Research Project on Ageing, Gender and Creativity: Main Conclusions

Núria Casado Gual
Women Writers

Authors

A.S. Byatt
Lorna Crozier

Daphne du Maurier
Sue Grafton
Jennifer Johnston
Erica Jong

Irma Kurtz
Donna Leon
Penelope Lively
Joanna McClelland Glass
Main Research Questions

• What changes in the writing process of a woman author in her late age?
• Are thematic or formal changes observed which may also 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?
Interconnected Theories

CRITICAL GERONTOLOGY
J. Baars, M. M. Gullette, S. Biggs, C. Gilleard, P. Higgs, M. Featherstone, M. Hepworth, T. Cole, R. Kastenbaum...

AGEING & GENDER: B. Friedan, G. Greer, Z. Brennan, M. Pearsall, K. Woodward, H. Zeilig...

AGEING & CREATIVITY: A. Cohen-Shalev, N. Delbanco, Martin S. Lindauer, E. Said, A. Wyatt-Brown...
Other Secondary Sources

(TRANS)NATIONAL LITERATURES

English, Irish, Canadian and American

GENRES & SUBGENRES

Novel, Detective Fiction, Short Story, Drama, Children’s Books, Memoirs
Dissemination of Results

• 19 CONFERENCE PAPERS
• 16 JOURNAL ARTICLES & BOOK CHAPTERS
• DVD COPIES of 2 INTERVIEWS with Joanna McClelland Glass (Univ of Calgary and UdL archives)
• Project’s webpage: [http://www.ageing-gender-creativity.udl.cat/](http://www.ageing-gender-creativity.udl.cat/)
General Conclusions

A.S. Byatt – Brian Worsfold
Lorna Crozier – Núria Mina
Daphne du Maurier – Marta Miquel
Sue Grafton – Carme Farré
Jennifer Johnston – Carmen Zamorano
Erica Jong – Ieva Stončikaitė
Irma Kurtz – Billy Gray
Donna Leon – Emma Domínguez
Penelope Lively – Maricel Oró
Joanna McClelland Glass – Núria Casado
Núria Mina on Lorna Crozier (b. 1948)
Crozier’s Autobiographical Writing

• Lorna Crozier’s creation process has always been related to portraying and giving voice to her everyday realities and concerns.
• Her move from her native Saskatchewan prairie to Victoria in British Columbia implied the incorporation in her poems of new metaphorical elements from her new environment.
Lorna Crozier’s Middle and Later Works

• Return to themes present in her first literary works.

• Continuous and recurrent use of the symbol of snow, which either becomes a source of creativity and a force for change and renewal, or is associated with grief and a possible anxiety over loss in old age.
Lorna Crozier’s Late Style

• Snow as grief = beginning of late style

• What is more, the passing of years has added further concerns regarding the treatment of the ageing process by society
Ageing and Self-Perception

“Since many of the poems come from my life [...] it’s no wonder that they are often about growing older. My new book came out just before my 67th birthday”. (Núria Mina’s interview with the author, 7 June 2015).
Changes in the Poetic Voice

• “In the early books, the lyrical "I," which is always a fiction though it is also me, was younger, angrier, outrageous in an in-your-face way. Now that speaker, that persona, is perhaps less sure, more wise (I hope), more sad, more aware of loss and its costs. The outrage remains but perhaps it strikes a different note.” (Núria Mina’s interview with author)
Ageing and Self-Definition

“The years, [my partner] says, have made me elemental. I taste more and more like salt.”

(From “Taking the Measure,” in Lorna Crozier’s Small Mechanics, 2011)
Marta Miquel on Daphne du Maurier
(1907-1989)
Three Stages in Her Later Creativity

• 1) Awakening of “the boy in the box” (mid forties) / The Birds and Other Stories
• 2) Becoming a “disembodied spirit” (mid fifties) / The Breaking Point: Short Stories
• 3) Giving voice to a “multiplicity of selves” (mid sixties) / Don’t Look Now and Other Stories
‘The unexpected politics of age’

• Her late short fiction reflects the evolution of her writing-persona as symptomatic of the liberating progression of her sexuality

• Letters written by the author at the age of 60 reveal her ambivalent attitudes towards ageing.
Reversing the Standards of Ageing

“I also was thinking the other day, how awful it would be if, instead of getting older, after middle age, we regressed, and the person of sixty suddenly jumped to twenty (though still feeling sixty), and then at seventy (Tod, say) looked like ten, all short and with socks and things, and had to buy child’s clothes to dress in (can’t you imagine Tod’s rage?!?) and then at eighty, although perhaps quite lucid still, had all the indignity of having to be carried, and napkins. But the point would be, the looking forward would be so fearful. I mean, now, I can look forward say to a reasonable old age, and death around eighty; but what if I had to plan for my schooling one more at ten, and for someone to look after me at seven – would Tessa or Flave? The idea has frightful possibilities.”

