

Long-Term Caring:
Canadian Literary Narratives of Personal Agency and Identity in Late Life

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This thesis was inspired by Muriel Yewer.
It is dedicated to Jonathan Life and Richard Life
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Abstract

This thesis analyses thirteen key literary texts taken from the last century of Canadian English-language publishing to assess how each text reveals, reinforces, and /or resists narratives of natural-aging, decline, progress and positive-aging. When considered together, these texts illustrate overall patterns in the evolution of age-related beliefs and behaviours. Stories have a potential emotional impact that scholarly readings do not, and thus the reading and study of these texts can serve to promote conscious intellectual consideration of the issues surrounding age and aging.

My analysis focuses on how our Canadian literature envisages aging into old age, primarily addressing stories set in late-life-care facilities and comprising what I am naming our ‘nursing-home-narrative genre.’ Although my chapters follow a chronological progression, beginning with Catharine Parr Traill’s 1894 *Pearls and Pebbles* and concluding with Janet Hepburn’s 2013 *Flee, Fly, Flown*, I am not arguing that each age-related belief is replaced by a succeeding one. I would assert instead that over time Canadians have accumulated an assortment of age ideologies, some of which mesh and some of which duplicate or even contradict others. For example, although many people have embraced new positive-aging ideologies, aging-as-decline narratives still circulate strongly.

Using social and literary theory as support, I argue that the selected literary texts of my analysis (Traill, Wilson, Laurence, Shields, Wright, Barfoot, Munro, Tostevin, Gruen, Hepburn, King) reveal a genre that is evolving quickly in both form and content. The nursing-home-narrative genre begins with gothic stories of fear of the nursing home, of aging and of death, expands to include darkly humorous stories featuring increasingly empowered residents successfully living within care homes, and is introducing, during the

twenty-first century, fantastical stories of escape from the home and of return to youthful behaviours and preferable habitats. This most recent narrative joins the earlier ones to create a new master narrative in which aging people can overcome fear with agency and thus ultimately reject the nursing home and old age itself. However, in the most compelling of the new agency and escape narratives, authors lay a thin icing of entertainment over a dark undercurrent of reality.

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Introduction

When Stephen Leacock asked himself in 1942 “how old age feels, how it feels to have passed seventy,” he used the metaphor of a soldier venturing through No Man’s Land to express the future he envisioned for himself – a lonely decline towards inevitable death.

While the imagery is compelling, the message is dire:

Old age is the ‘Front Line’ of life, moving into No Man’s Land. No Man’s Land is covered with mist. Beyond it is Eternity. As we have moved forward, the tumult that now lies behind us has died down. The sounds grow less and less. It is almost silence. There is an increasing feeling of isolation, of being alone. We seem so far apart. Here and there one falls, silently, and lies a little bundle on the ground that the rolling mist is burying. Can we not keep nearer? It’s hard to see one another.

Can you hear me? Call to me. I am alone. This must be near the end.... (173)

Leacock’s grim description of his anticipated journey through old age expresses perhaps the most common of aging tropes of the twentieth century: the decline narrative,¹ which equates aging with loss.

Leacock concludes the sketch (“Three Score and Ten – The Business of Growing Old”) with the gloomy comment “Give me my stick. I’m going out to No Man’s Land” (179). The request for his stick may suggest that he intends to tackle aging with some pluck, yet clearly he has negative expectations of old age. While it is true that all of us are

¹ Jean Francois Lyotard explores ‘grand’ narratives in *The Postmodern Condition*, repositioning the term ‘narrative’ to mean a circulating story carrying connotations of ideology or bias. He argues that overarching belief systems embraced by culture infiltrate all aspects of life to the point where they become naturalized, inevitable and possibly invisible to those who live in their shadow. Lyotard argues that even writers and story-tellers are affected; thus, culturally prevalent beliefs and habitual behaviours are intentionally and/or unintentionally included in all artistic productions. As a result, thoughtful art criticism has the responsibility and the capacity to reveal which narratives have been internalized and to what effect.

mortal and that many will encounter aspects of decline prior to death, each person's late-life experience is individual and not all are so bad that they resemble stumbling through the frontline of a war into oblivion. This decline narrative, however, has been pervasive in our Western culture.² As theorist Sally Chivers puts it, old age has been construed as a time of "disease, decline, and death" (*From x*).

Until they reach its border, people prefer not to think about their own decline or trip to "No Man's Land," picturing old age as something that has happened to other people, not as something that will inevitably happen to us all as we progress along our life courses. Yet more recently, the topic of age has become a focus of public and media attention – primarily due to the supposed financial threat associated with the aging of the Baby Boomers born following WWII. The public has long viewed aging negatively, but now the old, a large and growing demographic cohort, are increasingly depicted by the media as a problem confronting government and its purse.

For the last several decades in Western society, the politically volatile categorizations of race, class and gender have drawn public interest and critical academic enquiry. Arguably, age is an equally volatile social differentiation, yet it has been largely ignored in the humanities in general and in the study of literature in particular. Consider that while we will probably not ever experience living in a different gender, class, or colour of skin, each one of us, barring premature death, will experience our own version of Leacock's trip through "No Man's Land" (179). Age as a category of difference should be

² I use the term 'Western culture' as a catch-all term to refer to the norms, values, ideologies, customs, systems, artifacts, and technologies that evolved and are evolving in response to England and its language, origins, and empire; to the larger European community; and to the consequent world-wide influence and counter-influence.

of compelling interest to us all from both a personal and an academic perspective, and yet most scholars have thus far dismissed it as a topic of little concern.

In the 2011 text *Agewise*, cultural theorist Margaret Morganroth Gullette argues that “ageism is to the twenty-first century what sexism, racism, homophobia, and ableism were earlier in the twentieth – entrenched and implicit systems of discrimination, without adequate movements of resistance to oppose them” (“Introduction” 15). Though academia’s current era has supposedly rejected the idea of privileged knowledge sets in favour of multiple forms of knowledge, I would argue that the critical study of age remains peripheral. As Anne Davis Basting recently wrote in the *Journal of Aging, Humanities, and the Arts*, “the field of age studies – the critical and cultural study of representations of aging” is “woefully underexamined” and “[t]raditional humanities disciplines seem all too eager to leave issues of aging to the gerontologists. But gerontology as a field has never fully carved out space to welcome, support, and encourage the voices of humanities scholars” (4). Amelia DeFalco summarizes these arguments as follows: “age remains an under theorized site of difference in cultural studies” (xv).

This academic neglect should be remedied. My hope in writing this thesis is to increase the visibility of age as a category of difference, to facilitate an increased awareness of age-based distinctions, and to encourage readers to reflect on their own age-related attitudes and behaviours. My research pinpoints and analyses dominant narratives regarding late-life identity as revealed in Canadian literary texts; discusses age ideologies identified by relevant social theorists; explores the interconnections amongst these narratives and ideologies; demonstrates how they are illustrated and resisted and/or perpetuated by

specific literary texts; and argues for the importance of an increased public understanding of their significance.

Literary narratives dealing with late life and institutionalized long-term care are central to my analysis. While in the past nursing-care institutions epitomised decline, I will argue that now they are often presented as sites where late-life individuals exert agency over their surroundings, further enrich and expand their personal identities, and avoid application of the decline narrative to their own lives. I will also show that early twenty-first-century texts have begun to add a surprising new narrative where residents have acquired so much agency that they are able to walk away from the nursing home and even from old age itself.

My second goal in writing this thesis is to encourage readers to acknowledge nursing-home narratives as a recognizable genre, under the general umbrella of age narratives, and to analyse the characteristics of this rapidly expanding literary entity. This Canadian nursing-home-narrative genre begins with realism flavoured by the gothic, evolves into mystery edged by black humour, and finally transforms into fantasy with an undercurrent of grim awareness. I compare the image of the dreaded nursing home of mid-twentieth-century texts to its metamorphosed images in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century texts, and I argue that authors are now beginning to combine narratives of fear of the nursing home, aging, and death with narratives of positive-aging and late-life agency. This mixture has culminated in the birth of new fantasy stories featuring successful escape from nursing homes and aging, although awareness of reality's grim truths also still lurks within them.

Context of Project: Social Theory

Three meanings of the word ‘age’ co-exist within the English language, the first two being common understandings of the term. The first is that ‘age’ is chronological, a constructed measurement of the fixed time set apart in different periods of life and along a developmental process extending from infancy to old age. Hence periods such as ‘youth,’ ‘middle age,’ and ‘old age’ are determined according to an individual’s anticipated progress across the expected human life course. A second meaning of age derives from the social conditions by which age gradations are administered and governed in a collective sense. For instance, society considers four-year-olds too old to need diapers and, in most of North America, considers fourteen-year-olds too young to marry. There are legal and bureaucratic ‘ages’ associated with drinking, voting, marrying, driving and entering educational and military systems, and these restrictions are also crosscut by relations of gender, race, class and religion. Chronological categorizations are frequently denoted by time-marking rituals such as coming-of-age, marriage or retirement ceremonies. Thirdly, age gains meaning through relativistic and interactive processes. To a typical long-term-care resident, I am young, whereas to a typical graduate student, I am old.

Further complicating the complexity created by the relativity of age, people attach connotative meanings to age terms. Cultures – and cultures within cultures – assign a variety of expectations to age, and these expectations can create contradictory meanings. Consider for example the following quotation from Thomas Jefferson, writing in 1815: “‘Nothing is more incumbent on the old, than to know when they shall get out of the way, and relinquish to younger successors the honours they can no longer earn, and the duties they can no longer perform’” (qtd. in Cole, *The Long History* 214).

Now compare this endorsement of retiring and humble behaviour in the aged to the following words of advice offered by Cicero in 44 BC: ““Old age will only be respected if it fights for itself, maintains its rights, avoids dependence on anyone and asserts control over its own to its last breath”” (from *On Old Age* qtd. in *The Long History* Thane 5). Across time, Western societies have associated chronological ages with different age-related beliefs and behaviours, but the various mandates assigned by societies differ vastly and are often contradictory. What remains unambiguous is that, consciously and unconsciously, most people in Western culture categorize themselves and others according to chronological age and according to age-related expectations, yet they do not always acknowledge the fluidity and relational conditions that underlie their experiences of aging.

One of the most important areas wherein constructed and relational meanings of age intersect is retirement and the transitions from a productive to a supposedly unproductive period of life. In “The History of Aging in the West,” Pat Thane looks to “literary evidence from the 16th century” to support the claim that for “both men and women in preindustrial Europe old age was defined by appearance and capacities rather than by age-defined rules about pensions and retirement; hence people could be defined as ‘old’ at variable ages” (9). He indicates that often menopause was seen as the beginning of old age for women and the inability to perform manual labour as the beginning of old age for men. Thane also notes that “research into English poor relief records in the 18th century first describe[s] some people as ‘old’ in their 50s, others not until their 70s” (9). The industrial revolution led to a new awareness of chronological time and its capacity to regulate behaviours when factories began to normalize a daily work schedule and working lifespan for their employees. Since then, Western governments have disciplined societies through mandatory retirement

restrictions based simply on chronological age, and therefore little emphasis has been placed on function as a delineation of age. The more recent trend towards the discontinuation of mandatory retirement has decreased the significance of chronological age measurement and increased emphasis again on function.

While participation in the larger Western culture leads to general age-related beliefs and behaviours, interaction within smaller sub-communities creates variation in people's perception of the age identity of self and others. Cathrine Degnen's "Minding the Gap: The Construction of Old Age and Oldness Amongst Peers," a 2007 study of old people and their interactions in a South Yorkshire village in Britain, suggests that each community assigns age identities specific to its own dynamics. Whereas in the context of the larger community, all individuals forming part of the group of old people that Degnen studies would be considered to be old, within the community of the group itself, further age criteria separate the individuals. She explains, "Unlike definitions of old age which have emerged from other research that privileges ability and functionality as markers of oldness, being old in this context ha[s] much more to do with what is deemed to be proper social comportment" (75). In discussing the ostracizing of one "old" group member, she writes that "the vagueness of her speech patterns in conjunction with the highly visible impairment of her motor skill functions are interpreted by other members as markers of oldness" (73). "Normal" oldness is considered to include some slowing and physical incapacity but "getting past it" is seen as "real" oldness. She concludes by saying that, "the older people I work[] with made far more distinctions about who is old and what oldness is than most younger people would ever make or have a vocabulary to distinguish amongst"

(78). Degnen's study points out that the nuances of the term "old" are more complex for the aged than they are for the relatively young.

Thus as the post-World-War-II Boomers passed middle age and considered whether or not it was time to label themselves as old, they became more sensitive to the prevalent derogatory age narratives of their Western culture. The decline narrative remains somewhat prominent today; however, the Baby Boomer cohort has introduced a counter-narrative, namely 'anti-aging,' 'successful aging' or 'positive aging.' As Degnen's study explains, age looks different from the inside. Thus when the Boomer generation began to feel the pinch of old age and its negative associations, they saw their culture's mandates regarding age in a new light. While the prevailing decline narrative predicted that old age would swallow them whole, this cohort established a new narrative to govern life in the fifties, sixties and seventies. Thus Boomers cling to a version of youthfulness and refuse to act age appropriately as determined by earlier generations. The sheer size of this demographic cohort has allowed them to reject previous definitions assigned to their life stage and instead to instigate massive change.

Degnen's studied group created categories of difference within their own community; the Boomers' influence extends beyond their own membership. By embracing attitudes and behaviours associated with more youthful stages, Boomers have determined a means by which to push *real* old age further away from themselves – despite their chronological realities. In an attempt to distance themselves from the truly aged, the Boomer cohort has prompted the construction of a new chronological category labeled by scholars as the 'third age,' which is a fourth stage inserted after youth and middle age but before old age. Their behaviours demonstrate that age, like gender, can be performed, that

enactment of the attributes of age can trump chronological reality. Although previously enculturated by the generation that preceded them to accept the decline narrative associated with the approaching end of middle age, many third-agers now believe that as long as the semblance of youth can be maintained by means of appearance-altering activities and products, the individual can remain 'youthful' despite chronological aging.

In *Aged by Culture* (2004), Gullette writes that children accept and/or resist the view of the world imposed upon them by their parents' generation. That worldview includes attitudes towards aging:

The meanings of age and aging are conveyed in large part through the moral and psychological implications of the narrative ideas we have been inserting into our heads, starting when we were very young indeed....Our age narratives become our virtual realities. Certainly, whichever accounts you and I find ourselves living with and seeing the world through make a fundamental difference to the quality of our lives, starting with our willingness or reluctance, at any age, to grow older.

(11)

Feminist scholars challenge the 'naturalness' of 'female' behaviour and re-label it 'performance' or culturally induced beliefs and behaviour. Similarly, Gullette challenges the 'naturalness' of age behaviour and re-labels it culturally induced beliefs and intentionally assumed and performed behaviours (161). Adapting Judith Butler's initial work on the performance of gender to her purposes in Age Studies, Gullette writes, "We know that gender is a performance because we can see it feigned so well. About age as a performance, we need to start the arguments" (159).

She believes that age expectations or narratives, like gender narratives, are initially imposed on children:

The Body's expressions are partly derived from socialization....Acting one's gender begins in early childhood. When you learn cultural attitudes and habits that early, they become second nature....As Judith Butler points out, you can't fall out of character even performing them day after day, all day.... (160)

But Gullette offers encouragement by saying that performance of both age and gender can be selectively modified by the individual: "These consolidations of habit are not fixed and final.... During an individual's life course, people can opt for new bodily attitudes, habits and self-descriptions" (160). Gullette states that people continue to be acculturated in the performance of both gender and age throughout their lifetimes. However, with consciousness, people can exert control over the narratives which exert pressure on them. They can perform age as a message directed from themselves towards others (as Butler maintains gender is performed) by deliberately projecting the behaviours associated with a specific version of oldness.

Shrewd members of the corporate world have, of course, joyfully embraced the new business prospects afforded by a giant cohort of third-agers who would like to avoid their own personal decline narrative by performing a more youthful age. In the 2008 text *The New Old: How the Boomers are Changing Everything...Again*, David Cravit explains how the Boomers' desire to remain forever young can provide rich commercial opportunities. His boss, Moses Znaimer, the aging media magnate, positive-aging guru, and powerhouse behind the magazine *Zoomer*, coined the tag 'Boomers with Zip' or 'Zoomers,' and has provided the corporate world with an example of how to target 'successful' aging Boomers.

The merely *chronologically* old are now being actively separated from the *truly* old by his and others' commercially inspired and media-promoted impetus towards 'positive' aging. In *The New Old*, Cravit, Executive Vice President of Zoomer Media, explains that the Baby Boomer cohort has always had the kind of numbers that should draw the attention of marketing experts, and he points out that smart business people are re-thinking what they know about old people and adjusting their product lines accordingly. He argues that in the future

BoomerAging will have created new norms, new definitions of what happens at every age and what is expected at every age. The generations that come in behind the Boomers will *not* be acting 'younger than their chronological age' – they'll be acting in accordance with what's expected at that age' – they'll be acting in accordance with what's expected at that age, *as pioneered today by the Boomers*. What seems remarkably new and different today...will simply be the way things are. (199)

In the future, people's performance of age behaviour will reflect and resist the new norms being established now in the beginning of the twenty-first century, just as today people are reflecting and resisting the age behaviour established by the generation previous.

Although roughly associated with the typical chronological age of retirement, the term 'third age' carries behavioural connotations. As cultural theorist Stephen Katz explains, the "age markers of the third age, recognized as beginning sometime after 55 or 60, are less relevant than the freedoms and accomplishments that are assumed to distinguish it from younger second and older fourth ages" (*Cultural* 152). Upon their retirement and upon their exit from middle age, those who lack the vigour associated with

the third age proceed to enter directly into the category of old or fourth age. Unlike the feeble fourth age, the third age connotes 'successful' or 'positive' aging and can stretch limitlessly across the chronological spectrum as long as the individual remains financially and physically competent. Katz identifies four common themes implicit in this 'positive aging' viewpoint:

- (1) a critical attack on the belief that aging is essentially a disease;
- (2) a focus on activity as crucial to individual happiness and health;
- (3) a celebration of the possibilities of stretching midlife and postponing old age;
- and
- (4) an emphasis on adaptation skills that reduce dependency on public health care systems. (145)

While an impetus towards maintained health and independence seems to offer the potential for increased happiness in aged adults, Katz warns of the tyranny of a "positive aging culture that overshadows the difficulties and challenges experienced by many older individuals," difficulties and challenges rendering them incapable of 'successful' aging (145).

The third agers may have reduced ageism against themselves by creating a distinction between themselves and old age, but they have, in so doing, directed it with increased force against the fourth agers. Katz points out the risk assumed by potentially 'unsuccessful' members of the fourth age when a society's belief in the righteousness of independence allows it to reduce support systems for those who fail to maintain financial or physical wellbeing on their own. Broadly applied cultural imperatives are inappropriate. Societies should not require all seniors to be independently successful any more than it

should require them all to be retiring and dependent. What can be forgotten sometimes in the face of pervasive narratives is that the aging population is diverse and has diverse capabilities.

While commercial and governmental pressures have assisted the Boomers in their push to create the ‘third age,’ adding another age stage is also a reasonable response to the higher life expectancy Canadians have gained over the last century. According to Statistics Canada, male and female life expectancies at birth in 1920 to 1921 were respectively fifty-nine years and sixty-one years. For 2007-09, Statistics Canada lists the figures at seventy-nine and eighty-three years, which computes to a gain in life expectancy of twenty years for men and twenty-two years for women. Since the number of years that an individual can be expected to live following middle age has increased, it seems appropriate to acquire more descriptive terms by which to identify them. Consider the number of age designations for those under fifty; an incomplete list would include ‘baby,’ ‘infant,’ ‘preemie,’ ‘toddler,’ ‘preschooler,’ ‘pre-adolescent,’ ‘adolescent,’ ‘pre-teenager,’ ‘teenager,’ ‘youth,’ ‘young adult,’ ‘adult,’ and ‘middle-aged adult.’ The short list of terms applied to those on the other side of middle age includes only ‘senior,’ ‘elder,’ ‘geriatric,’ ‘aged,’ ‘retiree,’ and ‘old.’ Significantly, there are possibly more derogatory appellations than there are respectful ones; consider ‘geezer,’ ‘dirty old man,’ ‘hag,’ ‘crone,’ ‘old fart,’ and ‘old bag’ – to list just a few.

As Degnen argues, “compared to other parts of the life course, the social category of ‘old age’ is a remarkably broad term... and the category is left to cover a wide range of heterogeneous experiences and changes without distinguishing amongst them” (69). If we ignore for a moment the connotations the term brings to the table, adding the term ‘third

age' would make sense simply because its use facilitates discussion of distinct groups of adults beyond middle age. In fact, as Degnen's article makes clear, the lexicon would have to be enlarged significantly before we could discuss late-life stages adequately.

People aged beyond middle age have had time to grow more diverse in their identities than any other age group. Their multifarious differences cannot all be fit into a 'decline' narrative or into a 'positive aging' narrative. The evolving nature of age identity and the confusing expectations directed towards aging and the aged by society make age categorizations at least as complex and worthy of study as the arguably more fixed differentiations of race, class, and gender.

In common parlance, the term 'identity' usually references a person's stable fixed core, his or her essential self-hood. However, I and most other age theorists believe that while an underlying selfhood persists, identity is also fluid and multiple, growing to encompass the changes that occur with aging. In *Uncanny Subjects: Aging in Contemporary Narrative*, Amelia DeFalco argues that "identity functions as a process, shifting to accommodate the changes in one's life story" (15).

Margaret Morganroth Gullette complains that "the idea that identity changes over time (a staple of researchers in development) remains stubbornly undeveloped in so-called high theory" (*Aged* 121). She adamantly disagrees with Jens Brockmeier's idea that identity describes that part of the self "that remains unchanged" and discounts arguments about identity, such as Stuart Hall's, which "assume a stable subject" (121). She sees identity as being comprised of all that a person has been and has done up until the current point in time, writing "I think that identity over time can be seen as a sense of an achieved portmanteau 'me' – made up, for each subject, of all its changeable and continuing selves

together” (125). Following Gullette and DeFalco, in this thesis I argue that identity is flexible and fluid. It is also multiple, allowing each person to be identified in a number of ways simultaneously.

Warren Bourgeois voices an opinion on identity similar to that of Gullette in that he believes that the definition of identity should be expanded to allow for the changes that happen to a person over time. In *Persons: What Philosophers Say about You* (2003), he points out that we view “outward resemblance and some kind of continuity of body” as the most important identifiers of the ongoing sameness of a person (23). He explains that “the strength of this outward resemblance criterion is probably dependent on our religious heritage – on the doctrine of the immortal soul entering the body at conception and, whatever the changes to the mind, leaving the body only at death” (23). He argues that this belief in the permanent presence of a soul in the living body has encouraged society to consider “identity” as a fixed essence or object.

Yet, as he points out, “[p]ersons, however, change from moment to moment and, whether or not they appear stable to their friends and loved ones, over the years they change their bodies and many of the characteristics by which we know them.” He ponders how identity of the body can be considered to be consistent:

Persons sometimes seem to be much more like the things we call ‘processes’ than like the things we tend to call ‘objects,’ much more like a sunrise than like the relatively stable moon, though they are importantly unlike either sort of thing. On the other hand, when we think of persons as souls or selves unchanging within the body and mind, persons seem more like objects and less like processes. (Bourgeois 27)

I would conclude that even if a personal belief system were to lead us to believe that a person's soul forms the essence of identity or even if we were to perceive some material object (DNA for example) as being the essence of identity, a recognition of the processes of change that influence persons would require an expansion of the definition of identity. Bourgeois accommodates this need by recognizing both "object" (the usual fixed definition of identity) and "process" (a changeable identity) in his definition of identity.

Mindful of the above scholarship, in this thesis I use 'identity' as an encompassing term, referencing what Gullette calls 'multiple age identities' and also referencing the 'object' and the 'process' of Bourgeois's complementary explanation. Although philosophical debate continues, this thesis accepts the premise that each person is a distinct experiencing entity and that the acquisition of identity begins with birth and continues indefinitely. Identity also influences and is influenced by factors such as the relationships we share, the work we do, the fashion we wear, the vehicles in which we transport ourselves, and the home in which we live. Each becomes an extension of our body's identity, representing us to the rest of our society and in turn influencing the development of our identity.

In Western culture, moving to a nursing home has been construed as one of the most wrenching identity changes of late-life. Admission to a home has long represented people's loss of youthfulness, their decline. As Sally Chivers writes, the home can be an "ominous symbol" and can

signal failure – of old people to remain independent and of family members to provide adequate care. Nursing homes invite fear partly because they house a conglomeration of what people often dread about old age. If old age were not

necessarily to conjure up negative opinion, nursing homes may, in turn, not seem or be as threatening. (*From 58*)

Long-term-care facilities have long been construed as sites of hegemonic oppression, the dreaded modern-day descendants of Victorian poorhouses and of insane asylums, where inmates were stripped of all dignity and agency. The nursing home has represented the exact opposite of what a home should be, and the early authors who founded the genre established it as the ultimate horrific setting for the decline narrative. Yet some more contemporary nursing-home-narrative authors reject the realism and gothic style of the mid-century works, instead incorporating aspects of humour, mystery, and fantasy to assist them as they reimagine the home as a potential site of personal agency and of meaningful identity development.

By analysing Canadian literary narratives, I show that the cultural ideologies informing societal attitudes towards the new 'third' and 'fourth' ages now permeate literature set in the long-term-care institutions that cater to late-life needs. I query two possibilities. Does the consequent, new and uplifting, long-term-care literature increase the public's familiarity with these institutions and thus serve a useful purpose by reducing associated fear, or does this more cheerful literature promote a new harmful type of 'positive ageism' that assists aging Boomers to distance themselves from truly frightening old age? Does claiming that it is possible to remain youthful while living in a care facility or that it is possible to escape the facility and even old age itself ostracize those unsuccessful fourth agers who fail to live independently? I would conclude that imaginary stories about long-term care facilities can help readers by providing them with an

opportunity to see a variety of their fears and dreams expressed and to consider their own feelings and thoughts about the realities of aging.

Context of Project: Literary Theory – Genre

This thesis primarily analyses Canadian literary texts that contribute to the nursing-home-narrative genre, is prefaced by a discussion of two texts that precede the genre's beginnings, and is concluded by a summary of those that are excluded from the genre. My use of the term 'genre' has associations that relate to the fourth essay of the *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* where Frye refers to genre as "the intention of producing a specific kind of verbal structure." He traces the origins of the term to the Greeks who designated that the first three genres were "drama," "epic" and "lyric" (Frye 228). He notes, "The Greeks gave us the names of three of our four genres: they did not give us a word for the genre that addresses a reader through a book." He writes that he will therefore "make an arbitrary choice of 'fiction' to describe the genre of the printed page;" he thereby indicates that he recognizes in total four genres (230).

Today a tour of any bookstore would confirm that our contemporary popular literary culture recognizes many more genres than four; none of the shelves bear the title of 'epic' or 'lyric' (although they are still important to the academy), and the presence of newcomers such as the 'graphic novel' indicates that the term 'genre' is defined much differently today than in the time of either the Greeks or of Frye. Thus I venture to identify the rapidly growing and diversifying nursing-home narratives as a genre. The latter half of the twentieth century has seen an increase in the number of genre divisions. However,

considerable disagreement exists amongst genre theorists in regard to the criteria appropriate for classification and naming of genres and subgenres.

