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The final publication is available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/19325610903134488>

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### Female Ageing: Between Fiction and Real Life

Journal:	<i>Journal of Aging, Humanities and the Arts</i>
Manuscript ID:	draft
Manuscript Type:	Original Paper
Keywords:	ageing protagonists, contemporary English fiction, female ageing



## Female Ageing: Between Fiction and Real Life

For centuries, a person reaching seventy, eighty or ninety years old was considered unusual, almost a miracle of nature. It did, however, demonstrate that human beings could reach such a stage in their life course and still be healthy and active. Since the 1950s, with the development of welfare states in western countries and the rapid advances in technology and medicine, a new social group defined by age emerged, the 'third age.' According to David Troyansky, it was a time "which saw the generalization of an entirely new stage of the life-course." Troyansky, following Peter Laslett's definition of the 'third age', refers to it as "the young old, who retire early enough and in sufficiently good health to enjoy an unprecedented period of cultivation, creativity and leisure." (1997, 50)<sup>1</sup>

Advances in all spheres of life has made possible an enlargement of Laslett's 'third age,' which accompanied by a decrease in childbirth, has resulted in a progressive ageing of a worldwide population. The fact that by 2050 the elderly population is expected to quadruple, as announced in the Second World Assembly on Ageing which took place in Madrid in 2002, is forcing us to consider the social, economic, political and cultural changes which will be needed so that our society can cope with this demographic revolution. To imagine that in a matter of years there will be as many people in the age or over the age of retirement as young and active adults not only requires a rethinking of social and economic structures that have been successful up

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Laslett's defines the 'third age' in *A Fresh Map of Life: The Emergence of the Third Age*. London: Widenfeld and Nicholson. 1989.

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6 until now, but also a redefinition of attitudes and prejudices towards old age, specially  
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8 in relation to women.  
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11 The Second World Assembly on Ageing and other events that are taking place  
12 will probably find satisfactory solutions to a redefinition of social and economic  
13 structures. However, it is precisely cultural constructs and negative attitudes that have  
14 been interiorised and considered true for years and years which are most difficult to  
15 change. In western societies, ageing has been traditionally associated with decrepitude,  
16 loss and disengagement from society; as Hepworth states:  
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26 In western culture this period has usually been regarded as one of decline; a time of  
27 gradual disengagement from worldly activities when the consolations of religion are  
28 the main resource for making sense of ageing and drawing comfort from the belief that  
29 physical decrepitude normally associated with old age is a tiresome prelude to the  
30 liberation of essential self (soul) from the flesh into eternal life. (2000, 3)  
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38 It seems this accepted ageism becomes more acute when applied to female  
39 ageing. Patriarchal standards which have dominated most of the world until quite  
40 recently have limited the role of women to that of procreators and family carers.  
41 Therefore, when they reach an age in which they cannot be mothers and are considered  
42 to have lost their physical attraction they are consciously or unconsciously relegated to  
43 an invisible social position. However, faced with a social landscape in which the ageing  
44 population is increasing, the reality of ageing women should also be reconsidered. As  
45 Marilyn J. Bell writes in the introduction of *Women as Elders. The Feminist Politics of*  
46 *Ageing*:  
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6 Our culture gives us many images from grandmothers in Norman Rockwell magazine  
7 covers to bag ladies on street corners to adolescent mentalities in aged bodies on TV  
8 sitcoms. Our policy makers, until very recently, assumed we would be provided for by  
9 our husbands. Our religious institutions gave us theology which sees women as  
10 valuable only for procreation, not the activity of the aged. Our medical and mental  
11 health professionals describe a limbo between menopause and death. This is not the  
12 “stuff” of our dreams, it is the “stuff” of our issues. (1986, 1)

