

Ageing and Gender in Contemporary Literary Creation in English

Núria Casado-Gual (Project Leader), Marta Miquel-Baldellou, Núria Mina-Riera, Ieva Stončikaitė, Maricel Oró-Piqueras, Emma Domínguez-Rué, Carmen Zamorano-Llena, Carme Farré-Vidal, Billy Gray, Brian Worsfold.

SiforAGE International Conference. Envisioning a New World: Social Innovation for Active and Healthy Ageing. Barcelona, 19-21 October 2016



Penelope Lively

Irma Kurtz

Donna Leon

Jennifer Johnston

Sue Grafton

A.S. Byatt

Erica Jong

Lorna Crozier

Daphne du Maurier

Joanna McClelland Glass

ABSTRACT

Between 2013 and 2015, the research project "Ageing and Gender in Contemporary Literary Creation in English" funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness, studied the work of ten contemporary women authors, namely:

A.S. Byatt, Daphne Du Maurier, Donna Leon, Erica Jong, Irma Kurtz, Jennifer Johnston, Joanna McClelland Glass, Lorna Crozier, Penelope Lively, and Sue Grafton.

The literary works of these authors, as well as (auto)biographical sources, were studied in order to address whether changes in the writing process of a woman author in her late age can shed light on our understanding of ageing and deconstruct, at the same time, negative stereotypes related to the older woman. The ten case studies analysed bear witness to the complexity of the experience of growing older through the diversity of personal and literary responses to ageing they reflect. Despite this diversity, they all demonstrate that ageing should not necessarily be perceived through the narrative of decline that underlies social understandings of old age; that growing older can, in fact, foster an artist's creativity; and that processes of (literary) creation may help the (older) artist transcend cultural norms attached to biological age.

METHODS

Main research questions:

The literary corpus for each woman writer was analysed according to the following questions:

- What changes in the writing process of a woman author in her late age?
- Are thematic or formal changes observed which may contribute to a new phase of experimentation in late age?
- Up to what point can these changes differ from those presented in the work of men writers of similar age and situation?
- In what way can literary creation modify individual and socio-cultural perceptions of the women writers' identity as a woman in late age?

Critical frameworks used:

The study of the literary creativity of these women writers in their late years was conducted through the critical theories of:

- gender studies, with a special emphasis on the effect that late ageing has on the gender identity of these authors both as women and as writers.
- literary gerontology, focusing on the examination of the role that late ageing plays in the literary creativity of these women writers, through the analysis of –
 - primary sources : the literary works that these writers produced in later phases of creativity.
 - secondary sources: critical works on cultural gerontology from a gender perspective, with particular attention to autobiographies, biographies, and personal interviews with the authors.

Literary genres covered:

The literary works analysed cover a wide variety of literary genres, including novels, short stories, plays, poems, autobiographical writings, and children's literature.

FINDINGS

Having studied the literary works of these ten women writers at a later stage of creativity, we have reached the following conclusions:

1.- A gendered perspective is manifested in their later literary creativity in different ways:

a.- Female characters acquire a more central role in the later works of Sue Grafton, Joanna McClelland Glass, Erica Jong, and Penelope Lively.

b.- Explicit references are made to gender-related issues, such as violence against women, motherhood, or female sexuality, in the later literary works of Daphne du Maurier, Erica Jong, Joanna McClelland Glass and Donna Leon, and in the later autobiographical writings of Irma Kurtz.

c.- Although a few of the writers consider themselves overtly feminists, a feminist perspective of ageing and creativity can be identified in all of them, since:

i.- they deconstruct views of older women as declining after menopause.

ii.- they reject the belief that the fate of older women is that of social invisibility.

iii.- they show that creative careers for older women of their generation involve processes of creation that are entirely different from those of their male contemporaries (especially, in the case of Daphne du Maurier, Erica Jong, Joanna McClelland Glass, and Sue Grafton).

iv.- they condemn the persistence of inequalities between the sexes in the younger generations (Lorna Crozier in particular).

2.- The interaction between the writers' process of ageing and their creativity is defined under these perspectives:

a.- A therapeutic value comes hand in hand with writing at a later stage of creativity (as Erica Jong claims).

b.- The creative drive is approached as a source of self-knowledge and as a result of ongoing curiosity (as Joanna McClelland Glass contends)

c.- Later literary creativity is perceived as a liberating power in order to counteract biological, social, and cultural age-related restrictions (as reflected in the literary works of Daphne du Maurier and Penelope Lively)

d.- In some cases, creativity in later years is so remarkable that it can even become a source of disruption (as argued by A.S. Byatt).

e.- Literary creativity in later years enables women writers to attain a personal fusion between their world, their creativity, and themselves, so that they are allowed to continue shaping their identity (as revealed by Daphne du Maurier).

SELECTION OF QUOTATIONS

"Do you think there is an age when we become completely *adult*, Mrs Wellwood, with no child left in us?" (Byatt, *The Children's Book* 183)

"How awful it would be if[...] after middle age, we regressed and the person of sixty suddenly jumped to twenty." (Du Maurier, *Letters from Meville*: 177)

"Objects survive us and go on living. It's stupid to believe we own them. And it's sinful for them to be so important." (Leon, *Quietly in Their Sleep*)

"If sex and creativity are often seen by dictators as subversive activities, it's because they lead to the knowledge that you own your own body." (Jong, *The First Ms. Reader*)

"All an old woman has left and is dying to share is her opinion" (Kurtz, *Then Again* 41)

"Let's raise a glass to Carlotta Sturges, because, even when her wheels leave the tracks, and she's off on a rail, she is [...] *vital*." (McClelland Glass, *Amsterdam to Budapest*: 72)

"The years, [my partner] says, have made me / elemental. I taste more and more like salt." (Crozier, "Taking the Measure," *Small Mechanics* 81)

"One of the few advantages of writing fiction in old age is that you have been there, done it all, experienced every decade." (Lively, *Amusements & Leaping Fish* 24)

"People always seem to think that old people will set the house on fire. It seems to me a bit absurd." (Johnston, *Two Moons* 107)

"Old people die every day and nobody thinks a thing about it". (Grafton, *T for Trespass* 422)

RESULTS

Main conclusions published in the volume of critical essays:

Casado-Gual, Núria, Emma Domínguez, and Brian Worsfold, eds. *Literary Creativity and The Older Woman Writer: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Bern, Peter Lang, 2016

Individual case studies presented at 21 international conferences and published in the form of articles in 14 international journals, as well as a DVD.

See the titles at: <http://www.ageing-gender-creativity.udl.cat/results.php>

Seminar sessions and presentation of project results:

- Seminar of Experts celebrated on the 14th and 15th of December 2015 at the University of Lleida

-Nurse Education undergraduates at the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Lleida, 29th April 2016

-The 3rd International Staff Week, Baltic International Academy, Riga, Latvia, 9-13th May 2016

-The Seminar on Narrative Gerontology at the Trent University, Peterborough, Canada, 30th September 2016

(See the 'Results' section for more information)

FUTURE ACTIONS:

Project funded by the University of Lleida on ageing, creativity, and life narratives (2016), and new project funded by the Ministry (2016-2018)

