in turn conveys cultural knowledge, specifically Japanese words, to Murasaki. It is by means of that cultural knowledge that the imaginary connection continues.

Murasaki uses her newfound linguistic connection to provide Naoe with a self-description that avoids Hagar Shipley's grotesque elision of her old body with bestial decay:

> When I was young and beautiful, my lips were an ornament upon my face. Now my face is crumpled with care and seams adorn my cheeks. My mouth bursts wide and the words rush out, a torrent of noise and scatters. An old woman on a wooden chair might not be much to look at, but step inside her circle of sound and fall into a tornado. (24)

Naoe, even in self-description, denies the stasis restraining Hagar and Aggie by investing instead in a metaphor of movement and power which begins with her constant barrage of sound. She defines her presence aurally more than visually, so that when she escapes (achieves mobility) it is the silence more than anything else that marks her absence.

The dual narration of this novel, which is in fact plural and singular at the same time, since many voices are filtered through that of Murasaki, intensifies and symbolises the ultimate connection of old and young. Naoe becomes a rodeo star. Read literally, Goto's depiction of Naoe suggests that

alternate possibilities of living old include becoming an octogenarian rodeo star. Read figuratively, Goto's Naoe makes possible a similar realm of seeming impossibility. Old women could be considered powerful within language; old women could be valued culturally and socially; old women could maintain control over destiny. Goto's freeing metaphors provide a refreshing counterpoint to the damage more common metaphors do to perceptions of old age, so that old women are no longer old birds, bats, crones (from Dutch for carcass), or shrews. Deliberately making Naoe's experience into a metaphor--Naoe is a rodeo star--forces a recognition of a libratory potential nestled within figurative language. Because of the connection between a grandmother and a granddaughter, the old bird becomes a freed cicada, a plumped up chicken, and an oversexed rodeo star.

Murasaki's imaginary dialogue with her grandmother, which could be called dual narration because it deliberately embodies both perspectives, extends how Hirsch postulates dual narration's potential to grant maternal subjectivity within fiction to consider the potential for grandmaternal action, mobility, and freedom within fiction. Naoe is able to act as the guardian angel posited by de Beauvoir, in perfect generosity rather than the painful cultural sacrifice Kay has chosen to make for her daughter. The transfer of cultural and gendered knowledge is indeed labyrinthine as it traces the linguistic and experiential gaps and correspondences between the mothers, daughters, and grandmother in the novel.

Beyond Hirsch, however, the novel confronts readers with their expectations about old age, so that they have to adjust what they imagine to be

(im)possible in order to understand the complex layering of narrative voices. In the process, Goto makes crucial all three female generations, so that the intergenerational struggles provide the connection between grandmother and granddaughter with the impetus to restore cultural knowledge. Naoe's example inspires Murasaki's adult choice to immerse herself in Japanese culture so much so that the novel concludes with Murasaki's open-ended flight to Japan, which reverses Naoe's earlier migration.

Both of these novels suggest another way for females to express and share devotion, experience, and story. Since sacrifice and responsibility are not the primary modes by which grandmothers and granddaughters are meant to relate, Frances and Murasaki do not cancel out their grandmothers metaphorically or otherwise. Since Aggie and Naoe do not hold responsibility for the success or failures of their granddaughters, and since no physical transformations are directly related to them playing grandmother to the young women, their roles are not entirely scripted and contain enough freedom for an imagined physical and social escape from the constraints which continually gird female experience. There is such distance between Frances's small town and urban life that she can attribute difference between her and Aggie to external factors and appreciate the gains of both shared love and different opportunities. Murasaki and Naoe do not even share a language, and so, despite the embarrassment Murasaki does admit to having felt, Murasaki can embrace the difference to the extent that her adult life commits itself to bridging the cultural gulf rather than condemning her grandmother for perceived limitations. The relationships forged in each of

these novels exceed the potential inherent in mother-daughter conflict because there is no either/or configuration. Within a nuclear family, then, it is possible to imagine the development of a female-female relationship which presents possibilities unavailable in other configurations of women and which frees both generations of women, at the very least imaginatively.

Instead of controlling readers by making a series of truth claims which restrict thinking to connections with experience, these novels, and their manipulation of the identity and status of narrative agents, appeal to readers' imaginations as connected to a possible social world. Readers are free to rethink social values and relationships without having to consider their own physical, cultural, and familial situations, but they are not prevented from doing so. As a result readers can play either or both roles mentally when reading and remembering Duet for Three and adjust their ideas about female relationships accordingly. Chorus of Mushrooms forces readers to play any number of parts and closes the door on previously held assumptions of limited, static old age. To read Chorus of Mushrooms is to accept cunning and fantastic narrative detours, and so Naoe's influence, resulting from her improbable escape, cannot be denied on realist grounds.

Endnote

1. Dickens's Miss Havisham and virtually any Disney depiction provide the most obvious examples.

Chapter Five:

Reality Orientation: Fictional Perspectives on Nursing Home Care

"When visiting a patient with dementia, keep in mind that his reality is not the same as yours." (qtd in Friedan 514)

The dependence implied by moving in with relatives because of physical and economic needs brought on in late life looms even larger over the choice to enter an institution. Co-director, Owen Kydd, calls his film, You are Here, (winner of the 1998 Montréal Film Festival in the category of best student documentary), a "poetic documentary, comparing two buildings," (December 28, 1998). In the process of comparing a functioning nursing home, occupied by residents, with a defunct one, occupied by squatters, the video juxtaposes two conversations. The piece begins in a Vancouver nursing home where female nursing home residents are gathered in a discussion group clearly carefully designed for their own personal expression. They discuss contemporary and past issues, as well as life in the nursing home. Presumably expressing her frustration with nursing home staff, one woman jeers: "I'll be back in a minute. Here, every minute is ninety seconds." The contrasting conversation occurs between young squatters in a café where the men and women discuss the strategy behind their future occupation of the defunct building. They excitedly contemplate the possibilities of what could still be inside the former institution. The implications of the juxtaposition are profound: the women occupy the space of the institution, nursing homes contain enough potential to risk legal penalty to enter them, and group discussion can lead to organised, influential, and controversial action. The seeds of nursing home reform, challenging perceived dependence, lie within

such exchanges.

In each of the Canadian novels I have discussed so far, the nursing home presents a threat that precipitates the crisis of the narrative. Hagar Shipley finds a pamphlet and is treacherously taken to Silverthreads for a surprise--to her--visit. This shock prompts her finally to attempt to take control of her surroundings and venture on the fateful bus trip to the lake. As I have previously argued, although Stone Angel criticism rarely explores it, the Silverthreads visit encompasses the central conflict of the novel especially when discussed in terms of its present tense narrative. In Duet For Three, Aggie's incontinence causes June finally to investigate the local nursing home on behalf of her mother, and the novel resolves to some degree with Aggie's assent that "I know we'll have to do something" (248). The threat posed by June's exploration prompts the retrospective narration which comprises much of the plot, motivates the content of the stories told, and makes Frances's upcoming visit crucial to the interactions between the two older women. In Chorus of Mushrooms, the ominous Silver Springs Lodge enters Kay's thinking about her mother because she misunderstands the old woman's increasingly strange behaviour. As a result, Naoe begins her physical journey. In each case, an old woman is reluctant to choose to enter an institution, and her offspring are reluctant in turn to commit (as it is so frequently put) a parent to such a place. Each individual agonizes over the choice until it can be presented as the only viable option. The situations depicted in these novels are not necessarily representative of actual decisions in relation to nursing home care or even of novelistic representations of the institutions, but they do signify potently the ominous symbol that the nursing

home can be for the elderly, and those caring for them. Currently, and for the most part, nursing homes signal failure--of old people to remain independent and of family members to provide adequate care. My analysis addresses that frequently automatic, negative association in an attempt to demonstrate how new thinking about nursing homes might contribute to recent movements supporting nursing home reform. My discussion of nursing homes fits into my larger analysis of negative conceptions of old age, especially since the caregivers I present work as examples for readers of the pitfalls and benefits of interpretation. Nursing homes invite fear partly because they house a conglomeration of what people often dread about old age. If old age does not necessarily conjure up negative opinion, nursing homes may, in turn, not threaten in the same way.

It is extremely difficult to theorize the nursing home since so much depends not only on cultural, but also on geographical considerations. Because of vast differences in health care funding, for example, dilemmas differ drastically for Americans and Canadians when they consider moving themselves or their parents into institutional care. The issue becomes politically charged because nursing homes often rely on governmental financial support, and so choices have widespread economic repercussions. In addition, individual economic choices enter into any such decision, changing the emphasis of the emotional consequences. Even more than these to some degree generalisable differences, there are countless factors--health, mobility, habits, age, sex, mental acuity--in each individual case which make any theoretical conclusions about nursing homes inevitably reproduce the institutions' own biggest flaw: a tendency to homogenize the very old. As

with most aspects of studying old age, nursing home life demands a continued consideration of the physical aspects of changing age, especially since relatives and medical practitioners usually present physical infirmity as the reason or excuse for sending an old person to an institution. To avoid treating old people, and old people in nursing homes in particular, as uniform, caregivers must take physical differentiation into consideration. This presents an intricate difficulty of emphasising individuals without overprivileging the physical demise old age is too often thought to be.

Julietta K. Arthur, in her 1954 How to Help Older People: A Guide for You and Your Family, explicitly but unconvincingly addresses homogeneity as a positive aspect of nursing home care. Arthur explains that facilities try to group together people who they predict will get along based on similar backgrounds. Her pragmatic explanation--

> This is not snobbishness. It is a practical recognition that problems arise when people live together whose life patterns were set long before they met each other. Homogeneity helps to eliminate sources of possible friction-- (241)

although dated, does at least show an attempt to recognize individual similarities, acknowledging that old people have distinct backgrounds that can be matched. Accordingly, there are differences among the elderly, but there are distinct groups within which members can be considered alike. However, the underlying assumption, oddly, is that people with similar experiences will experience old age similarly. By emphasising experiences, Arthur does eschew the dangerous overconsideration of physical change and even avoids merely grouping together those with similar physical challenges.

Still, though seemingly sensitive to a constructivist concept of aging, her overt valorisation of homogeneity ignores characteristics which may transcend similar experience. The example Arthur offers of a nursing home which houses only formerly wealthy, now destitute men is clearly problematic in this way. Each man could have extremely different views of old age (and the physical changes which might accompany it), regardless of the fact that he thought he would have the money to take care of himself in a different way and now does not.

Arthur considers similar experience to be more significant than myriad other similarities or differences. An even larger problem occurs when the similarity of being old is thought to be greater than other potential similarities and differences, however constructive or complicating. It is dangerous to think of old age as an overreaching, uniform category rather than as a descriptive term which might apply to a large number of distinct people with different needs, experiences, and expectations. To see age first supports the melding of individual differences which, necessarily to some degree, governs many institutions.

Because old age is so frequently thought of as a unifying similarity, nursing homes themselves face countless stereotypes which challenge their own distinctness. Judging from media coverage, medical textbooks, and many fictional depictions, a typical understanding of a nursing home includes physical restraints, forced confinement, being committed against one's will, overmedication, diapers, bad food, and a general lapse into an undesirable complete dependence. Often, people fear that moving into a place designated for old people will make age a defining characteristic and

that the most negative physical changes will accompany that designation. Numerous media reports about nursing homes support a general understanding of such places as repositories of dependence and abuse. Typical images accompanying such coverage consist of an elderly resident lying helplessly in bed with some other younger human figure, a relative or employee, standing nearby in order to provide a contrast which emphasizes the 'plight' of the elderly.

Betty Friedan, in her "The Nursing Home Specter," cites many American institutions where residents are physically restrained and neglected. In addition, she invokes personal experience to condemn institutional care:

> I admit my own overwhelming dread and prejudice against nursing homes. In ten years of research, no data has emerged to counteract my impression of nursing homes as death sentences, the final interment [sic] from which there is no exit but death. In some research I have seen, no matter their condition upon entering, men or women tended to die within six months of being put in a nursing home. Even if they were not dying, or in any state of terminal disease when they entered--merely no longer able to take care of themselves, living alone, like my mother--something happened, as a result of being put in the nursing home, that led to death. Of 'no apparent cause,' as they said of my mother. She died in her sleep 'of old age'; she was ninety. I think she had no wish to live any longer, in that nursing home; no bonds, no people she cared about, no purpose to her

days. (510)

Friedan's experience is, however unfortunately, not entirely unique. She goes on to cite numerous instances where physical and mental deterioration, even to the point of death, do increase when older adults find themselves in nursing homes that restrict freedom of choice or personal control. Of all the negative associations with nursing homes, the overriding and most damaging process, linked to many other problems, is the development of dependency or even just an attitude of dependency to the extent that individuals lose control or distinction.

Clearly the negative associations that govern cultural attitudes towards late life institutional care need to be changed. If Friedan is to be credited, this is an instance when perspective can lead to death. The poor popular image of nursing homes likely results from both actuality and normative myth (like the Japanese lazy housewife narrative cited in chapter 2). William F. Forbes, Jennifer A. Jackson, and Arthur S. Kraus, in their 1987 monograph Institutionalization of the Elderly in Canada, explain one way these connotations develop:

> Inappropriate placement of the individual in long-term care and the popular attitude that institutional placement is the end of the road, with a loss of personal freedom and identity for the resident, have combined to encourage these negative perceptions. (xi)

They also explain that many negative perceptions result from the derivation of institutional care from a Victorian poor / workhouse model. (Arthur's reference to people growing up with Will Carleton's "over the hill to the

Poor-House" supports this progression (232)). If popular conceptions are grounded in fact, abuses in nursing homes have to be pinpointed and eliminated. If they rely on myth, stories of nursing homes have to change. There may not be one simple solution to this dramatic problem, but obviously improving cultural attitudes could significantly alter how old people comprehend a move into institutional care, so that although they will likely live there until death, the choice to enter such a facility would not be thought the means to death.