The word 'genre' still suggests a set of prescriptive rules, which debates about post-modernism have raised, although contemporary post-modern literature can in itself be called a genre as well as a period. It is marked, to some extent, by its tendency to fragmentation, parody and self-reflexivity; however, in *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of contemporary English-Canadian Fiction* (1988), Linda Hutcheon stresses that the post-modern is characterized most significantly by an "urge to trouble, to question, to make both problematic and provisional any[...]desire for order or truth through the power of the human imagination" (2). Tongue in cheek, one could say that post-modernism, in its attempt to defy classification, introduces an anti-genre genre. The post-modern, which Hutcheon describes as "something new [which] began to appear in the seventies and eighties," has been characterized by our culture's tendency to re-sort categories and indeed to question categorization itself.

Hutcheon argues that modern literature reveals "a search for order in the face of moral and social chaos," that is, a search for the type of ordered confidence manifest in realist literature. In relation to realism and modernism, post-modernism is characterized by its lost belief in the possibility of absolute order (2). Frye's point, however, is still valid when he states: "The purpose of criticism by genres is not so much to classify as to clarify[...]traditions and affinities, thereby bringing out a large number of literary relationships that would[...]not be noticed as long as there were no context established for them" (229).

Contemporary writers and critics flaunt convention by mixing previously separate genre styles. However, they also confirm the worth of the original function of genre division by making use of relationships to earlier bodies of literature in order to create and/or undermine meaning. New conventions work in part because writers and readers are aware of the way in which earlier writing can be and is being twisted. Linda Hutcheon writes, “As Derrida has argued, any genre designation both pulls a body of texts together and simultaneously keeps it from closing. Classifications of genres are paradoxically built upon the impossibility of firmly defining genre boundaries” (22). A single text can be categorized several different ways according to several different criteria. It can be identified simultaneously by its historical time period, its geographical source, its political or ethnic affinities, and so on; the tension within and between genre boundaries has become a rich source of cultural meaning.

Consequently, critics such as Ralph Cohen (1991) argue that “in the last half of the twentieth century generic theory has reemerged as a critical force.” Cohen states that “a theory of genre can account for literary change more adequately than histories based on themes, ideas, periods, and movements” (85-6). Discussion of genre today must consider the foundational meanings derived from genre categories, the meanings derived from shifts in genre categorization, the meanings derived from texts’ contestation of genre categories and also the role of the reader who inevitably approaches a text according to preconceived genre-related expectations.

Linda Hutcheon’s embrace of the post-modern perspective is evident when she concludes: “In the end, genres are defined by readers” (22). In making this claim she is referencing “reader-response” theories which derive principally from the work of Fish, Iser,

and Bakhtin. In *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies*, Stanley Fish argues that “what is left out of the traditional or classical account is the actualizing role played by the reader in the production – as opposed to the mere perception or uncovering – of literary meaning” (Fish 68).

Whereas formalism contends that meaning is contained within texts and relayed to the reader through the act of reading, reader-response theories argue that in response to the act of reading the reader constructs a meaning which is suggested and constrained by the parameters of the text but which accords with his/her own literary and cultural background. In “Perspectives on Stance in Response to Literature: A Theoretical and Historical Framework” (1992) Susan Taylor Cox explains that

Fish identifies the reader’s interpretive community as the source of literary meaning. According to Fish, the members of an interpretive community share not only an approach to literary meaning-making, but also the learned perceptual habits, the humanly constructed models for making sense of the world that Fish calls, in general, interpretative strategies. (18)

The author first creates possible meanings by positioning the text within an inter-textual context and within an inter-genre context; but then, depending on how the reader – in responding to the text – decides to classify a text, he/she extracts his/her own specific meaning or meanings from the potential variety of meanings that the text facilitates.

The nursing-home-narrative genre is expanding and evolving quickly in relation to other genres, and so it should be considered as important to literary studies as age-related social theory is to sociological studies. An analysis of this new genre, as Cohen states, can explain literary developments and can contribute at least as much to our understanding of

cultural change as analysis of thematic trends or historical periods and movements. I would augment this claim to argue that analysis of the nursing-home-genre can contribute at least as much as quantitative, qualitative and participatory sociology to our understanding of age ideologies.

Context of Project: Literary Theory – Point of View

The use of the term ‘point of view’ in literary criticism refers to the perspectives from which the author writes, from which the narrator tells the story, and from which the reader interprets a meaning or meanings from the story. Since our criticism in cultural studies now acknowledges that there should be no assumed central truth, meta-narrative or privileged point of view, the matter of perspective has become an important focus of analysis in our critical humanities. The contest between elitist traditions and the post-modern recognition of the margins has meant that critics have attempted to displace power away from the centre by recognizing the literary voices of the margins. In so doing, the critics reveal that both the centre and its margins are social constructs.

Earlier writing in the canon of English literature was usually written from the perspective of an assumed centre. Omniscient third-person narration and an associated sense of authority have been and are common features of traditional realist writing, whereas post-modern forms of writing more often reflect doubt regarding authoritative knowledge. Particularly in regard to first-person texts, the tension between a narrator’s professed reliability and his/her admission of unreliability is a rich source of meaning for the literary critic.

Many of the texts analysed in this thesis are written from the first-person perspective of an elderly narrator who is recalling memories from the distant past and who may be suffering from forgetfulness. As such these accounts, even when written in realist style, may suggest the unreliability of the narrator, and thus require careful examination of the texts' potential meanings. Third-person accounts also require interpretation in relation to the possible significance of individual focalizations within the overall point of view.

Context of Project: Historical, Economic, and Political Theory

My research contributes to 'literary gerontology,' a subfield situated between the fields of literary studies and gerontology. While the role of gerontology is to explore the physiological aging experience, the role of literary gerontology is to explore the cultural meaning of that experience as it is expressed, created and represented in texts and works of fiction. With the above various and sometimes conflicting definitions of age as background, this thesis looks to current dominant cultural narratives within literary sources to contribute to an understanding of what age and the nursing home mean to us today.

While age-related beliefs and behaviours undoubtedly have existed since human life began, and while poets and philosophers have always endeavoured to grasp and express age-related truths, the field known as gerontology officially originated in 1903 when zoologist Elie Metchnikoff invented the term and thus marked the beginning of the West's scientific study of the problems specific to old age (Squier 1999 93). This early attempt to identify the importance of aging as a separate field of inquiry had its political counterpart later in the century. In 1968, Robert N. Butler invented the term 'ageism' and was one of the first to address issues associated with aging that exist beyond the medical. As Kathleen

Woodward explains, the term ‘ageism,’ “in analogy with sexism and racism... was first coined... to name widespread discrimination against the elderly based on prejudice rooted in the very fact of being older” (x).

In 1970, Simone de Beauvoir published *La Vieillesse*, republished in English in 1972 as *Old Age* in the United Kingdom and Canada, and as *The Coming of Age* in the United States. She can be credited with a review of historical and contemporary attitudes towards old age, offering a critical and perhaps pessimistic perspective on old age – what could be described as a version of the decline narrative: “the vast majority of mankind look upon the coming of old age with sorrow or rebellion” (599).

In the 2008 issue of the *Journal of Aging Studies*, Harry R. Moody identifies the birth of his own and others’ interest in culture and aging as occurring in the 1970’s and early 1980’s (Moody 209). This account accords with Cole’s (1992) periodization of the critical field:

Over the past 20 years, many people have sensed that something important is missing in a purely scientific and professional gerontology. Mainstream gerontology – with its highly technical and instrumental, avowedly objective, value-neutral and specialized discourses – lacks an appropriate language for addressing basic moral and spiritual issues in our aging society. (“Humanities” xi)

During the 1970’s and 1980’s, social science and humanities scholars like Thomas Cole augmented the work of medical gerontology, thereby creating a unique interdisciplinary academy focussed on the study of age. Moody remembers that it was a time of “waning cultural optimism” when, therefore, the “critical perspective became even more important.”

Writing in 2008, Moody suggests that this specialized area of gerontology has reached maturity as a field of study (205).

Today, the public's attitude towards issues of age is volatile. Economists and politicians must deal with people's fear over what is regarded as a looming problem – a huge demographic of potentially dependent old people and the likely impossibility of extending government budgets to accommodate their current and future needs. Over the past century, old age has increasingly been construed and studied primarily as a problem – a medical, psychological, social, economic, and political problem. Thus all age groups, including the Boomer cohort, have a vested interest in erecting a dividing line between themselves and the *truly* old. This type of negative assessment of a body of people can in itself be identified as a problem and should spur humanities and social science scholars towards critical theoretical research.

Today's age ideologies – both the 'decline' narrative and the 'positive' aging narrative - have the potential to create marked divisions amongst the post-World War II age cohort, the *truly* old cohort, and the smaller demographic cohorts composed of everyone else. In earlier times, Western society associated potential weakness, dependency, and death not only with the old but with all ages, but today more people are living in good health for the full length of the expected human life span. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the highest life expectancy in Western society was about forty years, although in periods of plague and famine, it was obviously much lower. Historian Shulmith Shahar explains that the low average was primarily due to high infant mortality and that those who successfully reached adulthood could expect to live until the age of sixty, seventy, or even occasionally eighty or ninety ("All want to reach..." 71).

There are currently fewer deaths of the young due to causes such as childhood illnesses, fewer deaths of the middle-aged due to causes such as war, and fortunately plagues and famine have become rare in Western society. Accordingly, instead of viewing the old as those few special people who have been tough enough to have survived to late life, as earlier generations might have, today society often sees today's large numbers of old people primarily as those most likely to become dependent or to die. As Znamer says, "we can no longer trade rarity for esteem" (C1 6). The old are suspect for their potential financial dependency and also for the reminder of mortality that they extend to younger people.

Ageism arises from a multitude of factors, perhaps the most basic being that old people remind those younger than themselves that life is finite and that time is also ushering them towards old age. People prefer to avoid contemplating their own demise, particularly in these more secular times when fewer people anticipate an afterlife, and so the young distance themselves from the aged and from contemplation of their own aging. Although aversion can be explained, the study of age is not – and should not be – just a study of the old for the old.

Aging is ongoing at all stages across the life course, and all individuals hold age-related beliefs that induce age-related behaviours. Circulating age ideology affects ongoing identity formation throughout the life course. As Amelia DeFalco writes, "we are all growing older every moment, and this constant movement of time will eventually undermine any attempt to fix age identity" (xiii). All people, barring accident or illness, will experience old age for themselves and thus will need to address the issues of late life, but pressures related to ageism affect even the relatively young.

Today's society increasingly puts pressure on all people to avoid aging, to the point that narratives demanding successful aging are morphing into narratives demanding the achievement of particular physical norms. Cosmetic surgery is commonplace in the Western world not just for rejuvenation but also for reaching an expected standard of beauty. The felt need to avoid decline is part of a larger, more pervasive, need to alter appearance to an unrealistically high, media-inspired pinnacle. Ageism in combination with pressure to achieve this normalized standard of appearance applies pressure now at all chronological stages. People's performance of their age has become at least as important as their chronological age, making age assessment increasingly complex, contradictory and multi-levelled.

History of Long-Term Care Facilities

In this thesis, I will apply Albert Banerjee's definition of long-term care:

Long-term care typically refers to ongoing, indefinite care for individuals who can no longer fully care for themselves. Long-term care straddles both *health care* in the form of nursing/medical care and *social services* in the form of income-supported housing, assistance with 'activities of daily living' (i.e., basic functional tasks performed on a daily basis, such as general mobility, being able to cloth or feed oneself, to be continent and use the toilet, and to shower or bathe), and the provision of recreational and social programs. (30)

It follows then that a long-term-care, continuing-care, or nursing home refers to a residential facility that provides housing and care for the aged on an indefinite and ongoing basis.³

In Pat Thane's anthology *The Long History of Old Age*, Thomas Cole and Claudia Edwards explain that Western culture's twentieth-century perception of late-life care facilities as sites of oppression and fear dates back to their beginnings in the early 19th-century poorhouses of Britain (such as those depicted by Charles Dickens) and to the public's disdain at that time for those who, with no family to care for them, were forced to seek charity to survive (Cole, "Don't Complain" 238).

Susanna Moodie, an early settler in Upper Canada, included a short sketch "The Walk to Dummer" in *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852) that provides an early example of the type of Christian-duty social work that laid a foundation for today's government-run Canadian social programs in the twenty-first-century. The story depicts the twenty-mile walk undertaken by Susanna and her friend in January 1839 to take food (bread, ham, beef, sugar, tea and a dozen fish) to a woman who had been deserted by her husband and eldest son (448). The sketch illustrates the sense of shame associated with poverty at the time and the tact required by Susanna to coax the humiliated woman into accepting charity for her children's sakes: "how shall I be able to ask her to accept provisions from strangers? I am afraid of wounding her feelings" (449). Later, Susanna's husband "raised a subscription among the officers of the regiment for the poor lady and her children, which amounted to forty dollars" (463).

³ While many long-term-care facilities provide service only to the elderly, some facilities also house younger individuals who have serious physical or mental impairment. NB: None of the literary texts discussed in this thesis addresses this other type of L.T.C. resident.

Susanna's sister, Catharine Parr Traill, depicts a similar case of early social work in "The First Death in the Clearing" in *Pearls and Pebbles* (82). A small child comes to Catharine to summon her to the sick bed of a neighbour's baby some distance away. The mother is contracted to provide meals for mill workers, and her boss will not or cannot allow her time to attend her dying child. Traill does what she can for her neighbour and the child, but she must rush home shortly to attend to her own multiple duties.

In Canada, private, usually faith-induced, acts of individual charity such as Susanna's and Catharine's eventually led to the creation of relief societies. Elwood H. Jones explains, in *Anson House: A Refuge and a Home*, that one of the new colony's first official bodies, the Peterborough Relief Society, was founded near Traill and Moodie in Peterborough in 1862. It was originally formed by local women to assist those "requiring and deserving assistance" to make it through the winter" by giving outdoor relief primarily to destitute women and children (1). Jones explains that the same women achieved the opening in 1865 of the Peterborough Protestant Home (later renamed Anson House), as "an extension of neighbourly concern" to provide food and shelter until its "inmates" could be restored to familial or self-support once more.

Once such initial facilities were established, local governments across the country intervened to lend a hand to private citizens in organizing and at least partly funding social care, and as time went on provincial and federal governments also interceded. Early homes of a type similar to Anson House were built in Toronto in 1837 and 1852, Kingston in 1855 and 1861, Scarborough in 1856, Guelph in 1861 and Ottawa in 1864 (Jones 23). The United Province of Canada first provided financial assistance to its charitable homes

between 1860 and 1864. The *Municipal Institutions Act* of 1866 included a requirement that counties and towns erect a House of Refuge within the next two years.

In the 2010 text *Long-Term Care in Saskatchewan: Its History & Evolution*, Boris Kishchuk states that “Saskatchewan’s first long-term care facility was the Saskatchewan Provincial Hospital for the Insane in North Battleford, later called the Saskatchewan Hospital – North Battleford” (17). It opened in 1914, its first resident a 65-year-old man from Regina (17). Residents were “officially deemed to be dangerous lunatics, as mental illness was considered to be a crime and not a health condition” (15). Only later, in 1921, did the provincial government open its first owned and operated “special care home” or nursing home. It was located in Weyburn and named the “Home for Infirm,” although it was sometimes referred to as the “Home for Incurables” or the “Home for the Aged and Infirm.” Kishchuk indicates that the “first residents, 19 male and 7 female, were transferred from a private residence located on Hamilton Street in Regina,” which suggests that perhaps locally run homes such as those built in Peterborough existed in Saskatchewan first too (59).

In *Into the House of Old: A History of Residential Care in British Columbia*, Megan J. Davies reports that the first care homes built in British Columbia primarily addressed the needs of elderly single men who had no familial support:

unlike rural Ontario, British Columbia did not have settled agrarian communities with established traditions of supporting aged kin. Instead the dominance of resource-based industries meant that British Columbia had a significant population of elderly single labouring men, many of whom had been transient workers in their young and middle years. (16)

Whereas in British Columbia care homes were created for men, throughout most places in early Canada, homes were primarily built to house women. Then as now, females constituted the majority of the vulnerable elderly.

Over the course of time, a variety of services and institutions developed throughout Canada to meet the health and social needs of its people. Today terminology referencing services, institutions, and in-patient, out-patient, and in-house assistance varies vastly across the country. As Banerjee says, “[l]ong-term care has different developmental histories in each province and territory, leading to a varied set of present circumstances. What’s more, while Statistics Canada has been gathering data on residential care since 1974, there are few pan-Canadian analyses of long-term care, making any conversation at the national level a challenge” (29).⁴ Banerjee’s thoughts can be found in the 2009 anthology *A Place to Call Home: Long Term Care in Canada*, which constitutes one of the few attempts at a national analysis so far completed.

A history of the development of care in Canada is difficult to compile because communities created their own early relief services; developed their own combinations of services, hospitals, and chronic-care institutions; and allowed multiple agencies such as religious organizations, charitable lay organizations, workers’ associations, and municipal, provincial and federal governments to provide different types of leadership and funding. According to Jones, the Peterborough home Anson House opened with the intent of

⁴ However, following the attention drawn to aging by the aging of the Baby Boomer cohort, large-scale studies have begun, such as the Canadian Longitudinal Study on Aging that was first conceived in 2002, “a large, national, long-term study that will follow approximately 50,000 men and women between the ages of 45 and 85 for at least 20 years” from all across the country. It began recruitment of the first 20,000 participants in 2009.

offering relief to worthy people of the Protestant Christian faith, although it would not “refuse the same assistance and comfort to the Roman Catholic poor, provided they submit to the established Rules and Regulations which are printed and hanging up in several of its rooms” (Jones 8). The Catholic House of Providence (later Marycrest) was not built in Peterborough until 1890 (Jones 28). Regardless of their religious affiliation, while living in the Protestant Home, all inmates were expected to work to help defray costs of their keep, and their tenancy was expected to be temporary.

Over time, certain homes came to be designated specifically as old-age homes as opposed to generalized houses of refuge for the indigent. The *Confederation Act* of 1867-68 directed more building of separate facilities for the “mentally ill, mentally handicapped, deaf, [and] blind,” and for “correctional facilities” (Jones 26). For example, in 1884 a separate orphanage building was created in Peterborough to house the Barnardo children (14). The *Charity Aid Act* of the 1870’s indicated though that much of the funding of refuge institutions should remain the responsibility of private and charitable organizations.

The first indigent-care institution in the Lakefield area (where Traill originally settled) was built in 1907 and named the Peterborough County House of Refuge. It was built under government auspices following Inspector Smith’s decision to house the elderly outside of city limits in order to provide wholesome country air and to allow the possibility that its “inmates” could farm the land to help support their house (Jones 28).

In Ontario, from 1886-1947, these institutions were under the jurisdiction of the Inspector of Prisons and Public Charities who reported on the Houses of Refuge to the Minister of Public Welfare. By the early 1900’s, local control had diminished and was

largely replaced by government control in association with funding, but the public continued to view pauperism as the fault of the pauper.

In the short story “Spelling” in the 1978 text *Who Do You Think You Are*, Alice Munro’s narrator and protagonist Rose recalls attempting to admit her elderly stepmother Flo to the county home. Munro reflects the prevalent view of the story’s time setting when she has the stepmother refer to the home as the “Poorhouse” (197). In the story “Who Do You Think You Are?” of the same 1978 text, the narrator Rose recounts a time when she was in her “senior year” at school and attended a lantern-slide show by a missionary who reflects the time period’s cultural belief associating religious piety and financial wellbeing when she offers this explanation to the assembled teenagers: “The Chinese are heathens,” Miss Hattie said, “That is why they have beggars” (209).

Social programs during these early times were administered under the assumption that only the unworthy could fall into poverty and require public support. Jones reports,

In the Victorian sensibility, one’s physical, material and spiritual condition in old age was solely a matter of individual responsibility. The assumption was that everyone could be healthy and self-reliant in old age if one had not sinned against God’s laws of nature and morality – under this view, poverty, disease and frailty appeared to be shameful, as they were visible signs of personal moral failure. (60)

Early Ontario government policies reflected and reinforced the shame and dread that Canadian society continued to associate with poverty and with living in refuge homes.

An example of this attitude is evident in the *Thirty-seventh Annual Report of the Inspector of Prisons and Public Charities... aided by the Province of Ontario for the year 1905* (1906), which in part reads:

While I was gratified with the evidences of philanthropy that provides homes for the aged and infirm, care must be taken that we do not fall into the mistake which has been created in some countries and build pauperism. Only those who are incapacitated by the infirmities of age should seek assistance.... Pauperism is a condition created by indiscriminate charity. This we must seek to avoid. (qtd. in Jones 30)

Although old age pensions became available minimally in Ontario in 1929 and indicated a growing sense of social responsibility, no effort to minimize demeaning language was evident in the government reports, perhaps because the introduction of the pension itself pointed out the likely financial dependence of the aged.

However, in the *Report of the Minister of Public Welfare: Province of Ontario for the fiscal year 1946-1947* (1947), the earlier distinct focus on financial stewardship and the emphasis on weeding out unworthy recipients were augmented by an increase in social empathy:

The Old Age Pensions Act requires a report once a year as to the continuing eligibility of the pensioner. However, data derived from investigation by the field staff would indicate that many of the old age pensioners require considerably more attention than the annual re-determination of their eligibility. Community services are required to arrange for hospitalization and medical attention; to assist the pensioner in securing suitable living accommodation, and to create interest among friends and relatives in his physical care. Since all pension recipients are over 70, they represent a problem of care which a monthly grant alone cannot always meet. (qtd. in Jones 34)

As Jones explains, with the 1947 and revised 1949 *Homes for the Aged Act*, “[a]ttitudes shifted from reform of ‘inmates’ to providing a comfortable residence for elderly” (76). Post WW11, the public began to see maintenance of a sustaining standard of living in old age as a right rather than as a boon afforded to worthy supplicants by their benevolent betters, and Canadian governments began to build infrastructures of homes to house those dependent impoverished elderly who had no family to care for them.

The Western public’s general perception of the aged also altered notably in response to the advent of the scientific study of the problems specific to old age. As Tamara K. Hareven summarizes,

In the late nineteenth century, American society passed from an acceptance of aging as a natural process to a view of it as a distinct period of life characterized by decline, weakness, and obsolescence.... Beginning in the 1860s, the popular magazines shifted their emphasis from attaining longevity to discussing the medical symptoms of senescence. (120)

With the increase in studies in gerontology, the public began to consider the dependencies associated with aging less as a moral failure and more as a consequence of disease. This change in perception came with its own problems in that the public began to see the aged less as individuals and more as a homogeneous body of patients in need of medical attention. All elderly began to be perceived as vulnerable.

The federal government’s introduction in 1966 of the Canada Pension Plan (with a minimum age for receiving federal benefits set at 65 years) evidenced further evolution in state and public attitudes. In 1967, guaranteed income support for poorer elderly was added (Jones 71). Although the pension plan was enacted as much to free up jobs for the boom of

youth following WWII as it was to recognize the needs of the aged, the CPP's universal application did much to eliminate the humiliation formerly associated with the recipient's necessity to prove worthiness (Jones 71).

When the government later switched nursing homes from the jurisdiction of social welfare ministries to that of health ministries, it further contributed to the medicalization of old age (Jones 83). In Ontario for example, in 1993, Bill 101, the Long-Term Care Statute Law Amendment Act, "concentrated the control of residential care for seniors under the Ministry of Health," thus reducing the emphasis on financial welfare and recognizing the increasing demand for nursing care in long-term care facilities (Jones 83).

Another shift in perception occurred in the 1980's when governments began to encourage the private sector's expansion into housing, products, and services for the elderly. Thus the marketplace began to provide diversified care options according to the financial means of the elderly (Jones 80). Also since the mid 1980's, Canadian federal and provincial governments have encouraged a shift away from state-funded residential "super-homes" and towards support by the Ministry of Community and Social Service within the community. This is referred to as "serving people in place" or "aging in place" (Jones 86). Although government encouragement of aging in place and of privatization of nursing facilities is perhaps financially more than altruistically motivated, as a result, many options are now available to seniors.

In the 2011 census, Statistics Canada reports that of the "4, 945,000 seniors aged 65 and over in Canada," "92.1% lived in private households or dwellings (as part of couples, alone or with others)" while only "7.9% lived in collective dwellings, such as residences for senior citizens or health care and related facilities." Thus, in summary, in a total

population of roughly 35 million people, there are about 5 million seniors. In 2011, of those seniors, only 8% were residents of institutional homes (this category to include nursing homes, chronic care homes, long-term-care facilities and senior-citizen residences along with other institutions such as acute care and correctional facilities)

In the preface to *A Place to Call Home: Long Term Care in Canada*, Pat Armstrong argues that long-term care today is primarily of concern to women because they are the ones most likely to live in care and/or to act as paid and unpaid care-givers. She states that

long-term facility care [i]s a woman's issue. Most of those who live in long-term care facilities are women, although more men have been joining them there in recent years as other kinds of institutional care are closed and as hospitals focus on narrowly defined acute care. Just as important, the overwhelming majority of those who work in residential care are women. Women are also the ones most likely to provide unpaid support in these facilities. (8)

Many more men than women age and die at home. Since many women marry men older than themselves and also have a longer life expectancy, they are often widowed. Women more often end up living alone and with lower incomes than their male counterparts. Statistics Canada states that the total number of males in nursing homes, chronic care homes, long-term-care facilities, and senior-citizen residences is 112,850 as opposed to 265,190 females, roughly a ratio of 1 male for every 2.4 females.

In *Figuring Age*, Kathleen Woodward rejects Germaine Greer's stated belief that aging women, once they turn fifty years of age, must accept a new status of invisibility. Woodward states that she wants to reject "the notion that women as they grow older must pass through invisibility, as though we must adopt the veil" (xiv). In the future, the current

cohort of middle-aged working women aging into old age may contribute to new narratives of more agential elderly womanhood. However, the female protagonists discussed in this thesis reflect time periods when women aged into old age following a life in which the powers controlling them were largely patriarchal. Since the majority of the women discussed in this thesis could be categorized as “invisible,” it makes sense that until now the nursing-home-narrative genre that tells their stories has also remained unnoticed in the field of literary studies. My goal is to make the women, their stories and their genre become vividly visible, and so this thesis focusses on Canada’s literary depictions of late-life care and long-term-care facilities.

Chapter Contents

Each of the chapters of this thesis applies the theory discussed in this introduction to a set of sketches, a short story or a novel. Specifically, I follow the example of literature critics such as Sally Chivers, Amelia DeFalco, Mike Hepworth, Kathleen Woodward, Teresa Mangum, and Margaret Morganroth Gullette.

To differentiate her approach from those literary gerontologists before her, Gullette coined the term ‘age studies’ (Woodward xvii). Like literary gerontology, age studies explores art and aging, but, like cultural studies scholars, age studies scholars focus their efforts on discovering the forces that underlie a society’s beliefs. While literary gerontology limits its scope to the study of literature and what it reveals about the meaning of age today and in the past, age studies explores age as embodied in all aspects of our culture. Thus it addresses a great variety of cultural sources and vehicles of cultural expression, including those emanating from the worlds of art, entertainment, performativity, speculative fiction,

fashion, media, film – in short, all encoded productions. Age studies scholars analyze the dominant narratives and stereotypes that influence Western society's attitudes and behaviours in regard to age, explore the ways in which people of all ages accept and resist culturally assigned definitions of age, and challenge people to reconsider their assumptions in regard to age and aging.

Some scholars of age use the term 'literary critical gerontology' rather than 'age studies,' thereby emphasizing the inclusion of critical theory within the mandate of the discipline. I prefer to use the term 'age studies' for my work because it suggests that the study of age should not be limited to the study of the old for the old and because it applies to criticism of all types of cultural production.