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22 The need to redefine the negative stereotypes and cultural constructs of ageing  
23 women becomes a matter of prime importance. Whereas demographic statistics prove  
24 that women live longer than men, they still suffer the consequences of a patriarchal  
25 based society at an economic, social and cultural level. A life dedicated full-time to their  
26 family or to combining home responsibilities with a job results in a lack of economic  
27 means and a poor social life when they reach old age. Therefore, a number of elderly  
28 women have to survive on a small pension and have to build a social life of their own in  
29 order to struggle against boredom and solitude. Moreover, elderly women are seen as  
30 unattractive, useless and dull, among others, attributes which are still powerful although  
31 far removed from the reality towards which humanity is walking. According to Evelyn  
32 Rosenthal: “Varieties of ageism directed toward women today contribute to a picture of  
33 aging women as unproductive, dependent, rigid, weak, defenceless, morally old-  
34 fashioned, timid, ugly, senile and lonely.” (1990, 6)

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Aware of the fact that ageing has as much to do with science as with other disciplines such as sociology, economy or the humanities, present-day gerontologists have instigated their scientific discipline to incorporate the humanities in the study of human ageing. Helen Zeilig refers to a new field of study known as ‘critical

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6 gerontology' and highlights the awareness of researchers in the field for both areas,  
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8 science and the humanities, to work together when dealing with ageing:  
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11 There has been a growing awareness that gerontology may have much to gain from the  
12 humanities in general. It has been increasingly appreciated that, just as Kohl (1988:  
13 368) noted that the sociology of ageing has barely moved from its status as an applied  
14 discipline and that ageing should not be treated as a topic by itself, neither should  
15 gerontologists confine themselves to purely 'scientific' field of research. This premise  
16 is argued by Cole et al. (1992: 8), who state that the relevance of the humanities for  
17 ageing is that 'we are asked to contemplate not only a proposition but the  
18 proposer...we hear the human voice behind what is said.' (1997, 39)  
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30 The question that follows is to what extent and in what ways literature can contribute to  
31 scientific studies. Literature, as both mirror and criticism of ideological frameworks  
32 within a society, would be a weapon to recognise and redefine negative stereotypes of  
33 ageing. In their book *Ageing and Identity. A Humanities Perspective*, Sara Munson  
34 Deats and Lagretta Tallent Lenker consider literature as a form of art and conclude that  
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42 even if we reject the view that art mirrors nature, we may agree that art certainly  
43 inscribes the ideologies of a given culture and that one of the primary goals of  
44 criticism is to make visible these ideologies. It follows, therefore, that studying the  
45 way in which stereotypes of any kind – gender, race, class, or age – are constructed  
46 within a work of art can help us to learn about – and to challenge – the construction of  
47 stereotypes within our own society. (1999, 3)  
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56 In this paper, I aim to contrast the case studies and scientific theories developed around  
57 the process of female ageing as an individual and social phenomenon with the  
58 representations of female ageing found in the novels *The Cupboard* (1981) by Rose  
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6 Tremain, *Staring at the Sun* (1986) by Julian Barnes and *Wise Children* (1991) by  
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8 Angela Carter.  
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11 Two of the factors which gerontologists, sociologists and humanists coincide in  
12 pointing out as hindering ageing women in coming to terms with their last stage in life  
13 are lack of a social life and concern for their changed bodies. These two factors actually  
14 go hand in hand and contribute to a self-enclosure of elder women in their homes as if  
15 they were cocoons that will protect them from a youth-centred society in which they  
16 seem to be of little use. The protagonists of the three novels acknowledge the fact that  
17 they spend most of their time inside their homes and inside their memories.  
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29 In *The Cupboard*, Erica March is an eighty-seven year old writer who lives in a  
30 little house of her own in London and counts on the help of a neighbour. The quiet and  
31 monotonous life Erica has led for years is interrupted by Ralph's visits, an American  
32 journalist who intends to write and publish Erica's biography. Forgotten for many years,  
33 Erica revives both as a public figure and in her inner self when Ralph enters into her  
34 life: "I suppose you're reviving me, dear, are you? Before I pop off? I think it's quite  