Not surprisingly, analysts and reformers of nursing home care continually cite, as I have, the tendency to generalize and not treat elderly people (sometimes referred to as inmates, residents, patients, or, if lucky, consumers) as individuals. In addition and contrast to her poignant description of how institutional care contributed to her mother's death, Friedan offers positive examples of alternate models for group care which continually provide residents with choices that individuate them and counter their perceived dependency. The California Live Oaks Living Center and numerous group homes in Oregon cluster their caregiving strategies around the individual desires and needs of the old people they house. For example, residents are free to move back and forth between acute care and supported living, so that any one resident's physical situation does not define that person within his or her living space. In her discussion of "the dignity of risk," Clara Pratt (director of Oregon State University's Gerontology Program) echoes (unconsciously) Forbes, Jackson, and Kraus's explanation about the importance of allowing old people to take risks: "the need for an individual's independence and privacy makes it necessary to accept some risks, including

the possibility of falls" (qtd in Friedan 528, Forbes 74). Because of a seeming need to characterize the very old as feeble in order to maintain a comfortable distance perhaps from younger bodies, caregivers become protective (A narrative example of this would be The Stone Angel's Hagar Shipley feeling trapped like an egg in a crate) which is not always a productive or positive mind set for helping an elderly person decide to enter an institution. Rather than constant vigilance against dangers that could have repercussions for them politically and economically, understanding the need for continued life helps nursing home residents to develop a fulfilling community in late life. As Friedan describes them, the potential results of an alternate model at Live Oaks are remarkable in terms of physical rehabilitation and general well-being of residents.

Sources of information about nursing homes differ in how they can navigate the difficulty of individualizing late life institutional care to counter cultural fear, because writers appeal differently to their audiences. Gerontological and geriatric texts address medical professionals and students. Their pragmatism dictates a concentration on the physical, which frequently leads to generalizable individuation (eg. arthritics, schizophrenics). Popular nonfiction, written for a general public, such as Arthur's How to Help Older People and Friedan's The Fountain of Age, generalizes constantly, but offers individual examples either for impact (to evoke pity) or to provide a specific example from which to generalize, often too hastily. They, along with most journalism, risk exploiting old bodies to gain or maintain a readership. Fictional narrative, like popular nonfiction, appeals to a general and varied audience. Novels and short stories also risk

exploiting aging bodies to individuate them, to create questionable symbolism, and to match circulating images of grotesquerie. Some fiction writers, such as those I cite, avoid exploitation through innovative narrative structure and by privileging certain themes. Fiction is not bound by truth claims to offer a completely balanced set of insights, so narrative choices can guide readers to notice many or few facets of living in a nursing home. A fictional story can choose a voice through which to siphon a narrative in a nursing home and counter readers' expectations in a way that encourages them to rethink what a nursing home can be. Authors of fiction do not have to cite abuses and explain the problems which do often accompany institutional experience in the process of weaving their tales. Fiction writers are free to develop new strategies and avoid the homogeneity that frequently pervades depictions of nursing homes and that would be detrimental to fiction's creative mandate.

Current gerontological nursing textbooks, though strictly bound to truth claims, do sometimes stress to a degree the importance of individuating care for the elderly, and so occasionally avoid and even combat the pervasive homogenization of late life care. A recent study suggests that caregivers themselves need to operate as individuals in order to have a larger, systematic effect within their profession. In her "Older Women: Social Policies and Health Care," Margaret Dimond explains,

> At the individual level, gerontological nurses are students with the major responsibility to stay abreast of the latest information on health promotion and the rapidly changing approaches to the management of myriad mostly chronic conditions that affect

> older women. They are educators whose knowledge of health promotion and chronic illness is shared with clients and families. They are counselors and coaches who guide and encourage older women in their pursuit of health. As advocates, gerontological nurses lead the efforts to increase access to culturally sensitive, quality care for all older women...Through political action, gerontological nurses can work to eliminate the root causes of discrimination against older women and ensure quality health for all older women. (14)

This idealistic appeal to pathos begins with an exhortation to individual nurses to take on particular roles within that profession and hints at potential macro effects of mobilising politically. Nurses are responsible for physical care, and so they require an elaborate understanding of chronic illnesses. The crucial differentiation between residents can begin here, at a physical level. As I have argued, however, the differentiation must transcend physical bounds, and, almost ironically, that move beyond physical needs is most likely to be made first by medical professionals, since gerontological nurses often have the most frequent contact with nursing home residents.

The recognition of their own potential individual roles can then lead nurses to understand and partake in the necessary steps towards nursing home reform. As Loretta J. Aller and Harriet Van Ess Coeling's put it in their "Quality of Life From the Long-Term Care Resident's Perspective": "Only through changes in attitude and the elimination of the dependency-producing nature of nursing homes can individual autonomy and independence be promoted" (22). Nurses need to be able to change their own

and other attitudes towards the elderly, specifically in connection with their perceived dependence, in order for political change to take place. They are most likely to succeed in doing so by directly engaging with patients to learn their individuated strengths. In their "Nursing Home Quality Perceptions," Mary Bliesmer and Pat Earle explain one way that nurses can participate: "Nursing staff, operating from a base of honest and ethical behaviour, can develop trust and respect for the individual's autonomy by encouraging involvement in the selection procedure" (35). Knowing old people, not just residents, well enough to be able to aid them in choosing to enter an institution means nurses have to develop communicative strategies in addition to expertise in chronic care. To develop a solid enough relationship with patients and potential residents, nurses need to be able to communicate effectively with the elderly people they tend[1].

Aller and Van Ess Coeling's chapter ("Quality of Life From the Long-Term Care Resident's Perspective"), is not, as one would expect from its title, written by residents, but rather by health care professionals. The article evaluates the difference between what caregivers perceive to be important indicators of quality of life for elderly residents and what elderly residents claim in interviews are actual indicators. Current research by professionals in the field claims that "physical environment, recreational activities, and social environment" (21) are key factors to long-term care quality of life. In fact, residents identify only the latter as crucial and they do so only insofar as they stress the importance of social interaction:

> The importance of being able to interact with other residents was identified through responses such as 'I've made a lot of friends

> since I've been here.' Other typical comments: 'I like to meet people' and 'People are the most important thing.' One theme identified was the subjects' ability to communicate with other residents and staff within the facility. (20)

Despite what other research has suggested, when residents are actually consulted (spoken with), they pinpoint communication as a priority for improving quality of life in an institution. Such communication presumably involves not just exchanges of seemingly vital information, but also narrative discussions. Health care professionals must prioritise communication with residents. Such interaction is what the study that involves communication with residents recommends, and so that is the methodology which gathered the only information which actually considers the perspectives of elderly residents.

Forbes, Jackson, and Kraus stress communicative strategies between caregivers and residents as crucial to the development of individualised care. They explain a method for addressing problems of mental disorientation commonly associated with the elderly, a technique which is intriguingly named "reality orientation":

> One technique used in the care of confused and disoriented elderly residents of long-term care facilities is reality orientation....The primary purpose of reality orientation for these individuals is not as a treatment that aims to improve memory and other features of cognitive performance. Rather this technique is a basic method of communication with the resident by all staff. The technique uses a process of day-to-day

> information exchanges between staff and resident that aims to stimulate and develop the senses and to increase social contacts. This provides support to the individual's failing memory, and a feeling of comfort and security to the confused. A sense of security, a steady supportive relationship with staff and a reduction in the level of anxiety may also have a beneficial effect on memory and behaviour. (75-6)

A deliberate procedure of speaking with residents about the choices they will make during their day and valuing personal knowledge of their increasingly confined world allows residents to remain oriented to a reality which has perhaps been forced upon them. That such a process must be named and encouraged is sad testimony to the assumptions made, even (or especially) within the medical discipline dedicated to their care, about old people, particularly those living in institutions. The key to the reality orientation solution is communication with individual residents to create a shared understanding of what comprises a shared reality and not simply to assume that understanding without dialogue.

The most immediate solution that can also have long-term effects with regards to current nursing home problems lies with the caregivers. If caregivers can work with residents carefully in a manner which respects their individuality as often as possible, residents will gradually respond in ways which gratify caregivers and begin to counter stereotypes of nursing homes. Forbes, Jackson, and Kraus explain, "For the staff caring for elderly residents, it is important to remember that the patient must be treated as a 'whole' person with attention directed to the social and psychological problem as

well as to the medical problem" (68). Wholistic care is necessarily individualised, and current gerontological nursing textbooks continually stress it. In chapter one of their Gerontologic Nursing: Wholistic Care of the Older Adult, Mary Burke and Mary Walsh, assert that "the astute and objective observer will view each aging person according to individual talents, abilities, and state of health, thereby minimizing or avoiding misconceptions about aging" (2). Richard Barry and Donald J. Joyce explain in "Gerontology, Spirituality, and Nursing" that "one of the very first components taught to student nurses in their classes on therapeutic communications is 'to establish trust in the patient'" (49). Establishing trust in a patient with the goal of constructive dialogue will necessarily entail a consideration of that patient as distinct and complete. Bliesmer and Earle also stress that "the staff need to listen and talk with the residents about a variety of personal topics and issues" (32). The discussion with residents needs to be not only functional, but also individuated and personal. To know what old people need, caregivers need to know old people as complete individuals with distinct physical and other traits.

I argue that narrative fiction provides an even richer opportunity to reconfigure such attitudes because of its imaginative and multi-facetted illumination of different subject positions within situations like nursing homes. Readers are not limited to their own experiences or the experiences of the author when connected with a fictional world. As I have already argued in chapter four, it is possible, in relation to a work of fiction, to alternate between the thoughts and perspectives of various characters. Such positioning makes possible simultaneous, alternate, and/or even dialectical

vantages on the nursing home as potential residence or workplace.

Gail Landau, a health care worker in a Toronto nursing home, writes of attention to entire individual care in a poignant 1998 Globe and Mail article. She emphasises the familiarity which allows her to see beyond the oldness of the residents to their individuality. In contrast with the general public to whom she writes, Landau explains, "Mrs. L. does not look to us like Y. Simply because they are both small, old and grey." She explains how seemingly small details become individualised rituals with each resident and that "establishing the appropriate relationship with the residents is part of the task." She touches on the displeasure that forcing a resident to wash against his will gives the three caregivers it requires and does not ignore other negative aspects of her job: "stress-related tempers, suspicious family members, unrealistic regulations." But she goes a long way to debunk numerous erroneous assumptions and even describes meal time as an exciting individualised moment when caregivers scramble to meet the distinct desires and tastes of the one hundred and fifty residents. For Landau, experience has eliminated the problematic views she had about elderly people when she trained:

> On my break, my mind returns to the nursing home where I trained. My first impression was that it was dark, with a pervasive smell of 'oldness.' Fragile bodies, pale faces. Unanswered calls for help. Now I wonder at how those impressions have evaporated. Warmth and familiarity have replaced the darkness.

Landau recognises the importance of developing relationships with the

individuals she cares for and further realises that the general public does not have the same access she does. She relays her experience with the hope that she can pass on her increased understanding, which she unfortunately associates with light implying the problematic association between sight and knowledge, through illustrations of the people she knows.

Landau's evocative exposé exemplifies the possible dedication caregivers can have to individuals in institutions and the potential transformation in attitude that can take place because of a career entailing personal, individualised care of older adults. She writes a personal narrative which offers a similar opportunity to a general public since they can share in a new understanding of the individuals where she works and so potentially transform their attitudes alongside hers. Her carefully structured piece suggests that narrative is an important mode for organizing and relating the processes of change necessary to nursing home care, as well as for making an appeal to a general public whose attitudes must also change in order for reforms to succeed.

The epigraph to this chapter comes from a newspaper article quoted by Friedan. "When visiting a patient with dementia, keep in mind that his reality is not the same as yours" is one item in a list of "tips to avoid guilt" offered in the Los Angeles Times to offspring of potential nursing home residents. This piece of advice, minus the reference to dementia, is very much in line with what I argue in this dissertation. The reality of an old person is not the same as the reality I face every day. To better understand the reality of an old person, a reality which (best case scenario) will one day be my own, I need to understand and yet traverse that difference. The gerontological texts I have

cited thus far touch on gerontological strategies, such as reality orientation, to create a better understanding, by younger people, of old people in nursing homes by means of communication. The intended audience of those texts are health care professionals and gerontological researchers, and so the appeal is specific and limited. The two newspaper items appeal to a larger audience, but do so directly in connection to personal experience with the hopes of stimulating selfish interest on the parts of readers. I suggest narrative fiction offers a better venue for bridging the gap between elderly people and younger people--for providing a reality orientation. In particular, I am interested, in this chapter, in the interpersonal relationships which can develop out of the dependence typically dictated by nursing home conditions and in how fiction can illuminate those relationships in a way that gerontological nursing textbooks, newspaper and other media coverage, and first-hand experience narratives do not. The broader appeal and rich realm of imaginative possibility allows readers from different backgrounds to examine and evaluate the drawbacks and potentials of institutional care and develop new understandings of the many facets of nursing home life. The texts seem to offer data for research about nursing homes, but more so they theorize institutions in such a way as to make abstract claims about the homes' possibilities for companionship, mutual support, and change.