Potential text selection for this dissertation is virtually unlimited. Not only do all texts have the capacity to reveal issues related to age, but all literary narrative falls under an age studies umbrella simply by virtue of the fact that narrative involves characters who move through time and who thus experience aging. Since humans exist within time, all texts are age studies texts. However, since little has been done on age theory and literature specific to Canada, I have selected only Canadian literary texts. Although categorization by national identity in this fragmented cosmopolitan world is considered suspect, and age-related behavioural divisions can perhaps more readily be explained by, for example, rural/urban differences than by national differences, as a Canadian I choose to write about Canadian literature and am using a national focus to help me situate and unify my discussion.

In order to encourage awareness of age-related attitudes and behaviours, I have chosen to address Canadian literary authors' texts that consciously explore aging, that

facilitate introduction of age definitions and terminology, that express key aspects of past and current age ideology, and that specifically address late life and long-term care. A second goal of my thesis is to identify what I am calling the ‘nursing-home-narrative genre.’ I introduce selected texts that I believe most capably highlight particular shifts in age ideology in the nursing-home-narrative genre and the distinctive alterations in form that have occurred in response to its evolving content.

I would generally typify the nursing-home-narrative genre by the following characteristics: texts depict one or more elderly protagonist(s) during the latter period of life and include those details of earlier lives as are fundamental to the aged character’s(s’) development(s); texts resemble the Bildungsroman in that they depict ‘coming of age,’ yet more aptly could be said to be “Reifungsroman,” or novels of ripening into old age;⁵ texts may use first- or third-person point of view or a combination of both; and texts use a nursing home (or some variation of an institutional late-life care home) as their physical setting for some and usually most of their plot.

Although I acknowledge that they are also worthy of study, I have chosen to exclude from the analysis in this thesis non-fictional memoirs and also other related fiction texts⁶ such as familial-care-giver and professional-care-giver narratives where the content may include a nursing-home setting but where the focus is not on the aged person. As well,

⁵ American scholar Barbara Frey Waxman is known for having introduced the term to describe a novel of “aging as ripening” in her text *From the Hearth to the Open Road: A Feminist Study of Aging in Contemporary Literature* (1990). She differentiates these stories from the Bildungsroman, by explaining that the Reifungsroman describes “ripening” or coming *further* of age. By her use of the metaphor “ripening,” Waxman asserts her belief that aging into old age should be figured as a gain rather than as a loss. In the text *To Live in the Center of the Moment: Literary Autobiographies of Aging* (1997), she studies autobiographies of aging and asserts that there is an increasing demand for literature about “ripening” into old age and an increasing demand for work by authors who are “ripening” into old age (11).

⁶ *The One with the News, Cereus Blooms at Night, Purple for Sky, Night Light: Stories of Aging, A Sleep Full of Dreams, Scar Tissue* - see Works Cited for details.

I have excluded texts⁷ where the focus may be on an aged person but the setting is not an institution.

In the first chapter of the thesis, “Before Ageism: Measuring Maturity in *Pearls and Pebbles* and *The Innocent Traveller*,” I consider the elderly female protagonists of two early Canadian texts as models of the aging ideologies of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I use this first chapter to explain the historical foundation that existed prior to the publication of the first key texts of the nursing-home-narrative genre. In particular, I note the absence of internalized ageism and the tendency to familial rather than institutional late-life care that characterize the two texts, and I analyse Traill’s and Wilson’s texts as forerunners of the genre. Inclusion of analysis of these texts is essential to the thesis because they epitomize what Canadian age ideology and literary texts were like prior to the mid-twentieth-century escalation of the decline narrative and prior to the beginning of the nursing-home narrative genre.

My analysis focusses on Traill’s protagonist Catharine as a model of exemplary late life, and I compare Catharine to Wilson’s protagonist Topaz, who lives a more predictably dependent old age (for a woman of Victorian times). While Catharine Parr Traill writes about herself in *Pearls and Pebbles* and thus employs the first-person voice, Ethel Wilson writes about a fictionalized version of her great aunt in the third-person voice, occasionally offering insertions in a first-person voice, but under the fictionalized name of Rose. I am interested in the similarly advanced chronological age attained by Traill’s and Wilson’s two main characters and the dissimilarity in functional aging that distinguishes them because these two women taken together model the range of potential development available to

⁷ *Memory Board, Soucouyant, Chorus of Mushrooms, The Widows, Night Light: Stories of Aging.*

women of this time period. This initial chapter also shows that the term ‘old’ as used in both of these texts lacks the derogatory connotations that our current youth-obsessed era associates with oldness and aging, and it illustrates how familial late-life care models, such as Catharine’s and Topaz’s, laid a foundation for the social care systems later developed in Canada.

In the second chapter, “Assembling Identity: Decline and Progress Narratives in *The Stone Angel* and *The Stone Diaries*,” I introduce the 1964 novel *The Stone Angel* as an originating text of the nursing-home-narrative genre and as a text that epitomizes the prevalence of narratives of aging-as-decline and nursing-home-horror typical of the mid-twentieth century. In *The Stone Angel* and other texts of the same time period, the genre is initially characterized by a style that combines realism with the gothic. Shields’s contributes a post-modernistic self-reflexivity and multiplicity of representation.

In this chapter, I consider the internalized, self-directed ageism of Hagar, the protagonist of Margaret Laurence’s 1964 novel, and contrast it to the self-acceptance of Daisy, the malleable protagonist of Carol Shields’s 1993 novel, who moves complacently forward in time through alternating periods of decline and progress. In her old age, Hagar continues to cling to a fixed youthful ideal in order to define herself. Thus she refuses to acknowledge her aged body and fears that institutionalization in a long-term-care facility will eradicate her true personal identity and force her to accept a decline narrative. By contrast, when Shields’s protagonist of the 1993 *The Stone Diaries* faces admission to a long-term care facility, she feels at first that she is “not myself here,” but later adjusts. Hagar attempts to avoid admission to the dreaded nursing home and clings to an outdated self-image, whereas Shields’s Daisy accepts that identity is multiple and fluid across time

and adjusts to old age and to life in a care facility – both texts thus revealing the cultural attitudes of their time towards age and aging.

The second half of my thesis focusses on late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century texts that incorporate new positive-aging narratives and that consequently portray residents who successfully achieve greater agency in relation to their nursing home administrations and greater control over their own aging. Notably protagonists in these later texts tend not to die at the end of their stories. I explain in chapters three through five how age ideology changes during this period and how the genre evolves through various forms, eventually extending chronologically into the present day, as represented by the 2013 text *Flee, Fly, Flown*.

Chapter Three is entitled “From Horror to Hotel: Transforming the Nursing Home in *Sunset Manor* and *Exit Lines*.” Here I focus on Richard B. Wright’s 1990 *Sunset Manor* as an example of the revisionist narratives that are joining the Canadian nursing-home-narrative genre founded by texts such as *The Stone Angel*. Wright’s novel offers an early example of the late twentieth-century turn away from the portrayal of home as horror, portraying instead a place wherein the aging individual has the *potential* to cope successfully with change and with the demands of administration. I compare Wright’s text to Joan Barfoot’s 2008 novel *Exit Lines*, which was published nineteen years later and which reflects the Western public’s further re-imaginings of the nursing home – here as a late-life hotel. Barfoot’s Idyll Inn is a place where residents can do more than merely cope; it is a place where they can exert power, resist the home’s administration, and capably maintain control over their own destiny. By displacing realism and the gothic and by

adding slapstick, dark humour and mystery, Wright and Barfoot push the genre towards a less serious form.

Taken together, *Sunset Manor* and *Exit Lines* also contribute to the demarcation of new age knowledge by pointing out that some people now see nursing homes as housing “truly old” people, whereas they see retirement homes as housing those who remain in control of their own lives and who therefore are still relatively youthful. While retirement home administrators continue to act as the main antagonists in both *Exit Lines* and *Sunset Manor*, the primary difference between the mid-twentieth century texts and Wright’s more recent 1990 text and between it and Barfoot’s even more recent 2008 text is in the clear increase in agency exerted by the protagonists in relation to the administrators, a difference that indicates these authors’ rising estimation of the retirement-home resident’s power and that suggests a shift as well in the society that they reflect. In this chapter, I show that while the trope of the overbearing administrator persists in a weakened form in *Sunset Manor*, it is presented but then triumphantly inverted in *Exit Lines*.

In Chapter Four, “Shaking off Shackles: L.T.C. Freedom in 'The Bear Came Over the Mountain' and *The Other Sister*,” I explore two texts where the protagonists’ lives can be interpreted to have improved following admission to long-term care institutions. Alice Munro's 1999 short story, best known by its movie title *Away From Her*, is similar to Lola Lemire Tostevin’s 2008 *The Other Sister* in that both withhold definitive closure and in so doing potentially contest the aging-as-decline narrative. Munro's story suggests that, for some residents, institutionalization could provide more freedom of identity than is available within the more invisible enclosures of their lives outside the long-term-care facility. Munro's character Fiona mirrors Margaret Laurence’s Hagar in age and in her growing lack

of physical self-sufficiency, but Munro's long-term-care facility is different in that, after admission, Fiona creates a new and possibly more fulfilling life for herself. My analysis of this story acknowledges the existence of a complex love and marriage relationship, but it primarily addresses the story's ambiguous interpretation of the long-term-care facility as a potential site of disruption of patriarchal hegemony, as a place where new personal agency away from an oppressive husband might be enabled.

Lola Lemire Tostevin's 2008 *The Other Sister* tells the story of a woman who not only maintains agency while institutionalized, but seizes the power to return to an identity that she had been forced to abandon earlier in life. In the process of freeing herself, she completely confounds her family, the other residents and the administrative authorities.

In Chapter Five, "Walking out the L.T.C. Door: Cages, Fantasy, and Freedom in *Water for Elephants* and *Flee, Fly, Flown*," I consider positive-aging trends such as 'aging in place,' their influence on retirement, and how they relate to escape narratives about rejecting institutional late-life living. When Jacob Jankowski, elderly first-person narrator of Sara Gruen's 2006 novel *Water for Elephants*, becomes frustrated with the limitations of living in his assisted living facility, he grabs his walker, walks out the front door, and restarts his life by getting a job in a circus (109). This image resonates with many aged adults who would prefer not just to best an 'overbearing administrator' (as for instance in Joan Barfoot's *Exit Lines*) but to avoid placing themselves under the care of any administrator or institution. However, Gruen's circus setting in combination with the possible dementia of her narrator suggest a departure from realism and a movement towards the genre of fantasy.

Janet Hepburn's 2013 *Flee, Fly, Flown* embraces fantasy wholeheartedly. She steps even further away from Laurence's gothic realism by borrowing a 'handsome-prince' character from the genre of romance and a Kerouac-style road narrative from the genre of adventure to create a tale where two old female patients, Lillian and Audrey, escape from their lock-down dementia unit, steal a car, pick up a young man named Rayne whom they find on the street, and set off westward across the country to enjoy themselves. Hepburn's text holds the potential to sober the reader at its conclusion, however, when the first-person narrator falls in a river, becomes ill, requires hospitalization, and is consequently recovered by her daughter, whose intent is to re-incarcerate the escapees. The author leaves the reader to interpret whether the narrator will persist in her goal to travel all the way to British Columbia or whether her daughter will separate her from her friend Audrey and place her in an even less acceptable long-term-care facility than the one from which they have so cleverly escaped.

The sixth chapter, "Outside the Nursing-Home-Narrative Genre: Race and Gender Exclusions in *Green Grass, Running Water*" serves a function similar to the first chapter on Traill and Wilson in that it indicates not what texts are included but what texts are excluded from the nursing-home-narrative genre. Primarily white, straight people of Judeo-Christian and Anglo-Saxon heritage inhabit these homes and are addressed in the texts of the genre. This final chapter discusses the people who are absent from nursing-homes. People such as the four old Indigenous patients depicted in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* are excluded, feel excluded and/or exclude themselves from residency in Canadian institutions.

King's four elderly protagonists walk away from a mental institution to resume their place as elders in their Indigenous community and "fix the world." The text is entertaining, mythical and magical, and provides a stirring mix of adventure, mystery, and humour. Like *Water for Elephants* and *Flee, Fly, Flown*, King's text could be described as fantasy.

However, this text also looks seriously at those who have been excluded or who have felt excluded from admission to a care institution, either because they have ideology which precludes residency or because they are deemed unentitled by typical long-term-care cultures. It sets ageism into context alongside multiple varieties of societal oppression by its manipulations of paralleled story lines.

Summary

The study of age and aging is increasingly relevant and is a particularly under-examined topic in the humanities. The expected life course in the West is lengthening dramatically, and this has and will have implications not just for our current elderly but for all people now and in the future – implications affecting them during their youth and all the way along the life course. This thesis demonstrates that analysis of late-life literature has the potential to reveal dominant cultural narratives of late life and long-term care, in particular, that of the nursing home and the oppression, identity confusion, and loss of agency it has represented. It argues that some current literature reimagines late life and even the home as potential sites of personal agency and meaningful identity development, and it points out that some go so far as to depict the home as a place from which it is possible to escape in order to reclaim a life complete with meaningful ongoing remunerative employment and engagement in the world.

However, the growing tendency for third agers to cling to a semblance of youthfulness and to attempt to distance themselves from the potential hardships of late life may account for these optimistic depictions of late life. Unfortunately, it may also contribute to the isolation and denigration of the most dependent members of our population. Where some aging people claim to age successfully by maintaining agency and independence and by distancing themselves from those who are *truly* old, others by inference age unsuccessfully. Thus, by the advantage to some, those who are perceived as truly old may increasingly become the victims of positive ageism. While a societal attitude that encourages independence in the old has the benefit of empowering the old with confidence and determination, sometimes all the will in the world cannot allow a person to remain viably independent.

Since each individual's life experience is unique and is dependent on many factors such as financial, physical and psychological well-being, quality of late life must also be diverse. As the aged population grows and as a variety of long-term-care facilities and services consequently evolve to meet the needs of this diverse population, the dominant negative image of the home is being joined by a variety of other images. The nursing-home-narrative genre is expanding to include many new publications and, since the form of the stories must reflect the rapidly changing social narratives of our times, it is currently evolving faster than most other contemporary literary genres. If narratives of more luxurious and accommodating facilities begin to overshadow the narrative of the horrific home and if narratives that entirely reject dependency gain momentum, it may not necessarily mean that the dreaded home no longer exists or that the old as a whole have

achieved Herculean strength, but only that those who age ‘successfully’ are choosing to ignore ‘unsuccessful’ old age.

As I have demonstrated, the texts chosen for my thesis can help us to think productively about such issues. Access to these texts will I hope encourage readers to obtain greater consciousness of the complexity of issues surrounding age and aging, to find inspiration to pursue a meaningful and engaged old age for themselves, and to develop an increased empathy for those aged who are caught within the horrific stories that continue to play out in real life.

Chapter One

Before Ageism: Measuring Maturity in *Pearls and Pebbles* and

The Innocent Traveller

Age ideology is in a constant state of flux. People have always marked the passage of time and to some extent been aware of aging's chronological, functional and cultural aspects, yet each era views aging differently. In this chapter, as an initial point of reference for the thesis and in order to establish a model of independent and fulfilled late life that will later be compared to other lives lived within long-term-care facilities, I consider the elderly female protagonists of two early Canadian texts as models of the aging ideologies of their time: Catharine Parr Traill's 1894 *Pearls and Pebbles* and Ethel Wilson's 1949 *The Innocent Traveller*. Inclusion of these texts is important to the thesis because they reveal the dominant characteristics of texts published prior to the first of the nursing-home-narrative-genre texts of the mid-twentieth century.

In my analysis, I focus on Traill's autobiographical protagonist Catharine as a model of exemplary late life. By comparison, Wilson's protagonist Topaz lives a more dependent old age (as would be customary for a relatively wealthy Victorian woman). My interest is in the similarity of chronological age that links Traill's and Wilson's two protagonists as they reach the end of their lives in relation to the dissimilarity in functional aging that distinguishes them. When the texts are read in combination, readers can see Traill's protagonist's maturity in relation to Wilson's protagonist's immaturity. Together these texts illustrate the range of potential development possible for women at the beginning of the twentieth century. In this chapter, I also show that the term 'old' as used in both of these texts lacks the derogatory connotations our current youth-obsessed era

associates with oldness and aging, and I consider how familial late-life care models, such as Catharine's and Topaz's, laid a foundation for the social care systems later developed in Canada.

I have selected these two texts for my initial analysis because they portray two early Canadian personalities who have persisted vividly in my mind since I first read about them and because they claim a significant place in our early Canadian literary heritage. The two texts compare well on several points: Catharine and Topaz both enjoyed good health well into their tenth decade; although the characters were separated by half a century and by the width of almost an entire country, both were of British birth and were early Canadian immigrants; Traill wrote about herself and Wilson wrote about her great aunt, and so both protagonists are real people portrayed through the lens of fiction. Traill writes from the perspective of her great old age. Although Wilson writes as Rose, she switches from past tense to present tense when she begins to depict the last twenty years of Topaz's life. Therefore, like Traill, she emphasizes the latter years of the protagonist's life.

Pearls and Pebbles

Traill's *Pearls and Pebbles*, alternately titled *Notes of an Old Naturalist*, is comprised of connected sketches encompassing ninety years of the author's life. These sketches were written over the course of her life but were first published in 1894. *Pearls and Pebbles* verges on autobiography, but since Traill wrote professionally to support herself and her family from the age of sixteen, readers should assume that the text is shaped by her craft and that the author and the protagonist of the same name thus should be afforded separate identities (xi). The widow of half-pay officer Thomas Traill, Traill had published the

famous settler's guide detailing their life in the bush, *The Backwoods of Canada*, fifty-eight years previous (1836). She is better known for it and for *The Canadian Settlers Guide* (1854) than for *Pearls and Pebbles* or for her children's literature such as *Canadian Crusoes*. Editor Elizabeth Thompson introduces *Pearls and Pebbles* in the 1999 edition, stating: "[n]ear the end of the century, and almost a century old herself, Traill looks back to reflect on her life and on Canadian pioneering; she looks around her and observes her contemporary landscape; and she looks ahead to the twentieth century, predicting further changes in the place she loves" (xii).

To date, critical attention to Traill's oeuvre has focussed on her roles as an early Canadian botanist and as a struggling settler bringing the values of the British Empire to the New World. However, my interest in the text is in the picture it presents of an intelligent and engaged old woman writing and editing sketches that derive from her difficult yet fulfilling life. Catharine avoids all typical pitfalls associated with old age by maintaining sustaining personal relationships (with humans and with the natural world), by remaining meaningfully busy, by receiving recognition and remuneration (though minimal) for her work, by enjoying a rewarding spiritual life, by living independently with her daughter in her own home, and by maintaining adequate physical, mental, and financial health. At different points in the text she acknowledges the fact that she is an "aged naturalist," an "old woman" and an "old lady," yet the text contains absolutely no wistful mirror gazing or self-denigration in response to aging (4, 16, 47).

While Traill experienced periods of decline during her mid-life, such as when she and her family faced illnesses, deaths, and financial hardships, now in her nineties she has weathered most of this and demonstrates strength and maturity as a result. She could be

said to have progressed rather than declined into old age. As Thompson writes in the 1999 introduction, *Pearls and Pebbles* was her penultimate text and “her pen was stilled only by her death in 1899” (xii). She also says that “Traill might have lacked money, but she certainly never lacked friends” (Thompson xiii). Following her husband Thomas’s death in 1859, her brother Samuel Strickland and some friends cared enough for her that they built her a house in Lakefield near Peterborough. When it was completed in 1861, Traill named it Westove in honour of her husband and the estate his family owned in the Orkneys when he was a boy. This was her home for the rest of her life, and this is where she compiled *Pearls and Pebbles* (Peterman xlvi). During her later years, Charlotte Gray explains, while working on her writing projects and correspondences, she shared daily tasks such as housework and gardening with her daughter Kate (339). Although she and her daughter could rarely afford meat, she lived surrounded by the support of her family. The recipient of her family’s and friends’ loving assistance in meeting her needs for housing, sustenance, and care, the aged author’s need for material wealth was small.

Fellow author and great niece Mary Agnes (Maime) FitzGibbon was a strong supporter of Traill and was responsible for instigating the publication of *Pearls and Pebbles* in that she introduced the author to Edward Caswell, a young literary editor of the Methodist Book and Publishing house. He was apparently “captivated by the genial, white-haired author, now in her nineties, who sat on the verandah and seemed to recognize each individual bird that flew through her garden” (Gray 341). *Pearls and Pebbles* received “favourable notices in both Canada and England” and, “[w]ithin three months, 750 copies, at one dollar a copy were sold,” in part, according to Gray, because by this point Traill was seen as somewhat of a Canadian celebrity (341). In the 1894 introductory note that is part

of the original text, Traill's great-niece writes of her "love for the honored and valued authoress of '*Pearls and Pebbles*,' concluding "[m]ay we keep her long to bless us with her loving smile and happy, trustful spirit, and enrich our literature still further with the products of her graceful pen" (152). These depictions of Traill by those who knew her are devoid of any patronizing ageism and are instead full of respect for the author.

Traill concludes her own preface to *Pearls and Pebbles* by speaking directly to "my readers," by identifying herself as a "now aged naturalist" and by indicating that she hopes said readers will find a "pearl" in the "pebbles" that she has gathered from "notebooks and journals written during the long years of her life in the backwoods of Canada" (4). Readers can conclude from these words that this woman is confident in her role as writer, teacher, and naturalist, making no apologies for her identity as a life-long female scholar. She provides herself with authority by mentioning her efforts and her years of experience.

Contrast this confidence to that of the young author who for socio-political reasons must introduce *Backwoods* in 1836 as "Letters from the Wife of an Emigrant Officer" rather than as the carefully crafted writing of a well-educated emigrant woman. The subtitle states that *Backwoods* is "illustrative of the domestic economy of British America," claiming that men's writings do "not enter into the routine of feminine duties and employment," and gently arguing that "a woman's pen alone" can inform readers about the domestic aspects of living in the backwoods (1).

In her old age, the same author exhibits comparative boldness and estimable self-awareness, her former acceptance of hedging having been abandoned. Although still humble, she does not play the part of an "invisible" older woman when she claims that she has learned through her own observations and that she hopes to inspire young people to do

as she has done and seek knowledge for themselves: “I know little beyond what observation teaches or suggests, and am open to correction when I err. My main object in these pages has been to awaken an interest in young readers, such as to induce them to seek and learn for themselves” (*Pearls* 117). The old protagonist revealed in this text is engaged, tested, and strong, and now knows clearly who she is and how she wants to present her knowledge. She presents a well-honed and distinctive style.

As indicated by the preface, the young author of *Backwoods* attempted to shape her craft to the expectations of her society. Readers can see that, in *Pearls and Pebbles*, Traill follows her own rules and writes in an established genre uniquely her own. She writes as she sees fit. Her identity – as a naturalist, as a Christian, and as an old woman who has seen the cycles of life – holistically permeates all parts of her text regardless of the topic. As Thompson says, “a tapestry of interwoven textual strands” relays the content, and, stylistically, “miscellany rules” (xiii). Writing in the first person, Traill speaks mainly about the environment and about pioneer life in Upper Canada, but she includes quotations from the Bible and from poetry and mixes a light entertaining voice with a detached one providing scientific information and observations. She writes about topics as they were in the 1830’s and as they are in the 1890’s while also juxtaposing personal reminiscences that span her entire life, including her childhood in Britain. The text even includes footnotes providing detailed information and the Latin names for plants, which as Elaine Freedgood has pointed out, seem to offer an alternative reading experience for the more serious-minded reader (399).

The diversity of Traill’s topics and styles in this and other texts has led to confusion and also to some neglect by readers and scholars. Serious botanists might take exception to

the inclusion of poetry, for example, and readers who enjoy fiction might find her botanical descriptions or religious quotations intrusive. Michael Peterman reports that some critics perceive Traill as a writer notable only for her children's stories, while others see her as an admirably rational and intellectual adult writer (liv-iv). Carole Gerson concludes that Traill wrote primarily for instructive purposes, "[approaching] the New World from a perspective akin to eighteenth-century rationalism" (41). She suggests that Traill saw her writing as a "vehicle for communicating practical and moral information," using the story telling merely as a means to carry her intended messages (22). All of these characterizations of her work are equally apt because she writes uniquely and consistently in all of these ways and all within the same text. *Pearls and Pebbles*, her last major text and written in her old age, is an example of this distinctive style, well-honed after years of practice.

On the surface, Traill's sketches appear to be thrown together haphazardly. Stories about Indigenous people and settlers' lives seem to be dispersed randomly amongst information about animal and bird habitats. Analysis indicates, however, that Traill's peculiar juxtapositions allow her texts to make multiple statements. Her work, although heavily scientific in places, can also be read as one would read poetry. That is to say, the sketches support simultaneous interpretations. Margaret and Neil Steffler offer an explanation: "As Traill insists on a holistic approach to the natural ecosystem, so we as readers need to approach Traill's text with a similar openness to connections, relationships, and contexts" (126). While some readers may refuse to acknowledge intention in Traill's ordering of the text, no one could deny that the text's juxtaposition of stories and statements makes a powerful statement about the worldview of this very old, self-accepting yet humble woman, about her serene embrace of the natural world and about her own place

held within its Creator's hand. Whether readers share her worldview or not, they cannot help but admire and covet this very aged woman's joyful and confident approach to life.

In the first sketch, "Pleasant Days of My Childhood," Catharine reminisces about being crowned the queen of May amongst the children as they happily celebrated May Day (6). Perhaps to mollify any Christian critics, she tags on a disclaimer proclaiming the innocence of the May Day celebrations: "no doubt a relic of some ancient pagan rite, but, the origin forgotten, now perfectly harmless." Within the first three pages, Catharine also offers a Biblical quotation (from Job 13:2) and refers to the natural garden surrounding her childhood home as their "Eden" (5-7). Thus, by juxtaposing Biblical quotations, depictions of her own youth, and depictions of pagan spring festivals, she begins her text by pointing out that her life and other humans' lives mimic the plant world by following a cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Throughout the text, she repeatedly draws parallels between her life, the text, and the natural world.

She begins the text with a sketch to indicate that the springtime of her own life parallels the spring season, and then, throughout the rest, she parallels the progression of her long life with the progression of the recurring seasons. By these juxtapositions, the text asserts that she and the natural world are both part of God's plan, and that she and that world represent and are represented by Christ's birth, death and resurrection. Later in the text, referencing Matthew 6:26-29 and Luke 12: 24-27 from the Bible, she asks, "Did not our Lord, in whom the fullness of wisdom dwelt, point out to His disciples lessons to be learned from the flowers of the field and the birds of the air?" (81). These connections meld religion, botany, and her own life into one homogeneous, genre-defying text, and they

allow this old woman to offer her worldview to others, to explain to them how she is able to remain serene and happy as she proceeds towards death.

The Stefflers argue that Traill blends botany with “personal, philosophical, cultural, social, and moral views,” and that in her writings, plants and the natural world, like her words, must be “read” “correctly” as texts (123). In *Pearls and Pebbles*, Traill points to Christ’s death and resurrection in the springtime by setting a mid-text sketch, “The First Death in the Clearing,” not in winter, the season of coldness and death, but in April, the season of rebirth. Although this sketch ends in sadness and death, she reports that “The infant slept, too, its last sleep on earth, to waken to a new life in heaven” (84). Whenever she talks about nature, she is also talking metaphorically about the human condition. She portrays herself not as an individual but as part of a community, part of God’s world. Traill’s genre is mixed because – and perhaps to indicate that – life’s various parts cannot be separated from the whole. That is the wisdom this old woman attempts to share.