35 clever, because I can't go on much longer can I?" (1999, 13) Although Erica is in quite  
36 good health, she declares on various occasions she is afraid of open spaces and prefers  
37 to spend her days at home. The first time Ralph proposes going to the park and taking  
38 some photographs, Erica replies: "Good for me? Heavens no, dear! I don't go out any  
39 more, not to open spaces. An open space would terrify me. I'd be blown up into the sky,  
40 like a kite, I'm sure I would." (1999, 66)  
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58 It is only with Ralph that Erica eventually agrees to visit an open space: "Ralph  
59 had telephoned for a taxi and the taxi had deposited them at the north entrance of  
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6 Regent's Park. Erica had been afraid of the outing, but Ralph had wrapped her in a coat  
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8 and a shawl, guided her safely down the stairs and into the sunshine." (1999, 76) Erica's  
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10 fear of going to an open space could be interpreted as a symptom of her feeling fragile  
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12 in a 'modern' world in which she does not perform any significant role, nor has for  
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14 some years. When her last partner Bernard, died, she was sixty and felt any work or  
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16 activity she could do, mainly writing, would be insignificant:  
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21 When you think of it, it's heartbreaking, and when you're sixty, as I was, you see so  
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23 clearly that for all your self-importance and going on panel games, your piece of work  
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25 is something so pitiful and tiny and the world goes rollicking on and you lose touch  
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27 with the young people, and your hunger for words, which used to be so strong in me,  
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29 leaves you. I suppose it's a bit like hunger for a person: when it leaves you, you never  
30  
31 get it back. (1999, 231)  
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35 In Julian Barnes's *Staring at the Sun*, the hundred year old protagonist Jean  
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37 Serjeant, explains her gradual confinement, not only in her home, but also within her  
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39 memories: "She lived increasingly inside her head, and was content to be there.  
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41 Memories, there were far too memories; they raced across her sky like Irish weather."  
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43 (1987, 140) She sees herself as a woman with an ordinary life; she had married, she had  
44  
45 divorced, she had had a child and brought him up on her own, she had even travelled  
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47 around the world. Now, in old age, she is deprived of any role, both in her little family  
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49 and in the social entanglement. As she herself explains, "She had long since given up  
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51 following public events; her character seemed less important to her than it once had; her  
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53 eyes had lost some of their blue and taken on the milky grey of a morning sky that has  
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55 yet to make up its mind." (1987, 141)  
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6 Jean Serjeant has been healthy and strong all her life. She explains at sixty she  
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8 still felt young and at eighty she felt middle-aged. However, it is the social pressure  
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10 around her that makes her behave like an old woman is supposed to be. She considers  
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12 “[y]ou grew old first not in your own eyes, but in other people’s eyes, then, slowly, you  
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14 agreed with their opinion of you. It wasn’t that you couldn’t walk as far as you used to,  
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16 it was that other people didn’t expect you to; and if they didn’t, then it needed vain  
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18 obstinacy to persist.” (1987, 139) Although Jean has led a solitary life, in her old age,  
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20 she is absolutely confined to her inner world. Her son Gregory tries to convince her to  
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22 go out with people her own age; however, Jean shows her own negative prejudices  
23  
24 towards old age when she says she is not interested in meeting other elder people:  
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30 Occasionally, Gregory would try introducing her to other very old people, and  
31  
32 be disappointed by her lack of enthusiasm. ‘But I’ve never been very interested in old  
33  
34 people,’ she would explain. ‘Why should I start now?’  
35