The two works of fiction I discuss in this chapter situate relationships between young caregivers and older nursing home residents in an institutional setting and offer readers at least dual, though perhaps pretending to be neutral, access into longterm care in Canadian and West Indian settings. Shani Mootoo, in Cereus Blooms at Night, adopts a first

person voice through a character not usual to contemporary fiction and so pretends at a personal insight that most readers will need to adjust to: evaluating old age in an institution via a transvestite body and mind. Nurse Tyler actually stands in for what we all are as readers, since we must cross dress to gain new understandings of institutional care. Strangely, through third person descriptions of common space, Edna Alford, in A Sleep Full of Dreams, manages to draw readers inside an institution in a way the nonfiction texts I have cited cannot. Readers participate in the disturbing disjunction caused by the homogenization of individuals and have to follow the main character to negotiate the attendant complications. Arla is a cipher for what readers have to do in connection with narrative fiction. These caregiver figures are especially interesting because of the theory of readership they offer, allegorically.

In Edna Alford's collection, the short stories are linked by their setting in a Calgary nursing home, Pine Mountain Lodge, and by the character of Arla, a young, female caregiver who works with the elderly characters in each vignette. Although Alford uses the third person, Arla's continued presence encourages the reader to evaluate and relate to her constantly changing and developing perceptions of the older adults she tends. Arla's assumptions are continually undermined, whether she begins a story with a negative opinion which is thwarted by some new knowledge or starts out full of optimism which is debunked. Accordingly, readers can accompany Arla through this third person, partially omniscient narration in her continual reevaluation of her job, Pine Mountain Lodge's residents, and her own thoughts on aging. The seeming neutrality which the third person sets up is subtly and gradually

altered by introductions to various Pine Mountain residents. Readers must (re)orient reality accordingly (and repeatedly).

Overall, there is a stark disjunction, which is reflected architecturally, within the nursing home. The contrast between the individual stories of the characters as located in their personal rooms and their uniformity in the dining room and common areas crystallizes the conflict between homogeneity and individuality which inhabits the institutional setting of any nursing home. Via setting, the stories manage to evoke what the gerontological nursing textbooks begin to hint at--that individuality is crucial to an overall engagement with aging residents. The difference Friedan illuminates between certain institutions and the Live Oaks Living Centre is accomplished and elaborated in Alford's depiction of an unenlivened, typical, institutional setting which, in the case of the dining room especially, flattens the individual characterisations of the residents that occur throughout the rest of the stories, set elsewhere.

The first story of the collection, "The Hoyer," comments on the nature of representation and storytelling between generations. Arla takes Miss Bole from her room, where her own art work differentiates her as a valuable citizen who contributed greatly to a larger community, to a general bathing room, where she is just another old, incapacitated body. She is hoisted into that room on a machine that further dehumanises the processes which continue to maintain her body in old age. Arla performs the weekly ritual of bathing Miss Bole, who requires a giant metal contraption, the hoyer, for the task. As revenge for the fear invoked by this instrument, Miss Bole repeatedly tells grotesque and grim stories of farm accidents to Arla, seemingly in the hopes

that the young woman will be so shaken as to err in the bath-giving process and justify both the old woman's fear and possibly even a change in procedure.

At a point when the hoyer severely restricts Miss Bole's mobility, she turns to the only site of power remaining to her, her ability to tell stories based on a vast and disturbing set of experiences. The guised battle that results conceals the degree to which each woman is acutely aware of the other. Miss Bole knows the limits of her game:

> Miss Bole was perceptive. She possessed a sophisticated and accurate set of emotional antennae. Although most of the time she kept this apparatus well camouflaged, she always tested only as far as she safely could, never far enough to push the girl over the edge into anger because that was very dangerous. (10)

She is also fully aware of the effect she produces, but plays on conceptions of an elderly, unreliable mind to achieve the desired results:

> 'I don't b'lieve I ever told you 'bout the time I's at my cousin's place.' They both knew she had and both knew that the other knew. 'Yes, we was both little girls then. It was late summer, I b'lieve.' (15)

Miss Bole uses the process of telling stories, of weaving narratives, to evoke in Arla the fear she herself repeatedly feels at the young woman's hands. The patterns of her repeated tales affect Arla, allowing readers to understand the power that fictionalised narrative (the stories seem to have some basis in Miss Bole's past) can have. In this depiction, old people's stories are meant to disturb, and readers are offered in Arla a touchstone for a typical, likely

familiar reaction to the usually irritating, repetitive narratives of the old.

Arla's shudders and disgust at the old woman's body are barely hidden when she strikes back via the humiliation inherent to the bathing process, advising Miss Bole,

> 'You better do that thoroughly, Miss Bole, ' Arla said sharply, under the guise of efficiency. 'You won't be having another bath till next week.' That was one way of getting back at her. Ruthless, Arla was aware, but one way. The remark was double-barrelled, with the humiliation of having to wash even the most private parts of her body in the presence of another person as well as the threat of next week's bath. (17)

The veiled battle has its desired effect on both women, humbling Miss Bole into washing thoroughly and sending Arla into questions about her role at the nursing home.

When the two return to Miss Bole's room, a department of cultural affairs representative awaits the old woman because she has an interest in Miss Bole's earlier artistic production. Arla inquires into the type of paintings, which she has never taken seriously at Miss Bole's word--old people's stories are not to be fully credited after all. Lyanda Weatherby tells her that "'most of them are of meadows filled with flowers so perfectly executed and flawless that for a long time the critics didn't consider them seriously at all'" (26). The exact mimicry of the repeated gruesome stories is replicated, with starkly different subject matter, in the paintings which have garnered the woman's fame. Both try accurately and repeatedly to depict an external actuality. The contrast between the pictures' idyllic and the stories' gruesome subject matter

leads the reader to question what rebellion the old woman's art may enact. Having followed Arla as exemplary interpreter of old people and sensed her error in failing to comprehend the significance of Miss Bole's ruthless replication, readers reevaluate continually both the stories of the old and the interpretations offered by Arla.

The following story, "Mid-May's Eldest Child," reverses the pattern of "The Hoyer" so that Arla approaches Miss Moss in a positive frame of mind, looking forward to her impending interaction with the old woman. Her plans to thwart nursing home policy in a day away from Pine Mountain excite her since she believes they are formulated with the desires of Miss Moss in mind. Taking into account Miss Moss's love for romantic poetry, Arla is certain that a connection to the natural world will appeal to the old woman. She sees Miss Moss as distinctive amongst the lodge residents and likes her even though other employees consider her "an irascible, uncompromising old witch and they would have as little to do with her as possible unless she mended her ways" (29). Arla is shocked and disappointed by Miss Moss's transformation from the resident "full of spit and fire" and with unequalled rhetoric to a tired, confused, wheezing, old woman in public (29). Again, Arla fails to interpret appropriately the individuality of the old people she works with. In this case, a compulsive optimism and desire to see more than is there fails her and readers. "The Hoyer," suggests that old people have inherently valuable insight to offer younger generations, but "Mid-May's Eldest Child" drastically undercuts this when Miss Moss turns out to need exactly the kind of care and protection the institution offers her.

Their failed outing ends in utter disagreement with Miss Moss

threatening to report Arla's flaunting of Pine Mountain Lodge regulations. As a result, Arla thinks of Miss Moss as similar to the other residents, in contrast to how the ending of "The Hoyer" leads Arla to a unique understanding of Miss Bole. Disappointed by the old woman's inability to commune with nature as Arla had envisioned,

> Arla began to feel not so much hurt any longer, but anger toward the old woman, she felt herself withdraw, felt the old woman's power over her diminish, was relieved to find herself objective. Miss Moss was just an old woman. That's all she was. (39)

Arla's back and forth between individualising and generalising the nursing home residents stands in for a cultural necessity continually to interpret the elderly as complete entities. Arla's conclusion, that Miss Moss is "just an old woman," is clearly insufficient since it has already been proven, in the previous story, to have no inherent meaning--there is no such thing as "just an old woman" any more than feminists at the very least would agree that there is no such thing as "just a woman." Readers become increasingly aware of Arla's futile struggle to maintain a consistent outlook as caregiver to institutionalized, elderly people. Both the individualities and the similarities of the residents necessitate continual adjustments. Readers learn first-hand the need for such adaptation and develop strategies for understanding and coping with the problems of Pine Mountain Lodge's rigid systems alongside Arla.

When Miss Moss is ill at the entry of the lodge steps, Arla remembers what Miss Moss had taught with intense irony. The failure of romanticism to translate into a gratifying escape into an outside world culminates in Arla's

accompaniment to Miss Moss's dry heaves:

> 'A thing of beauty is a joy forever,' she recited to herself, her voice mocking the old woman's, her mouth twisted, her eyes glazed with anger--'Its loveliness increases; it will never/ Pass into nothingness; but still will keep / A bower quiet for use and a sleep / full of sweet dreams and health and quiet breathing.' (40)

A sustained one-on-one encounter with the old woman has indeed continued Arla's capacity to interpret the poetry she has learned from the retired teacher, but the bitterness of failed hopes belies the positive spin Arla continually tries to put on her nursing home job when justifying it to her family and fiancé. Frustratingly, Arla must continue to understand the many facets of her relationships with various residents and cannot settle on any particular solution to her own, let alone her family's, concerns about her job. At another remove, readers engage with a different textual mode, poetry, and its, at times ludicrous, tendency to idealize and obfuscate (or embellish) through language.

"The Visitor" moves the reader from individual considerations of old women in the nursing home to a perspective on interactions between the old women. Through Arla's eyes, readers encounter Myrtle Emmerson whom Arla calls

> 'Hot Wheels' (in her head, of course, never to Mrs. Emmerson), because of the inner-tube hose and because she was getting worse, [scurrying] around the lodge day in day out, ranting and raving. (41)

Alford draws readers into a conflict between Mrs. Emmerson and Sophie Thiesan whom Arla remembers as arriving with a doll, looking more suited for an orphanage than for an institution for old people (46). The two old women fail to communicate adequately because of a language barrier and hearing problems, but Myrtle overtly associates Sophie with Naziism because of her German heritage, certain that German-speaking relatives are spies, and readers must historicise the old women rather than continue to think of them as amorphously ancient.

Alford allows readers to engage with Myrtle's thought patterns when Mrs. Thiesan receives a visitor:

> German. He was speaking German. Why not English for goodness sake? Like the rest of us. The reason was obvious, even to her. He was a spy. (45)

Readers also enter Sophie's room where she speaks to the cleaning lady and asks her to interpret in order to reconcile with the misguided Myrtle Emmerson. Despite a seemingly successful interaction, Myrtle is unable to associate the gift of figs with Sophie because of her delusion that Gertrude (the cleaning lady) had brought her mother, and not Sophie, by. Arla is aware of Myrtle's persistent badgering of Sophie Thiesan, but it is the intervention of another resident, Mrs. Bishop, that results in Mrs. Emmerson being sent to Ponoka (a nearby mental institution). Sadly, Mrs. Thiesan, never having understood the conflict generated by the proximity of her room to that of Mrs. Emmerson can only comprehend that Myrtle's absence signifies her death, as is so often the case at Pine Mountain. The women are utterly unable to express their individuality to each other so that complete misreadings of each

other are reciprocated and mirror the misunderstandings of the historical pasts they remember.

In contrast, when Tessie Bishop and Flora Henderson go to the Stampede parade together they discover a compelling camaraderie which is overcome only as the result of having overimbibed. Tessie exhibits concern about her public appearance, covering herself in makeup so that "the bright pink cheeks clashed violently with her 'Scarlet Fire' lips and together with white, heavily powdered skin in wrinkles, made her look like a clown" (67). She is jealous of Flora's white sandals in comparison to her brown oxfords, but she manages to overlook the embarrassing contrast since Flora is partially deaf, therefore not as together as her shoes may indicate. Despite her physical deficiency however, Flora's past as a madam in a bawdy hotel has provided her the means to go to the parade with Tess each year and makes her the perfect companion for the debauched day. From their strong position as allies, they are able to mock the women remaining at Pine Mountain while they escape momentarily: "'You know what they say, Flora--mind your own business, eat your own fish--not to mention the dog in the manger'" (71). The women leave the nursing home of their own accord and alone, countering common understandings of nursing homes as venues of incarceration.

Their return to the home is, on the surface, equally resistant to common conceptions of old age and uniform institutions. Tess decides, after Flora has made a pass at her, that the women are due to return home. The women, returning at the title time of "Half-past Eight," bang on doors, yelling and singing, and seemingly rebelling against the general understanding that they have been consigned to institutional conformity. However, the final haunting

image of Tess brings the story full circle:

> Her moon white face appeared to project itself out of the dark, like a mask on a stick. Her eyes were rimmed in black where the mascara had run in the hot afternoon sun and met the thin black arches pencilled on her brows. (82)

Readers understand that these old women may simply be performing a fleeting freedom rather than genuinely succeeding in a rebellion. The play on perspectives highlighted by this final image continues the barrage of alternation Alford offers throughout the stories and reminds readers of the dangerous preconceptions they hold.

Whereas outside the nursing home, the old women hold the gaze and critique younger female flesh ("'You and me, Tess, if we had a couple of them peaches, we could buy and sell that Pine Mountain hole ten times over'" (77)), when they try to do the same to the old women in the home Alford pulls back to reveal that they belong to the group they ridicule. From within, they feel powerful and different, but from without, their attempts to transcend only reveal the futility of their efforts. Alford forces readers into sharing the sense of frustration and impossibility because they accompany the women in their giddy drinking spree and yet also see the marionette-like image the women project once back in the residence. There is no comfortable position from which to imagine the women's friendship.