(Letters from Menabilly: Portrait of a Friendship, 177)
On the Need to Carry On

- “I’ve been doing this all the past week. Glancing at Country Life, picking flowers, taking the dogs down to Prid and thinking, ‘Really, what an aimless existence!’ But I know it is only temporary, and I refuse to be Doomed! So easy to say, I’m sixty, I’ve had my life, I’m just an old has-been who is stuck down in Cornwall, and wait for my grandchildren to visit me. That is no way to look at life! Yes, the only thing to do is to carry on, and the storm will blow over. [...] Life goes on. Life is everywhere. One must never be defeated!” (209-210)
Carme Farré on Sue Grafton (b. 1940)
Ageless Correspondence between Author and Character

• “Kinsey is my alter ego – the person I might have been had I not married young and had children. [...] While our biographies are different, our sensibilities are the same. As I have said on previous occasions, I think of us as one soul in two bodies and she got the good one.” (Kinsey and Me 5)
Absence of Ageing in Grafton’s Work

• Absent through her protagonist
• Advantage of the 80s as fictional time for the novels
• Thinking, ingenuity and persistence (as the protagonist’s virtues)
• Dealing with the presence through the safe distance of the past
Ambivalent Representation of Ageing in Her Work

• Older characters are found everywhere throughout the series.
• The main example is Henry Pitts, aged 81
• Other active and independent senior characters
• Positive picture of aging placed next to sadder versions in scenes in nursing homes.
The Alphabet Series as an Expression of Author’s Mature Work

• Kinsey Millhone’s series started when author was aged 42
• Had refined her style writing screenplays for television films in Hollywood
• Grafton’s plan is to finish the alphabet series with Z when Kinsey will be 40.
Emma Domínguez on Donna Leon (b. 1942)
Pattern of Continuity in her Novels

• The Brunetti series
• Continues to reflect and interrogate:
  – social justice
  – violence against women
  – environmental damage
  – the vulnerability of children and the elderly
  – the invisible machinations of corruption
  – the paradoxes of human behaviour
Sophisticated Style

• Leon’s hand skillfully guides the reader through the narrow streets of Venice, showing its darkest sides.
• The Brunetti series explores the nature of crime beyond the violent act itself.
• Presents an omniscient narrator that allows you to glimpse inside Brunetti’s mind.
• Cocktail of atmosphere and a well-rounded cast of characters, irony and humour, and a moderate dose of philosophy.
Parallel Processes of Ageing

• The passage of time is manifested in the protagonist of the 24 novels of the Brunetti series, as well as in his family.

• In her later works, the main character continues to evolve and deepen.

• Throughout 23 years, Brunetti has become vivid and familiar to the reader.
The Ageing Brunetti

• “People in other countries, he had been told, dreamed of retirement as a chance to move to a warmer climate and start a whole new chapter: learn a language, buy a scuba outfit, take up taxidermy. How utterly alien that desire was to his own culture. The people he knew and those he had been observing all his life wanted nothing more, upon retirement, than to settle more deeply into their homes and the routines they had constructed over decades, making no change to their lives other than to excise them from the necessity of going to work each morning and perhaps to add the possibility of travelling a bit, but not often, and not too far.” (Leon, Drawing Conclusions 2012, p.211)
Carmen Zamorano on Jennifer Johnston (b.1930)
A Sense of Hope and Salvation in Later Life

• “I think as you get older you discover more and more things about life and the possibilities that are there that are not recognized by very large numbers of people. And perhaps it’s – it is to do with hope, I think, and some sort of non-religious salvation which are two things which I seriously believe in. I don’t think we have to believe in God to create salvation for ourselves and I find that quite important.” (Interview, 1999).
Changes in Her Later Work

• Strides over the categories of continuity and late-life revival with respect to earlier work
• Her late-life style is characterised by a “new simplicity”, which can be related to “late style”
  – a “freer and more expressive” style
  – greater interest in the total effect rather than on specific details
  – “[d]iscrepancies from youthful accomplishments” that seems to originate in a greater freedom and boldness, or “bravery”, gained with age.
Changes in Thematic Focus

- Best understood as a radical change – characteristic of the late-life revival – of a specifically “compelling identity theme”
- Johnston’s “compelling identity theme” is her probings into the Irish dysfunctional family. In her later work, she fosters a re-examination of this trope as primarily associated with the Irish nationalist discourse.
A Creative Authority in Old Age

• In her late life, significantly contributes to the current Irish national debate on changes in social mores and population trends.

• This distinct change in subject matter is the result of the braver attitude gained with age.