My goal thus far in the analysis has been to demonstrate the extent to which these holistic interconnections permeate all aspects of her life. The same world view informs her attitudes towards aging, and so her conceptions regarding aging lack the 21st-century’s obsession with youth culture and denigration of the old. Traill’s text suggests that time and aging are largely irrelevant because the existence of an afterlife marks old age and death not as an ending but as a doorway leading to eternal life. The Bible quotations point out that life is part of a cycle rather than a one-way street leading to decline and oblivion: “‘Old things are passed away: behold, all things are become new.’ Slowly and surely the march of civilization has gone on, yet ‘seed time and harvest, summer and winter’ have returned according to their circuits; and as I look back through the long vista of the past I can trace

the guiding hand of Him who changeth not” (*Pearls* 81). Here she references 2 Corinthians 5:17, Genesis 8:22 and Malachi 3:6, which read as follows:

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; old things are passed away;
behold, all things are become new

While the earth remaineth, seed-time and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer
and winter, and day and night shall not cease

For I am the Lord; I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed. (195)

For Catharine, death is not frightening, and so old age is not either. Her spirituality supports every aspect of her life.

Traill sees aging as a precursor, not to Leacock’s “No Man’s Land,” but as a necessary step prior to meeting God and receiving her reward in the afterlife. Old age is followed by death, yes, but also by Heaven. She sees metaphors everywhere in the natural world, each confirming her Christian belief in resurrection:

the first really hot days cause the imprisoned insect to burst from its sealed coffin,
and its wonderful and mysterious resurrection to light and life is at once effected. It
flutters forth a glorious but short-lived creature, perfect in all its beauty, to soar aloft
in the sunlight and enjoy the sweet summer air for a brief season – a type to man of
the promised resurrection of his own body from the dust of the earth, through the
perfect work of redeeming love in the lord Jesus Christ. (53)

The biography written by Traill’s grandniece Mary Agnes FitzGibbon (and in the first edition included before the text) further confirms Traill’s religious confidence. FitzGibbon depicts her great aunt sitting in Westove by the Otonabee River:

Anyone seeing her now in the pretty sitting room, busy with her gay patchwork, stitching away at quilts for the Indian Missionary Auxiliary basket, or putting down the ferns and mosses gathered last summer during her visit to the island of Minnewawa, and watching the light in her blue eyes, the smile on her soft old face, unwrinkled by a frown, or listening to her clever conversation, sparkling with well-told anecdotes of men and things garnered during her long life and retained with a memory that is phenomenal, would realize that the secret of her peaceful old age, her unclouded intellect, and the brightness of her eye, is due to her trust in Providence, her contentment with her lot, and a firm belief in the future where a happy reunion with the loved ones awaits her. (FitzGibbon 179)⁸

As a firm believer in resurrection, Catharine has little reason to be frightened of either old age or death, and so no negative attitudes towards aging are evident in the text.

Contemporary readers of *Pearls and Pebbles* might assume that some of Catharine's lack of self-directed ageism is due to a 19th-century culture that respected the elderly. The idea of elder knowledge is, to some extent, evident in Traill's writing in that she several times refers to the old settlers in her community as a source of valuable information. For example, she refers to the "old settlers'" knowledge and naming of forest flower and bush types (68, 76). The clearest indication of elder respect appears when she acknowledges that "[t]he old settlers in the bush and the Indians were my only sources of information about the birds when I first came to the Colony" (33).

⁸ *Pearls and Pebbles* includes as Appendix A, a biography by Mary Agnes FitzGibbon, Traill's grandniece – grand-daughter of Susanna Moodie – whose mother Agnes FitzGibbon Chamberlin collaborated with Traill on *Canadian Wild Flowers* in 1868. Mary Agnes was a well-known writer herself and was apparently a support in Traill's community.

The text does not, however, voice wholehearted support of ‘elder knowledge’ as an infallible source. Catharine on one occasion questions what the elder settlers have supposed to be a “sulphur” scum on the local lakes and writes to educated botanists of her acquaintance for more information (121). Microscopic analysis reveals that it is not sulphur at all, and so Catharine dismisses the elders’ analysis and replaces it with knowledge gained by means of communication, science, and technology. Thus readers must conclude that the scientific method provided stiff competition for ‘elder knowledge’ in the writings of this particular very old woman in 1894.

Readers can admire Catharine’s self-confidence, faith in Providence, and absence of self-directed ageism. She also models an old age in which intellectual curiosity and engagement are still in evidence to an exemplary extent. Even though Traill is in her nineties as she compiles *Pearls and Pebbles*, the text reveals that she remains involved in the world around her and concerned about her own place within it. Although she is confident in her beliefs, she remains willing to probe and reconsider questions that seem to her to be confusing or contentious. For example, she expresses awareness of an unresolved tension within herself between the “pure and innocent delight” of the botanist immersed in the natural world and the “hurry and strife of the busy world” that she and her fellow settlers have created (140). She struggles to resolve what Thompson calls “the naturalist – pioneer duality” (xx) that sees the settler’s invasion as responsible for the loss of species and the retreat of wildlife: “There is a change in the country; many of the plants and birds and wild creatures, common once, have disappeared entirely before the march of civilization” (49). The Stefflers rightly point out that “Traill’s awareness of the species, relationships and processes in the natural world demands that she include herself as a living

part of the ecosystem” (136). She is aware that while she reveres and protects the natural world as a botanist, as a settler she threatens it. As the Stefflers explain,

Truill’s references to plants and flowers are highly metaphorical and symbolic, particularly as they reveal her conscious and unconscious feelings about the conflict involved in her position as a colonized and colonizing woman in a patriarchal Canadian society and landscape. If we ‘read it aright,’ Truill’s thoughtful and perceptive observations and analysis of the position of Canadian plants and flowers within their ecosystems reveal assessments of her own position and circumstances in the ‘new world.’ (124)

Her heart is clearly torn by the conflict between the needs of the settlers and the needs of the natural world that she and the settlers have manipulated and sometimes abused.

The tension and regret she expresses throughout the text are half-heartedly resolved at the end when she eventually privileges the settlers by suggesting that they are plants gardened by God, the ultimate gardener of both humans and the natural world. In the final sketch, “Something Gathers Up the Fragments,” she justifies the settlers’ presence on the land and their need to supplant nature, arguing that the “unseen, insignificant agents” have created the fertility in the land and “prepare[d] the ground to receive the grain for the life-sustaining bread for himself [the settler] and his children” and have been “under the direction of the infinite God” for this purpose (148). However, I do not believe that the author stopped thinking about these conflicts even though she sums up her position at the end of the book. I would argue that complacency does not win out here and that threads of the associated tension weave through the text amongst the rest of its holistic blend, infusing an effective latent energy into the reading experience.

Truill's uniquely holistic genre also serves to depict her definition of 'oldness' in an indirect but markedly benevolent way. She never addresses the topic of age head on, but her ideology, blended within all of the other topic threads, is nonetheless clearly expressed. The word 'old' appears perhaps two dozen times, and in each instance the use of the term lacks malice. She uses the term to express chronological age when she speaks of an "old Irish settler" (50, 97), "old acquaintances" (15), the "old country" (27), an "old diary" (49), "old notes" (50), an "old towel" (140), or an "old oak tree" (37, 39, 50, 78). Often she refers to something as 'old' in relation to nature's cycles, such as when she refers to the new leaves that are "hiding the old withered and persistently clinging foliage of last year, throwing it off as a worn-out garment" (25).

She expresses no distaste for used up or decayed materials when she finds a salamander on the "roots of a decayed old stump" (62), or when she sees "old decayed logs" (138) or "old rails and stumps" (146). In fact she demonstrates her respect for old and dying objects in the natural world when she writes: "Here lies one of the old giants of the forest at our feet. Take heed how you step upon it" (145). She implies a certain affection when she uses the term 'old' to speak of the "old summer haunts," "an old and trusted friend," a "good old dog" or an "old friend" (16, 16, 23, 92). Throughout the text, the term 'old' in application to objects and people primarily implies pleasant connotations.

Truill comfortably refers to herself as an "old lady" when she imagines a conversation with the birds in her garden: "'Here we are again; glad to see you alive and well, old lady.' And the old lady looks up, and nods a hearty welcome to the tiny brown birds" (16). Some might argue that in the following quotation when she refers to herself as "only an old woman" she is denigrating herself for her age, but this is as self-abusive as she

gets: “Have I made out a good case for the sparrows? I have said my say. I am only [an] old woman after all, with a Briton’s love of fair play, so let us give the poor sparrow a chance” (48). She uses the term ‘old’ to describe chronological age, to recognize a place in nature’s life cycle, or to suggest respect or affection. Notably, the text demonstrates a complete absence of the self-denigration associated with aging that has become common in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Traill’s protagonist is self-confident as she progresses through old age and towards death, is completely lacking in self-directed ageism, and is keen to contemplate intellectual questions. In her very old age, she is surrounded by a support system of family and friends, lives in her own house, and carries out the meaningful and (somewhat remunerative) work of writing *Pearls and Pebbles*. Simply put, Catharine is a model of exemplary late life.

The Innocent Traveller

The Innocent Traveller is similar to *Pearls and Pebbles* in that it is a collection of sketches that could also be considered to be a novel, and in that it tells the life story beginning in childhood and proceeding to old age of a female protagonist, who in Topaz’s case, dies at age one-hundred years. Both texts depict an early Canadian immigrant experience and present an Old Country / New Country dichotomy. My intent in the next section of this chapter is to demonstrate that Wilson’s text is similar to Traill’s in its absence of revealed ageism, suggesting that this negative ideology is not characteristic of early Canadian literature, although more sampling would be necessary to confirm the finding. I also point out that the immaturity of Wilson’s protagonist Topaz in comparison to Traill’s protagonist

Catharine suggests that missed opportunities for education and experience limit functional maturity.

As in *Pearls and Pebbles*, *The Innocent Traveller*'s protagonist is based on a real person. However, Wilson's protagonist Topaz is more fictionalized than Traill's, all of the real-life names having been replaced, and the author portraying herself as probably but not certainly the great-niece of the protagonist rather than as the protagonist (McAlpine 8).

Like Traill, Wilson inserts occasional pieces of poetry – in her case, most often from Donne. Whereas Traill's stories are told in a first-person voice, Wilson's stories, Beverley Mitchell suggests, primarily use “her own refreshing combination of third-person omniscient with authorial comment whenever she felt it warranted . . . such that she forms an alliance with the reader” (74-75). Where the first-person voice intrudes, Wilson speaks as herself but through the fictionalized persona of “Rose.” As in Traill's text, the genre of Wilson's text is difficult to identify. Both Traill and Wilson write what could be considered to be memoirs. However, both meld various themes and strands into a complicated whole.

My interest in *The Innocent Traveller* is in the similar attainment of great chronological age by Traill's and Wilson's two protagonists and in the texts' comparable presentations of age ideologies. These similarities are notable in light of the dissimilarity in functional aging illustrated by the two protagonists. The late-life Topaz resembles Catharine in that she reaches a comparable chronological age and also exhibits physical, mental, spiritual, and financial well-being in her old age. Yet she is starkly different in her comparatively childlike nature. Where Catharine is presented as experienced and wise, Topaz seems innocent and cheerful yet lacks the social depth and conscience usually acquired over time. Wilson presents Topaz as a “water-glider of considerable education”

but little wisdom (93). She writes that Topaz was “not particularly useful but...unquenchably gay” (57). Although similar in chronological age, Catharine has greater gravitas and functional maturity, probably as a result of being granted more opportunities to study as a girl and to assume the work and worry associated with being a wife, mother, homesteader and writer.

Like Catharine, Topaz emigrates with other family members from Britain to the New World. While Catharine settles in the 1830’s in what would become Ontario, Topaz settles in the brand new town of Vancouver half a century later. Topaz arrives shortly after the railroad and is therefore almost as much a part of early pioneering in Canada as is Catharine.⁹ However, whereas *Pearls and Pebble*’s protagonist demonstrates the sagacity gained from suffering through the physical and financial hardships associated with a rugged settler experience, the bearing of multiple children, and the somewhat inadequate support of husband Thomas, the elderly Topaz lacks depth as a result of being under-challenged throughout her life while confined within the patriarchal protection of her wealthy and competent extended family. First she is a daughter and a sister, later an aunt and great-aunt, yet always she is someone’s dependent.

Throughout the book, she is surrounded by family but is never considered to be anyone’s most important family member. Thus she remains weak and socially shallow. In her youth she suffers an unrequited love for Mr. Sandback. He overlooks her, despite the willing servitude demonstrated in her comments: “What will please him that I can do? I

⁹ Ethel Wilson (nee ‘Bryant’ and fictional name ‘Rose’) was sent to Vancouver at the age of ten in 1898: “It was a raw town in beautiful country and was only fourteen years old – four years older than Ethel Bryant” (McAlpine 8).

would lie down and let him tread upon me” (46). Unlike Catharine (who probably would have preferred fewer opportunities to look after herself and others and to struggle as an under-appreciated colonial writer), Topaz never attains the opportunity to assume a meaningful role, such as mother or caregiver to a family of her own. As a result, there is “something in human relations of which she was unaware, or which she was incapable of feeling” (190).

Topaz has lived shallowly, and, by the end of her life, remains shallow. Catharine at the end of her life, by comparison, has assembled a wealth of experience and a place at the centre of a loving extended family. Consequently, although her trials have been many, she has achieved an admirable late-life identity. Wilson writes that “the private life of Topaz, if life must be compared to a journey, had been like travelling on a canal” (65). Her life is smooth, with nothing very difficult to overcome, her direction and rate of flow determined for her. When the stepmother dies before Father, Topaz is “still in her light-hearted minority at forty-five” (67). Wilson writes: “Rachel slid by nature and unaware into the Stepmother’s place.... The niece was fifteen years younger than the aunt, but Rachel was a woman grown, and older than Topaz in wisdom, and now took upon herself another care” (82). Wilson writes that, at her father’s death, “Topaz attained her undesired majority and independence at the age of fifty. But she was only a girl grown old, however much strangers might take her for a woman” (80). Forced at his death to leave the care of her father, she enters the care of her older sister Annie and her daughter (Topaz’s niece), Rachel. As Donna Smyth writes, “She has not followed the common path of marriage and so the family of left-over women becomes her shelter and protection” (93).

It is important to note that Wilson does not suggest that the shallowness of Topaz is typical of all of the women of her family. The author suggests that women who serve in the role of mother and wife have an opportunity to be tested and to develop their strengths, at least to some extent, as a result. The text portrays the intertwined lives of four generations of women, each a model of the gradual transformation in women's rights that occurred over the course of a century. The eldest generation is represented by Topaz's mother who "sat gracious, fatigued, heavy behind the majestic crinoline with the last and fatal child" (9). In this one sentence, Wilson sums up the traditional life of the upper-class 19th-century woman, burdened as she was with inevitable pregnancies, but she credits this character with the majesty of her crinoline and does not denigrate her. Topaz's sister Annie follows successfully in Mother's footsteps, but then once widowed must emigrate in order to regain the protection of a male family member. Through Annie's actions and through her comments about Topaz, Wilson points out that only when women are un-partnered or without young children at hand can their situation lead to the emptiness and lack of growth-inducing opportunities evidenced in Topaz.

Annie's emigration to Canada was similar to Traill's in that each left Britain under the protection of a man. Both found new challenges in the New World, Annie returning to the role of mother and Traill embarking on that role as she arrived. Poverty necessitated Traill's descent from the gentility to which she had been raised and presented her with responsibilities that required unusual fortitude for a woman of her class and time period. Her life departed from the norms she had anticipated for herself, and as she laboured and aged she evolved into an early model of a liberated woman. However, had she been born into the lower classes, little fuss would have been made over her dismissal of lady-like

behaviours and her embrace of work such as farming. Lower-class women have always been *liberated* to work outside the private sphere to support themselves and sometimes also their families. In contrast, the privileged Topaz's life and experiences did not require her to face the emotional, physical, and financial challenges that Traill's did.

Topaz's niece Rachel and her great-niece Rose, although remaining financially privileged as is evidenced by the continued employment of a family cook, also present as women who assume new responsibilities inside and outside the home and who thus mature into women who have achieved greater freedoms than the older generations of women represented by Mother and Annie. Wilson indicates that once Annie's last son moved out of the house to which the women had immigrated, Rachel "became and remained the man of the house" (138). Wilson's and Traill's texts thus both suggest that while women like Topaz have an opportunity to age, an increased maturity – or perhaps I could say sagacity – in women is linked to opportunities for education and experience. Wilson suggests that while Annie and Mother were fulfilled in their traditional roles, a woman like Topaz was never allowed the opportunity to find fulfilment because she was denied both the traditional opportunities afforded Annie and Mother and the new opportunities afforded Rachel and Rose. Thus the text makes a statement about the patriarchal world to which Wilson was born and about the restrictions all women faced in their growth towards functional maturity.

Despite the polar difference Wilson depicts between Rose and Topaz in terms of opportunities for personal growth, Topaz is not a flat character or merely a symbol of patriarchal oppression. The text would not be worth writing about if that were the case. Despite her shallowness, friends and family appreciate Topaz because her personality

sparkles like a multi-faceted gem – a topaz to be precise. Wilson writes that Topaz went to the library every other day and brought home books and “read late into the night” (112), and that she also “made a great many friends in the little church... and her genius for acquaintanceship and activity sparkled and flew about” (112). She joined groups such as the Ladies’ Aid, Women’s Auxiliary, and Women’s Council (Wilson 112).

Wilson reinforces readers’ understanding of Topaz’s general character by adding, however, that she quit whenever responsibilities loomed: “Rarely, in the years that followed, did she allow herself to become entangled in responsibility” (Wilson 117). The author assigns Topaz one shining moment – the incident where she felt strong social empathy and ardently defended a black man against racial slurs (135). Although she indicates that Topaz behaved in an uncharacteristically insightful and brave manner by speaking up, the act suggests that Topaz at least had had the potential to develop further.

After Rose was orphaned, Annie, Rachel, and Topaz received her into their household. Topaz tends to be not the provider but rather the recipient of the mutual caregiving that ensues amongst the women. When, for instance, Annie lies dying, she asks for her daughter Rachel, not for her sister Topaz (189). Following Rose’s marriage, Annie’s death, and Rachel’s death, and at the age of seventy-five years, Topaz reaches the point where she has no senior relative to care for her. Wilson writes: “Now, for the first time in her life, Aunty ha[s] her own home. She reign[s] for the first time alone, and in her own apartment. And yet not alone, for there [is] a constant struggle for mastery with her companion Mme Brizard” (200). Wilson concludes that the companion “managed Aunty very well,” which suggests that even in her very old age, Topaz remains less than fully adult (200).

Although Wilson could be said to be making a feminist statement by querying the functional age of underdeveloped women like Topaz, the author seems to delight in Topaz more than to criticize her. As R. D. MacDonald points out, “Wilson’s story, her series of picaresque triumphs, celebrates not rest or arrival but the flow, the exuberant adventures of an eccentric soul forever young” (1). When Wilson tells a story about Topaz being duped on the cross-Canada train by men who tell her that the hills she sees were caused by many bison rolling on their backs, yes, she infantilizes Topaz, yet she also celebrates her cheerful enthusiasm for living (98). When she again infantilizes Topaz by telling a story about the great aunt losing her knickers while on a mission to buy ice cream, she also adds poignancy by depicting this event as the last outing shared by Topaz and a companion prior to the great aunt’s death (232). She seems to regard her great-aunt as somewhat of a pet.

Wilson’s depictions afford respect to all of her aged relatives. Depicting her great grandfather, she writes:

Happy, happy old man. He sat there, sleeping in security in the sunshine. His world was a good world. . . . Each age, like our own, has its large blind spots. The social conscience was stirring but not awake. Great Grandfather Edgeworth was a product of the ages which preceded the young Victoria. Here he was, sleeping in the garden, ninety years old, an upright old man in a world which he really thought was upright.
(69)

Here she acknowledges the old man’s limitations but portrays him with an affectionate tone.

The Innocent Traveller lacks any and all evidence of today’s prevalent ageism. Wilson probably suggests that her life as an orphaned youngster was somewhat dull when

she speaks of “this sedate household of three ageing ladies and one young girl” and when she comments that the visits of “Grannie’s sons and their exhilarating wives and children were the delight of this family” (180). However, her depictions generally favour all of the aged women who raised her (which was not politically necessary considering that they were all dead at the time of publication of the text). As Annie looked out the railroad window on her way to settle in Vancouver, Wilson suggests that she felt uncertain: “‘I am rather old,’ thought the Grandmother, looking at the swiftly passing familiar animals, ‘to be able to assimilate great change’” (Wilson 99). Wilson then goes on to show how admirably Annie did evolve and adjust to the changes her life brought as she settled in Vancouver.

The author speaks reverently of Annie: “Grandmother’s was the dialect of the soul” and her “spiritual life was all pervading” (151, 181), adding that “[h]er earth-bound granddaughter Rose, who was young but alert, would have been quick to detect the least scent of hypocrisy or of self-awareness in her Grandmother. There was none” (152). She writes that at the same time that Topaz, following family prayers, was jumping up and already thinking about eating grapes, Grandmother was still “looking through a mist” (154). She also comments that “Grannie was such a pretty old lady” (179). Twentieth-century writing rarely would refer to an old woman in these terms.

Wilson depicts Annie’s death lovingly, writing that one morning Rachel was unable to awaken her mother: “the once-beautiful Grandmother, with her long and good life behind her, lay without suffering, with eyes closed, unspeaking, cared for by the loving devotion of three women (186). When considering his grandmother Annie, Topaz’s great grandnephew thinks that her descendants remember her and act as her memorial: “why, there must be over fifty of us now” (94). The old settler leaves much behind on her death.

Unlike Annie, Topaz leaves no legacy of children. The words of an un-named great nephew in the story suggest that she wrote *The Innocent Traveller* to eulogize her great aunt, saying: “she has gone; there is no mark of her that I know, no more than the dimpling of the water caused by the wind a few minutes ago” (94). This comment indicates that she needed to recognize her great aunt by writing about her since, having glided through life, Topaz was at risk of disappearing quietly into meaningless oblivion with no monument of any type to mark her passing. In the story, Topaz is not frightened by death and seems to want to go: “She is very restless. She shows no fear and yet she seems to be in some kind of anguish. Plainly she is wanting something, an affirmation or release” (235). She seems, at one hundred years of age, to be going off on her next adventure. She doesn’t speak to God as Annie would have, but instead Wilson writes: “Let me go immediately ... immediately...” and “Quick, get me some fresh lace for me head, someone! I’m going to die, I do declare!’ Evidently she is pleased and confident. What an adventure, to be sure!” (235-36). Wilson indicates that Topaz did not have “religion” but did have “an indigenous faith in God” (82). As with Traill and Annie, this faith allows Topaz to accept aging and, at her death, to look towards the next life as a continuation of existence rather than as a frightening cessation. Confidence in the existence of an afterlife allows each of these three women to overcome fears associated with aging or death.

While the relative functional maturity of the old women illustrated in Traill’s and Wilson’s texts has been the primary focus of this chapter, the striking image with which *The Innocent Traveller* opens is also worthy of attention. Here Wilson speaks of age, but of youth rather than of old age. The text shows readers Topaz as a small child seeing only the world of shoes under the table, while it simultaneously makes readers aware of the larger

world above the table, hinted at but not revealed to the child. The text suggests here and throughout its entirety that Topaz is immature and child-like, yet it also suggests through its imagery that readers are child-like along with Topaz, seeing only a hint of the larger more metaphysical world. Wilson, Topaz and readers see the shoes only. Humans, like Topaz, are all water-gliders, seeing the surface while skimming over the unknowable depths.

Wilson's text offers more on the topic of age than just a consideration of chronological and functional aging. Yes, she states that women in a patriarchal world were limited by the protection of men to the point where some were functionally unable to grow past childhood. However, she also suggests that, metaphysically, all humans are child-like in their understanding of the spiritual mysteries of life.

Summary

According to an address at the University of Ottawa's Ethel Wilson Symposium in 1981, Wilson lived a further fifteen years after she was widowed, was crippled in mid-life by arthritis in her hip, and for the final eight years of her life, in the words of her friend Mary McAlpine, "lived (or, survived) in the Arbutus Nursing Home" until her death in 1981 (10). Unlike Traill and Wilson's female family members who were cared for in their own homes and by their own family, Wilson was institutionalized during her final years.

I have argued that negative attitudes towards age and aging are significantly absent in Traill's *Pearls and Pebbles* and in Wilson's *The Innocent Traveller* and that Traill's Catharine provides an exemplary model of ideal old age. However, the aging-as-decline narrative surfaces here in Ethel Wilson's friend's 1981 comments regarding the plans for Wilson's late-life care. McAlpine reports that "some of her friends dreaded her reaction

when she would have to be told [that] arrangements were being made for her to go there” but that it was “typical of the self-disciplined orphan child, now old lady, that she made no protest and went, with a semblance anyway, of acceptance” (10). These comments about “survival” in the home introduce not just the decline narrative but also the home-as-horror narrative that became prevalent in Canada in the twentieth century.

In the second through fifth chapters of this thesis, I explore eight stories about protagonists who live – like Ethel Wilson did and like 8% of our seniors today do – in late-life-care facilities, and I further trace society’s attitudes towards age and aging as expressed in our Canadian literature.

Chapter Two

Assembling Identity: Decline and Progress Narratives in *The Stone Angel* and *The Stone Diaries*

In this chapter, I will consider two Canadian novels, published 29 years apart, that together facilitate an examination of identity and agency in relation to aging. Margaret Laurence's 1964 novel *The Stone Angel* is probably the most well-known example of the decline narrative in Canadian literature and as such serves as appropriate marker to the beginning of the Canadian nursing-home-narrative genre. Carol Shields's 1993 novel *The Stone Diaries* gestures towards *The Stone Angel* in its recording of the life of an aged central female character, in its stone imagery, in its depiction of aging as decline and loss, and in its enquiry into the themes of late-life recollection and search for selfhood and meaning. Both texts focus on the protagonist's interior life and on the construction of personal identities more than on the action of an external plot. Both present the protagonist as central yet influencing and influenced by other characters and events, that is, as a hub where multiple stories intersect yet are reconfigured into a story or stories focused on the protagonist. The angst of the protagonists provides the energy in their respective texts. Both authors show their aged protagonists addressing their identities as individuals and as women within communities dominated by men.

However, while Laurence's modernist text presents a fictitious autobiography from the first-person perspective of the elderly protagonist and tinges realism with the gothic, Shields's humorous postmodern text portrays the protagonist's fictitious life by means of discontinuous first and third-person narrative strands, eschewing linearity and embracing ambiguity and multiplicity in order to represent a life. Both texts depict elements of aging-

as-decline narrative, but Shields's text also incorporates aspects of aging-as-progress¹⁰ narrative. Taken together, Laurence's and Shields's protagonists provide an intriguing illustration of opposing definitions of late-life identity.

As I have discussed in the introductory chapter, age studies theorists such as Margaret Morganroth Gullette argue against those who limit the definition of a person's identity to an unchanging central core essence. Instead they believe that people incorporate into themselves over the life course various ongoing experiences, character developments and interactions with others, ultimately resulting over time in progression towards fuller, more complete selves. While *The Stone Angel* provides an illustration of a protagonist who defines identity as fixed and stable and who strenuously resists all tendencies towards progress narrative, *The Stone Diaries* provides an illustration of a protagonist who appears to accept an identity defined as progress across the life course, as an accumulation of diverse and changing identity elements.