Alford similarly leaves readers in an ambiguous position when a strange lack of empathy on Arla's part thwarts the desperate efforts on the part of Mrs. Tweedsmuir in "Fall Cleaning" to hoard seemingly useless items probably so that she can maintain some feeling of control and individual

identity. The cleaning of her room has a devastating effect on the old woman, so that she requires extra care from Arla. Amidst a flash of insight that Mrs. Tweedsmuir may not have always hoarded junk, Arla nonetheless demonstrates her lack of sympathy:

> 'If you think that makes you special, Mrs. Tweedsmuir, you're wrong. There's not a woman here who doesn't have something wrong with her but most of them handle it far better than you.' Arla knew she was stretching the truth a little but Mrs. Tweedsmuir was getting on her nerves. (88)

Arla then takes the reader through the excruciatingly slow process of accompanying Mrs. Tweedsmuir to the next room while she continues her bitter thoughts. She begins to adopt the stereotypical attitudes towards aging that she tries to counter in her personal life and which her professional experience should help her to avoid: "She had whiskers growing out of the many moles on her face, like the witches Arla remembered from fairy tales" (89-90). Arla momentarily takes refuge from the unpleasantness of some daily aspects of her job by mimicking, with vitriol, cultural perceptions of old age which can do so much harm. Readers have developed too complex of an understanding thus far in the collection of stories to avoid frustration at being offered only Arla's biased view. Still, they recognize in her their own tendencies to vacillate between a rich new understanding of late life and a narrow, easy ageism.

Plays on Arla's changing perspective continue so that "Poll 101," wherein Pine Mountain employees, including Arla, encourage Mrs. Bjourensen to vote on the premise that a negligent son awaits her in the voting

room, ends with Arla staring at a newspaper page: "She must have figured it was Olaf, Arla thought, and stared at the picture for a long time, long enough to lose herself in the millions of minute black dots on the surface of the newsprint" (107). Arla avoids momentarily the unpleasant realization that, at present, she is complicit in the deception wrought by the nursing home which takes advantage of Mrs. Bjourensen's trust and cannot acknowledge Mrs. Tweedsmuir's need to hoard what is considered junk because of an inability to allow for a personal closeness which would make her understand both women's needs. She loses herself in the baffling surface array of seemingly meaningless patterned print to slow the process of understanding what lies behind the false image. Similarly, a focus on Mrs. Tweedsmuir's physical match to prevailing notions of typical elderly decay, and the same with Mrs. Moss's, enables Arla to justify a callousness which does not come easily to her since she works one-on-one with nursing home residents daily.

In "Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday," Arla begins to internalise and identify with the most devastating aspects of nursing home residency to an extent that makes her tenure at the home limited. Her encounters with the stubborn Mrs. Langland and her resulting impatience end in the stubborn older woman lying in a pool of her own feces. Alford once again offers readers a disgust beyond the stereotypical disgust elderly bodies the not-old often think such forms offer:

> Her face looked like a blank sheet of paper, her eyes large, almost silver, mirroring the eyes of the old woman lying on the floor. The longer Arla stared obliquely at the body, the more she recognized or remembered something familiar in the old

> woman's frozen face, something unholy in the humiliating posture of the crooked old bone body, framed in the yellow ooze of its own feces. (114)

Arla begins to see herself in the helplessness she perceives, so that she struggles to overcome her frustrations and administer the care Mrs. Langland appears to need. Unable to maintain a distance, Arla's identification with Mrs. Langland, a recognition that this too could be her own fate, initially pushes her frighteningly closer to damaging attitudes towards elderly flesh:

> And although she would never really know why, it tore like a ragged fish-knife through the flesh of her indifference, her only ally at times like this, left her with a deeper repugnance, a more palpable fear and disgust than she had ever felt before, even at Pine Mountain Lodge. (115)

She tries to overcome this disgust, motivated by association of her own potential plight with that of Mrs. Langland, and offer comfort with the only response coming from another nursing home resident, Mrs. Mackenzie, who makes clear to Arla that others observe her interactions and either sympathize or disapprove. Arla is forced to reevaluate Mrs. Langland's behaviour, defend it to Mrs. Mackenzie, and, eventually, accept the extent to which it is the potential fate of anyone. Yet, in order to continue in her role at the home and to accept its institutionalised indifference, she simultaneously backgrounds and foregrounds her understanding: "Angry now, forgetting grew easy for her, understanding impossible--both finally of the same thing--that these could be her feet, her toes, her somewhere, some other distant time" (121). To maintain the indifference necessary to represent the institutional

setting, Arla continues to force herself to perceive the old people she cares for as similar and merely old.

In the final story of the collection, "Companionship," however, Arla is faced with the impossibility of homogenising the old women she works with. Mrs. Dawson, so nearly a centenarian, after having fallen, cannot survive partly because she is mistreated through similar indifference to that which Arla has attempted to cultivate. As a result, Arla confronts the difficulties of working within the institutional framework as it stands at Pine Mountain and can accept its limits no longer. Watching a woman she grew to know and respect let go of a will to live she knows, from frequent contact, was hard earned, Arla can no longer pretend at the distance she desired:

> By now Arla was stooped over the bed, her hands softly cupping the old woman's face, looking hard at the eyes, desperately trying to reach into that space which housed the fight, the will the old woman had brought over from the old country and had worked for years like a plough horse in order to get through all she had. (151)

Arla walking away from Pine Mountain for the last time does not mark her failure to work with old women, but rather marks the failure of a specific type of institutionalised setting which does not allow for the kind of care Arla would choose to offer, despite her relentless struggles at indifference. Because she worked closely with Mrs. Dawson and conversed with her often, she knows how small a challenge this last bump on the head should be in comparison to countless preceding vicissitudes. Because Pine Mountain does not provide for the type of companionship (aptly the title of the final

story) she develops with Mrs. Dawson, she can no longer tolerate its bounds.

The narratives woven together in A Sleep Full of Dreams create a new and developing understanding of the experience of aging and, in particular, aging in an institution for readers. They show Arla to be a dedicated caregiver who is committed to the kinds of personal interactions, and especially conversations, necessary to nursing home reforms as suggested in gerontological nursing textbooks. Arla's exit at the conclusion of the stories demonstrates the incongruity of her style of caregiving with institutions which misunderstand and homogenize old age. The collection as a whole, even better than the textbooks, illustrates the invaluability of new, innovative, and even basic communicative strategies to adequate, nurturative, nursing home care. Further, the falsely neutral narrative voice involves readers in a process of reforming nursing home standards imaginatively and evaluating preconceptions of both the homes and the people they house. Arla's job is to interpret the needs and desires of nursing home residents; she is the readers, and she offers a paradigm for readers to care, to listen, to fail, and to engage.

Shani Mootoo's Cereus Blooms at Night depends, as a novel, so highly on a caregiver - nursing home resident relationship that there is no possibility for Tyler, a nurse, to walk away from Miss Mala Ramchandin, his charge. The friendship which develops between the two characters is as crucial to the transmission of the story as it is to the survival of the two characters themselves. Although the majority of the novel relates the framed story which explains Miss Ramchandin's past leading her to Paradise Alms, the frame itself, set in the nursing home, is crucial to that story. In his opening explanation, an address to the reader, Nurse Tyler makes explicit the

caregiver role of passing on old people's stories: "Might I add that my own intention, as the relater of this story, is not to bring notice to myself or my own plight" (3). He makes clear the necessity of story to his charge, since when she is committed to the home, her personal narrative is her only possession. The reader can imagine, from the very beginning, the communication that must have taken place to enable such transmission and the dedication to listening and understanding on his part it must have required. Tyler, too, offers an intriguing theory of readership.

As the novel unfolds, the devotion required of Nurse Tyler to divine Mala Ramchandin's story becomes clearer to readers. She does not articulate entire words or even make a sound for the first period of her stay. Since Tyler has not been allowed to care for any other residents of Paradise Alms because of his suspected queerness, he has more time and attention than other caregivers at nursing homes likely do. Nonetheless, his work serves as exemplary of the kind of transformation careful, steady attention can bring about when a caregiver focusses on the patient's desire or need to communicate. Tyler realizes that, although he elicits no response, his own words still have a crucial effect: "I became acutely aware of my movements and the subtleties of my tone, which may have been all that communicated with her" (16). Initially, he is forced to read Miss Ramchandin's responses in her body, be it the clenched fists that indicate a fighting spirit (17), or "her clenched fists, defiant stare, pursed lips and deep, slow, calculated breathing" combined (19), or her first gesture of turning her head to follow with her eyes (23), or much later her swinging legs which indicate happiness. As Tyler himself puts it, he becomes "accustomed to reading, as if by Braille, her

twitches and gasps" (100).

Unlike Braille, however, Mala's alternative communicative strategies reflect both her own and Tyler's capacities. The twitches and movements seem especially designed for Tyler in the way that Braille is adapted for those who feel better than see, but Mala's physical gestures also meet her own ends. Most significantly, she resists silently when she faces the possibility of losing Tyler's exclusive caregiving attention. He has been so effective at normalising her for other staff that they momentarily think they would rather care for her than the man who perpetually perceives red ants to crawl on him. Not even imagining that she does not care, Tyler fears that she does not even comprehend him when he communicates the potential change:

> That night I mentioned to Miss Ramchandin that I would not be spending as much time with her in the future. She didn't respond. I returned to my room but kept one ear open all night waiting, expecting, wondering. As the hours passed and there was no commotion I became more and more despondent. (97-98)

Miss Ramchandin waits until the next day and performs the insanity that has brought her the special care of Nurse Tyler:

> The centre of the room had been made bare. Three dresses, a slip, two nightgowns, panties, four pairs of socks, a pair of shoes, a night potty, brush and soap were neatly lined up along the edges of the room. A roll of toilet paper had been dissected, sheet by sheet, each sheet pinned to the wall. The dresser lay flat on its face in front of the window. The bed frame, balanced on its side, sat on the dresser. It was straddled by the eating table atop

> which lay the mattress, which itself lay under four drawers, neatly arranged side by side. Two chairs faced each other with their feet symmetrically placed in the drawers. Straddling the two chairs was the stool and in, or rather on the stool sat Miss Ramchandin. (99)

Mala comprehends to the degree that she fully understands her effect on the other nurses at Paradise Alms and exploits their fear in order to maintain her comfortable situation. More than the strange buzzes and moans she begins to verbalize, her defiant piling of furniture, a defensive gesture long-engrained because she hid herself from her father's incestuous advances by building a wall of furniture, signals to Tyler her complete understanding and desire for his care.

When Mala does begin to communicate verbally, Tyler strains to hear and understand her efforts and realises, from her repeated query, "Where Asha?" that she has a story to tell. He obtains a notebook in which he scrupulously documents every word she attempts "no matter how erratic her train of thought appear[s] to be" (99). The respect he accords her is well-merited since seemingly random references to insects and gramophones turn out to have individual, devastating significance. The story Tyler unfolds, though partly a love story, is intensely violent and disturbing. Graphic descriptions of incest and beatings form its core, and Miss Ramchandin's twitches and moans take on a new meaning within its turbulent bounds.

The narrative frame which the meeting of Tyler and Miss Ramchandin comprises partially mitigates the horrifying centre of the story. The retrospective narration is questionable and difficult subject matter for a novel,

and it is well-screened by the nursing home surroundings. Readers could possibly ascribe the horror to the setting of the narrative frame rather than to the comfortable domestic setting which the actual violence ruptures. Accordingly, the relationship which forms between Tyler and Miss Ramchandin, and his careful attention to all the details of her attempted communication, become as crucial to the narrative frame as to the framed narrative. Without Tyler's continued and justified respect, Miss Ramchandin's sounds could easily be dismissed, even by readers, as the ramblings of a deluded, senile, mental patient. Tyler's diligence, however, carefully informs readers that she has a potent story to tell. Readers subsequently cannot fully concur with the opinions of the other nurses at Paradise Alms, even though they may want strongly to situate themselves in alignment with those women to deny the terror of Mala's past.

Mootoo plays with the concept of the unreliable narrator, providing touchstones indicating the utter reliability of the source of her incest narrative and the unreliability of interpretation in connection with that source. She filters descriptions of extreme sexual abuse through an old, discredited body. Instead of thereby discrediting the story or dismissing old age as a natural consequence of abuse, she carefully weaves a tale of intergenerational friendship between outcasts. Readers have to identify with both of them and become careful interpreters of visual and verbal clues, as Tyler has demonstrated himself to be.

Both Alford and Mootoo position readers so that they have critical insight into the subtle negotiations involved in caring for elderly women who live in nursing homes. In Sleep Full of Dreams, the appeal to the reader takes

the form of a false neutrality which reveals a lack of social neutrality in connection to the elderly and especially the biases which typically rule nursing home care. Like Goto, Alford forces readers to examine their own attitudes towards old age which may have previously been thought of as givens, rather than opinions. As a result, readers relate to Arla's growing realization that the situation at Pine Mountain is untenable, and they also imagine other possible strategies that institutions could adopt. Mootoo's appeal to readers is filtered so carefully that they have to concentrate on how to negotiate the many subject positions they are forced to evaluate. The negotiations they undertake in order to connect with troubling subject matter mirror Tyler's own negotiations with Mala. Whereas gerontological nursing textbooks stress the importance of communication, they often present it as a secondary concern in a larger discipline dedicated to the physical care of the elderly. Alford and Mootoo make communicative strategies central in their imaginative depictions of nursing home care.

Communication, often between generations, is frequently crucial to survival in nursing homes. As Friedan explains, inadequate attention to individuals can literally lead to death 'of no apparent cause.' To maintain individuality and thereby hopefully eschew dependence, residents must have comprehensive interpersonal contact. This contact has to be available to them from caregivers, but they too have to be willing to enter into dialogue for their own survival. Fiction is one way to address cultural understandings of old age and perhaps to improve them. Though caregivers may be the source of the most immediate possible change, a larger audience must understand late life institutional care in a new way to improve perspectives that can be a

matter of life and death. Fiction that provides access to nursing home possibilities, such as Alford's A Sleep Full of Dreams and Mootoo's Cereus Blooms at Night, can encourage new thinking in caregivers, in potential residents, and in a larger public. An investment in narrative allows fiction to make that broad appeal through more than just the visual, which highlights the physical, so that readers might hear, feel, and see (in its literal and metaphorical senses) how late life has no one particular meaning.