36 ‘But couldn’t you... I don’t know... talk about old times?’  
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39 ‘Gregory,’ she replied with a certainty that sounded like severity, ‘I’m not  
40  
41 interested in their old times, and as for mine, I’m keeping them to myself. You can’t  
42  
43 be interested in old people when you’re old yourself.’ (1987, 142)  
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46 In the life-real-based studies present in *Women, Ageing and Ageism*, the  
47  
48 difficulty of old women to make friends and have a social life when they reach old age  
49  
50 is reiterated. According to Ruth Harriet Jacobs, “[f]ormerly married old women are  
51  
52 frequently unwilling to go to events or activities alone. (...) Many do not know how to  
53  
54 make new friends.” (1990, 20) Other women simply do not try because of their own  
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56 negative prejudices against old age; as Jacobs explains:  
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6 It is difficult to persuade some women to go to events at senior centers and similar  
7  
8 places when they will find age peers. This is because many women fear aging, deny  
9  
10 their own aging, and project their hate of their aging upon other old women. They see  
11  
12 other women as old but themselves as somehow different. (1990, 22)  
13  
14

15 Rachel Josefowitz Siegel talks of her own personal experience as a woman and a  
16  
17 therapist after midlife. Although, she is at the height of her career when she turns sixty,  
18  
19 she feels the pressuring demands of a society that requires her to be at home when her  
20  
21 husband suffers a stroke. Faced with this choice between career and family, Siegel  
22  
23 becomes more aware of the weight of her own ageing body and mind, and starts to feel  
24  
25 extremely lonely and isolated. In an attempt to overcome this crisis, she decides to start  
26  
27 a support group for women over sixty and a therapy group for some of her elderly  
28  
29 women clients in which they talk and exchange experiences. Siegel summarises the  
30  
31 results in the following way:  
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37 These activities have plunged me into a world of old women and have helped me  
38  
39 overcome my isolation and some of my own age prejudices. (...) Now that I spend  
40  
41 more time with older women, I like myself better in my aging body. I have a natural  
42  
43 forum for airing the concerns and issues that we have in common and that other  
44  
45 friends and colleagues tended to shun. Much of my anger has been channelled into  
46  
47 creative energy, and I feel empowered by our association with each other. (1990, 78)  
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51 Siegel agrees with Jacobs in the importance of making and keeping friends when  
52  
53 entering old age. Moreover, she acknowledges ageing not only as an individual problem  
54  
55 but also a social one. Kathleen Woodward also refers to this point in *Aging and Its*  
56  
57 *Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions* by considering that “a fear of ageing is not a  
58  
59 strictly “personal” problem. Our culture’s representations of aging are predominantly  
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6 negative and thus are inextricably linked to our personal anxieties – for ourselves and  
7  
8 for others.” (1991, 4) Therefore, in front of an extension of old age at a worldwide level,  
9  
10 researchers in different areas share their concern for a reversal of negative female  
11  
12 stereotypes both individually and socially so that old age is no longer seen as a time of  
13  
14 confinement, but as fruitful a period as any other in human life. These three researchers,  
15  
16 Jacobs, Siegel and Woodward, agree on the importance of ageing women relating to  
17  
18 each other, sharing their experiences and feeling they are seen and heard, in other  
19  
20 words, knowing that they are still present and useful in the social entanglement.  
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25  
26 This turn in the negative stereotypes related to old age is also present in the  
27  
28 previously mentioned novels. As noted above, Erica March in *The Cupboard* revives  
29  
30 through Ralph’s visits. It is their special relationship which makes Erica feel livelier and  
31  
32 as having something to offer to younger generations which, according to Ralph is  
33  
34 passion “or desire, or call it what you will, a craving of the spirit that’s lacking not just  
35  
36 in me but whose lack *characterizes this era.*” (1990, 117) Jean Serjeant, in *Staring at*  
37  
38 *the Sun*, does not really care about relating to other people. However, her son, Gregory,  
39  
40 is amazed by a revolution organised by the elderly population. In front of the reticence  
41  
42 of the government to improve the economic and social conditions of a growing elder  
43  
44 population, the old people in the country start a campaign in which they present some  
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46 demands and coerce the government to consider them by threatening to suicide:  
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52 The demands were as follows. 1) Stop all advertising of soft-termination facilities. 2)  
53  
54 Close down all old people’s homes. 3) Eliminate the word geriatric and its cognates  
55  
56 from official use. 4) Old people are to be known in the future as old people. 5) Old  
57  
58 people are to be loved more. 6) There shall be a special series of awards to recognize  
59  
60 wisdom, and the achievements of old people. 7) Creation of an Old People’s Day, to

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5 be celebrated once a year. 8) Positive discrimination in jobs and housing in favour of  
6  
7 old people. 9) Free fundrugs for the over-eighties. (1987, 143)  
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11 This episode in *Staring at the Sun*, which may seem funny, actually brings to the surface  
12  
13 a reality that concerns scientists, humanists and artists alike.  
14