Laurence and Shields both depict aging as a dismaying descent into physical ugliness and weakness, yet Shields's depiction is tempered with aspects suggestive of positive-aging ideologies. A comparison between the two texts demonstrates that, unlike Hagar, Shields's character Daisy bends according to her circumstances, thus serving as an

¹⁰ The term 'decline narrative' denotes the popular belief that a person progresses to the peak of adulthood after which they are 'over the hill' and descending towards death. The 'progress narrative' counters the 'decline narrative,' suggesting that this image of a single rise and fall is overly simplistic. Most people would be considered to experience intermittent and possibly concurrent periods of progress and decline over their entire life-course if all measures of psychological, social, physical, and financial states were to be taken into account. When I use the term 'progress narrative' therefore, I do not mean to imply necessarily that progress moves towards goodness or happiness or that it completely displaces decline, but merely that it moves towards something further or larger. By contrast, the term 'positive aging' (or 'successful aging' or 'anti-aging') connotes beneficial aging outcomes (such as maintained physical fitness), although in some usages 'positive aging' connotes contentious or faux beneficial outcomes (such as can be achieved through consumerist spending on such things as age-defying plastic surgery). This sense of 'positive aging' is often construed in opposition to a term such as 'healthy aging,' which connotes more general public approval.

illustration of Gullette's broader definition of identity. Daisy differs from Hagar in that she enables complementary relationships with others, drifts complacently from one living situation to another, and adjusts compliantly to the developments in her identity as she ages. She enjoys periods of positive progress, such as when she finds fulfillment in the art of gardening and in her related work as a journalist. She suffers psychological decline following the loss of her husband and job and physiological decline following her heart attack. Yet, positive progress repeatedly reasserts itself, even during her residency at Canary Palms. Throughout the text, she continually adjusts her internal autobiography as a way to cope with change and re-establish her ever-evolving identities. However, her ruminating attempts to justify the actions of others in order to construct an acceptable social history for herself could be said to verge on denial or even cognitive malfunction.

As I have argued in the previous chapter, Catharine Parr Traill's cheerful faith in God and Topaz's trusting anticipation of eternal adventure allow both protagonists to find purpose in their lives and to face aging and the approach of death with confidence. Although their approaches to self-definition differ during the course of the texts, both Hagar and Daisy face aging and death with marked disquiet. Hagar resists, runs away, and eventually capitulates, perhaps in the end finding some grace. Daisy by comparison repeatedly yields and adapts, seemingly progressing towards old age without resisting. Yet the final pages of the text reveal that "Daisy Goodwill's final (unspoken) words are 'I am not at peace,'" suggesting that she has been compliant but not approving of the channels her life has followed (361). Although Daisy has thus joined Hagar in voicing her dissatisfaction, neither text provides closure regarding its protagonist's eventual state of being.

In this chapter, I will show that both texts illustrate the aging-as-decline narrative, and I will also explain how, in its presentation of an alternative definition of identity, Shields's text mixes the influence of decline narrative with some aspects of an aging-as-progress narrative.

The Stone Angel

Margaret Laurence's 1964 realist novel is an early example of a now relatively substantial set of Canadian life-review literature employing a late-life frame narrative to weave a tale of the protagonist's earlier adventures, and, in so doing, to depict the process by which he or she acquires a full late-life identity.¹¹ Age studies scholars today afford *The Stone Angel* iconic status as an early Canadian work on aging, yet a full consideration of its age-related narrative has yet to be carried out. Sally Chivers argues that, in earlier years, critics ignored, underplayed or denigrated Hagar's age: "many studies 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." Yet she points out that "because many critics avoid the troubling present-tense narrative featuring the indomitable Hagar daunted by age, few refer to the Silverthreads nursing home visit even though it is the central conflict of the novel's frame" (*From 22-23*).

As all long-lived literature does, this text provides ample scope for simultaneous interpretations. Many critics disagree with Chivers, seeing different aspects of the novel as the central conflict. Nora Foster Stovel portrays Hagar's visit to the Silverthreads home as

¹¹ Think of Sara Gruen's *Water for Elephants*, Mordecai Richler's *Barney's Version*, Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes*, Frances Itani's *Remembering the Bones*, Jane Urquhart's *Away*.

the impetus leading to Hagar's symbolic descent into "Hell" at Shadow Point (Stovel 195), and chooses to focus her analysis on the climactic confession and pseudo-Christian communion she partakes of there in the form of shared wine and soda crackers (Laurence 223). Stovel argues that Hagar finally apologizes to her long-dead son John (as represented by the vagrant Lees) with the words "I didn't really mean it," and that she takes a first step there towards spiritual redemption by relinquishing her Lucifer-like pride (Laurence 247). Religious interpretations of the novel are undoubtedly significant and they help to place it within the rest of the Manawaka series, yet considering that the protagonist's primary obsession in the frame narrative is to align her current distasteful old-aged identity with the image she holds of a preferred youthful self, it seems surprising that age ideology has not been a more central topic of enquiry regarding this novel. Many people today are more immediately concerned with aging and its ramifications than they are capable of or interested in following Biblical and Miltonic allusions, so perhaps the age-related aspects of Laurence's work will maintain interest in the text amongst present and future readers.

Like Chivers, Amelia DeFalco primarily addresses the protagonist in her old age and within the frame narrative, discussing the "narrator's appeal to recollection as a means toward self-recognition and the summation of a life" (30). According to DeFalco, Hagar is attempting to reconcile her true free identity with the current, shockingly old version. She argues that "*The Stone Angel* depicts a character struggling to reconcile past and present, and offers a binaristic model of selfhood that corresponds to Hagar's persistent frustration and anger at what she perceives as a delinquent old self that distorts her true, young self" (30). For DeFalco, the primary conflict occurs in Hagar's mind as she tries to reconcile the two images of herself.

Laurence's portrayal of Hagar's alienation is, in part, a stark delineation of her acceptance of her society's ageism. Like Stephen Leacock's words in the introductory chapter from "Three Score and Ten – The Business of Growing Old" and like many other texts of the twentieth century, *The Stone Angel* embodies one of the most common of aging tropes: the decline narrative.

The Stone Angel predates the pro-agency age ideology instigated by the Boomer cohort, yet the central character Hagar can be seen to be facing the same type of crisis that third-agers today are attempting to avoid. She is rejecting arrival of what we would today call the fourth age or *true* old age, the onset of dependency and feebleness; she yearns for the power of her former self, now hidden inside her current bulky, uncooperative hulk. The text explores the fear of the long-term-care institution known as the home or the gothic home-as-horror narrative that was prevalent at the time Laurence wrote. Hagar sees her helplessness reflected in her aging body and in the aging bodies of others at Silverthreads, and she senses that removal to the home would force her to face her fears about aging.

For Hagar, aging is defined by loss – lost ability, lost possessions, lost privacy, lost autonomy, and lost true identity. Despite her desire to avoid it, she has succumbed to change. Yet she vainly clings to the ideal she held for herself in her early adulthood. In the present-time frame narrative, Hagar is ninety years old, suffers memory confusion, and sometimes falls when attempting to walk, yet she fiercely refuses to relinquish her independence. She has raged and resisted all her life in an attempt to defend herself. Her first antagonist was her judgmental father, whose fiery will she herself has inherited, yet who forced her to "memorize weights and measures" and to submit to being beaten on the

hands with a “foot ruler” – metaphorically requiring her to accept his rule over her life and his version of achievement (7).

After her marriage, Hagar had continued to define her power in relation to the restraints imposed by her husband and her sons, until finally she is “rampant with memory” and fighting against her aging body (5). For one moment in time, she had become what she considered to be her true and independent self when she announced to her father that despite his disapproval, she planned to marry Bram. Once disillusioned by the reality of her married life, she began to forever look backward to this ideal yet lost selfhood.

When forced by circumstances in middle age to go door-to-door selling eggs, Hagar encounters Lottie, a childhood acquaintance who has risen in life while she has fallen. Humiliated by the encounter, she escapes into a public rest room, focussing on her image in the mirror as a way of addressing the perceived discrepancy between her core identity and the ravaged exterior moulded by time:

I found what I needed, a mirror. I stood for a long time, looking, wondering how a person could change so much and never see it. So gradually it happens.... My hair was gray and straight. I always cut it myself. The face – a brown and leathery face that wasn't mine. Only the eyes were mine, staring as though to pierce the lying glass and get beneath to some truer image, infinitely distant. (133)

Hagar refuses to accept the changes time has wrought in her appearance, believing that her true self remains evident only in her eyes.

In the frame narrative's present time period, right after Doris asks the minister to coax her mother-in-law to accept admission to a home, Hagar looks into another mirror: “when I look in my mirror and beyond the changing shell that houses me, I see 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). Now well into old age, Hagar once again notes that only her eyes match the self that she perceives as her true identity. After meeting with the minister, Hagar muses that, even at ninety years of age, she should be able to “look into the mirror softly, take it by surprise [and] see there again that Hagar with the shining hair, the dark-maned colt off to the training ring” (42). As Sally Chivers has commented, Laurence “presents a strict division between the interiority and the exteriority of aging,” noting that she chooses to accept the veracity of the interior self and to ignore the reflection of the exterior self (*From* 14). Fiercely clinging to her own core selfhood as she perceives it, she is threatened by any behaviour that might compromise it.

Literary analysis of point of view reveals that although the character Hagar attempts to limit development of her own selfhood, the medium in which the author writes the story inherently attests to the protagonist’s development across time. Although the character refuses to accept change, the author makes those changes obvious to the reader. By definition, characters in novels exist in time and thus readers see the changes they undergo as the story develops. There are interesting tensions between the first-person narrator identified in present time within a text, the first-person narrator’s past and/or future selves as revealed in the text, and the first-person narrator as he/she is shown to evolve throughout the time period of the text’s present-time action. These multiple voices should not be conflated. In *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (1983), Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan explains that “focalization and narration are separate in so-called first-person retrospective narratives, although this is usually ignored by studies of point of view” (73).

Rimmon-Kenan's point can be understood by considering the evolving focalizers which bridge the present-age narrator Hagar in *The Stone Angel* as revealed at the outset of the text (who has just begun to experience symptoms of serious disability) with the present-age Hagar at the end of the text (whose resistance has been broken and who is now in hospital). His point can be further understood by differentiating the multiple focalizations of the present-age Hagar from the multiple focalizations of the past-age Hagar on which the narrator also intermittently focuses the writing.

Thus the medium of the novel itself differentiates between the present-age narrator Hagar who evolves throughout the present time of the text (who would be described by Rimmon-Kenan as "the centre of consciousness") and the Hagar of previous ages, all of whom in turn also become the "focalizer" through whom the narrator "sees" life. And so, there is a difference between the speaking, narrating Hagar and the seeing Hagar who become the temporary focus of the narrator's attention and through whose eyes the reader temporarily views the action of the story. Hagar is unwilling to accept changes to her personal identity, but the workings of the novel reveal the extent to which she does in fact change.

Since *The Stone Angel* was published in the same decade that saw the birth control pill become available to women, and that saw many women such as Hagar begin to question their traditional roles, the protagonist's strong will and determination to hold onto her youthful moment of absolute freedom suggest a parallel with all the women who rebelled in the 1960's against restrictive roles.¹² In fact, the identity encompassing all of the

¹² Is it a coincidence that Margaret and her husband split up over his dismissal of the novel? In *Dance on the Earth: A Memoir* Laurence writes: "Strange reason for breaking up a marriage: a novel. I had to go with the old lady, I really did, but at the same time I felt terrible about hurting him" (158).

women aging into old age during the middle and late twentieth century did change in that, through their assertion of women's rights and their cumulative resistance to patriarchal authorities throughout their lifetimes, they broke a path for contemporary aging women to disrupt the convention of invisibility as they age into their own old age in the twenty-first century.

Although Laurence's Hagar can today be recognized as an early model of united womanhood in resistance against patriarchal dominance, the character rejected association with the women who preceded her because she did not want to conform to the feminine role they represented. When her brother Dan lay dying, she refused to assume the identity of her own mother in order to comfort him because she was not and could not bear to be "a bit like her," that is, to be perceived as a submissive weak woman (25). Throughout her lifetime, she has been determined to fight against any step forcing her to accept a position of submission, weakness, or dependency.

When her son and daughter-in-law claim that she must move to Silverthreads, she becomes desperate at the thought of having her familiar home torn from her:

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)

Hagar sees her home as an extension of her own selfhood. The house and its familiar objects, each carrying a piece of the past, anchor her to a preferred version of reality and

give her at least a limited sense of permanence. To be torn out of this exoskeleton and exposed to the world resembles a type of death in that it would require her to relinquish her trust that a safe pseudo-eternity can be lived within its walls.

While Hagar sees her home of many years as a comforting shelter and a keeper of her past identities, she sees the nursing home as a new and unwanted shell that will force her to accept a changed identity. Silverthreads and her aged body both resemble encompassing cages that threaten to further restrict and disfigure her true identity. Laurence depicts Hagar looking down at a body she does not recognize as her own: “I... see with surprise and unfamiliarity the great swathed hips. My waist was twenty inches when I wed” (56). She no longer recognizes her alien body and feels as if it is betraying her: “as I lower myself to the chesterfield, the windy prison of my bowels belches air, sulphurous and groaning. I am to be spared nothing, it appears. I cannot speak, for anger” (58).

The long-term-care institution, known to her as the “home,” repulses her, as the Silverthreads scene makes apparent. She fearfully asks a female resident whether “you ever get used to such a place” and later comments on the unintended path her life has taken, saying, “I never got used to a blessed thing” (104). She has just raged hopelessly, refusing to accept her evolving identities.

Some critics figure Hagar as a fallen-angel Lucifer, an unredeemed sinner of the Western Judeo-Christian tradition as seen in the Bible, Milton and Dante. Laurence clearly intended religious interpretations of her story since she linked her protagonist to the Biblical story of Hagar through the name she assigned to her (Stovel 175). According to Christian doctrine, only by an act of confession and a request for forgiveness from God could Hagar be forgiven and reborn. Interpreters who analyse the novel’s religious

underpinnings disagree as to whether or not Hagar achieves this redemption by the text's conclusion. Paul Comeau argues that, while religious redemption seems a possibility, the text provides no closure to that effect (64). Laurence herself comments:

In what happens to Hagar at the very end of the novel there is to me some sense of redemption. Close to the end of her life she...really can admit to herself, when she says 'Pride is my wilderness,' that the tragedy of her life has been that, because of her spiritual pride she has been unable to give and receive the kind of love she is capable of...she always wondered what the neighbours thought. So I would say that the main theme is survival with the ability to give and receive love. But fitting into that theme and perhaps more important is the sense of a possibility of a kind of redemption. (qtd. in Fabre 193)

As Comeau points out, the qualifiers in Laurence's final sentence cast doubt as to her firm belief in her character's redemption. I would argue that while the text suggests the possibility of redemption, as Comeau says, Hagar may not achieve it by "virtue of her inability to bend enough" (64).

It could be argued that Hagar willingly changes and acquires a more altruistic identity at the end of the story when she seems to bless her son Marvin (45). Stovel states that in the final scene, "Hagar gives birth to herself as a woman" and dies a "woman and a mother, repeating...in her own hands, what she terms 'the mother words' – 'There, There'" (202). Yet Hagar prevaricates, saying that, although she speaks with a "kind of love," she tells "a lie – yet not a lie" to her son when she says he has been a better son than John (304-07). While it remains debatable whether she has fully embraced motherhood, it is clear that she is finally at least willing to play that role in order to give comfort to her son Marvin.

This marks a significant change from her refusal to assume the role of mother for her brother Dan. By including these parallel scenes, the authorial voice suggests that Hagar does indeed make a conciliatory gesture.

Stovel interprets the glass of water received from the nurse as a “sacramental symbol,” a representation of absolution or baptism (202). However, no closure can be asserted here because Hagar’s rude eagerness to seize the glass could be interpreted as her ongoing attempt to fight off her own helplessness (Laurence 202). It could also be argued that she extends a supposedly redeeming act of charity by getting out of bed and obtaining the needed bedpan for her fellow hospital patient. Yet this could be explained away too by arguing that she is merely refusing to give in to the limitations of her aging body and must therefore prove her continued strength and independence. And although the text’s final words “and then” suggest death, Laurence does not make Hagar’s achievement of a religious afterlife obvious.

Laurence provides no definitive closure, and so opens the door to multiple interpretations. I would argue that it is clear that Hagar repeatedly resists patriarchal authority and rejects the restrictions of a changing body, and that she strives until the absolute end of the text to assert her ideal youthful and independent identity. I acknowledge that she has achieved some self-knowledge by the conclusion and that she has become willing to extend a type of kindness towards Marvin. I would also agree that it is *possible* to interpret that she has exerted a type of agency in relinquishing her pride and accepting a religious redemption. However, I would assert that the only agency she *definitively* exerts is resistance against patriarchal authority, against her own aging body, and against submission to institutional care. In the last scene, severe discomfort forces her to request pain

medication, yet in her final act – grasping the water glass in her own hands – she can be interpreted to have rejected further assistance and to have again attempted to seize the independence that has eluded her throughout her life. Despite Hagar’s Lucifer-like qualities and her sheer orneriness, readers admire her plucky fighting spirit and identify with her fight against indignity, helplessness, and debility.

In Western culture, moving to institutional care has long been construed as a loss of independence and autonomy and as one of the most wrenching identity changes of late-life. Admission to a nursing home has been equated with loss of youthfulness, with decline towards death. When Laurence published *The Stone Angel* in 1964, nursing homes in the West had come a long way, yet people had not forgotten their ghastly prototypes – the workhouses of the nineteenth century. Laurence reflects the cultural beliefs of her time, presenting a powerful portrait of the fear and loathing such non-homes inspired.

Since roughly 1990, though, some contemporary authors have been reimagining the nursing home as a potential site of personal agency and of ongoing and meaningful identity development.¹³ Published in 1993, *The Stone Diaries* sits on the cusp of this change, representing a time period when decline narratives were fully entrenched but ‘positive aging’ narratives, ‘progress’ narratives, and new approaches to building long-term care facilities were beginning to alter age ideologies.

¹³ For Canadian sources, refer to: Richard B. Wright’s 1990 *Sunset Manor*, Alice Munro’s 1999 “The Bear Came over the Mountain,” Sara Gruen’s 2006 *Water for Elephants*, Joan Barfoot’s 2008 *Exit Lines*, and Lola Lemire Tostevin’s 2008 *The Other Sister*.

The Stone Diaries

When Shields's protagonist Daisy moves into Canary Palms Convalescent Home, she at first says "I'm not myself here" (Shields 324), a sentiment that echoes Hagar's question to a Silverthreads resident about whether "you ever get used to such a place" (Laurence 104). Both comments are compatible with a decline narrative. Yet later, after exerting little resistance, Daisy adjusts to her new situation (Shields 324). While Hagar clings to a prescribed and inflexible view of her own identity, Daisy bends and allows herself to move into her new identity as a resident at Canary Palms. She even comes to enjoy small accomplishments and pleasures (324). This character's adaptation implies that she is positioned within a progress narrative – and, in this case, a happier narrative than Hagar's. This difference, perhaps, can be explained partially by the disparities between the personalities of the two protagonists (and/or two authors); possibly, Hagar's innate stubbornness limits her ability to accept changes, whereas Daisy's affable nature allows her to accommodate the forces of circumstance. I would argue, however, that at least in part, these differences reflect the fact that *The Stone Diaries* was published twenty-nine years later than *The Stone Angel*, therefore reflecting changing attitudes towards religion, aging, selfhood, and late-life living accommodations. I am not arguing that Shields is denying the decline narrative in favour of a progress narrative, but that aspects of the progress narrative – such as the idea that identity is multiple and develops over time – are interacting with aspects of the decline narrative within the text.

The Stone Angel is probably Canada's most well-known expression of the decline narrative tradition of the twentieth century. Although Daisy's own experience at Canary Palms suggests progress, Shields's account of Daisy's visit to her father-in-law in a nursing

home is as extreme as Laurence's in its expression of horror at old age. Significantly, Daisy's visit concludes with what could be considered to be a positive-aging motif (including the negative connotation often attached to positive aging).

Grandpa Magnus Flett, whom Daisy finds living in a nursing home called Sycamore Manor in the Orkney Islands, is incontinent, blind, bedridden, and 115 years of age (295-303). The text's description of the man illustrates the type of gothic horror typically associated with decline narratives: "And now, here was this barely breathing cadaver, all his old age depletions registered and paid for. A tissue of skin. A scaffold of bone; well, more like china than bone" (305). Shields adds Daisy's reactions:

A few seconds passed – she let them pass – and then he opened his mouth, which was not a mouth at all but a puckered hole without lips or teeth.... She felt moved to grope under the sheet and reach for his hand, but feared what she might find, some unimaginable decay. Instead she pressed lightly on the coverlet, perceiving the substantiality of tethered bones and withered flesh. A faint shuddering. The rising scent of decomposition. (305-06)

Clearly Daisy finds the aged state of his body repulsive, and she is eager to leave Sycamore Manor.

Shields couples this clichéd gothic depiction, though, with the upbeat comment that "great old age is heartening to observe" (295). She depicts Daisy leaving the nursing home feeling newly young after comparing herself to Magnus: "Oh, she is young and strong again. Look at the way she walks freely out the door and down the narrow stone street of Stromness, tossing her hair in the fine light" (307). Daisy is shocked by his appearance, yet she successfully recovers by psychologically and physically distancing herself from old

age, leaving Magnus and the horrible home behind. Although Daisy would be considered to be relatively old by this point, she differentiates between her own level of oldness and her father-in-law's extreme level of oldness. Thus Shields, perhaps unintentionally, provides readers with an early example of the twenty-first-century positive-aging trend that shows relatively old, third-age people such as Daisy happily distancing themselves from those whom they consider to be truly old and frail – those now labelled as being in the fourth age.

However, in the following chapter "Illness and Decline," Daisy rapidly drops into her own decline narrative when she suffers a heart attack, which also causes her to fall and break her knees. During the associated hospitalization, she suffers kidney failure, prompting her doctor to diagnose and consequently surgically remove a cancerous kidney. The extent of Daisy's descent into a physiological decline narrative is made apparent in the comments of Daisy's daughter Alice: "She can't possibly go home, the doctor says it's impossible. How would she manage? She's helpless" (316). Daisy also senses her own lost agency: "Suddenly her body is all that matters. How it's let her down" (309).

In this chapter, Daisy is very like the aged Hagar in that she is widowed, feels alone and helpless in her old age, and is "trying to remember a time when her body had been sealed and private" (310). Like Hagar, she has been extracted from the homes that helped to provide her self-definition and has been forced into a new shell following her surgeries: Canary Palms Convalescent Home. Her daughter Alice muses on "life's diminution," looks at her "mother's bedside table at Canary Palms and s[ees], jumbled there, a toothbrush, toothpaste, a comb etc." She thinks: "That three-story house in Ottawa has been emptied out, and so has the commodious Florida condo. How is it possible, so much shrinkage?" (323). Here the text clearly states: aging is loss, not gain.

Daisy presents further aspects of aging-as-decline narrative when the text echoes Hagar's despondent mirror scenes: "She looks into her bedside mirror, so cunningly hidden on the reverse side of the bed tray, and says, 'There she is, my life's companion. Once I sat in her heart. Now I crouch in a corner of her eye'" (336). Like Hagar, she differentiates between the outward self so clearly ravaged by age and an ongoing interior self that has now been relegated to "crouching" in the corner of her life, remaining physically evident only in her eye. Shields hints here that, despite Daisy's tendency to accept alterations to her identity, she remains aware of the point from which she began.

Although there are parallels between the two novels in terms of their protagonists' sense of an interior ongoing selfhood and in terms of their expression of twentieth-century decline narratives, there are further significant differences too – differences that reflect developments in ideology that are characteristic of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

Hagar in part rages because she reflects the culture of modernity, a time when most people embraced the concept of free will and the central importance of humankind, but also believed that there was a good chance that God was ultimately in control of all life. By contrast, Shields's postmodern text presents a world in which Daisy drifts forward in time from random event to random event, with no belief in her own or anyone else's ability – and certainly not an omnipotent God's – to provide meaningful direction. Daisy expects a progress narrative, but not necessarily a progression towards happy outcomes.

Hagar tends towards impotent fury when faced with unfavourable changes, whereas Daisy accepts the alterations time brings and does not cling to her previous circumstances. For example, after she is widowed, Daisy travels to Canada and "to Barker Flett as to a

refuge,” not asking herself “what is possible, but rather what possibilities remain” (146). She complacently marries her much older pseudo-uncle because that is the only opportunity that her haphazardly evolving life seems to hold out to her. The text says that she is “accustomed to crowding her concerns into a shadowy corner” (147).

This pattern is in evidence late in her life as well when she fails to rage against the loss of her health:

Since her heart attack everything takes her by surprise, but nothing more so than her willingness to let it, as though a new sense of her own hollowness has made her a volunteer for replacement. Her body’s dead planet with its atoms and molecules and lumps of matter is blooming all of a sudden with headlines, nightmares, greeting cards, medicinal bitterness, crashes in the night, footsteps in the corridor, the odors of her own breath and blood, someone near her door.... (331)

Late in the text, one of her family members comments that “She just let her life happen to her” (356). Not all changes make Daisy happy, as evidenced by the depression she experiences following the loss of her journalism job, but she consistently appears to accept all progressions in identity (229). Such acceptance reflects the influence of a narrative of aging as progress.

Cultural shifts in age ideologies are also reflected in the difference between the texts’ depictions of Daisy’s and Hagar’s late-life living arrangements. Although Victoria’s move into Daisy’s home mirrors Marvin’s and Doris’s move into Hagar’s home, the precipitating causes are exactly opposite. In her middle age, Daisy takes Victoria into her home because Victoria needs care, not because she wants Victoria to care for her.

Daisy later moves out of the Ottawa house and into a Florida condominium in Bayside Towers where she becomes a part of the “Flowers” social group and shares bridge and conversation with Lily, Myrtle and Glad. Today such a building might be designated as ‘senior housing.’ This type of transitional home can act to buffer the shock that occurs when seniors leave a home in which they have lived most of their adult lives to move directly into an institution such as Canary Palms (or Hagar’s Silverthreads), where ‘home’ becomes limited to a bed and a dresser.

Shields’s depiction of the supportive bond enjoyed by the Flowers would fit what age theorist Sally Chivers calls “seriatim relationships,” or peer-care arrangements. She recommends “peer care as a possible strategy to redistribute power and to avoid the representation of burdensome old age. Even outside of care situations, the possibilities inherent within late-life friendship allow for a mutuality that might be lacking in inter- and cross-generational relationships” (*From* 80). Today, downsizing by stages and arranging for the benefits of a mutually supportive peer network are common in late-life arrangements, yet they were not typically available options in Hagar’s time. Thus, Hagar’s pride suffers when she lives with her son during late life, whereas Daisy, at least for a time, enjoys the support of peers after she is widowed.

Following Daisy’s departure from her condominium as a result of her emergency admission to Sarasota Memorial Hospital, Shields includes a pastoral visit scene that is reminiscent of the one in Laurence’s text. In this case, the power relationship favours the protagonist instead of the pastor, perhaps representing Shields’s desire to afford lessened respect to the ministry and increased agency to older women. In Laurence’s 1964 text, Clergyman Troy meets Hagar’s needs by singing an affecting hymn (291), whereas in the

1993 text it is Daisy who meets the needs of Reverend Rick. Daisy is irritated yet also flattered when he seeks her advice as to whether or not to tell his mother that he is gay. Instead of becoming teary like Hagar, Daisy provides instruction and then sends the “room-to-room peddler of guilt-wrapped wares” away weeping out his angst (332-35).