Of course, reading fiction does not offer a simple method of nursing home reform. I mean only to suggest that narratives structured to appeal to readers' understanding of possibilities nestled within institutional care offer an imaginative engagement that could transform attitudes. The much more complex and involved process of altering institutional abuses and making nursing homes a viable, and even desirable option would ideally follow such changed views. Even readers dedicated to nursing home reform could formulate new ideas and strategies after engaging directly with characters constructed as employees and residents of institutions.

Endnote

1. This is not to imply that current shortcomings of institutional care are attributable to inadequate caregiving strategies. Resources are needed to provide nurses the time and circumstances to be able to develop what may be the most important aspect of their job, when working with old people. Again, this need highlights the geographical distinctions of studying nursing home care, since Quebec nurses in particular clearly currently lack any flexibility to adjust their jobs in the way I suggest.

Chapter Six: Interdependence and Semi-fiction

Alford and Mootoo depict unique friendships between Arla and Mrs. Dawson and between Nurse Tyler and Mala Ramchandin; such depictions hint at the intense and constructive interpersonal contacts which can occur between residents of nursing homes and those who work with them. The works of fiction provide exceptional examples of how literary narrative can evoke powerful imaginative responses from readers in connection with topics often thought to be uninteresting or even depressing. In Owen Kydd's evocative filmic comparison, as well as in certain of Alford's stories, hints of another type of friendship appear. Friendships between old women present intriguing possibilities for building on interpersonal strategies crucial within nursing homes, but to do so outside any institutional bounds. Fiction about those types of social bonds further illuminates late life possibilities beyond the more conventional contexts of families and institutions.

B. F. Skinner and M. E. Vaughan's 1983 Enjoy Old Age: Living Fully in Your Later Years devotes a chapter to "Getting Along with People," figured as particularly important because of the needs old people accrue and as increasingly difficult because of the physical changes which often hamper late life. Skinner himself was seventy-nine years old when the book was first published, so he speaks from a position of authority, or "acquaintance" as he would put it, which I do not yet share (15). Still, like co-author Vaughan, I have a knowledge of how old age has been described, and I suggest that pervasively negative descriptions, particularly of dependence, affect the advice offered throughout the text which is subtitled A Program of Self-Management on the title page (a different subtitle from on the cover). A

subtle ageism influences the authors. For example, the segment "Being a Good Companion" in the "Getting Along with People" chapter concerns itself mostly (and oddly) with admonishing old readers not to back-seat drive. In their choice to situate old people as passengers who must learn to accept that they no longer control action, Skinner and Vaughan promulgate the widespread belief that old age means certain passive dependence. Instead, the elderly must find pleasure in gazing at the countryside, rather than focussing on the road ahead. Addressing the older population directly, Skinner and Vaughan say, "As you gradually withdraw from the role of doer, you are likely to find it more and more tempting to tell others what to do and how to do it" (108). Old people are sternly admonished to refrain from giving unwanted and presumably (to Skinner and Vaughan) outdated advice, particularly about actions.

Skinner and Vaughan's advice could probably be extremely helpful and even enlightening expressed differently. Implicitly, they compel old people to understand that younger generations rely upon their increasing dependence in order to separate their youthful selves mentally from the older generation. A more helpful statement would be something like: "Since you have decided to stop driving, young people rely on you to be incapable of any action, and so you should not threaten them by offering advice that reveals your capacity." Although younger people frequently condemn old people as burdens, their perceived dependence is actually necessary to the kind of projection of weakness discussed in my opening analysis of CBC ice storm coverage (chapter one). It is disturbing, in Skinner and Vaughan's manual, to see the inaccurately descriptive transform into the harmfully

prescriptive.

I have discussed many reasons why it is repugnant and even harmful to consider late life as a time of dependence. Counter-productive and debilitating in itself, the misconception that an elderly person can no longer function without constant aid and without living in continual fear of taking risks often brings on devastating physical, mental, and emotional pain. Nonetheless, for now, bodies do change and elderly people do continue to have emotional needs, so living situations do sometimes need to accommodate both. Women frequently outlive men, and so the heterosexual living arrangements that were typical to North Americans (of a certain generation) when under seventy, often cease to be viable to those North Americans now in their seventies and eighties. I have already written extensively about two possible situations for women living old: moving in with family and moving into nursing homes. Each has built-in complications most of which stem from a mutual understanding that an old woman who resorts to such measures succumbs to negatively-depicted dependence. In both cases, careful reconsideration and reimagination can counter the potential problems and make personal relationships within each milieu fulfilling and even constructive. In addition, another exciting possibility for late life is gradually gaining credibility and viability. Either directly or coincidentally answering feminist calls for female community and companionship, some women choose to pool their resources formally and informally and develop living situations which could best be referred to as interdependent[1]. In doing so the women depend upon each other, eschew the ever problematic binary opposition between burdensome old age and useful

youth.

Since poverty is a compelling and ubiquitous problem for old women, particularly those left newly single having supported a family in all ways but financial for decades, sharing rent or mortgages has clear benefits. The advantages of communal living extend beyond the direct, obvious financial spinoffs. Physical needs can be more easily met by a group of women sharing similar bodily changes. They can adapt buildings to meet collective preferences, so that no-slip showers, ramps, curb cuts, and brightly delineated surfaces no longer seem a direct concession to a declining occupant. Further, pooled financial resources and proximity mean that medical care will be more affordable and likely more closely scrutinized. The cumulative, combined experience that a group of old women cohabiting would necessarily have could in itself provide often needed emotional support in addition to the financial and physical benefits. Women, in choosing to depend upon each other, can defy cultural notions of the weakness and helplessness of the elderly (as well as of women). Rather than accepting the passivity required for Skinner and Vaughan's "Getting Along with People" which concerns itself only with intergenerational harmony, old women can actively embark on friendships with each other to develop sustained and sustaining communities.

I once again turn to fiction to assert that female friendships, and in particular communities, offer viable solutions to perceived problems of old age. In fact, the strength of such companionships often reveals that many of those problems are merely perceptual. In traditional novels, female friendships most often remain subservient to larger issues of heterosexual

connections. When female characters interact outside of family connections, they do so usually as part of an overall trajectory towards marriage or male achievement. In certain unique, though increasingly more prevalent, cases, women writers depict women as interacting solely for the purpose of their own interaction and without concern for supposedly masculine (i.e. connected to male characters) goals. The latter cases alter the damaging prescriptive embedded in the former and carefully draw the reader into a whole new possibility for female communities.

In this final chapter, I turn to literary critics to culminate my articulation of the role of fiction in opening up the possibilities of old age. Most of the fiction I have chosen for this study is too new, or undercredited, to have an accompanying body of criticism. Female friendship more generally has been debated and explored by literary scholars at some length, so my analysis opens by examining how feminist literary critics begin a dialogue about female friendship and the possible role of literature in its study.

Elizabeth Abel and Judith Kegan Gardiner's 1981 Signs interchange sparks a discussion on female friendship and how contemporary women's writing comments upon it. In her "(E)merging Identities: The Dynamics of Female Friendship in Contemporary Fiction by Women," Abel hints at a particular relationship between readers and characters when she argues that female friendship can play a crucial role in self-understanding mostly through commonality: female characters recognize themselves in each other and gain greater self-knowledge through interaction. By extension from Abel, female readers can see themselves in female characters and can undergo a

similar process of developing a new self-knowledge. Gardiner, in her "The (US)es of (I)dentity: A Response to Abel on '(E)merging Identities,'" takes issue with perceived narrowness in Abel's conceptualisation suggesting that complementarity can be as crucial to female friendship as commonality, so that women may work together to complete each other or profit from comprehending each others' differences. Together, Abel and Gardiner develop a valuable model for studying female friendship as it is depicted in novels about groups of old women--women can know themselves better by encountering similarities and differences in other women.

Gardiner raises explicitly the question of how literature, and especially the construction of the characters Abel discusses, affects an analysis of female friendship. She proposes that character criticism such as Abel's psychoanalytic approach can restrict the analysis of social context, and so she stresses the "specifically fictional dimension of the characters" Abel has discussed (Gardiner 437). For Gardiner, fictionality is important because of how fiction comments upon a social world. As I have argued, narration can guide readers' connections to a larger context. By examining the fictional elements of the friendships discussed by Abel, Gardiner demonstrates that readers can glean crucial insights into a social world, outside fiction. Themselves participants in that social world, readers participate in determining how fiction can fit into an even broader social milieu.

I am especially interested in how Gardiner overtly situates readers in the process of friendship depicted in novels, saying, "In these books we [as readers] join the narrator in reconstructing the other woman by whom we know ourselves" (442). Readers can benefit from depictions of female

friendship in the way that female characters are figured as benefitting. The narration sets up an affiliation with readers which draws them into the friendships constructed within the novel or draws them into a relationship with the narrator. Imaginatively, readers explore the possibilities of female friendship not only from how female friends are depicted, but also from how narrators situate readers in relation to those female characters.

The collaboration between these two feminist scholars, which includes a reply from Abel, goes a long way to support their points since, as Abel puts it, employing the terms their debate injects with particular meaning, "feminist critical projects at least are complementary and collaborative" (444). The two thinkers work together to present exciting developments in feminist thought which they effectively shift from mother-daughter paradigms to other female-female dynamics. Their thinking and intellectual contributions are interdependent and productive in the way that I assert female friendship can be, particularly in late life.

Pauline Nestor's Female Friendships and Communities: Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell extends Abel and Gardiner's thinking to a historical consideration of literary friendships. Making an explicit argument about the contribution of literature to public opinion about female friendship, Nestor stresses fiction's general influence, saying, "Literature is commonly seen as offering its own unique insights into a period. More than simply another source of opinion, literature in any age provides access to deeper levels of consciousness, liberating its own truth in fiction" (2). For Nestor, literature, and literary communities, offer a richer understanding of theoretical issues to historical study. Because readers perceive literature to

make a distinct contribution to a wider social sphere, they think of it as revealing some type of truth. Nestor further situates literature historically for her own purposes: "This inclination to privilege the insights offered by literature is particularly marked in regard to the nineteenth century when the popularity of fiction made it perhaps the most potent form of social commentary" (2-3). Because fiction was finally being widely read, Nestor can claim that its profound contributions to thinking about contemporary issues played a crucial and widespread social role. She can then argue that the types of female friendship the authors she studies had in their personal lives affected the types of female friendship they could depict in their fiction. The depictions of female friendship, in turn, had the potential to have a large social impact since female readership increased in this period. The descriptions of personal experience adopted and transformed into Victorian women's fiction become flexibly prescriptive, a seeming contradiction, because they suggest, and create, new possibilities for female community.

Tess Coslett, directly in dialogue with Abel and implicitly supportive of Gardiner's criticism in her Woman to Woman: Female Friendship in Victorian Fiction, expands Nestor's theoretical understanding of fiction's possible role:

> Abel's approach here seems to me to be mistaken (and representative of much feminist criticism), in assuming that fiction can and does simply represent 'actuality,' and in assuming that 'narrative considerations' are obstacles to this task. Fiction, I would say, actually consists in narrative devices and conventions, and these reflect, embody or even create not

'reality' or 'experience,' but ideology. (emphasis original 2)

Like Nestor's claims for 'deeper levels of consciousness" embedded in fiction, Coslett claims that in the interstices of literary production lie subtle understandings of a larger social world. She implies that fiction offers a type of knowledge, but not necessarily a reflection of actuality. For Coslett, the structure of fiction, its "narrative devices and conventions," not only absorb and repeat prevailing ideology but also prescribe it. In connection with Nestor's claim about the impact of increased nineteenth-century readership, Coslett's contribution suggests that literary production and literary study has a potentially vast cultural influence. I will explore this potential further in connection with how old women are depicted as forming friendships in contemporary narrative fiction and film. Rather than assuming that literature reveals a previously uncovered facet of reality, I suggest that fiction and film can lead the reader into a new imaginative engagement with actuality through their very structure.

For Coslett, narrative fiction is paramount because its conventions could potentially exclude the types of depictions of female friendship crucial to Abel's formulation:

> Here, I think, the important point is what is considered as suitable material for a narrative as opposed to a letter: what counts as an event in a story. The world of women's friendships seems to be perceived as something static, outside the action that makes a story. (emphasis original, Coslett 11)

Writers make specific and guided choices about what is suitable subject matter for particular genres. Narratives typically require action, so that

depictions of female-female friendship can be controlled by popular understandings of both what women are meant to do and what fiction is meant to encompass. When Abel sets out to "illuminate the dynamics of women's friendships as they shape and are shaped by the contemporary female literary imagination" (emphasis mine, (E)merging 413-14), she eschews the stasis that Coslett also condemns, and makes female friendships more suitable material for typical narrative: as dynamic, women's interactions could constitute "an event in a story." I extend this to argue that old women's stories, and old women's friendships, can also be thought of as dynamic narrative happenings, whether or not they match typical expectations of action.