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16  
17 Nora and Dora Chance are the twin protagonists of Angela Carter's *Wise*  
18  
19 *Children*. The novel starts on their seventy-fifth birthday and the beginning of the novel  
20  
21 already informs us they are not the traditional 'nannies' of the 1980s in the nucleus of a  
22  
23 traditional family:  
24

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26  
27 Good morning! Let me introduce myself. My name is Dora Chance. Welcome  
28  
29 to the wrong side of the tracks. (...)  
30

31  
32 Yes! Seventy-five. Happy birthday to me. Born in this house, indeed, this very  
33  
34 attic, just seventy-five years ago, today. I made my bow five minutes ahead of Nora  
35  
36 who is, at this very moment, downstairs, getting breakfast. My dearest sister. Happy  
37  
38 birthday to us. (1987, 1-2)  
39

40  
41 In their youth, they were successful as music hall dancers. When they turn thirty  
42  
43 the war finishes and an important crisis in the show business world follows. From that  
44  
45 moment on, fame and recognition escape their hands: "Before the war, we were young,  
46  
47 and then we were in sunny California (...) Then began those dreary years of touring  
48  
49 shows, smaller and smaller theatres, fewer and fewer punters, the showgirls wearing  
50  
51 less and less, the days of our decline." (1996, 165) Their glory years come to an end  
52  
53 when they reach thirty and, although they are still young and pretty, they are offered  
54  
55 fewer jobs in less important venues. Gradually, they are forgotten and enclosed in their  
56  
57 homes, just like the other protagonists. This episode in the Chance's life story precisely  
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6 shows that the passing of time is more punished in women than in men. Although the  
7  
8 Chance sisters fill their good and bad life experiences with humour and irony, Dora  
9  
10 expresses to her sister Nora the loneliness she feels in old age:  
11

12  
13           ‘I must admit, sometimes, it gets everso lonely, especially when you’re stuck  
14  
15 up in your room tapping away at that bloody word processor lost in the past while I’m  
16  
17 shut up in the basement with old age.’  
18

19  
20           ‘Don’t talk like that about poor Wheelchair.’  
21

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23           ‘I don’t mean Wheelchair and well you know it. I mean our old age, the fourth  
24  
25 guest at the table.’ (1996, 189)  
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29           The turn in their monotonous lives comes when, after many years of staying in  
30  
31 their home with few visits and no social life, they receive an invitation to their father’s  
32  
33 hundredth birthday party. In the party, they will not only come to terms with a  
34  
35 ‘disordered’ past and family history, but also with their own image as elder women and  
36  
37 with a group of acquaintances who have also reached old age. Contrarily to Erica March  
38  
39 and Jean Serjeant who are unwilling to attend public events, when the Chance sisters  
40  
41 receive their invitation, they do not doubt for a minute about accepting it: “Let’s have  
42  
43 all the skeletons out of the closet, today, of all days! God knows, we deserve a spot of  
44  
45 bubbly after all these years.” (1996, 5) Dora and Nora Chance carefully get ready to  
46  
47 attend the party. They put on shiny stockings, short tight skirts, stilettos and even  
48  
49 feathers. They put on their make up as they were taught in the show business world:  
50  
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53  
54           It took an age but we did it; we painted the faces that we always used to have  
55  
56 on to the faces we have now. From a distance of thirty feet with the light behind us,  
57  
58 we looked, at first glance, just like the girl who danced with the Prince of Wales (...)  
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6 'It's every woman's tragedy,' said Nora, as we contemplated our painted  
7 masterpieces, 'that, after a certain age, she looks like a female impersonator.' (1996,  
8 192)  
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13 When the Chance sisters arrive at the party, they see their own images reflected  
14 in the mirror of the party venue. They themselves qualify the image as ridiculous;  
15 however, they are proud of keeping their sense of humour and their physical and  
16 emotional strength "to laugh at the spectacle they have made of themselves." (1996,  
17 198) Moreover, they realise all the guests at the party have aged just as themselves  
18 have: "There were real candles everywhere else, (...) warming us all up, flattering  
19 complexions which were, one and all, aged, except for those of the waiters." (1996,  
20 198) By attending the party dressed in bright clothes and exaggerated make up, Dora  
21 and Nora Chance challenge negative stereotypes of ageing. Their over-made physical  
22 appearance questions not only the fact that make up or stilettos seem to be forbidden to  
23 elderly women, but also the fact that social events are restricted to the young in a  
24 society that is growing older. Although the Chance sisters are seventy-five and live  
25 mostly inside their homes, they still find it exciting to attend parties and relate to other  
26 people.  
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47 In our society, physical appearance is one of the first, if not the first, judging  
48 elements when meeting a person, and it acquires a symbolic relevance in old age.  
49 Kathleen Woodward considers "aging and old age are intimately related to biological  
50 phenomena" (1991, 19); and Mike Hepworth explains "one of the most disturbing  
51 images of later life is that of physical decline. The negative emotions associated with  
52 ageing are prompted by the idea of the deeply ageing body" (2000, 31) Ann E. Gerike,  
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6 in *Women, Aging and Ageism*, analyses the negative attitudes related to the greying of  
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8 hair as a symbol of ageing. According to Gerike:

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11 The coloring of gray hair disguises the physical feature associated with ageing and is  
12 most obvious and most easily changed. Such hair dyeing, in our youth-oriented  
13 culture, represents the attempt of aging people to “pass” as members of a group with  
14 greater power, privilege, and prestige than the group to which they in truth belong.  
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20 (1997, 37)

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23 The greying of hair is more punished in women than in men. Thus, Gerike  
24 maintains that a grey-haired or white-haired woman is seen as motherly and, therefore,  
25 taboo, which results in the woman being invisible or ignored. According to her research,  
26 women dye their hair, not only to look younger and more attractive, but also in order to  
27 keep or get jobs: “Such magical invisibility is not only sexual; it is pervasive.” (1997,  
28 39) The study concludes with the need for both men and women, for society in general,  
29 to re-evaluate their stereotypes in relation to the ageing body and old age: “a woman  
30 who allows her hair to gray naturally is accepting herself for who she is. She is also, in  
31 effect, challenging the ageism of a society that tells her she should be ashamed of her  
32 age and should make every effort to disguise it.” (1997, 45)

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48 Erica March, Jean Serjeant and the Chance sisters make reference to their white  
49 or weak hair as symbolic of the physical changes their ageing bodies are experiencing.  
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51  
52 Erica March, in *The Cupboard*, expresses on various occasions that it is her thick black  
53 hair that she misses most in old age. In the first conversation Erica and Ralph share,  
54  
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56  
57 Erica refers to her black hair with regret:  
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6 That was how he would photograph her, in the bright scarf she wore tied at the  
7 nape of her neck, but put on so badly, it hung over one eye. She caught him looking at  
8 the scarf.  
9

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11  
12 'I'm almost bald, you know,' she said. 'That's why I wear it. My hair used to  
13 be thick – in big plaits – but now it's just like duck down.' (1999, 8)  
14