While Laurence clearly intends readers to find religious meaning in Hagar’s story of potential redemption, Shields, who is on record as a non-believer, suggests that Daisy experiences little religious meaning in her life. Long-time friend and frequent interviewer Eleanor Wachtel records that “[n]ot only did Carol not believe in any sort of afterlife, she felt strongly that she didn’t want any sort of monuments to her death – no gravestone, not even an urn” (26). Since the time of Laurence’s text, the influence of religion in western life had significantly diminished. Thus the secular emphasis in the novel reflects both Shields’s status as a non-believer and her culture’s shift away from the church.

While Hagar runs away rather than accept residency in Silverthreads, Daisy moves into Canary Palms and with time adjusts her sense of self and finds sufficient cause to settle in. Despite her original desire to avoid him, she eventually does have an intimate exchange with Reverend Rick. She also shares a joke with Alice (335), and when she applies a little makeup, she comments on her sense of acceptance:

It surprises Grandma Flett that there is so much humor hidden in the earth’s crevasses; it’s everywhere, like a thousand species of moss. ... something amusing will happen on the floor, the nurses kidding back and forth, some ongoing joke. Who would have thought that comedy could stretch all the way to infirm old age? And vanity too. Vanity refuses to die, pushing the blandness of everyday life into little pleats, pockets, knobs of electric candy. (336)

Looking at her new manicure – “her ten buffed beauties” – she thinks, “[h]ow...such a little thing should give her so much pleasure” (337). While it can be interpreted that Hagar never accepts her aging identities and thus remains fiercely dissatisfied with her life, Daisy on many levels appears to adjust and adapt as her life progresses along. She finds ways to be, if not happy, at least complacent or content.

While it is true that the two protagonists’ personalities differ, there is enough evidence to assert that contemporary positive-aging ideologies and new age-related customs have permeated Shields’s representation of aging. However, layers of ambiguity in Laurence’s and Shields’s narrations complicate critical interpretations of both texts. Hagar’s harsh public voice hides a more vulnerable interior self, a self *potentially* capable of growth despite her own best attempts to armor herself with prickliness and pride, and Laurence’s authorial voice underlies the character’s voice to offer a slightly different identity for her protagonist. However, searching for the definitive identities of *The Stone Diaries*’ narrator may result in the reader becoming lost amongst the multiple strands that constitute the text’s narrations. As the title *The Stone Diaries* suggests, no one single voice or identity can be isolated easily as narrator, problematizing attempts to characterize the protagonist.

Although critics disagree widely as to how Shields’s narrative is constituted, most would agree that the text suggests that the protagonist has multiple changing identities. Thus Shields could be said to be rejecting the image of aging as erosion of an initial selfhood in favour of aging as progress towards a more complete and complex identity. As David Williams concludes, “each of her narrative choices illuminates what it means to be a

series of multiple selves that has come in the postmodern era to supplant a Cartesian model of unified, autonomous identity” (7).

In an interview, Shields herself places Daisy as the narrator, saying that “‘diaries’ is problematic because it’s much more of an autobiography than a diary, and of course it’s an unwritten autobiography — she never sits down and writes. This is the autobiography, or diary, that she carries in her head, this construct of one’s self that we all carry around with us” (qtd. in Wachtel 49). This indicates that, at least for Shields, Daisy herself speaks, even if only in an internal, unwritten sense.

It is of note, however, that not only does the narration portray Daisy’s identity as evolving over time and in relation to others, it also includes fictitious identities for Daisy. Thus it could be argued that the text speculates about the role of memory and imagination in reconstructing identity in late life.

In one narrative account, for example, her son Warren finds her essays in the attic, while in another account the children say that she left them to him in her will (251, 347). Readers might assume that the first account in Warren’s voice is in fact Daisy’s late-life voice ruminating about what his reaction might have been if he were to have read her essays and discovered evidence of her intelligence. In the second account, Daisy more pessimistically surmises that the children are surprised and stymied as to why he has been willed the essays, having little knowledge of their mother beyond her services to them. The narrator ponders to herself, thinking that

Words are more and more required. And the question arises: what is the story of a life? A chronicle of fact or a skilfully wrought impression? The bringing together of what she fears? Or the adding up of what has been off-handedly revealed, those tiny

allotted increments of knowledge? She needs a quiet place in which to think about this immensity. (340)

Daisy imagines various contrasting scenarios and then weighs them to determine her preferred options. In her old age, Hagar irrationally attempts to cling to an outdated vision of herself. Daisy, on the other hand, seems to irrationally create identities for herself that apparently fail to reconcile all historical facts.

Although appearances throughout the text may suggest Daisy's malleability and outward acceptance of societal pressure, the text's final unspoken words of resistance, "I am not at peace," dramatically impact possible interpretations of *The Stone Diaries* because they acknowledge that, at the text's end, she possibly shares Hagar's resentment of societal powers and may finally feel prepared to take a stand against them. The inclusion of Daisy's final words indicates that, although she has outwardly accepted the random shifts her identity has followed, she may have held other opinions inside. Alternatively, she may have reached a new point of growth where she now holds such opinions.

The aged protagonists of *The Stone Angel* and *The Stone Diaries* both appear to find new meaning or knowledge at the conclusion of the texts – although both texts withhold closure on this point. Despite her reluctance, Hagar acquires improved self-knowledge and assumes the role of nurturing mother – albeit minimally. Daisy adjusts to changes that occur with aging, forgives the other players in her life, and accepts the past – although all of this possibly comes about through her rather questionable reimagining of the past. When she comforts her son Marvin, Hagar tenuously links herself to her mother and the larger community of women, and when Daisy feels herself merging with and becoming "finally

the still body of her dead mother,” she strongly links herself to her mother and to the entire community of women (359).¹⁴

At least to some extent, both texts show their protagonists to be representative of all women. Although *The Stone Angel* is not self-reflexive in style and is less pointedly inclusive of other women, few would doubt that this text speaks a feminist position for women of the twentieth century. Both authors show protagonists who struggle against powerlessness and lack of meaning in their male-dominated lives.

Hagar possibly finds redemption through the relinquishment of her pride, through the acceptance of her connection to her mother and son, and/or through the grace of the Christian God. Daisy remains outwardly submissive, inwardly restless, and somewhat inscrutable to the reader.

Summary

The Stone Angel marks the beginning of the nursing-home-narrative genre, and its gothic realism epitomizes the twentieth-century’s aging-as-decline and home-as-horror narratives. Laurence’s protagonist Hagar clings to her youthful identity, thus illustrating a definition of identity as core, fixed and unchangeable. *The Stone Diaries* illustrates aspects of aging-as-

¹⁴ Shields’s intention may have been for Daisy to act primarily as a composite character representing powerless female literary characters of the past such as Hagar and others. Consider, for instance, that her portrayal of Daisy’s personality closely resembles Wilson’s portrayal of the pliable Topaz in *The Innocent Traveller*: “the private life of Topaz, if life must be compared to a journey, had been like travelling on a canal” or “a water spider gliding across a pond’s surface” (Wilson 65, 93). Wilson’s narrator Rose assumes a first-person point-of-view when describing her female ancestor Topaz just as Shields’s narrator Daisy does when describing her mother Mercy giving birth – even though neither narrator had been born at the time of the depicted scenes. Rose says, “I was never at a Book Meeting, because I was not alive and had not then been thought of, but I have heard so much about them that I am there with Topaz. There we sat...” (Wilson 57).

decline narrative alongside aging-as-growth narrative, while its protagonist Daisy illustrates a definition of identity as fluid, multiple and expanding – a representation more typical of postmodern narratives. Shields may have intended that Daisy's malleability and tendency to outwardly accept the changes in her life-course should represent the generally weak position of women in a patriarchal society. The text is opaque and difficult to interpret as a result of its multiple narrative threads. However, the gradually evolving and enlarging identity that Daisy illustrates may also be interpreted as a development in the nursing-home-narrative genre, as reflective of the late twentieth-century's internalization of positive-aging and progress narratives and society's changing attitudes towards late-life care and the meaning of aging.

Chapter Three

From Horror to Hotel: Transforming the Nursing Home in *Sunset Manor* and *Exit Lines*

Late-life institutional care in the West has long borne a horrific public image. In mid-twentieth-century Canadian literature dealing with late life – such as Margaret Laurence’s iconic 1964 novel *The Stone Angel*, Edna Alford’s 1981 short stories *A Sleep Full of Dreams* and Constance Rooke’s 1986 edition *Night Light: Stories of Aging* – the nursing “home” plays the role of “spectre,”¹⁵ the dreaded, shadowy fate that waits to seize us all. Laurence’s Hagar is, as we have seen, so afraid of admission to the home that she runs away. In *A Sleep Full of Dreams*, the protagonist, a care-giver at Pine Mountain Lodge, thinks that her boyfriend shuns her due to the “kind of curse, some contagion, some odour” that she carries with her as a result of her work in the nursing home (Alford 19). In the 1973 text *As We Are Now*, American writer May Sarton describes the nursing home as a “concentration camp for the old, a place where people dump their parents or relatives exactly as though it were an ash can” (9). The elderly female protagonist of Joan Barfoot’s 1985 novel *Duet for Three* worries about a potential “alteration in the power balance” (56-57) that would give the nursing home control over her: “What is going to come of this? She is not used to being frightened. To lose control, to no longer be able to say, Now I shall stand, I want to go here, or there, eat this or that, watch such and such a program, or turn the TV off and read this book – to face losing that is a fear” (54).

The early texts of the nursing-home-narrative genre have reflected and also reinforced a negative narrative about care facilities, a prevailing public belief associating

¹⁵ Coined first by Betty Friedan in *The Fountain of Age*, 1963.

them with horror. These texts are characterized by a realist style, are written in either first or third person, often end in the protagonist's death, and are substantially flavoured by the gothic.

As I have pointed out in the introductory chapter, the roots of Western societies' distaste for care facilities are to be found in the home's early Victorian counterpart, the poorhouse. In Pat Thane's anthology *The Long History of Old Age*, Thomas R. Cole and Claudia Edwards explain that "[t]he workhouses set up by new legislation in the 19th century were intended to be – at least for the 'deserving' among the aged poor – benevolent institutions. But they were not always sensitively administered, and many of the elderly poor came to fear them as much as the prospect of starvation" (238).

In early stories in the nursing-home-narrative genre, the image of the "insensitive administrator" or overbearing overseer is a familiar literary trope. This stock character derives from sources such as the workhouse beadle Mr. Bumble in Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*. As Marlene Goldman has pointed out, the trope also persists in narratives of mental health institutions such as Ken Kesey's 1962 *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. In the texts listed above, the aged protagonists struggle against their own failing health and diminishing independence, but the challenges of age are also often represented by a human antagonist playing the role of either the overbearing facility administrator, or the overly controlling family member acting like an overbearing overseer in the protagonist's home.

However, for the last two decades, writers such as Carol Shields, Richard B. Wright, Joan Barfoot, Alice Munro, Lola Lemire Tostevin, Sara Gruen, and Janet Hepburn have added diversity to the genre depicting the nursing home by portraying sunnier lifestyles within care facilities, by depicting relationships between residents, by illustrating

a reduction in administrative power and an increase in residents' power, and sometimes by showing protagonists who are able to escape the nursing home by walking out the door and beginning new lives.¹⁶ Collectively, these writers suggest that today's residents have the potential to live contentedly within care facilities and to retain attitudes and behaviours previously associated with youthfulness, despite advancing chronological age. Although the spectre of hoary old age and death still hovers in the homes in these texts, the possibility of personal agency and hope pushes aside some of the gloom. The foundational texts of the genre mix the gothic with realism, but these newer texts blend in mystery and humour.

In this chapter, I focus on Richard B. Wright's 1990 *Sunset Manor* as an example of the revisionist, aging-as-progress narratives that are joining the Canadian nursing-home-narrative genre founded by texts such as Laurence's *The Stone Angel*. Wright's novel offers an early example of the late twentieth-century turn away from the portrayal of home as horror, rendering instead a place wherein the aging individual has the *potential* to cope successfully with change and with the demands of administration. I compare Wright's text to Joan Barfoot's 2008 novel *Exit Lines*, which was published nineteen years later and which reflects the Western public's further re-imaginings of the nursing home – here as a late-life hotel. Barfoot's Idyll Inn is a place where residents can do more than merely cope; it is a place where they can exert power, resist the home's administration, and capably maintain control over their own destiny. While other novels reveal changing public attitudes to homes in various meaningful ways, these two compare particularly well because their plots are surprisingly similar. They both use a late-life care facility as their

¹⁶ See also examples of texts from outside Canada: Swedish novel *The 100-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out the Window and Disappeared*; British films *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* and *Quartet*; British television show *Waiting for God*.

primary setting, both present conflicts between fellow residents and between administration and residents, and both show their heroine successfully living on within that setting by the end of the text. The significant and useful difference for the purpose of analysis is a twenty-year gap between their publications.

Taken together, *Sunset Manor* and *Exit Lines* also contribute to the demarcation of new age knowledge by pointing out that some people now see nursing homes as housing “truly old” people, whereas they see retirement homes as housing those who remain in control of their own lives and who therefore are still relatively youthful. While Laurence’s generation of texts refers only to the nursing home, today’s texts often strongly differentiate between retirement homes or seniors buildings¹⁷ and the less expensive and desirable nursing or chronic-care homes. Late-life literature of the last couple of decades reflects the public’s new awareness of the diversity that exists past middle age and the adamant desire of many of those exiting middle age to distinguish themselves from the truly old.

While retirement home administrators act as the main antagonists in both *Exit Lines* and *Sunset Manor*, the primary difference between the mid-twentieth century texts and Wright’s and Barfoot’s texts is that both of these third-person stories focalize through four protagonists rather than just one (as in *The Stone Angel*), which serves to suggest the potential for community within the homes and also to point out the diversity of seniors’ personalities and lives. A second difference between the early texts and Wright’s more recent 1990 text and between it and Barfoot’s even more recent 2008 text is in the clear increase in agency exerted by the protagonists in relation to the administrators, a difference

¹⁷ Carol Shields’s Daisy of *The Stone Diaries* lives in a senior building during her time with The Flowers social group.

that expresses these authors' rising estimation of the retirement-home resident's power and that suggests a shift as well in the society that they reflect. In this paper, I show that while the trope of the overbearing administrator persists in a weakened form in *Sunset Manor*, it is presented but then triumphantly inverted in *Exit Lines*.

Sunset Manor

Sunset Manor begins with the admission of one of the four protagonists, Miss Kay Ormsby, to her new retirement home. The story is written in third-person perspective, and much of it is focalized through this retired English teacher. The other focalizers are her fellow residents, Edna Lucas, Lorne Truscott, and Arthur Wilkie, but they are not as well developed as Kay, functioning more as caricatures than characters and important primarily as plot devices and sources of humour. The use of a frame narrative set in the old age of these protagonists emphasizes their current feelings and experiences rather than those of their younger selves, and thereby privileges the aged viewpoint. Wright presents Kay as the most intelligent and capable of the various other residents, and her thoughts and actions provide the text's more serious commentaries on the challenges of adjusting to retirement home living. One of these challenges is dealing with the facility administrator, Mrs. Rawlings, who is another point of focalization. She acts as the novel's antagonist, the novel thus adhering to the trope of the overbearing overseer. Her power struggles with Kay and the other three main residents provide the primary conflict in the novel.

Like many other texts of the genre, this one is set in a protagonist's old age, and the frame narrative incorporates multiple flashbacks that provide back history and suspense. One of these occurs when Kay meets fellow resident Arthur, recognizes him as a former

fellow school teacher, and thus is prompted to provide the reader with thoughts about her earlier life and her decision to move to Sunset Manor (13-15). Despite their earlier acquaintanceship, the rather self-important Arthur prefers to reject any familiarity with Kay, and so she becomes aware that, despite the numbers of residents present, friendships are not likely to be formed at Sunset Manor. The text benefits from its inclusion of some of Kay's setbacks in that it thereby avoids suggesting that her eventual adjustment to living in the home is achieved without struggle.

A strong but humorous secondary conflict exists between the working-class prankster Lorne and his favourite victim, the sanctimonious Edna. Lorne adds entertainment to his life at Sunset Manor by tormenting her in a variety of ways (26). For instance, he orders a pizza and a chair in her name and on her credit card and arranges for a sales representative for funeral care to arrive for an appointment supposedly booked by her (39, 109). These escapades lighten the mood of the text and provide the reader with a break from contemplating the serious topic of late-life adjustment, and the swing between comedy and poignancy acts to increase the reader's sensitivity to both. These aspects mark the genre's growing distance from the gothic.

Wright adds mystery to the genre by incorporating a plot hinging on a murder attempt that eventually brings about the downfall of all but Kay. Lorne eventually irritates Edna so much that she contrives to poison him so that he will be transferred to a chronic-care facility. Although Lorne's treatment of Edna and her response to him is humorous, readers should note that here the text also subtly highlights the vulnerability an elderly woman might feel when forced to live side-by-side with a male house-mate whom she

distrusts and dislikes, as well as the frustration an easy-going fellow such as Lorne might feel when subjected to the false piety of a house-mate such as Edna.

The pharmacist who sells the poison to Edna becomes concerned by the idea of an infestation of vermin at the retirement home, and so he notifies the authorities. Lorne survives the poisoning with no ill effects, but Arthur catches sight of Edna adding “Mouse Treat” to Lorne’s soup, and so he also notifies the authorities (144). The novel concludes this humorous romp as an almost-murder mystery with the authorities’ arrival to inspect the facilities, which ultimately replaces the resident-against-resident conflict with a more serious-minded conflict between the residents and the home’s authorities. The arrival of outside authorities to inspect her premises incites both Administrator Rawlings’ fury and her decision to transfer all three troublemakers – Lorne, Arthur and Edna – to Chronic Care, at which point humour takes a sharply poignant turn (171). Of the four primary characters, only Kay proves to be clever enough to adapt to conditions at Sunset Manor and to avoid the wrath of Mrs. Rawlings.

Sunset Manor’s self-interested administrator clearly fits the literary trope’s historical template of the overbearing overseer. In the hope of increasing her power by creating further divisions amongst the residents, she deliberately contributes to the tensions amongst them. For example, Edna’s and Lorne’s conflict is exacerbated by the fact that she places them in adjoining rooms, which allows him to taunt her through the wall about her embarrassing gastro-intestinal issues (26). Philip Marchand notes Wright’s use of the stock character of the overbearing overseer in his comments in a *Toronto Star* review:

“conventions of retirement home drama – a sub-genre that grows in popularity as more and more Baby Boomers face the problem of aged parents – demand that the person running the

home be smarmy, insensitive and a tyrant. Wright obliges with the character of Mrs. Rawlings” (2).

To be fair, I should add that the text depicts the administrator’s legitimate frustrations and includes her as a point of focalization, but no reader could condone her condescension or her habitual invasive monitoring of the residents. Her surveillance includes entering residents’ rooms without their permission in order to paw through their belongings and assess any potential threats to the smooth running of her dominion: “Mrs. Rawlings opened the drawers of the dresser and carefully inspected the stockings and scarves and bloomers. The latter appeared to be unstained. At least she was continent and that was a blessing” (72). Mrs. Rawlings shrewdly differentiates between those who pose a threat to her and those who, like 100-year-old Mrs. Fennerty, are “a pet to the staff and really no bother” and thus do not need to be sent away (171).

At Sunset Manor, removal to the chronic-care facility or nursing home is not dependent on chronological age or ability but solely on the administrator’s strategy for maintaining control. Sunset Manor residents consider the retirement home to be a relatively safe haven in marked contrast to the nursing home, and so Mrs. Rawlings consequently uses the threat of transfer as a means of exerting her power over them. She cautions Edna: “[the] next step along the line is the Chronic Care Centre, and nobody I’ve met is in a hurry to go there” (27). By the end of the story, she has decided that it is time to make this threat real: “Edna Lucas... was a troublemaker of the first water, and Mrs. Rawlings had plans for her in the new year. It might require a ruse of some description, but it would have to be done” (171). Mrs. Rawlings’s character epitomizes the worst aspects of institutionalization. However, Wright breaks new cultural ground, intentionally or otherwise, in that, through

Mrs. Rawlings's repeated threats to transfer the residents from Sunset Manor to the Chronic Care Centre, the text reflects and reinforces a strong differentiation between retirement homes and other heavier care centres.

This 1990 text also breaks ground in that the major protagonist Kay counters the prevailing negative pattern of nursing home narratives in its time; she is not defeated by her own aging or by the challenges of moving into a nursing home. Although the other characters go down in flames as would be expected, Wright's text presents a new model of aging in Kay – someone who is able to make considered decisions in response to a perceived need for change, who is capable of dealing adroitly with administration, and who is confident and clever enough to take actions that result in fortunate outcomes. Wright's text moves its protagonist closer to a position of autonomy and further away from Hagar's position of helplessness. In the 1964 novel *The Stone Angel*, Hagar's only agency exists in her resistance to the patriarchal men and rules of her world. Her sense of self-identity is tied to an earlier youthful version of herself, and she feels that change erodes her identity and takes her further from a position of control. Her only act of agency is to run away in a futile attempt to avoid forced admission to the home.

Wright presents Kay as independent, single, and childless, with no family members to take her into their homes or to bully her into making the choices they prefer. She moves into Sunset Manor because she has been having forgetful lapses, one of which required a visit from the Fire Department. However, no one forces her to make the decision to move (3). Once there, she misses her home, but the text portrays her as a decisive and optimistic type who proactively thinks of ways she can adapt to her new lifestyle without sacrificing everything she enjoys. For example, she purchases a yellow Walkman so that she can

ignore the distasteful music playing throughout the retirement home and can continue to play the music she prefers without upsetting the other residents with its sounds (119). By this exercise of tact, ingenuity, and willingness to learn, she avoids conflict with the other residents while still managing to pursue her own ends. While Hagar performs blind resistance to the restrictions imposed by age and appears unable to develop helpful alterations to her own enculturated behaviours, Kay applies her intelligence to the new problems arising after admission, thus finding ways to alter her behaviours to accommodate others' needs without losing too much of what she wants to maintain from her earlier life.

Over her lifetime, Kay has formed firm convictions, and so she also shows no hesitation in soundly rejecting the falsely cheery, positive ageism expressed by Mrs. Rawlings: "My dear Miss Ormsby, let us hear no talk of dying. I cannot allow such talk in the facility. It upsets the residents. It's quite forbidden" (25). Her doctor calls her forthright discussion of the likelihood of death "morbid," but Kay states her own mind: "On the contrary...I consider it morbid not to think of death. Only by thinking of death can one come to value and enjoy life" (149). Kay manipulates situations so that she can continue with the activities and beliefs that sustain her, yet tactfully avoids irritating Mrs. Rawlings to excess – at least for now. Edna, Lorne, and Arthur prove not to have Kay's ability to avoid conflict with one another and with administration and so, as the story closes, they face imminent transfer. Thus while Wright's portrayal of the first three residents reinforces a predictable image by poking fun at the old as incompetent and powerless, his portrayal of Kay, surprisingly, challenges it.

Wright's text suggests a 1990 culture that still considers the nursing home and its agents to wield much more power than the average aged individual. However, it suggests

that someone like Miss Kay Ormsby – although an exception rather than the rule – has the ability to triumph in her conflict with administration. Wright's apparent endorsement of Kay's cleverness and his flippant approach to the characters who remain caught in the web of administration could suggest that the author has wholeheartedly embraced positive aging and its negative and corresponding, individualistic pursuit of success and happiness in old age. However, any simplistic reading of his work is rendered null by his fairness in representing both the frustrations and the vices of the administrator and by his subtle attentions to the vulnerability and valid fear felt by Edna. The text merits critique as a comedy, as a mystery, and as a commentary on aging, but I would summarize that it is particularly noteworthy in two ways. Firstly, it resists the usual pattern of the negative nursing-home narrative in that it allows Kay's ongoing successful adaptation. Secondly, it presents a clear differentiation between chronic-care homes and retirement homes. Thus Wright should be recognized as having initiated diversity in the genre of nursing-home narratives, having moved away from the gothic towards mystery, humour, and poignancy and away from the depiction of home as horror towards a depiction of the potential for ongoing agency in old age.

Exit Lines

Joan Barfoot's 2008 novel *Exit Lines* presents a different image of the nursing home than that presented in Wright's 1990 *Sunset Manor* and a markedly different image than that presented in the genre's mid-century texts (*The Stone Angel*, *A Sleep Full of Dreams*, *Night Light: Stories of Aging*). Notably, Barfoot also presents a different image of the home than that presented in her own 1985 novel *Duet for Three*. In the 2008 text, she reimagines the

late-life care institution as a potential site of personal agency and of meaningful identity development, even though in the novel she wrote twenty-three-years-previously, the conventionally gothic image of the nursing home prevails. As Wright has done, Barfoot stretches the genre to encompass mystery, but she tinges the humour with more darkness.

Like *Sunset Manor*, *Exit Lines* introduces a single female protagonist as she is admitted to a retirement home and focusses on her ensuing relationships with the antagonist administrator and with three other protagonist residents, all of whom act as points of focalization. In Barfoot's text, the other three residents are two women –Greta, and Ruth – and one man – George. This ratio represents the approximate ratio of men to women in Canadian care facilities, which is about 1:2.4 (as I have indicated in the introduction). As in Wright's text, Barfoot's multiple protagonists serve to suggest the diversity and potential for community present in the home. Unlike in *Sunset Manor*, where Kay struggles against the administration and the other residents, in *Exit Lines*, the four residents band together to protect each other. The text decidedly overturns the expected decline-based image of nursing homes (and of the nursing-home-narrative genre as established) when these residents develop new and meaningful friendships after admission to the Idyll Inn retirement home, when they accept and embrace their age identities, when they continue to exert considerable agency over their lives, and when they acquire more control over meaningful knowledge than the care facility's administrator.

Exit Lines begins by providing a brief flash forward in time (from what will be the primary narrative set in the protagonist's present) and offers a hint of the resolution of its mystery plot, depicting unidentified people abroad at three o'clock in the morning in the corridors of the Idyll Inn and suggesting that some unnamed activity about to take place

will require their courage. Barfoot strategically nestles more forward flashes amongst her depictions of Sylvia settling in to life at the Idyll Inn, thereby creating interest and suspense. This departure, from the usual pattern of inserting flash-backs to reveal the protagonist's past, serves to emphasise that elderly residents moving into the Idyll Inn have a future yet to be lived.

Eventually the flash-forwards culminate in the revelation that, without the approval or even the knowledge of administration, the four residents have agreed to meet in the middle of the night to euthanize Ruth because she has decided that she has no more reason to live. Like *Sunset Manor*, *Exit Lines* depicts the antics of its four residents with a blackly humorous touch, and so, just as Sylvia, Greta, and George are attempting to wrap saran around Ruth's face, they are interrupted by the sudden illness of Greta. Thus they must abort the murder of one in order to save the life of the other, effectively also aborting Ruth's reinforcement of the decline narrative. The plot is resolved when Ruth decides that life is after all still worth living and determines to enjoy the companionship of her new friends and to eat birthday cake. She acknowledges, however, that "[t]his is not a happy, easy ending" and that "[t]he other way," that is, euthanasia, "that's the one that might have been easy" (319). By comparison, living a positive progress narrative requires effort.

Comparing Wright's and Barfoot's texts reveals that the superior agency enjoyed by the four *Exit Lines* characters in relation to administration derives from their willingness to band together to form a community identity. While each character is unable to function relatively well individually, working together, they are able to increase their overall strength, even to the point of having more control over events than the administrator has.