“...I think I am just becoming braver, that I’m able now to do a lot of the things that I wouldn’t have dared to do with my first seven or eight books. You know, I’m just becoming braver. It’s about time.”
Counteracting the Absurdities of Old Age

• “This isn’t much fun you know, hanging around waiting to be felled by the sergeant. Filled with silly anxieties about falling in the bathroom or setting the house on fire. People always seem to think that old people will set the house on fire. It seems to me a bit absurd. Of course, I am a bit absurd now. I see that in their faces.”

(Two Moons 1998: 107; Mimi’s words).
Ieva Stončikaitė on Erica Jong (b. 1942)
Thematic Continuity

In her later fiction, Jong continues to deal with:

• Motherhood
• sex and sexuality
• Family
• Feminism
• Death and spirituality
Changes in the Treatment of Her Themes

• Less explicit portrayal of female sexuality
• “I wanted sex to prove that I would never die” (Erica Jong, *Fear of Dying*, 2015)
• Older fictional heroines are also revitalized through their sexually-active lives
• The Western cult of youth is emphasized through characters who want to recover their youthful looks
The Most Obvious Changes

• Home as a space that provides older heroines with a sense of continuity with respect to their family’s history

• Transcendental character of her poetry through different poetic traditions and a recurrent search for personal freedom
Life and Literature: a Continuous Interaction

• Old age offers alternative possibilities and inner growth

• “I often wonder how people who don’t write endure their lives ... Sometimes my funniest stories have come out of the blackest despair” (Erica Jong, 2006, Seducing the Demon: Writing for My Life)
Billy Gray on Irma Kurtz (b. 1935)
Thematic Concerns in Kurtz’s Later Texts

• Fascination with the subject of ‘hauntings’ from an earlier, younger self.

• Intimate connection between sexual desire and personal memory.

• Hauntings, in Kurtz’s words: “when home becomes unfamiliar....when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what’s in your blind spot comes into view. Hauntings raise spectres, and they alter the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, present and future’
Temporal Continuity in Old Age

• ‘the temporal disturbance produced by haunting is probably its key feature’.
• There is no possibility of a present that is uninformed by the past
• ‘...a lack of haunting would seem to be a truly precarious and disturbing condition’.
• A sense of temporal continuity is one of the prerequisites of a genuinely human experience.
‘The memory of the aged person, even while it is failing as a faculty, can deepen into what is virtually a new emotion, expressing itself in abstractions and in inventions too, in tales containing history and truth that, at their best, ascend to art’
Maricel Oró on Penelope Lively (b. 1933)
Recurrent Concerns

- with a recurrent preoccupation on the interrelationship between clock time and human time, narrative and memory

- “One of the few advantages of writing fiction in old age is that you have been there, done it all, experienced every decade [...] it is certainly a help to have acquire that long backwards view; not only do you know (even if it's getting a bit hazy) what it felt like to be in your twenties, or thirties, but you remember also the relative unconcern about what was to come” (Ammonites & Leaping Fish. A Life in Time, 2013: 19).
Writing into Her Middle and Later Years

- From her early 40s to her 80s she has published 17 novels, 3 collections of short stories and 3 memoirs
- Example of a contemporary writer whose literary production has improved and developed as she has aged
- Has explored new characters, situations, contexts and narrative techniques
The Value of Fictional Creativity

• Every human being is the result of a multiplicity of factors

• Fictional creativity is a powerful resource to go beyond categories based on either external appearance or restrictive social and cultural rules
An example: *Moon Tiger*

The protagonist’s life review challenges:

- a chronological narrative form
- social and cultural constraints attached to women past their fertile years
- the physical limitations of the protagonist’s own body
Brian Worsfold on A.S. Byatt (b. 1936)
A.S. Byatt on Late-age

- For A.S. Byatt, the best way forward into late-age is to live on, free from all the mental trappings induced from childhood to early-late-age, into a world without gods or a God.
- For A.S. Byatt, there is really no choice. Life must be tackled head-on, with no soft, hypocritical cushions to ward off unpleasantries.
Brian Worsfold on A.S. Byatt

• It seems that, for A.S. Byatt, in order to cope with creativity in late-age, there are three fundamental aspects to be taken into account:
  • 1) All that is ‘twee’
  • 2) Anxieties about parenting
  • 3) Trivial memories
1) Flight from ‘the twee’ #1

She is especially concerned with the quintessentially English perception of life:

“Yet here she was in the magical Garden of England, with a good body, and a face that was, she thought, more interesting, more defined, yes indeed, more beautiful, than when she had been a green girl.”