In a footnote, Abel explains that "While male relationships tend to be more instrumental, oriented toward purposive group activity rather than intimate verbal sharing," "female friendships are emotionally deeper and involve a higher level of self-disclosure" ((E)merging 415 n4). I propose that during old age, when femininity is perceived as fading and when both men and women are considered to be beyond action, perhaps this gender distinction with regard to friendship could also transform. During old age, with physical, financial, and emotional needs paramount, female friendships, and communities, can be simultaneously intimate and goal-oriented. Like Nestor and Coslett, I want to explore how depictions of female friendships in fiction present richer possibilities for this multi-facetted interpersonal connection than those offered in other media. I also want to suggest that works that choose to expand understandings of late life friendship could be thought of as prescriptive. If fiction taps into a constructed and imaginary

world which can reflect and especially affect circulating social thought, then it might also participate in the larger process of rearranging crucial social configurations such as groups of old women, at least in the cultural imagination.

Most studies of female friendship in literature and many friendships depicted in fiction are concerned primarily with one-on-one interactions and developing relationships between two women. Such connections are the building blocks to larger communities of women, so this is clearly a good starting place for studying female communities. Indeed, as with Tessie Bishop and Flora Henderson in "Half-past Eight" of Alford's A Sleep Full of Dreams, such friendships can in and of themselves provide a form of the liberty I suggest female interdependence can offer old women. Still, a completely viable alternative to home or institutional care probably requires the strength of a larger pooling of resources, financial and personal. I begin by reviewing The Stone Angel and Duet for Three in connection with their investment in friendships forged by elderly characters. I then explore Barfoot's Charlotte and Claudia Keeping in Touch which centres entirely on a friendship between two old women. The dual narration draws readers into a compelling, interactive relationship that enriches late life experience for both women. Lastly, I will analyze a Canadian film which explores and explodes the boundary between fiction and non-fiction, providing a test for my projections about the possibilities inherent in participating in the creation of a fictional world. In addition, Cynthia Scott's The Company of Strangers depicts a large group of women interacting for their survival, drawing readers into relationships with a number of women from different

backgrounds, and providing what Mary Meigs calls a semi-fictional example of how old women can pool resources for sustenance.

As I have previously argued, Hagar catches the first glimmer of female interaction as a possible respite at Silverthreads. Sadly, her interaction with Mrs. Steiner, and its hint at the possibilities offered by groups of old women, actually prompts her fatal escape attempt. Hagar finally finds strength and acceptance through the other women in the hospital, but both arrive too late for her to contemplate restructuring her world to accommodate communal living. Because the only places she encounters women like herself are institutions which forebode ill and limit movement, Hagar only glimpses the possibilities inherent in female friendship and community. Having isolated herself socially earlier in life, through her marriage to Bram Shipley and professional relationship with Mr. Oatley, Hagar does not have a basic understanding of the potent strength of female community to build on in late life. By layering themes (present and retrospective), Laurence underlines Hagar's self-imposed isolation, so that she finally is segregated from the group of women she comes to appreciate, ironically by her own previous pleading. Readers, in connection with the subsequent depiction of loss and lack, are left to postulate the fulfilment Hagar might have gained from earlier embracing female companionship.

Like Hagar, Aggie also separates herself socially. She does so by refusing to understand that misunderstanding acceptable physical form impacts her social position. Her obesity, which symbolises a significant refusal to conform, isolates her from a social world which might have included other women to learn from, share with, and make up for the lacks

she continually perceives. Sadly, she pursues obesity because her pregnant body seemed to allow her the feeling of belonging to a female community. She does form an intense and important bond with Barney in a rare two-sided heterosexual friendship. Still, Aggie cannot be incorporated into Barney's world, and so, when he falls ill, she does not even feel comfortable phoning his wife to find out if he is all right. Just as there is no place in Aggie's world for her idiosyncrasies, there is no place for her unconventional friendship, and so it is not sustainable. Readers perceive a lack and, again, are left to project what late life interpersonal connections could enrich Aggie's experience, beyond the solace she gains, significantly, from being an avid reader of fiction.

In another Joan Barfoot novel, she picks up the thread of Aggie and Barney's friendship and weaves it into a complex and durable model for late life. Charlotte and Claudia Keeping in Touch charts through retrospect the developing friendship between two women, now approaching seventy. Their complementarity exceeds their commonality to the extent that they play completely different roles in their separate stories. The different stories are narrated alternately, in the same manner as Duet for Three, so that readers have a similar task of aligning and realigning themselves, this time in a friendship rather than a battle.

The novel opens with Charlotte crouched in the shrubbery outside the home of her former, married lover trying to ascertain the import of her earlier decision to leave him (or make him stop visiting her). Claudia, in her own very domestic world, has played the part of the long-suffering wife who has been repeatedly cheated on by her husband with women playing the role her

dearest friend Charlotte chooses. Somehow these women can look beyond the role each other plays and maintain a crucial intimate bond. A pairing of women can signify more than merely amorphous femininity eager, or at least willing, to further narratives structured around the goals of male characters. Readers have to rethink affinities continually, since they first side with the other woman, then with the wronged wife, and then strangely, somehow, with both.

The support the women have been and continue to be to each other illuminates the strength of complementarity stressed by Gardiner; as Claudia muses:

> Perhaps between the two of them, Claudia and Charlotte, they've managed to create one single, whole, full life. Maybe Claudia actually relished, the way she could Bradley's body, Charlotte's excursions into what must have looked like wickedness; and maybe Claudia gave Charlotte a relationship, however remote, with solidity and normalcy; at least of the sort promoted by certain kinds of magazines. (85)

The differences between the women allow them to offer something otherwise lacking to each other and be fulfilled by their interactions. Similarly, readers can imaginatively engage with the completion gained by the constructed experiences of these two elderly characters. Though it might be too simple to suggest that they too benefit from the completion, readers likely gain a new way of thinking about how female friendship can offer fulfilment.

Later, in describing their friendship to Charlotte before their agreement to live together, Claudia depicts their separate choices as entailing both loss

and gain: "'You don't get to have both, by and large. So you chose interesting, and lost out on ordinary. Me, I chose ordinary, so I couldn't have thrills and change'" (236). The two overcome what could have easily been, from Claudia's perspective, irrevocable differences in a lasting and supportive friendship. The support they offer each other extends into a decision to spend their late lives together. In making an unconventional, but logical, choice the female characters agree to benefit from close contact with the other side of their crucial earlier choices and, to a degree, gain the "interesting" and "ordinary" they had previously missed. The novel deliberately oversimplifies the dilemma of banality versus excitement to exaggerate how female interactions can overcome difference and compensate for loss. Readers can imagine through either or both of the characters that they too gain another perspective from the access each narrator offers them.

Readers witness Claudia, having helped her philandering husband to a swifter end via morphine, write to Charlotte after a year-long silence. Charlotte, disturbed by her own recent turn to spying from hedges, responds with a warm invitation. The resulting meeting allows the two old women to understand the strength of their collective experience, and they decide to move in together to combat their excruciating memories and perilous financial states. Charlotte expresses the potential of their friendship strengthened into a new living arrangement:

> 'Well. It's only, I thought it would be cheaper for both of us, for one thing. But also it might keep us from driving ourselves crazy. You wouldn't have to be off brooding in that house on your own, and I wouldn't get frightened or tempted by

> foolishness. I can see getting brave again, instead of ridiculous. I can see us doing things.' (emphasis original 257-258)

Instead of continuing to be the wronged wife and the forgotten mistress, the two women could function together socially and combat their fears of late life fatigue, senility, and decline. Further, they can identify themselves primarily as friend, perhaps, rather than as lover or wife, both the latter in relation to a man. The solution offers what old people are supposed to lack, as Claudia puts it: "'I was thinking, what a relief. What a blessing, to have such a hope.' She could just weep with hope" (258). Rather than contemplating a shared life between two elderly women as only a shared intimacy, usually attributed to female friendship, Charlotte entices Claudia with the prospect of shared adventure, usually attributed to male friendship. The resulting plan provides them each a future impetus that had been previously waning as they each preoccupied themselves by mentally reliving past interactions with men. Because of the escape from at least two damaging binary oppositions--age/youth and female/male--readers begin to imagine new possibilities for late life female friendships to be action-centred (if desired) at the same time as emotionally profound.

The friendship these two women have managed to forge becomes more crucial to them than any relationships they have developed with men or even offspring. As Claudia thinks to herself:

> Their friendship is a spine that has grown with them, and whatever aches and pains and inflexibilities it has developed here and there, now and then, its absence is not imaginable. What would one be without a spine? (162)

They become mutually dependent to the extent that they share a support system. Neither is entirely dependent and therefore vulnerable to accusations of insufficiency; instead, they require each other. As a result, when Claudia confesses murder to Charlotte, Charlotte offers comfort, thinking, "Well. Friends perform certain acts, no matter what" (251), and she expresses worry for Claudia, rather than for the man Claudia killed.

Charlotte says to Claudia repeatedly in her letters and in person, "'I think we tried to look after each other. I think that's what friends do'" (235). The friendship depicted between these two women hints at a world of possibility for female late life: neither woman will remain alone in an unsustainable home, neither woman will depend on family to an extent that she may lose the freedom she has finally gained, and neither woman will be relegated to an institution unnecessarily. The two will budget together and explore the numerous possibilities they have been unable to pursue because their various and varied love choices interfered with their friendship. As Claudia puts it, "'Its nice anyway, ending up with a friend'" (260).

This fictional exploration of two old women regaining contact to further their friendship at a crisis point in both their lives offers rich insight into the potential for female friendship to offer respite to women at any time, and especially in late life. Never having been able to (or chosen to) make their friendship central in their adult lives, the women realize that doing so could provide a solution to their financial and emotional woes. Readers imaginatively engage with the complex memories and justifications of both women with regards to extremely different experiences, and so they, by growing to understand both Charlotte and Claudia, can imagine that the

benefits offered by pooling resources are open to different types of women. The alternating perspectives and retrospective narration draw the reader into an imaginative construction which solves a potential problem of late life.

Suzette Mayr's The Widows draws readers into relationships with three old women on a quest. Though not exactly friends, the three main characters work together to achieve a goal in the manner usually attributed to male social bonds. Hannelore and Clotilde Schmitt, immigrant sisters, team up with Freidl Schnadelhuber, Clotilde's lover, to go over Niagara Falls in a vessel especially created for such an event. The women follow the example of Annie Edson Taylor, who, as Pierre Berton puts it, "[shook] her fist at Victorian morality, which decreed that there was no place but the almshouse for a woman without means who had reached a certain age" (qtd in Mayr 1). Having learned from a touring musical about Taylor's desperately brave attempt to make money at sixty-three, the women band together to embark on the ultimate road trip. The road trip is usually considered a male genre in that it is linked closely to a series of male buddy films and is decidedly action-based and goal-oriented. The films often symbolize the independence maintained within a male-bonding framework, so that the road signifies freedom and progress. Mayr, by choosing to characterize three old women on a quest, urges readers to imagine women collectively acting, striving, and achieving a goal in the way that men on the road supposedly can.

Women on a journey challenge cultural expectations of feminine passivity. Old women on a journey especially confront those expectations, as well as expectations of elderly inaction. Mayr's imaginative, comic enactment of women barrelling down the TransCanada evokes laughter not at the

women who embark on such a ludicrous journey, but at people who cannot imagine it possible. Mayr manipulates readers' expectations of narrative chronology, not only by providing retrospective narration, but also by placing three narrative perspectives side by side in columns. Readers have to decide the order and importance of the tellings.

In Deepa Mehta's Camilla, Jessica Tandy and Bridget Fonda depict intergenerational friends in a road trip/buddy film which comments on and departs from the more typically male versions. The men in both of the women's lives abandon them, so the women decide to relive Tandy's past success by travelling to Toronto to hear the Brahms violin sonata. The film succumbs to many criticisms currently levelled at female friendship films in that even Tandy's ultimate escape is into the arms of a male lover. As Karen Hollinger warns in her In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Films:

> From this perspective, female friendship films seem particularly insidious, in that they appear on the surface to offer new representations of women and their relationships with each other when in fact they really serve to reaffirm male dominance and the advisability of women's unshakable allegiance to men. (5)

Despite Camilla's late, unfortunate turn which at least counters viewers' expectations with regards to late life sexuality, viewers join Tandy and Fonda in an unmistakeably goal-driven escapade, so that they see how an intergenerational friendship can exceed intimacy and involve action, if that is desirable.

Although not all the female main characters choose road trips in the

fiction I have discussed thus far, escape is a motif, theme, or even plot device in most of the works. Many of the characters I discuss embark on a journey or road trip of some kind. Hagar runs away at the prospect of confinement into an institution; Aggie escapes into (and not from) an unacceptable physical manifestation of herself; Naoe escapes successfully, though fantastically, from the dry, creaky, prairie house into a limitless world of possibility; Flora and Tessie momentarily escape the confines of Pine Mountain Lodge.

The above-mentioned characters are repeatedly depicted as desiring freedom from transformed physical manifestations that limit them and threaten them with confinement in a nursing home. To present an aged character who miraculously is not subject to current physical restrictions of late life would lessen the credibility of these narratives and/or change the genre to something like science fiction. Unable within the realistic (though magic realism in some cases) novels they inhabit to eschew physical transformation, Hagar, Naoe (the latter successfully, because she has been mired through language), Flora, and Tessie each attempt to escape physically their present confines in order to avoid what they perceive as a worse restriction.

On another level, facing an inability to escape social constructions of old age (constructions that reinforce their perceived uselessness and change their incapacity into a burden on offspring who are still considered productive members of society) and often physically unable to run away, the elderly female characters also often attempt to find some sort of mental freedom. The mental perambulation which drives each novel allows a penetrating view of the old protagonists' world- and self-views. In general,

these protagonists are mired in their flesh to an extent to which they were not in the pasts they relive mentally, and so they find a realm which does not restrict their subject matter in the way that old age would generally be perceived to limit topics. Their bodies do not limit their experience.