Sara Jamieson argues that Barfoot “draws upon the pastoral tradition” and depicts “dependent elderly” as “vulnerable to exploitation.” She points out: “pastoral writing is characterized by an acceptance of vulnerability and loss, and this provides Barfoot with an effective counterpoint to a contemporary culture of ‘positive’ aging founded on an ethic of bodily control” (370). Jamieson’s analysis identifies significant pastoral aspects of the novel, recognizes Barfoot’s dismissal of narratives of faux youthfulness, and also insightfully shows how the novel “participates in a rehabilitation of concepts associated with disengagement,” that is to say, rejects activity theory’s endorsement of busyness as a cure-all to be applied to the dissatisfactions of old age (374).

While Jamieson effectively emphasizes the vulnerability of these particular residents, I would argue that, once they have settled in and become friends, their combined abilities overcome their individual disabilities to a large extent, at least for the duration of the novel. George has had a stroke, has trouble talking, and needs a wheelchair, yet his anger acts as an energizer for the others, and his need for massage and manipulation provides an initial cause drawing the group together. When he falls while moving into his wheelchair and cannot get up, Ruth summons help and Sylvia and Greta assists him to struggle back into position because they are all aware that summoning staff must be avoided so that George will not be considered dependent and in need of transfer to a nursing home. Sylvia summarizes the experience: “Actually, it’s rather useful to know we can look out for each other. I’m all in favour of not letting our guard down with authority. Staff” (133). Sylvia provides knowledge and leadership, Greta provides physical agility, and Ruth provides mental combativeness and a compelling group challenge that pits the four of them against the administration, against their disabilities, and against the potential

meaninglessness of their lives. Together they establish a community where kindness, wisdom and sharing are more significant than frantic efforts to regain youthful health and levels of activity.

Instead of denying the changes associated with aging, the four main characters of *Exit Lines* – like Kay of *Sunset Manor* – maintain their own agency by adapting to life within the home and by seeing the required change as a rewarding challenge (16). Unlike Kay and her fellow residents, they form meaningful new relationships with one another, relationships that exclude staff and that go beyond the type of limited professional relationship that can exist between a caregiver and a resident. Like the residents in *Sunset Manor*, each of the four diverse residents in *Exit Lines* arrives with a rich identity and past history. Unlike the residents of *Sunset Manor*, they share their inner lives with one another, but remain inscrutable to the patronizing administrator, Miss Annabel Walker.

As the reader is first introduced to Annabel, she is contemplating the challenge of becoming the administrator of the newly opened retirement home, and she reveals that she hopes to become a powerful overseer: she “knows there will be people at the Idyll Inn over whom she’ll particularly have to exert her authority.” When the protagonist Sylvia comes into view, Annabel thinks, “and here, quite possibly comes one now” (8). Like Mrs. Rawlings, Annabel thinks that she will be in charge. However, as the story develops, it becomes apparent that Annabel lacks power, authority, and knowledge. For example, readers learn that Sylvia had had an affair with Annabel’s father and that Sylvia’s daughter is in fact Annabel’s half-sister – all of which is unbeknownst to Annabel (148). Readers also learn that two of the residents – George and Greta – had worked together and had been

lovers when they were middle-aged (36). The residents relish the ignorance of the administration and staff, and enjoy the sense of power it affords them.

Together, the four residents of *Exit Lines* do more than just maintain a dignified self-image in their old age – they successfully exert control over their own activities and identities and slyly subvert the administration’s control over them as they attempt to accomplish their goals – one of which is to euthanize Ruth. And when Sylvia, George, and Ruth adjust their plans and capably save Greta, they also demonstrate their ongoing ability to react to new information and to alter their consequent opinions and actions. As a result of successfully countering their physical and mental disabilities to work together to this end, their self-esteem soars. By the end of the text, having bested the administrator on many levels, Sylvia gloats, ““Poor Annabel. She has no idea”” (318). Through Mrs. Rawlings, Wright reflects and reinforces the trope of the overbearing overseer. Through Miss Annabel Walker, Barfoot first reflects but then eventually breaks the trope, presenting instead a darkly humorous satire of the gothic style that is characteristic of the foundational texts in the nursing-home-narrative genre.

Although the text’s central conflict between administrative and resident powers is buffered by Barfoot’s humour, the issue raised – that is, administrative control – is of great interest today to the next generation of care-facility residents. The privileged cohort of Baby Boomers who rejected authority in the 1960’s will likely also reject the deeply rooted institutional paternalism fundamental to traditional geriatric care, and they will want to wrest control into their own hands. They, like Kay Ormsby and like Barfoot’s four residents, will want to invert all Rawlings-style invasive surveillance – institutional scrutiny reminiscent of Foucault’s and Bentham’s disciplinary panopticon.

Stephen Katz explains the historical foundation that supports today's culture of geriatric care: "[g]eriatrics and gerontology arose in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as classifying, human sciences. As with the other human sciences, these sciences of old age formulated new knowledges on the basis of a new subject – the figure of aging *Man*" (*Disciplining* 18). This scientific study of man resulted in categorization and analysis that then helpfully led to treatments for standardized problems, but also, according to Michel Foucault, to the disciplining of populations into normalized standards. As Katz explains, "disciplines do not just construct dominant representations of the world but also determine the ways in which the people who inhabit it can be known, studied, calculated, trained, helped, punished, and liberated" (2).

Foucault explains that institutions submit their residents to unremitting and demoralizing surveillance and "induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault 201). Mrs. Rawlings of *Sunset Manor* represents the epitome of institutional discipline as she firmly oversees residents' diets, schedules and activities with the goal of rendering them completely compliant in her hands and unmindful of their submission to her. The residents of *Exit Lines* reject and overturn Annabel's attempted institutional discipline and transform the administrator's gaze into the residents' gaze. They boldly move about the residence in the middle of the night in the dark, and they know more about the administrator's private secrets than the administrator herself does. In *Exit Lines*, Barfoot dismisses historically confirmed care traditions and suggests that residents have the potential to emerge victorious in the struggle for knowledge and power.

Like Wright, Barfoot also challenges the traditions of the nursing-home narrative genre by reflecting the fact that, in today's culture, the public is beginning to differentiate between nursing homes and retirement homes and to associate only the former with dread. *Sunset Manor* residents know that life at the retirement home is relatively good and that transfer to the chronic-care home is to be avoided. In *Exit Lines*, the continued agency of the four protagonists even while living in residential care is placed in contrast to the "oldness" and dependence of George's wife Alice, who is a resident in a nursing home and who is in the final stages of dementia. George ruminates: "Alice no longer knows her own name, never mind his. His situation could not be more distant from hers. Well, okay, it could be. But still" (29).

The story of this married couple in *Exit Lines* points out that in some ways little has changed since the Victorian workhouses depicted by Edwards and Cole in that the couple has been separated, but it also points out that there is a vast divide between George's retirement home and Alice's nursing home and between their respective conditions. Barfoot later again stresses the difference: "Ms. Walker says Mrs. Perry is too dotty to stay and has to go to a nursing home. There's the lesson: don't falter, because action will be brutal and swift against any residents who let down their guard" (121). Here Barfoot suggests that residents are in a type of contest with administration, and that they understand that losing means that they will be transferred to a nursing home where they will be designated as truly old.

Like Wright, Barfoot breaks new cultural ground in the nursing-home narrative genre by illustrating a differentiation between retirement homes and nursing homes. Like Wright's Miss Kay Ormsby, Barfoot's Sylvia Lodge presents as a new, more capable type

of aging protagonist. Of particular note is the fact that Barfoot initiates an even larger cultural shift than Wright when she suggests that residents have the capacity to wrest power away from overbearing overseers and to exert agency over their own lives. These shifts of position in the imaginations of the authors in turn suggest that there have been changes in the societies they reflect and in the publishing industry that supports them. In the introductory chapter of this thesis, I quote Sally Chivers's assertion that nursing homes "invite fear partly because they house a conglomeration of what people often dread about old age" (*From* 58). An explanation for the current change in point of view might be found in the words Chivers wrote following this quotation: "If old age were not necessarily to conjure up negative opinion, nursing homes may, in turn, not seem or be as threatening" (58). Today, ten years following Chivers's 2003 comments, society does seem to see late-life as less threatening.

Many in society – particularly the Baby Boomers – have rejected the previously pervasive 'decline narratives,' narratives which equate aging with loss. Aided by consumer products designed to diminish the effects of aging, they have embraced 'successful' or 'positive aging' narratives, which reject the necessity of decline. The brighter of the 'positive aging' narratives involves the maintenance of good health and cheerful attitude. Sylvia (like Kay) models the latter:

This will be fine. Fine enough. It only takes getting used to, and a little time to get settled. It'll remain a shock for a while, being incarcerated even in this genteel, open-doored prison. Not that she intends to be excessively jailed, and sorting out who and what still interest her from who and what no longer do is going to be interesting. As will be the fresh challenge of acquainting herself with people she

might not otherwise know; a potentially stimulating project, a means of taking advantage of opportunity, taking charge of a new environment, making the most of necessity. The most positive possible plan. (16).

Sylvia is aware that the retirement home is a type of prison, but at the same time she is proactively planning how to meet the challenge of admission to it. While she is aware that some aspects of her life are in decline, she is plucky enough to focus on those beneficial aspects that remain a part of a progress narrative. Proponents of positive aging argue that youthful attitude, behaviour and appearance can counter the mere chronological passage of time, and Sylvia endorses that creed as she embarks on the most “positive possible plan”.

However, ‘positive aging’ is also associated with excessive consumerist zeal and with an unrealistic, psychologically unhealthy, and fanatical obsession with youthfulness. Sarah Jamieson writes that Barfoot’s characters encounter this type of ‘positive aging’ “in the form of newspaper headlines like ‘*Spry granny climbs Kilimanjaro*’ and ‘*Fiesty senior beats off purse-snatcher*’” (373). Jamieson argues that Barfoot offers “a critique of a twenty-first century culture of positive aging that alternately stigmatizes and masks the existence of decline and dependency in late life” (373). Although I agree that Barfoot rejects faux youthfulness and excessive consumerism, I would argue that in many ways the text embraces other aspects of positive aging. Sylvia and her three friends are presented as being resourceful and capable of exerting considerable agency, and their strength is placed in contrast to the relative vulnerability of the administration. Significantly their strength is also juxtaposed against the weakness of other old people in chronic care institutions.

I would suggest that *Exit Lines*, by its differentiation between the retirement home and the nursing home, illustrates the newly determined division of ‘old age’ into ‘third’ and

'fourth' age categories. This century's 20-year increase in life expectancy logically requires the establishment of a new means by which to differentiate amongst all the people who have aged past middle age. As I discuss in the introductory chapter, inclusion in the third category, although roughly associated with the chronological age of 55 or 60, is primarily determined by behaviour. Regardless of chronological age, those who lose vigour and independence move directly into the fourth stage, while those who make a successful effort to maintain agency strive to delay true old age by lingering in the third.

Unlike the feeble fourth age, the third age connotes 'successful' or 'positive' aging and can stretch limitlessly across the chronological spectrum as long as, by some means, the individual remains physically, mentally, and financially competent. Hagar, incapable of independent living and ninety years of age, could be said to be of the fourth age (Laurence 5). In *Exit Lines*, readers are told that Ruth thinks that at seventy-four she is probably the youngest at the Idyll Inn and that the other three must be about eighty (55). Barfoot indicates that Sylvia is eighty-one-years old upon admission (9). Chronologically, these four could therefore be considered to be in the same fourth-age category as Hagar, and initially they are anxious about having been admitted to a care facility. They are potentially feeble. Ruth, for instance, feels out of control when her fellow resident Greta, whom she does not yet know, places her walker just slightly out of reach (44). However, Sylvia, George, Greta, and Ruth group together and fight to maintain their competency; thus, in effect, even though their definition of successful aging does not include frantic imitation of youthful appearance and behaviours, they are fighting to remain in the third age.

An interviewer with *The Canadian Press* asked Barfoot if writing *Exit Lines* prepared her for her own old age. Her response epitomizes the antithesis of feebleness:

“I’m going to be so cranky and so demanding, probably without the grace I would like to have...What other bad things will I be? Unleashed. And not taking any prisoners”

(Burgmann 1). In an interview for *CanWest News* following the release of *Exit Lines*,

Barfoot states: “I’m on the edge of the boomers. Right on the front edge. And I reckon that as old people we’re not going to be particularly meek. We’ve been in charge of our own lives. We’re used to being in control of our own lives, for better and worse. But responsible. And this, I think, is going to be a surprise to retirement home operators”

(Barfoot qtd. in Portman 3). The characters of *Exit Lines* seem to be seeking the “control of [their] own lives” and enacting the “surprise to retirement home operators” that Barfoot champions and foretells in this quotation. As Burgmann points out, Barfoot shows interest in *Exit Lines* (and has shown interest in previous texts) in the subject of “choice and autonomy over one’s body” (1).

Exit Lines is not so much an exploration of the potential vulnerability of old age, as it is a brief nod to vulnerability followed by a vision of the potential agency of late life. Self-euthanasia could be considered to be an extreme example of personal agency, the ultimate example of individualism and neoliberalism. Barfoot’s text suggests that seniors might seize the ultimate agency, that is, agency over their very existence. By exploring this shocking topic, she jolts readers into considering their own late-life autonomy.¹⁸

¹⁸ By raising the issue of euthanasia, Barfoot also alludes to the significant point that in this current era of high medico-technological skill, euthanasia could be said to be routinely administered by staff in long-term-care facilities – if not in fact, then by omission – but she presents no clear statement as to her opinion on its advisability. In cases where a limited quality of life may make medical intervention more painful than desirable, medical administrations frequently invite long-term-care residents and/or their agents to sign a do-not-resuscitate order, to refuse transport to an Emergency Department, and/or to refuse medications (such as antibiotics) in order to allow death to occur. The goal of these procedures is not to actively induce death but instead to eliminate the pointless continuation of suffering. While euthanasia is a significantly more agential procedure, an agreement to disallow future treatments places a life-and-death decision in the hands of the resident and/or agent and is a sobering event.

However, while Hagar's ongoing resistance to institutional care only serves to isolate her, and *Sunset Manor's* Lucas, Truscott and Wilkie primarily engage in conflict with one another, Barfoot's four residents clearly benefit from their mutual support of one another and from their shared resistance to authority. Instead of acting as individuals, they form a new community. It is that shared community that allows them to retain competency and thus to continue in the third age. This theme is not new in Barfoot's work. As Sally Chivers points out, in Barfoot's 1994 novel *Charlotte and Claudia Keeping in Touch*, two near-seventies women discover that they can remain independent by living together: "[n]either is entirely dependent; and so neither is vulnerable to outside accusations of insufficiency, instead they require each other" (*From* 88).

In some ways *Exit Lines* could be accused of embracing the fantasy of choice and autonomy, predicated on the illusion that cognitively "healthy" subjects can retain agency and control until death, but readers are also encouraged by the mutuality of the euthanasia pact of these residents to consider Barfoot's enquiry into individual and community identities. Initially Ruth sees herself as alone and considers that her departure would not affect the others. However, by Ruth's requirement of the assistance of others in order to commit the act, and by the eventual victory of friendship and the cessation of her desire to kill herself, the text suggests that individualism is less important than community. Although initially the text seems to champion the power of the resident in relation to the oppressive powers of authority and thus seems to be advocating individual rights, it provides an interesting twist in that it shows these four residents each achieving more power as individuals by acting in concert.

While Hagar reacts to old age by performing resistance and self-destructive behaviours, Kay, Sylvia, George, Ruth, and Greta perform an intelligently crafted combination of compliance and resistance in order to achieve results most beneficial to their wellbeing. Barfoot suggests that seniors would have the capacity to maintain independence and agency if they were to approach late life with pluck and a willingness to seek creative solutions for new problems – and if they could afford to stay in the more expensive homes. Yet the text’s message regarding the importance of a community of friends resists its identification as a mouthpiece advocating the self-centredness and grasping consumerism associated with positive aging. As is often the case with intriguing literature that inspires thought, the exact identification of the ideology championed in the text is debatable. Perhaps Barfoot’s achievement in this text is not so much an illustration of the division between third and fourth ages as it is an obfuscation of any strict delineation between the two. Both *Sunset Manor* and *Exit Lines* demonstrate the naiveté that would be inherent in construing a simple binary between the decline and positive-aging narratives. By the power literature has to show us the complexity of human beings, these texts challenge the closure of categorizations such as positive aging, instead demonstrating that real life is more complicated than the theories we embrace to explain it.

Summary

The study of late-life literature has the potential to reveal dominant cultural narratives of late life and long-term care, in particular, that of the care home and the oppression, identity confusion, and loss of agency it has represented. As Ulla Kriebeneegg argues in response to *Exit Lines*, Barfoot “draws readers into the world of the retirement home, permitting them

to identify with her protagonists in their struggles” (18). The field of age studies benefits from study of the growing genre of nursing home narratives because these stories put the emphasis on the experience of residents rather than on that of administrators and staff, because they facilitate recognition of the individuality of the lives lived within these institutions, and because they reflect the ways in which Western culture is differentiating between old age and older old age.

The question that arises after noticing the reimagining of the “home” in these texts is whether or not the change is positive or negative. Does the softer image portrayed in current literature increase the public’s familiarity with retirement homes and thus serve a useful purpose by reducing the fear associated with entering assisted living of any type? Alternatively, maybe this literature just promotes a new, harmful type of ‘positive ageism’ that assists aging Boomers who seek to distance themselves from truly frightening old age. By claiming that it is possible to remain youthful and empowered while living in a care facility, the Boomers have in effect created a division between themselves, in the third age, and those fourth agers who fail to live independently. Next, of course, those who are older than middle aged yet who are still living independently in their own homes will need to differentiate themselves from those third-agers living in retirement homes. More new labels will need to be invented and the ostracizing of the other will continue throughout the aging spectrum.

The recent change in representation of the “home” and the increasing diversity in nursing-home narratives are not surprising considering that these writers reflect a twenty-first-century Canada and a larger Western world where globally dispersed relatives make familial care less available to the old, where the Boomer generation schemes about how to

stay vigorous forever, and where a heightened, more luxurious standard of care is available for those who can afford it. As well, government and media increasingly promote a narrative where the old are required to be independent, which of course most old people would prefer to be and attempt to be.

This chapter has argued that some current literature reimagines late life and the retirement home as potential sites of personal agency and meaningful identity development. It also points out that friendships amongst residents can increase their happiness and contribute to a sense of meaning in life.

However, the growing tendency for third agers to attempt to distance themselves from the potential hardships of late life may in part account for many of these new, optimistic depictions of late life. Unfortunately, it may also contribute to the isolation and denigration of the most dependent fourth-age members of our population. Where some aging people claim to age successfully by maintaining agency and independence and by distancing themselves from those who are *truly* old, others by inference age unsuccessfully. Thus, by the advantage to some, those who are perceived as truly old may increasingly become the victims of positive ageism. As the aged population continues to grow and as a variety of care facilities consequently evolve to meet the needs of a diverse population, the early negative image of the home will continue to be joined by a variety of new images. If narratives of more luxurious and accommodating facilities begin to overshadow the narrative of the horrific home, it may not mean that the dreaded home no longer exists, but only that those who wish to age ‘successfully’ are choosing to differentiate themselves from the ‘unsuccessful’ aged.

Chapter Four

Shaking off Shackles: L.T.C. Havens in “The Bear Came Over the Mountain”

and *The Other Sister*

Living environments that to some seem inferior might to others seem superior. An individual’s evaluation of a set of conditions depends on the standards already established by that person’s life experience. A refugee, for instance, having lost his or her home through natural disaster or war, might consider the meagre accommodations of a temporary shelter to be luxurious. Certain desirable features, such as safety, could eclipse supposed insufficiencies. In this chapter, I explore two texts where readers could interpret the protagonists' lives to have improved following admission to long-term-care institutions: Alice Munro's 1999 short story “The Bear Came Over the Mountain,” best known for its adaptation as the movie *Away From Her*, and Lola Lemire Tostevin's 2008 novel *The Other Sister*.

For most of the twentieth century, Western society has considered nursing homes to be undesirable, to be places inhabited only by those with no alternative to call home. As I have mentioned in previous chapters, Margaret Laurence’s 1964 realist novel *The Stone Angel* and numerous similar texts¹⁹ of the nursing-home-narrative genre have reflected and reinforced a negative cultural image of the nursing home. More recently, texts such as²⁰ Joan Barfoot’s 2008 *Exit Lines* have begun to reflect a more positive public perception of late-life housing. However, while the texts suggest that a reasonable maintenance of personal agency is now considered possible while living in a care facility, they still assume

¹⁹ Such as: Edna Alford’s 1981 short stories *A Sleep Full of Dreams*, Joan Barfoot’s 1985 novel *Duet for Three*, and Constance Rooke’s 1986 edition *Night Light: Stories of Aging*.

²⁰ Also: Richard B. Wright’s 1990 *Sunset Manor* and Carol Shields 1993 *The Stone Diaries*.

that residents would need to fight against oppressive administrative authorities to avoid the erosion of their independence and the diminishment of their selfhood. In this chapter, I would argue that Munro's and Tostevin's texts both withhold closure²¹ and in so doing potentially contest the aging-as-decline narrative; moreover, they take the nursing-home-narrative genre one step further by adding an aging-as-opportunity narrative. For these protagonists, admission to a long-term-care facility could be interpreted to have provided a new and more encouraging environment, a place in which they can find a safe haven and shake off the shackles of their former lives.

Stephen Katz points out that "a nursing home is not simply a building or residence: rather, it is a micro-complex of architectural, administrative, financial, clinical, familial, symbolic, and emotional interactions and power relations" (*Cultural* 204). As a result of becoming a part of this volatile mix, new residents upon admission face the challenge, but also the opportunity, of adjusting their own identities in response. In this chapter, I argue that new home environments allow Munro's and Tostevin's protagonists to focus on certain aspects of their identities while disremembering some others, and that these women both gain by shifting away from earlier modes of being.

In the 2012 article entitled "Embodied Memory: Ageing, Neuroculture, and the Genealogy of Mind," Katz "explores the relationship between the aging mind and cognitive culture, with a focus on the production and distribution of memory as a master metaphor for successful aging" (1). In our ageist Western culture, the loss of a sharp memory is considered to be a sign of a diminished human being, but Katz argues that "our aging and our pasts are molded as much through the work of forgetting as they are through the tracing

²¹ Since there is no closure in either text, other valid interpretations are possible.

of memory” (“Embodied” 9). We do not remember every detail of our pasts because we must selectively forget some parts while embracing and remembering other parts in order to shape a narrative history and identity for ourselves. In cases where a past may be extremely troubling, people may protect themselves by engaging in some rewriting of their personal history for the sake of their health. Readers could interpret that this is one of the points Carol Shields makes in *The Stone Diaries* as her protagonist Daisy attempts to creatively remember an acceptable memoir for herself.

The loss of many memories occurs as a matter of course for everyone and is helpful rather than hurtful because maintaining the full and unfiltered magnitude of our personal history would be overwhelming. Katz points out that “one of the benefits of human brain plasticity is that it allows us to filter, change, interpret, negotiate, and even forget our memories in order to create coherence and stability in our lives, despite social pressures to optimize memory” (“Embodied” 9). For the sake of our own wellbeing, we instinctively shape our own life story, ideally dwelling on the aspects that enrich rather than trouble us. While the extreme and sometimes absolute memory loss associated with a disease such as Alzheimer’s undoubtedly constitutes a tragedy, certain types of loss prevent memory overload and other types accommodate the creation of a beneficial self-story. Memory loss in itself is not always a bad thing. In both texts addressed in this paper, the selective forgetting, remembering, and refocusing facilitated by living in a new environment allow the protagonist to live, arguably, to greater advantage. Notably, these texts push aside the home-as-horror nursing home narratives of the genre to introduce instead a home-as-haven narrative.

“The Bear Came Over the Mountain”

Alice Munro’s 1999 short story/novella “The Bear Came Over the Mountain” has become well known since being adapted as a screenplay for the movie *Away From Her*, directed by Sarah Polley (Jaffe 67). Munro’s female protagonist Fiona mirrors Margaret Laurence’s Hagar in age and in her growing lack of self-sufficiency. Yet after admission to Munro’s version of a care facility, this protagonist creates a new and possibly more fulfilling life for herself. The story suggests that, for some residents, institutionalization could provide more freedom of identity than is available within the more invisible enclosures of their lives outside the care facility. My analysis of this story primarily addresses the story’s ambiguous interpretation of the long-term-care facility as a potential site of disruption of oppressive normality, as a place where new personal agency away from an unfaithful husband might be enabled.

The story begins with a brief flashback to Fiona’s and Grant’s courtship prior to their marriage and then abruptly jumps several decades to arrive at the present where they are leaving their long-time home to drive Fiona to Meadowlake for treatment of her recent escalating problems with memory loss and confusion (1-3). In order for Fiona to adjust optimally to her new situation, the facility’s administration advises Grant that he cannot visit during an initial thirty-day orientation period (8). By this policy, the administration actively discourages residents from dwelling on memories of their previous homes. By the time Grant sees Fiona again, she has formed a new and intense friendship with Aubrey, a fellow resident and dementia patient, and appears to have forgotten who Grant is – much to his alarm (20). When Aubrey’s wife Marion takes him home again at the end of his scheduled respite stay, Fiona, in his absence, falls into a decline. This further frustrates and

upsets Grant (41), and so he determines to coax Marion into restoring Aubrey to Fiona (58-63). Ironically, by the time Grant has arranged the reunion, Fiona has forgotten about Aubrey and instead once again demonstrates affection towards her husband (65).

The most obvious interpretation of the story would identify dementia and the demands of institutional living as the negative forces upsetting the couple's life-long love. If readers interpret that Fiona has suffered severe and ongoing memory loss as a result of a disease such as Alzheimer's, then the story should be interpreted as a tragedy with dementia playing the role of villain. The screenplay and other critics of the story have interpreted Munro's work as a poignant love story wherein the husband Grant is as much a victim of his wife Fiona's dementia as is she. In referring to the movie, Ellen S. Jaffe and Ellen Bouchard Ryan talk of "the grace of love which the couple ultimately salvage" (Jaffe 4). This interpretation is valid and the story can be lauded as an exploration of the losses associated with dementia.

I would argue, however, that because Munro's writing is somewhat impenetrable, this interpretation is debatable. The narration is third-person omniscient with focalization occurring through Grant, but various nuances suggest that the story might differ if readers could hear it through Fiona's voice. As Coral Ann Howells speculates, the story "could be read as the story of a wife's escape through dementia from the prescribed plot of her married life" (75). After her admission, Grant misses Fiona at home, buys flowers to give to her on his first visit to see her at Meadowlake, and apparently attempts to eradicate his wife's unhappiness at Aubrey's absence with no thought to anything except her wellbeing. However, in order to restore Aubrey to her, he is willing (the story suggests) to repeat a life-long pattern of marital infidelity by seducing Marion (61). He relishes the idea of

persuading Marion to do his will, saying, “[i]t would be a challenge, a creditable feat. Also a joke that could never be confided to anybody – to think that by his bad behavior he’d be doing good for Fiona” (61). Many readers will falter here and withhold from Grant the label ‘selfless hero.’