2) Putting anxieties about parenting to rest #1

When you reach early-late-age, three things hit you ‘like an oncoming express train’: your childhood, your latent sexuality, and parenting. Of these, the most powerful is parenting.
2) Putting anxieties about parenting to rest #2

Issues:
1. how your parents brought you up;
2. how you brought up your children;
3. how you took care of your parents during their late-age.
4. how your child(ren) are taking care of you in your late-age.
3) Trivial memories #1

“A family and a human being inside a family, put together a picture of their past in voluntary and involuntary ways, carefully constructed, arbitrarily dictated. A mother remembers one particular summer gathering on a lawn, with iced lemonade in a jug, and everyone smiling – as she puts in the album the one photograph where everyone is smiling, and keeps the scowling faces of the unsuccessful snapshots hidden in a box.”

The Children’s Book (2009)

3) Trivial memories #2

“Odd things persist for inexplicable reasons. A pair of shoes that never quite fitted. A party dress in which a girl always felt awkward, though the photographs are pretty enough. One violent quarrel of many arising from the unjust division of a cake, or the desperately disappointing decision not to go to the seaside. There are things, also, that are memories as essential and structural as bones in toes and fingers. A red leather belt. A dark pantry full of obscene and lovely jars.”

A.S. Byatt and English Language

- A.S. Byatt turns to the English language, the vehicle of her existence, of her consciousness in Time, and the vehicle of her creativity.
Núria Casado on Joanna McClelland Glass (b. 1936)
Playwriting Career in her Middle and Later Years

• Early middle age as the first “creative impulse”

• 49 years of professional work for the theatre and also as script-writer

• *Amsterdam to Budapest* in phase of rehearsals
Pattern of Continuity

• Themes: growth; the passage of time and memory; search for love; personal ‘difference’.
• Trope of the family as source of conflict and also as refuge.
• Settings: mostly Canadian and American / homes
• Characters: combination of young, middle-aged and older characters
Variations in her Later Plays

• Canadian identity voiced through characters rather than represented in settings
• Settings are expanded and include various cities or countries: beyond the “regional” study of difference
• Families (and homes) are more fragmented in her later plays
• The theme of loss is manifested more evidently
On Loss: between Acceptance and the Impossibility of Accepting

• “fondness for grief” (quoting Shakespeare in Trying)

• “I don’t believe in closure. Closure is so much swill” (Amsterdam to Budapest)
Changes in the Portrayal of Ageing

• Centrality of older characters

• Between narratives of decline and progress

• Repositories of the author’s interest in the combination of fragility / naïveté and courage/strength in characters / people
Experiments in Form

• Continues to display a heightened style in her dramatic dialogues, but places emphasis on accuracy
• A Chekhovian sense of humour/irony substitutes the insufficiency of final reconciliations / closed endings
• The designs of the presentational spaces are either more enclosed/allegorical or more open/epic (vs Naturalistic settings of middle plays)
• Dramaturgical aesthetics: more open, bolder or less “commercial”, more “free”:
  “I see a finite future with less years to cause me panic, I no longer have three children on board, I have some financial ease.
The Writer’s Perception of her Literary Creativity

• ‘Adult plays’: Trying, Mrs Dexter and Her Daily, and Amsteram to Budapest (written in the author’s 70s)

• Command of structure and knowledge of the languages of the theatre
A Gendered Perspective

- Female characters
- Gender-related issues
- Feminist declarations
Feminist Views of Ageing/Creativity

• Deconstructing views of older women as declining after the menopausal years
• Contradicting the idea that the social destiny of the older woman is her inevitable social invisibility
• Demonstrating, through their real or fictionalized life reviews, that creative careers for the women of their generation involved processes of creation that were entirely different from those of male authors
• Denouncing the persistence of inequalities between the sexes in the younger generations
Models of (Ageing) Creativity

• Therapeutic value of writing: “I can get through the pain [of living] by writing stories” (Erica Jong) /

• Source of self-knowledge and agency: “My observations and often turbulent emotions [are] the engines of my writing” (Joanna McClelland Glass)

• A ‘controlled’ force: “[t]his has the danger for the artist of meaning that your art gets to mean too much for you because your intense happiness probably consists of just enjoying the fact that you can actually do it” (A.S.Byatt)
Models of (Ageing) Creativity

• “We are none of us isolated in time, but are part of what we were once, and of what we are yet to become, so that these varied personalities merge and become one in creative thought, wearing, at times, an additional disguise, the face and voice of someone observed at a distance and believed forgotten, or bearing the casual gesture of a friend. ...” (Daphne Du Maurier)
Making Connections

Older Women Writer’s Identity / Views

Older Women with Other Personal / Professional Pathways

Other Sectors of Society

‘Affirmative’ Old Age
AGING AND GENDER in Contemporary Literary Creativity in English
A Research Project of Grup Dedal-Lit

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