15  
16  
17 Erica starts seeing herself as unattractive after her fifties when she meets  
18 Bernard, her last partner. Although Bernard loves her for what and how she is, Erica  
19 keeps on wishing he could have seen her some years earlier, before her beauty had  
20 gone:  
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28 Almost suddenly, it (her beauty) went, because when I first met Bernard some shreds  
29 of it were there. But now I was very grey and the glasses made me ugly. So vain to be  
30 depressed by this, but I was. I think, secretly, I'd always been very proud of my black  
31 hair. (1999, 192)  
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38 In *Staring at the Sun*, Jean Serjeant not only finds herself unattractive, but she  
39 does not even bother to take care of her hair or her appearance. As noted previously, she  
40 considers that the people around her judge her as a very old person and, therefore,  
41 ignore her. Her instinctive reaction is that she does not make any effort either to relate  
42 to other people or to improve her appearance:  
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52 Jean no longer cared to examine herself in the mirror. Not from vanity, but lack of  
53 interest. You could be intrigued or alarmed by only so many elastications of the flesh;  
54 another one was scarcely news. She wore her hair in a loose bun; she had not washed  
55 in for several years, and its whiteness had now moved into an accumulated  
56 yellowness. (1987, 141)  
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6 Contrarily to Jean Serjeant, the protagonists of *Wise Children*, Nora and Dora  
7  
8 Chance, spend time taking good care of their appearance. They started to die their hair  
9  
10 when they start in the show business. Although they stopped doing so in old age, they  
11  
12 prefer to look as pretty and as youthful as possible:  
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15  
16 We're stuck in the period at which we peaked, of course. All women do. We'd feel  
17  
18 mutilated if you make us wipe off our Joan Crawford mouths and we always do our  
19  
20 hair up in great big Victory rolls when we go out. We've still got lots of it, thank God,  
21  
22 iron grey though it may be and tucked away in scarves, turban-style, this very  
23  
24 moment, to hide the curlers. We always make an effort. (1996, 6)  
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27  
28 When getting ready to attend the party, the make-over of their external appearances  
29  
30 seems to imply an ironical critique of the social necessity of women to hide their real  
31  
32 age.  
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36 The protagonists of the three novels are aware of their ageing bodies and are not  
37  
38 happy with them, maybe because our social constraints relate beauty with youth, maybe  
39  
40 because "the look of age is considered unwelcome and undesirable" (2000, 32), as  
41  
42 Hepworth supports. However, the reality is that in front of an extension of our life span,  
43  
44 youth is the period that lasts the least, and, consequently, a redefinition of the positive  
45  
46 features of reaching the 'third age' is required. The lives of these different protagonists  
47  
48 prove that gerontologists and sociologists may not be mistaken when describing the life  
49  
50 conditions of an ageing population. Elderly people are mostly confined to their homes  
51  
52 and their memories when it is confirmed that openness to a social life would benefit  
53  
54 them. However, if they attend parties or public events they are either seen as ridiculous,  
55  
56 like the Chance sisters, or merely ignored, like Jean Serjeant. The notions the  
57  
58 protagonists themselves have of their own old age is of little help. Whereas Jean  
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6 Serjeant just does not care for her ageing body, Erica March and the Chance sisters try  
7  
8 to disguise it as much as possible, by recalling a better and more attractive young body.  
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10  
11 In all the novels, there are hints that old age is not necessarily related to  
12 confinement, ignorance or ugliness. Erica March enlightens and amuses Ralph with her  
13 memories of life episodes and smart storytelling. The Chance sisters manage to make  
14 everyone laugh at the party with their fancy dress-like appearance and good sense of  
15 humour. Jean Serjeant considers she has actually acquired intelligence in old age. She  
16 thinks her son sees her as “an alert, tidy, sympathetic old lady who, if she hadn’t  
17 necessarily attained wisdom, had at least discarded all stupidity.” (1987, 185) Moreover,  
18 the elderly people in Jean’s society are improving their situation. Although negative  
19 stereotypes are still alive, old age does have positive features.  
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33 Through the protagonists of their novels, Angela Carter, Julian Barnes and Rose  
34 Tremain show their agreement on the thesis shared by gerontologists and sociologists  
35 that the question of old age is closely related to negative cultural stereotypes. These  
36 prove to be still powerful within both elderly protagonists and the society around.  
37 However, all three authors also point out the importance of relating old age to a full  
38 social life and of detaching it from the perception of an ageing body which is synonym  
39 of decrepitude and unattractiveness. Germaine Greer suggests that women accept old  
40 age as a different stage in life, with its losses and its benefits, an advice that could be  
41 useful to Erica March, Jean Serjeant and the Chance sisters:  
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55 other role models for the aging woman, role models who are not simply glittering  
56 threads, some bones, some silicone gel and hanks of hand-knotted bought hair. If the  
57 world has dubbed you crone, you might as well be one. There is no point in growing  
58 old unless you can be a witch, and accumulate spiritual power in place of the political  
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5 and economic power that has been denied you as a woman. (...) The wild white  
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witches live outdoors and hobnob with the lower orders. (1991, 9)

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