A dual escape motif results wherein the characters describe a past escape at the same time as they strive for a present one: Hagar's narrative encompasses a series of escape attempts from her marriage to Bram Shipley, to her employment with Mr. Oatley, to her trip to the cannery; Naoe describes her past obligatory escape from Japan because of her family's wealth; and Mala Ramchandin's retrospective narrative offers a devastating tale of psychic escape in which she has developed another persona who she must protect from her father as she was unable to protect herself. Within retrospective narration, characters, especially Hagar Shipley, also adopt metaphorical language to negotiate a new relationship with a treacherous and abject body. Such linguistic engagement allows them yet another opportunity to escape or evade the changes they are bound to by cultural notions, which are themselves often metaphorical, if not physical, changes.

On film, as with Nettie Harris's disturbing visual presence, metaphor can no longer operate as a veil for viewers. Film crews can cloak and filter images of elderly female actors, and they can certainly suggest associations which are metaphoric and symbolic, but they often do not offer the evasion that a strictly verbal metaphor can. Typically, viewers must gaze at both tenor and vehicle to establish a figurative relationship between the two. It is probably impossible to make the visual even secondary in what is typically considered a visual medium, despite its large investments in sound and story.

Still, the visual can highlight other registers, so that it might be possible to control how the visual is privileged and how the visual privileges. Further, the visual dimension of film enacts, to a degree, the simultaneity attempt by Mayr's column structure.

Originally called The Bus, Cynthia Scott's The Company of Strangers is a semi-documentary in which, as actor Mary Meigs puts it in her book-length narrative about the filming,

> 'our eclectic group of seniors' is being taken in a rented school bus...'to a Golden Age exchange program at some remote resort'...The bus 'runs gently off the road into a ditch,' says Gloria, as we make a detour to find Constance Garneau's childhood house. (9-10)

Cynthia Scott and Gloria Demers chose the group of actors/subjects because of their different backgrounds, but, with the exception of Michelle Sweeney, 27, who drives the bus, the women are all over 65: "Alice Diabo, 74; Constance Garneau, 88; Winifred Holden, 76; Cissy Meddings, 76; Mary Meigs, 71; Catherine Roche, 65; Beth Webber, 80" (10). They play themselves, and there is no attempt to hide their particular ages and backgrounds. As a group, they succeed to a larger degree than the characters I have discussed thus far in escaping and reshaping devastating understandings of old age. Even though Scott and Demers present them through a visual lens the actresses' mutual discoveries draw viewers into reevaluations of what old people can do (even more than be).

Meigs talks about the significance of the borders between fiction and nonfiction and between young and old:

> We are ourselves, up to a point; beyond this point is the 'semi,' a region with boundaries that become more or less imprecise, according to our view of them. In one sense, it is semi from beginning to end, for we wouldn't be out there in the wilds, wouldn't have boarded the bus together. Semi has worked to put together seven old women and a younger woman who would never have known of each other's existence, with the ironic outcome that both in real life and on film we become friends who now need to keep in touch with one another. A real documentary might not have had this effect; it might have isolated each of us in her own life and surroundings." (59)

The strength of community is obvious in Meigs's account of the process, but she also discusses how the women individually and collectively grapple with the possibilities afforded them by a partially fictional medium. They also wrestle with the disjunction between those possibilities and what they perceive as reality in their own nonfilmic worlds. A documentary "purports to present factual information about the world outside the film" (Bordwell and Thompson 42), as does The Company of Strangers. But the NFB's most popular film creates a fictive scenario through which to access the seemingly accurate information about old age and the individual women's experiences.

Meigs provides a definition of semi-documentary: "A semi-documentary is a happening within an artistic structure, which is set up with a delicate instinct for possibilities, for recognizing the moments at which possibilities happen" (148). The Company of Strangers partially thwarts the usual properties of a fiction film because the people presented are not mostly

imaginary or entirely constructed, but the location and events are. The film becomes uniquely dependent for the possibilities it can explore on the participants' link to a lived reality. Meigs tries to explain the thin line between fiction and nonfiction:

> We are all 'in real life,' since we are ourselves in a semi-documentary, or 'alternative drama.' Our semi or alternative category shapes our story, which has no plot and no conventional drama; it is a happening in which strangers become company. (9)

"The Bus" has the possibilities of narrative, the imaginative detours of fiction, and yet a uniquely permeable boundary between character and actor. Because the actors were cast based on their diverse backgrounds, and because they are called upon to play themselves, even though awkwardly scripted at times, changes both to the screen version of the story and to the personal experiences of actors increase in number and significance.

The process of filming results not only in a different version than the directors had envisioned, which is typical, but also in a different self image than the actors had understood. Meigs explains that "Gloria's scenarios had suggested a 'story,' but this film had been taken by the wayward movements of the cast away from and beyond the 'story' to an unanticipated place where it wanted to live" (29). Thus, the process of filming itself had the effect that I propose female friendship can have in that it provided these women an opportunity to do something; their emerging friendship revolves around collective action both in the fictive world they share, where they work together to survive, and in the non-fictive world they share, where they work

together to create a narrative.

When Constance complains to Meigs that nothing happens in the film, making it a poor example of narrative, Meigs responds "we are what happens. The film is about seven semi-old women and a young woman happening" (78). The women themselves are an experience, thwarting conventional understandings both of film and of old women. Old women are not typically viable subjects for a film, and so Meigs's response may not go far to alleviate Constance's concerns. In the process of filming, the women present various concerns about whether they will come across as themselves, or as the characters they portray, as old or as semi-old, as their mirror images or as the movie stars dressed up like old women they frequently refer to themselves as: "ourselves, who were radiant film stars disguised as old women" (38). They fear that the necessary privileging of the visual required by film will limit how they will be seen and how they will be able to see themselves.

Despite their emerging belief in movie illusion, the old women do not overcome their strong understanding that their bodies are typically considered inappropriate for display. The problem crystallises in Meigs's repeated reference to a bathing scene which director Cynthia Scott wanted to film naked:

> The distinctions we make between real and semi, between what we will and won't do, like or don't like, are perfectly clear to us. We are asked one by one, how do you feel about walking nude into the lake? That's how I understood the question, though Cynthia tells me that it was hedged with delicate precautions, which, in my panic, I didn't even wait to hear. My horror of the

> idea must go back to the irreversible prudery instilled in me seventy years ago. (61)

Meigs claims that her fear of nakedness comes from internalised notions of appropriateness and the display of female bodies, but the rest of her discussion makes clear that a fear of exposing old flesh pervades the women asked to disrobe. The fear was of physical ridicule, of exposing that their bodies were, in fact, old:

> We were semi-old. It was a lovely illusion that got us through long days without falling in our traces like decrepit cart-horses. It was the reason for our refusal to be in a nude scene, for wouldn't this have proved that we weren't semi but old? Young bodies should be celebrated and old bodies derided, according to society's dictum, proclaimed in books, films, advertising, television. We did not mind being filmed behaving like children in the splashing scene, but wanted our bodies to stay hidden in semi-reality, protected by clothes from the camera's (and the cameraman's) eye. (74)

Despite some of the women's continued reservations, the directors film a compromise scene. Because of a camaraderie developing between the actors, a scene in the water turns into a childish, teasing water fight:

> 'Grotesque, ridiculous, they're trying to make a laughingstock of us,' says Constance about our splashing scene; she is looking through the eyes of a hostile audience. But the camera keeps rolling while we (Cissy, Alice and I) become ourselves as little children and, fully clothed, chase each other into the dazzling

> lake, scooping up warm water as we go. Alice goes in up to her waist, heaves gallons of water at Cissy and me; Cissy and I shriek in mock terror. (61)

Strangely, although the fear of nudity overcame the desire to be made new by the camera and produced a preventative embarrassment, the women did not have the same fear of acting youthful, even childlike. The moment captures the developing intimacy amongst a group of old women, to a degree, and helps release the tension in the film's loose narrative about the struggle to survive while stranded in rural Québec. Still, the tranquility originally envisioned dissipates partly because old women's bodies are not credited, in this case, even by themselves and partly because the directors were unable to come up with any other alternative.

Meigs's version of Cynthia Scott's actual vision of the scene is oddly removed from what occurs in the film. Scott tells Meigs she had no intention of fully exposing the women or having them parade naked in front of camera men. The scene would have been filmed by a woman, and the actors would have worn bathing suits: "The seven of us in the calm lake with our backs turned--that was Cynthia's vision" (74). Her sense of loss in connection with the scene is intensified by an understanding that the actors compensated for remaining clothed by splashing about like children. The potential for the kind of disjunction (between imagined youth and actual age) of posing naked is possibly even more present in the scene as filmed than in the envisioned scene. Somehow, it is more appropriate that old women mimic the ridiculous, giddy games of children than that they expose their flesh.

Meigs speaks of the film as "the first time in our lives we are separated

from our mirror-images, the ones we can control, and have become Others" (75). She recounts an experience Constance told her:

> She tells me about the stranger riding beside her on a department store escalator, a well-dressed, attractive woman who looked like her and to whom she turned at the ground floor. She felt that she knew her and wanted to greet her. The woman had vanished; she was Constance's mirror-image. Constance realized with surprise that her mirror-image could please her as long as she was a stranger. (76)

The women have a similar experience reconciling themselves with their filmic images. Meigs speaks of recognising herself on the screen after having participated in the illusion of her semi-oldness:

> During the entire filming we are invisible to ourselves, but each must have had a private image different from the one we see when we are shown the film. How strange she is, I think of the Mary I see; she has a slow, creaky voice and a face like her mother's crackleware teapot. (78)

Meigs wonders about the new realization, whether it lies with the medium or a subjective reevaluation which occurs differently in mirror gazing: "We are seeing our new selves--the real ones? or the ones that others see? It must be this, for the others don't seem strange to us, as each of us is strange to herself" (78). The entire process of creating an illusion has changed Meigs's relation with her physical manifestation so that she no longer feels stuck within the only perspective available from within that physical frame: "Because we are sealed into our bodies, we are surprised by things in ourselves that we have

never noticed and that now seem exaggerated and slightly embarrassing" (74). As a result of movie magic, the same process which allows them to turn chicken legs into frog legs during filming allows them to believe in a new physical freedom:

> We can bask in a whole summer of attention, we are acting out the myth of our ideal selves, off- and on-camera, and we come to believe in our new reincarnations, there in the centre where the perspective lines meet. It doesn't matter that we, flesh and blood old people are being translated into a film-language that expresses old people (us seven, at least) to Cynthia, Sally, Gloria and others. (77)

It does not matter, to Meigs, that an illusion is being created for a semi-fictive exposé of old age. She, and the group of seven women, had an opportunity to forge a new relationship with an ideal self not subject to the usual social dicta. The semi of the semi-documentary opened the door for the old women to realize the potential of fiction in recreating their self images.

The interaction between the women actors is crucial to their capacity to reimagine themselves. As Meigs points out, only by understanding that since she is seeing the others, on film, as she sees them regularly, she must also see herself as others see her. The filming process brought new ways of seeing out of each of the women as well as bringing together a diverse group of people who, as Meigs admits, otherwise would not have met. Meigs's description makes clear that the women became friends both on and offscreen simultaneously: "In the first rushes, Sally says, we seemed (as we were) almost strangers to each other. Our becoming friends off the set changed the

nature of the film and made scenes of discord or violence impossible" (77). The kind of community the women form is so strong that it affects the type of film that is made and precludes a previously planned death scene. Originally, Constance's pouring of pills into the lake resulted in her death, but the women grew to know and understand each other so well, and developed such faith in the magicification of cinema, that they could not actually film that death.

Meigs explains the fictive power of the developing friendship: "The story of the film is the story of the eight pieces of us coming together, an invisible and motionless progress, a gravity pulling toward the still centre that is the place of art" (47). Meigs describes the blending of people into an aesthetic which transforms old bodies for film viewers as part of the developing friendship: "Mixing, not only in terms of sound, but also in the mixture of us: connection or binding, each with every other, and all of us with the elements" (153). The strength of the developing bonds makes even prickly Constance tell Meigs, "'I'm very fond of you... I feel you filled a gap in my life'" (87), and motivates Gloria to ask, in a child's line, "'will you be my friend forever?'" (98). That strength also affects the technical aspects of filming and postproduction. Meigs uses a figure of speech, mixing, which evokes the splicing of the sound track, not the editing of a visual scene, to describe the friendships which emerge as complexly as the film encourages viewers to perceive the women.

The award-winning The Company of Strangers is, of course, a selection of the many hours of shooting into a compact narrative with decidedly documentary moments. The conversations between women take the place of

talking heads interviews and could make the overall narrative thrust seem contrived except that the landscape is so carefully woven into each conversation as well as into the overall story (they are stranded within the landscape after all) that the willing suspension of disbelief includes accepting moments of awkward disclosure. The setting operates metaphorically so that the two houses comment on the old age faced by the women. The building isolated near the water offers a tranquil but lonely refuge. The other decrepit dwelling turns out to be full of hidden treasures which the women, because of their own lengthy experience, understand. The quilt they unearth represents to them hours of careful handiwork. The bizarre and disturbing Victorian bootjack shaped like a woman's body provokes different reactions in the women based on their various relationships to pornography and feminism. The discoveries happen early in their stay and offer an opening to the development of understandings between the women. The metaphors do not veil the aging bodies, but rather comment upon them and enhance how they can be seen and interpreted.

The interrupted journey which offers these women the time they share by the lake in rural Québec can, like the other journeys in the novels I have discussed in this chapter, be thought of metaphorically. No longer as able to travel forward, physically hampered from activities previously crucial to everyday life, the women are offered the time and space to discover each others' knowledge, strengths, and stories. In this extreme case, they rely on each others' expertise to survive, since they do not have food to sustain them. Alice's Mohawk knowledge is the most obviously helpful in various ways, but many of them participate in gathering and killing frogs as well as sending

smoke signals and picking berries. Read literally, the film offers the possibility for a group of women to work together, even in late life, to survive a potentially traumatic, life-threatening time. In addition, The Company of Strangers shows that constructive bonds can develop out of such interdependence. Read metaphorically, the film offers the possibility for viewers to imagine late life as a tranquil, well-composed, companionable space, much ameliorated by community.

Rather than the metaphors Hagar hides behind, which indicate scorn and contempt for her own changing physical form and the cultural meanings it encompasses, Scott's filmic juxtapositions poignantly link old bodies to surroundings without avoiding the bodies themselves. Those bodies, the real live old women chosen to play themselves, establish friendships which sustain their late lives both in fiction and after filming. Getting along with people does not mean making it easier on young people by both depending upon them, and denying knowledge that would translate into continual advice, as proposed by Skinner and Vaughan. Instead, forming interpersonal bonds means finding spaces of interdependence which offer new strengths and experiences. Without evading the visible implications of growing old, the film works through the visual to demonstrate a range of viable tactics for understanding late life, all of which rely on a female community.

I suggest that Cynthia Scott has enhanced the visibility of old women, much in the way Kathleen Woodward and her colleagues aim to, without making that visibility paramount. Viewers do have to interpret the various old frames continually offered them, but they also listen carefully to the different stories the women have to offer. The film interlocks a series of

personal narratives which are crucial to the women's developing friendships. What the film offers beyond the limits of personal narrative is a realm of fictional possibility. There is an appeal to imaginations at the same time as there are numerous truth claims.

I maintain that fictional narratives, more than personal narratives, offer a wealth of possibilities to reconfiguring and reimagining late life. As Nestor and Coslett argue, there are deeper levels of consciousness to be gleaned from literature in its speech and in its silences. It is necessary to write women, and especially old women, into fiction, so that they are written into the popular imagination. The kind of interaction readers can have with old female characters mirrors the kind of interaction I argue can help solve the late life dilemma of where to live when living alone no longer seems viable or desirable. Reading can emulate a friendship, based on complementarity, commonality, or, most likely, both. Readers and novels become interdependent in a process of appealing to an imagination which can make a link to a larger, positive social impact.

Endnote

1. Like The Golden Girls, who chip in for rent, women in North America and Britain often choose to move into apartment buildings, renovate penthouses, and collectively hire outside care to help with tasks like shopping, cleaning, and medical care.

Conclusion: Shifting Meanings

My analyses of narrative fiction about old age juxtaposed with analyses of other approaches to old age aim to alter the interpretive meaning of the term old. I have demonstrated how fictional depictions of elderly characters, especially elderly narrators, draw readers into an imaginative engagement which can transform how readers interact in a larger social world that includes old people. Though not as effective as reading the narrative fiction I examine, reading my discussions of fiction centred on late life changes how those stages of life resound culturally. Old does not have to connote frailty, decline, death, or dependence. By analyzing the narrative structure of selected Canadian female-authored narrative fiction and film, and postulating its interaction with readers' imaginations, I have opened up the possibilities inherent within both narrativity and old age. Because many of the texts are new, or because they concentrate on topics that make critics uncomfortably self aware, I am the first scholar to write about many of these texts at all, the first scholar to link them, and the first scholar to examine them with old age as the primary category of analysis.

The American translation of Simone de Beauvoir's La Vieillesse differs in title from the Canadian/British version, even though the rest of the translation is identical. Americans encounter The Coming of Age where Canadians and Britons find Old Age. The euphemistic choice by United States distributors fascinates me in its evasion. Implying both a passage into adulthood and a distance, as though people are immune to age until a certain point, The Coming of Age appeals to an audience who can remain in denial. Because my goal is to change the interpretive meaning of typical signs of old

age, such as wrinkles, institutional care, and continual retrospective narration, I have tried to avoid euphemism in my study. It is my hope that people will cease to invest in the binary opposition between youth and old age.

I deliberately choose the term postmenopausal only when the precise information it indicates about a character or individual is crucial to my argument. I fear that adopting medical terminology will reinforce dangerous understandings of old women as ailing bodies, and that emphasising women's passing out of a possibly reproductive phase will yet again stress female capacity for motherhood. The two main descriptive terms I choose are old age and late life. Old age is a blanket term meant to encompass many stages of life. I have chosen not to follow disability studies models and place the adjective after the person to emphasize individuality over physical state. My reasons are partly to avoid unwieldy expressions such as "person of advancing age" and "person in late life," but more importantly I want to stress that old age is not primarily a physical state[1]. The adjective old does not have to connote frailty or decline, and so it does not have to follow the individual as though it is a physical disability. Late life is meant as a relative term. I recognize that late might imply an impending mortality, but it also accurately captures that people ages seventy and over, the objects of my study, progress along an age continuum. If that implication is problematic, the problem only serves to support my work as a whole: progress along an age continuum can be as positive as it is thought to be negative.

My interdisciplinary analysis demonstrates how different modes of talking about age can shift the meaning of old, negatively or positively. My analysis of CBC ice storm coverage exposes how old age stands in for cultural

vulnerability at times when a scapegoat is needed. Many academic studies of old age concentrate on that vulnerability to examine what is too frequently called, even by Gloria Steinem "the plight of older women" (qtd. in Friedan 38). Indeed, when I contacted CBC to obtain transcripts of their extensive coverage, Eta Kendall spoke with me about "the plight of the elderly" and the resulting "precious moments" (October 1998). I have, through literary narrative, reconstrued what is precious about encounters with old people, in the hopes that academic studies might address more facets of late life than problems.

In her 1997, To Live in the Center of the Moment: Literary Autobiographies of Aging, Barbara Frey Waxman explains:

> It is an axiom among literary critics and theorists that a reader's response to a text reveals as much about that reader--family background, education, values, life experiences, membership in various communities, personal needs, and the times in which she or he is living--as it does about the text. (4)

The diminished attention literary critics pay to age as a category of analysis reveals much about the field. A denial of aging pervades academic disciplines to the extent that even fields that have to work hard to avoid analyzing old age, such as literary studies, manage to evade or denigrate it, as evidenced by the majority of The Stone Angel criticism. Critics who are themselves growing old and who follow critical movements linked to personal experience, such as feminism, begin to recognize age as valid subject matter when it becomes relevant to their life experiences and personal needs. I have taken an interest earlier in my life precisely because of the influence the

novels I study have had on me, rather than because of my personal experiences with middle or old age.

I think that my interest, as a relatively younger reader, in old age proves my overall point. Waxman expresses a belief that "language can reshape aging readers' identities and recast the ways in which we experience aging" (14). Keeping in mind that aging, non-euphemistically, is everybody's experience, I claim that reading The Stone Angel and other fictional narratives of old age has recast my thinking about old age to the extent that I have made it my primary category of analysis. I have argued that although novels of aging do not necessarily transform their readers, a committed reading of certain literary appeals can permanently alter connections with a larger social world.

In my examination of narrative structure's appeal to readers, I have presented the joint possibilities of fiction and old age. Fiction can encourage a reimagination of social problems, such as ubiquitous negative conceptions of late life. Old age can offer many previously absent boons, like emotional freedom, intense intergenerational relationships, and the more obvious impressive cumulative knowledge. It is my hope that the adjective, old, can evoke cultural specificity, wonder, awe, and excitement.

To achieve my goal of shifting the interpretive meaning of the adjective old, and other typical signs of aging, I have compared a series of Canadian fictional narratives with a series of other textual modes that depict late life. I justify my methodology, interdisciplinary, culturally-inflected close readings, by providing the first extended critical study of Simone de Beauvoir's ground breaking La Vieillesse, which also combines disciplines in

its scope. The cumulative analysis I offer charts a development in the descriptive register for old age within Canadian fiction since the 1960s. I offer concrete new ways of thinking about old age, through new Canadian narratives, and I point towards further possibilities to be gleaned from a continued engagement with narrative fiction.

Simone de Beauvoir's fiction of middle age, Les Mandarins, La Femme Rompue, and Les Belles Images theorizes the complex negotiations between biological exteriority, mental interiority, and cultural exteriority aging women undergo. Working within fiction to create interpretive gaps, de Beauvoir engages readers in the potentially devastating realisations middle age can invoke. Old age haunts but does not inhabit her narrative fiction. However subversively she may be working within narrative conventions, de Beauvoir remains caught in negative descriptions of aging that support general assumptions of decrepitude and uselessness, though she does at least make such descriptions viable subject matter for literature and literary study.

The Stone Angel offers a chronological, retrospective narration by a nonagenarian woman who deftly manipulates linguistic expression to control how readers see and encounter both her old age and her biography. I have filled in a critical gap by explaining how committed readers join Hagar Shipley through a painful journey of self discovery when she is an old woman. They experience how old people might choose stubbornness and defiance for reasons other than simply inflicting pain on caregivers. Readers leave Hagar Shipley on what is presumably her deathbed knowing that old people do not fit the many stereotypes assigned them, and realizing that the few stereotypes that happen to fit do so coincidentally and for entirely

different reasons than previously imagined. Many youthful character traits explain why Hagar matches typical readings of an elderly woman in her stubbornness and inability to understand those around her. The term old no longer implies those facets of her individual character. Still, she, like de Beauvoir, reinforces interpretations of aging as decrepitude since her metaphoric register chooses mostly negative and grotesque comparisons to evoke her anger and fear in connection with her body.

Duet for Three and Chorus of Mushrooms draw readers into complex familial negotiations, forcing a recognition of the role that old people can play in a family situation. They expand and articulate academic criticism's hints of grandmotherly possibility, so that old women might offer a complete, new emotional register to a distant generation. Joan Barfoot theorizes through Aggie the potential for grandmothers to project previously disappointed hopes for fulfilment onto granddaughters and to be emotionally generous in ways previously impossible. Hiromi Goto theorizes through Naoe the importance of language to a cultural connection between grandmother and granddaughter, so that linguistic power becomes new cultural power in the connection Murasaki and Naoe forge. Old implies a new familial role that contributes to what is often thought of as a difficult living situation. Old relatives can exceed dependence by participating in the development of grandchildren. These authors mark a chronological development in depictions of old women in that they begin to break free from the poetics of decline offered by Margaret Laurence through Hagar Shipley.

A Sleep Full of Dreams and Cereus Blooms at Night compel readers to think about old age from caregivers' perspectives, encouraging a practical,

nuanced reevaluation. Readers have the opportunity to imagine not just nursing home residents, but also younger people's attitudes towards their older charges. Old no longer functions as a blanket term when readers follow Arla through the different rooms at Pine Mountain Lodge and try to grapple with Tyler's careful patience in gradually teasing a story from Mala Ramchandin. The two caregivers provide models for readers' interpretive task.

Charlotte and Claudia Keeping in Touch offers readers two old women who are friends before lovers and who seek late life outside of family and institutional frameworks. Readers newly understand the power and flexibility of female friendship at the same time as they encounter a unique, viable living situation where old women can share resources. By living beyond their previous roles as wife and lover, the characters undo a gender duality at the same time as their friendship undoes an age duality. The Company of Strangers draws viewers into a circle of old women, enabling them to imagine from within emerging friendships between the old women and better understand the countless misconceptions and surprises late life brings even those experiencing it. The visual reasserts itself, because of the filmic medium, but, since these women are living beyond conventions of family, institutional care, and the poetics of age as decrepitude, the visual has a different valence. Old, and its likely accompanying physical changes, imply a time of life when new and innovative living situations are possible. Old age can be a problem because it is bipolar; my analysis of friendships between old women counters the coupling of frail old age with sleek youth.

Waxman chooses, in To Live in the Center of the Moment, to write

about "self-consciously literary autobiographies" because

> They are...potentially more transformative of sociopolitical attitudes about aging because of their sophisticated narrative methods, depth of characterizations, and rich descriptive powers. In other words they are more capable of creating 'literary experiences' for readers, more skilled at transporting readers into the foreign country of age. (17)

I examine precisely the "sophisticated narrative methods," especially narrative voice; the "depth of characterizations," in particular of the narrative agent; and the "rich descriptive powers" enacted by narrators of overtly fictional narratives about old age. I argue that those narrative elements draw readers into an imaginative engagement with old age, which is for me a foreign country, so that they can transform their "sociopolitical attitudes." I do not mean to suggest that reading narratives of aging provides readers with the experience of aging. I suggest that narratives of old age can offer readers ways of thinking about the experience of late life that could change how they interact with the elderly and with themselves as they age.

In keeping with the problem-solving bent of gerontological study, I have addressed the problem of ageism, rather than the problem of aging. Ageism, coined by psychological gerontologist Robert N. Butler, causes the incorrect readings of dependence and inadequacy so often assigned to old women, and so ageism makes late life choices difficult. Because of negative attitudes towards old age, old women perceive decisions to live with families or in institutions as connoting their frailty and imminent death. I have worked within those choices, family and institutional care, to show that

fiction can theorize new, different possible meanings. And I have moved beyond those choices to that of female friendship which offers freedom from dangerous dualities and freedom to escape from the poetics of decline.

Endnote

1. I borrow partly from Martin Norden's justification in his The Cinema of Isolation: A History of Physical Disability in the Movies:

> I am ... aware that the phrase "a person with a physical disability" is not the same as "a physically disabled person"; the latter identifies the person primarily in terms of the disability while the former treats the disability as one of the person's attributes. I confess to using the "physically disabled person" type of wording from time to time, but only out of a desire to avoid unwieldy sentences and with no invidious intent. (xi-xii)

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