The text explains that Grant’s reputation as a philanderer had required him to accept a reduced pension and to retire early from his career as a professor of Anglo-Saxon and Nordic literature (35). At this time, Fiona had also given up her job as a “hospital coordinator of volunteer services,” and they had moved to the country where there were “no bare female toes creeping up under a man’s pants leg at a dinner party” (16-17). The text presents Grant as feeling disgruntled and maligned, justifying his behaviour and musing that he had never treated any of his lovers heartlessly and had “never stopped making love to Fiona in spite of disturbing demands elsewhere” (16). To these thoughts, most readers’ response would be less than completely sympathetic. The text explains that following his banishment, he “got drunk, and without its being required of him – also, thank God, without making the error of a confession – promised Fiona a new life” (15). What is not explained explicitly is to what extent Fiona has been aware of Grant’s repeated infidelity and how she feels about his behaviour and her own exile to the country.

When Fiona first experiences forgetfulness, seems confused, and becomes difficult to interpret, Grant is unsure how concerned to be, thinking that “she’s always been a bit like this” (5). He cannot explain to the doctor that he feels

as if she’d stumbled on some adventure that she had not been expecting. Or was playing a game that she hoped he would catch on to. They had always had their games – nonsense dialects, characters they invented. Some of Fiona’s made-up

voices, chirping or wheedling (he couldn't tell the doctor this), had mimicked uncannily the voices of women of his that she had never met or known about. (5)

Although Grant apparently believes that she had known nothing about these “women of his,” the text allows room to interpret that Fiona had known exactly what he was doing all along.

When Grant is given permission to visit Fiona after her initial orientation period at the long-term-care facility, he cannot determine whether his wife's new ambivalence towards him is due to her dementia or whether it is a joke or even an act of cruelty. As Sally Chivers says (albeit in discussing the movie interpretation of the story), “[w]hether she deviously and vengefully plays on her newly acquired unreliability, or whether she genuinely forgets him, does not lessen Grant's suffering” (*Silvering* 90). While Fiona's memory losses precipitated her admission to the home, Munro leaves room for readers to interpret that this dementia patient, once admitted, may be not quite as overwhelmingly affected by forgetfulness as people think. Chivers writes that it is possible to speculate that “her attachment to Aubrey becomes a coy yet manipulative way to make Grant reassess, regret, or at least suffer for his own past treachery” (90). Grant himself questions whether Fiona might be playing a game with him: ““I wonder whether she isn't putting on some kind of a charade”” (26).

By focalizing the story through Grant, Munro allows room to interpret that Fiona may have consciously embraced a new lifestyle free from Grant's oppressive behaviour. Her relationship with Aubrey may be interpreted as a willful attempt to seek revenge against Grant for his infidelities. Aubrey does not seem like a great improvement over Grant as a partner in that he also attempts to control her actions, but he is not her husband,

and so she now at least has freedom of choice. Readers could alternatively interpret that she does suffer from dementia-related severe memory loss and that therefore her behaviour is a less-than-fully conscious, knee-jerk reaction to Grant's previous bad treatment of her and that her subconscious has not yet got over her earlier anger. Munro is elusively suggestive rather than clear.

The text could also be interpreted as saying that, in her relationship with the wheelchair-bound Aubrey, she is enjoying an opportunity to put back into action her former care-giving skills as a coordinator of volunteer services, and that she may simply be enjoying a new and rewarding relationship for its own sake with no particular motivation deriving from her previous relationship with Grant. Alternatively, Fiona may have surreptitiously carried out her own affairs throughout the years, and now that she is incapacitated by dementia may no longer be skilled at hiding her relationships with other men from her husband. Readers should avoid the sexist assumption that only Grant could have been unfaithful in their marriage. Munro is not known for portraying solely angel-in-the-house wives.

When Fiona demonstrates affection towards Grant at the end of the story, she may be surfacing from a severe phase in her dementia, or she may have determined – consciously or otherwise – that he has been punished sufficiently. The ambiguity of the text invites readers to consider whether Grant's and Fiona's marriage has transcended – and will transcend – his tendency to cheat, or whether he is merely demonstrating that he will betray his wife even in her illness. Grant casts himself in the role of hero, but the reader could just as easily interpret him as the villain. Does the relationship transcend monogamy, or is he just proving that he still does not understand what is important in a relationship? Munro's

ambivalence invites but does not require readers to see Fiona as a woman who has been previously disempowered in this marriage but who, advantageously, may have “forgotten” her marriage – consciously or otherwise – and who may have redirected the misfortune of being admitted to a care facility towards her own fortunate ends, towards subverting the controlling power of her husband. Her new distanced behaviour and the various visible new markers of her identity associated with living at Meadowlake require Grant to reassess his understanding of Fiona and to reassess his attitudes towards their relationship.

Amelia deFalco rightly points out that Grant’s knowledge of his wife is “significantly limited” and that “he has tended to think of Fiona as delightfully foreign, as a dynamic but mysterious being” (75). At their first meeting when young, he had been “bewitched by her vitality” and had “accept[ed] her subjectivity as entirely mysterious, often quaintly so” (77). DeFalco adds that Grant “relied on Fiona’s persistent otherness to justify his betrayals, regarding her as a delightfully opaque object, denying her subjectivity in order to indulge his own transgressive desires,” but that “Fiona’s dementia forces a new engagement with responsibility” (76). Thus when dementia alters her behaviour, her opaqueness and his inability to see into her are familiar yet also strangely exacerbated and new.

When Grant visits for the first time, he finds Fiona’s name on the door to her room, but he cannot find the woman he now badly wants to see after being denied her company for the previous month. In a sense, she has become for him the desirable “other woman.” The emptiness of her room can be interpreted to represent their estrangement and the erasure of their shared past: “She wasn’t there. The closet door was closed, the bed smoothed. Nothing on the bedside table, except a box of Kleenex and a glass of water. Not

a single photograph or picture of any kind, not a book or a magazine” (18). He soon finds also that she has donned different clothing, has had her hair cut, and has assumed new behaviours (33). To use Freudian language, his once familiar wife has now been rendered strange and somewhat frightening or “uncanny.”

DeFalco interprets that these changes in Fiona and the time he spends following her and her friends around in the care facility eventually cause Grant to see himself as the “other,” to catch sight of his own uncanniness or strangeness in relation to the different standard of normal established at Meadowlake. As DeFalco points out, readers can better understand Munro’s text by considering Freud’s explanation of the significance of disorientation: “the uncanny would always be an area in which a person was unsure of his way around: the better orientated he was in the world around him, the less likely he would be to find the objects and occurrences in it uncanny” (Freud 125). Grant’s altered view of his wife and of himself unhinges his self-confidence and sense of place in the world.

Possibly, Grant comes to value his wife and understand himself differently by the final scene of the story when she once again demonstrates affection towards him – or at least seems to demonstrate affection. He suggests to her that he would never abandon her, saying “not a chance,” and he keeps his face against her “sweetly shaped skull” (65). Yet he has noted to himself, just before reassuring her, that she smells like “the stems of cut flowers left too long in their water” (77). The text’s mention of the yellow of her dress and of her unpleasant scent suggests that Fiona is represented by the previously described yellow skunk lilies in the swamp near their home that may or may not generate true warmth. By this insinuation, the motivation for her behaviour becomes inscrutable, and, as

Coral Ann Howells points out, there may be in Grant's final words "an echo of his old duplicitous reassurances" and prevarications in relation to matters sexual (77).

At the time of Fiona's initial admission, sexual intercourse had been an important extra-marital part of Grant's life, but it had been, at least to some extent, a recent part of their marriage as well. Readers are aware that Grant and Fiona have been sexually active recently because, during his period of waiting, he reminisces about the routine he had previously enjoyed with her in the evenings: "[t]his was their time of liveliest intimacy, though there was also, of course, the five or ten minutes of physical sweetness just after they got into bed – something that did not often end up in sex but reassured them that sex was not over yet" (13).

When Grant visits following Fiona's orientation period, he becomes worried that Fiona and Aubrey are having an intimate relationship, talking to Kristy "about these affections between residents" and asking "[d]id they ever go too far?" (25). He notes that Fiona and Aubrey spend time together behind closed bedroom doors (32), but he feels reassured when he remembers that Aubrey is in a wheelchair (26). However, readers later see Fiona helping Aubrey to begin walking again, and thus his incapacity is rendered questionable (27). Without explicitly depicting Fiona's sexual experiences, Munro suggests that a long-term care facility could potentially be the site not just for new friendships but also for new intimate relationships that could include sexual intercourse.

The text's depiction of the extreme initial limitations on visitation at Meadowlake points out that paired people like Fiona and Grant and like Aubrey and Marion face the likelihood of forced separation when one half of the couple requires admission to a care facility. Thus her text points out a current unaddressed problem in late-life care policy, that

is, that treatment is individual in nature and does not often consider the needs of coupled individuals. While Munro's 30-day no-visitation rule is stricter than that encountered in reality, by its use she metaphorically references all of the ways admission to a long-term-care facility drives a wedge between partnered individuals. When couples no longer share a home, less obvious losses occur as a result. The non-residential spouse is limited to visiting during prescribed hours, and thus he or she loses the familiarity and intimacy associated with being included in activities of daily living such as bathing, dressing, eating, sleeping, and doctor visits.

On the bright side, Munro's depiction of the tender affection shared by Aubrey and Fiona also suggests that there is a potential for people to begin new and meaningful relationships upon entering care facilities, even though dementia may necessitate an early end-date for them. Munro's depiction of the new relationship between Aubrey and Fiona invites readers to consider the influence of dementia on an individual's morality and ethics. She asks to what extent patients such as these two can be held accountable for their behaviour and at what stage the diagnosis of dementia precludes the application of a charge of adultery. Healthy partners such as Grant and Marion at some point must accept their partners' diminishing mental capacities and associated lost loyalty to former relationships. Munro also queries whether healthy partners who have been abandoned as a result of their partners' diseases have the right to begin new relationships without feeling that they are betraying their original partners.

The general public, for the most part, would prefer to assume that old people are sexually inactive. Thomas Walz, who reports his research findings regarding nursing home sexuality in "Crones, Dirty Old Men, Sexy Seniors: Representations of the Sexuality of

Older Persons” (2002), explains that in the late 1970’s, while working as a “clinical teaching social worker in a Family Practice Geriatric Clinic,” he attended the examination of an eighty-two-year-old woman who had little claim to physical beauty and who had had her left leg amputated.

When she responded to an enquiry from her attending physician about the sensation in her leg, Walz inadvertently learned that “Emma” still experienced sexual desire: ““Doctor, the higher you go, the better it feels.”” Walz explains further that “[s]tunned by the sexual connotation of her reply, the doctor blushed and remained silent” (105). Walz admits that he too was surprised to consider that she might remain sexually interested. He arranged to interview her formally later and found that she frequently partnered with her late husband’s cousin who was living in the same nursing home. Walz’s contact with this woman inspired him to join other researchers who were studying late-life sexuality. He reports that

The breakthrough in survey research of sexual behavior in this country is credited to Alfred Kinsey and his reports on male (1948) and female (1953) sexual behavior. In the later report, although only a small segment of his sample were older women, he did find women’s interest in sex consistent from the late teens into the 60s, with a modest decline in the frequency of sexual intercourse as women aged. (103)

He also reports that, since that time, *The Hite Report* (1976) confirmed these findings, and that Masters and Johnson (1966) “proved that only rarely does the sexual equipment of the aged fail to allow older persons to remain sexually active” (Walz 103).

As Walz says, the general public prefers to believe that sexual activity is linked to conventional attractiveness, and so, as a result of narratives of positive aging, “there seems

to be an increased willingness to credit old people who are aging well (i.e., who look and act young) with being sexually interested and probably active” (101). However, people who look like Emma are assumed by the young to be inactive, despite statistical evidence and qualitative research findings that contradict this supposition.

By her inclusion in a 1999 story of the issue of sexuality in a long-term care setting, Munro should be credited with pushing against then current social awareness boundaries. More recently, attention to late-life sexuality is increasing – both in scholarly texts such as Kate Davidson’s and Graham Fennell’s *Intimacy in Later Life* (2004) and Stephen Katz’s and Barbara L. Marshall’s “Forever Functional: Sexual Fitness and the Aging Male Body” in *Cultural Aging* (2005), as well as in popular texts such as Joan Price’s *Naked at Our Age: Talking Out Loud About Senior Sex* (2011). In the professional manual *Sexuality & Long-term Care: Understanding and Supporting the Needs of Older Adults* (2012), Gayle Appel Doll stresses that studies show that “libido persists even in frail nursing home residents” and that for care facilities to ignore this fact constitutes neglect (20). She adds that “[u]nfortunately, many expressions of sexuality are seen as inappropriate in nursing homes (6).

The words Munro ascribes to the nurse Kristy allude to a disbelieving or even scornful attitude on the part of the public in regards to late-life sexual expression. Kristy comments:

The trouble we have in here, it’s funny, it’s often with some of the ones that haven’t been friendly with each other at all. They maybe won’t even know each other, beyond knowing, like, is it a man or a woman? You’d think it’d be the old guys

trying to crawl in bed with the old women, but you know half the time it's the other way round. Old women going after the old men. (27)

Kristy suggests that it is humorous, troublesome, and shocking to think that old people might still seek intimacy. By this quotation, the text invites discussion of the need to change public attitudes and to question the responsibilities of administrations in regard to this topic. It prompts discussion of an administrator's duty to protect residents from each other, to determine a resident's capacity to consent, and to liaise with family members who may have power of attorney and the legal right to limit the sexual activity of their ward.

Gayle Appel Doll points out that the range of sexual expression for older adults can be much broader than is often thought, and she thinks that home administrations should accommodate this diversity: "Expressions of sexuality in nursing homes... might be seen in flirtation and affection, passing compliments, and proximity and physical contact" or in "women dressing up and having their hair and nails done to look attractive." However, she adds that "[k]issing, fondling, masturbation, oral sex, and intercourse are also ways that many persons choose to express their sexual feelings" (5-6). She argues that residents' rights in regard to sexual expression should be recognized, although she acknowledges that sensibilities and rights of staff can sometimes make this difficult.

Although the reader is left to interpret whether Fiona's and Aubrey's sexual expression includes intercourse or just flirtation and friendship, Munro's text raises important questions on the topic just because it illustrates residents expressing their sexuality within the walls of the care facility. And if readers interpret that Fiona is not helplessly victimized by severe dementia but instead to some extent is making use of her

identity as a Meadowlake resident to claim her freedom from an oppressive relationship with her husband, then Munro has created an aging-as-opportunity nursing-home narrative.

The Other Sister

Like Munro's protagonist Fiona, Lola Lemire Tostevin's ninety-plus-year-old protagonist of the 2008 novel *The Other Sister* encounters new opportunities following her admission to a care facility – in this case, to Evenholme Retirement Living. Tostevin's protagonist shakes off a mantle of responsibility that she had been shouldering and seizes the opportunity to make new friends, including a fellow resident named Daniel with whom she shares walks, meals, and confidences. Once established at Evenholme, she is surprised to find that it is “not the lonely purgatory she had expected” (3). Thus *The Other Sister*, like “The Bear Came Over the Mountain,” can be interpreted to be an aging-as-opportunity nursing-home narrative.

Following her admission, Tostevin's protagonist feels sufficiently free to return to an identity that she had abandoned earlier in life. Although she presents initially as Mrs. Julia Brannon, the text unravels a mystery to reveal ultimately that she is in fact Jane Crane, unmarried identical twin sister to Julia. Once a new resident, Jane rejects the role imposed on her by societal duty and embraces her own individual interests and desires for the first time in fifty years. The reader learns that when Julia had committed suicide at forty and left her four-year-old daughter Rachel motherless, her sister Jane had assumed Julia's identity and had abandoned her own career as a professor of philosophy (201). Jane had thereafter provided a stable home for Rachel, who had grown up knowing Jane as her mother and remaining oblivious to her initial identity as her aunt (169).

In the present time and third-person perspective of the frame narrative, the protagonist's granddaughter Thea gives the protagonist a laptop because she thinks that her grandmother is suffering mental confusion and asks her to record the events of her life with the hope that her memory will improve (3). By this device, the text inserts flashbacks into Julia's and Jane's past in the first-person voice of the protagonist and in a distinctive italics font that distinguishes it from the rest of the text. These insertions create suspense and interest, but at the same time, since their author is presented as an unreliable narrator, the reader recognizes that the veracity of their contents is questionable.

The flashbacks gradually inform the reader that Rachel's father Wilson Brannon had loved Jane but that she had rejected him, preferring to attend university. At Jane's suggestion, he had married the more passive twin. Julia's suicide had been precipitated by the death of her husband and two sons and by finding Wilson's love letters to Jane, and so Jane's guilt and sense of duty had driven her to snuff out her own life as a career woman and to assume Julia's life as a mother and homemaker (213). In a sense, she had arranged for Jane's life to end instead of Julia's.

Tostevin also incorporates a subplot that places Jane in a meaningful new friendship with fellow resident Lena Kohn, whose dementia causes her to fixate on the torture of herself and her twin in a Nazi concentration camp. By so doing, Tostevin keeps the topic of the Holocaust in front of the reading public, and readers will appreciate that she is compelled by the subject matter and is in large part writing the book as a tribute to those who suffered.

This 2008 novel has as yet received little attention. The novel's popular strengths are to be found in its unique mystery plot and perhaps in its enquiry into the twin roles (in

the home and in the workplace) between which women were torn during the latter half of the twentieth century. In an initial review of the novel, Andrea MacPherson argues that it is the “challenging of gender expectation that sets Julia apart from other characters in the novel,” pointing out, however, that Tostevin’s “descriptions of her as feisty and forward-thinking no longer feel fresh” (162). She adds that “[t]hese revelations of Julia’s life ... sometimes in italicized sections, other times in stiff dialogue, often feel too much like information being fed to readers” (163). Since, as MacPherson points out, the topic of changing roles for women has been addressed by many, I would argue that the greatest significance of the novel may be its contribution of an aging-as-opportunity narrative to the nursing-home genre.

After admission to Evenholme, the protagonist rejects the restrictions of the past, embraces the opportunity to once again become Jane,²² allows her more assertive nature to resurface, and begins to talk about previous interests such as books and philosophy. Lena’s descent into dementia, associated with her inability to stop reliving the events of the Holocaust, presents a foil against which the couple’s happiness seems especially fortunate and thus keeps the story from becoming saccharine sweet. However, Daniel’s and Jane’s lives clearly improve after they meet. Like Jane, Daniel comes to appreciate life at Evenholme: “[t]ake this place, I never thought I’d get used to it, but I’m having a rather nice time. It’s awfully good to be able to talk like this, Julia. You’re a wise old broad” (104). The two of them enjoy verbal sparring while they share tea in either his or her suite,

²² Even if readers interpret that she has dementia and, as her granddaughter Thea fears, has become confused about her own identity at this point in her life, the narrative could still be considered to be a story of opportunity because she clearly embraces new friendships and expresses contentment in her new home. (An alternative interpretation could be that she has always been Julia the wife and homemaker and has now decided in her nineties to try out the persona of her sister Jane the intellectual.)

and, eventually, she reveals herself to him as Jane rather than Julia. At the end of the story, she designates him as the keeper of her laptop – and her true identity – which is not to be shared with her family until after her death (210).

Jane and Daniel illustrate one of Gayle Appel Doll's most important points about sexuality and long-term care, that "the longing for a loving relationship does not diminish with age" and that "feelings of homelessness that result from an overwhelming sense of loss of meaning of life" can be alleviated by "promot[ing] intimate relationships for residents" because "[i]ntimacy or emotional closeness can act as a buffer in adaptation to stress and may be a requirement for survival as one grows older" (5). As Margaret Morganroth Gullette puts it, "[c]uddling is the most elemental form of love" ("Improving" 142). Tostevin's text suggests that Jane's growing relationship with Daniel nurtures her willingness to reclaim her own identity. His interest and conversation draw her back into being Jane as she was and help her to develop Jane as she can be in the present.

In the preface to Doll's book, Peggy Brick explains that the "word *sexuality* can be a problem" because many equate it only with sexual intercourse when it in fact also "includes one's feelings about oneself as a male or female person, body image, and the need for intimacy, touch and connection" (viii). Although Tostevin mentions that the residents at Evenholme have a pornographic-film-watching club called The Old Degenerate Club (133), she also describes behaviours not specifically linked to intercourse but that are nonetheless important aspects of what Doll would call "sexual expression:"

There was a fair amount of flirtation at Evenholme, but Julia doubted there was much sex in spite of a few residents who still conducted themselves as if sex should always be on one's mind. Half-a-dozen women behaving like

schoolgirls.... The men weren't much better. In fact, they may have been worse, broadcasting their imagined conquests to anyone who cared to notice. Sonny Walsh placed flowers on the dining tables of the women he imagined he was wooing, while Graham Porter left notes under plates and doors.

Youth's swagger replaced by the bravado of old age. (87)

As the same passage continues, Tostevin's words begin to sound like Brick's, Gullette's and Doll's opinions about the importance of love: "[m]emories of the flesh carrying their own deceptive rhetoric in order to deal with the palpable dread of being alone. In a setting where people lived together from breakfast to bedtime, there was still the dread of not being loved enough. In this, even the aged were insatiable" (87). In this passage, Tostevin's text presents caring, sexually expressive relationships as an absolute necessity and as a means of eradicating loneliness and creating meaning.

Jane's physical attraction to Daniel as a man is evident when the text says that she "noticed him immediately" and thought that "[h]e owed much of his pleasant appearance to his ramrod posture and his white mane" (88). She also appreciates nonphysical aspects of his identity such as his position as a retired professor of mathematics (88) and his recognition of her as a fellow academic: "I hear you taught at the University of Toronto, he said, then added, As I did" (90). Their thoughtful interactions encourage her to reclaim Jane's intellectual history. As their relationship develops, grapevine talk amongst the other residents links them as a couple, and they enjoy hand holding and sometimes a kiss on the lips goodbye (120). Early on, Jane finds herself "losing interest in life outside Evenholme" (40). When Jane's granddaughter visits and fills her in on family news in the outside world, Jane feels it is "like hearing about strangers" (40). With Daniel's support, Jane throws off

the sham widowhood of fifty years, largely unburdens herself of family responsibility, and becomes content living at Evenholme. At least for the present period of her residency prior to transfer, she is able to put to rest and to forget the troubles of her past. Her new life within the walls of Evenholme allows her the opportunity to escape her old sense of responsibility, to find new meaning in life, and to tell her story as she determines it should be told.

Summary

“The Bear Came Over the Mountain” and *The Other Sister* could both uphold various readings. Munro’s focalization through Grant and Tostevin’s unreliable first-person narrator in the textual insertions preclude closure. That said, readers could interpret that in these two stories admission to care facilities provides the protagonists with opportunities, not simply to successfully contest the home’s administration as in *Sunset Manor* and *Exit Lines*, but to live more contented lives than they were living prior to residency. Care institutions can be accused of depriving individuals of contact with the outside world, but they also offer shelter from it. Munro’s character Fiona provides an example of escape – conscious or otherwise – from the oppression of an abusive husband. The text illustrates that, in certain cases, some forgetting as a result of dementia might provide the benefit of lessened stress. Thus, the text suggests that real-life residents outside of fictional stories might also benefit from some forgetting – perhaps, for example, by forgetting about intense grief felt over the loss of something or someone held dear. Both texts illustrate the importance of inter-resident relationships and show how new friendships can create meaning within a care-facility environment. Tostevin’s text illustrates the sense of freedom

from responsibility that some residents might feel upon admission and the opportunities for new friendships that might become available. It also suggests that the unfamiliar environment of a care facility has the potential to nurture new identity development. Significantly, these two texts add aging-as-opportunity narratives to the nursing-home narrative genre.

Chapter Five

Walking out the L.T.C. Door: Cages, Fantasy, and Freedom in

Water for Elephants and Flee, Fly, Flown

When Jacob Jankowski, elderly protagonist of Sara Gruen's 2006 novel *Water for Elephants*, becomes frustrated with the loneliness and limitations of his assisted living facility, he grabs his walker, walks out the front door, and restarts his life by getting a job in a circus (109). When two female protagonists, in Janet Hepburn's 2013 novel *Flee, Fly, Flown*, decide that they can no longer abide eating institutional food and playing bingo, they escape from their lockdown dementia unit, steal a car, pick up a young man to help them drive it, and set off on a cross-country adventure. Both texts are entertaining and can be appreciated solely as popular literature, each a happy mix of adventure and humour. Both could be deemed wishful thinking or dream narratives, with stylistic leanings towards romance and fantasy. However, these texts depict the serious issues associated with living within institutional care facilities and express the deep desire for escape that may be felt by many aging people. The extent to which the escape narrative that these two texts depict is viable is up to each reader to determine. Readers should note, however, that they represent a growing number of recent texts depicting escape from care homes, such as the 2011 Canadian film *Cloudburst*, written and directed by Thom Fitzgerald, the 2010 American novel *Escape from Bedlam* by Leslie Larson, and the 2009 Swedish novel *The 100-year-old Man Who Climbed Out the Window and Disappeared* written by Jonas Jonnason and translated into English in 2012 by Rod Bradbury.

Water for Elephants

Sara Gruen could be criticized for presenting a fraudulently optimistic and superficial ‘positive aging’ narrative in that her “ninety or ninety-three” year-old protagonist and first-person narrator Jacob Jankowski freely walks away from his long-term care facility, enters a nearby circus, and compels the manager to employ him as a ticket taker by astounding him with stories about working as a circus veterinarian in the 1930’s (said stories contributing the flashback portion of the text’s narrative). Alternatively, it could be argued that Jacob is merely demonstrating that he is fully recovered from a temporary medical problem when he escapes from the oppression of the “old folks’ home” to return to work and to what, for him, is his real home – the circus (322). The text rides the fence between realism and wishful thinking and leaves readers to choose their own ending.

Margaret Morganroth Gullette’s comment, that this is “a plot of rescue that isn’t credible,” makes the valid point that most circus managers would be unlikely to hire a man of Jankowski’s age and apparent health status, thus making his supposed return to work improbable (“Review” 306). And while the trope inherent in the young Jacob running away to the circus (in the flashback narrative) encourages readers to accept this plotline, there is little precedent supporting the idea that the old Jacob might run away to a circus too. The reader has difficulty imagining such a scenario.

Jacob offers an appealing vicarious escape to many aging adults who would prefer to prevail against the ‘overbearing administrator’²³ of a care institution, and, better yet, to avoid ever placing themselves under the care of any such place. Gruen may be selling escapist fairy-tale literature when she suggests that this old man could successfully return to

²³ See Chapter 3 for more about the trope of the ‘overbearing administrator’ in literature.

the work force, but she presents a story that currently resonates strongly with a public keen to embrace positive-aging ideology and twenty-first-century narratives of aging that speak for ‘aging in place’ and against retirement and withdrawal. While cultural and governmental pressure to remain independent and productive – to age successfully – may place unfair expectations on the truly disabled, the goal of maintaining youthful attitudes and physical vigour appeals to many people. Jacob Jankowski is not the only elderly person who loathes the idea of sitting passively, waiting for others to manage his life.

In *The Zoomer Philosophy VI*, Moses Znaimer writes that many, like himself, used to look forward to retirement as an escape from the working world and as a chance to “live happily ever after building model airplanes,” but now, in his opinion, such a fate is “far from heaven, that’s my idea of hell! In fact, far from being a time to cease work, retirement strikes me as a unique opportunity to change the direction, intensity and scope of our work” (C5 2). As Znaimer’s comment makes clear, an individual’s understanding of the definition and significance of work makes a difference in attitudes towards retirement. Work can be a necessary evil to some, a meaning-making activity to others, and a combination of the two for many.

Ronald Manheimer, in “The Paradox of Beneficial Retirement,” cites financial security as the most common consideration in the decision to retire but also lists factors such as illness and, although rare now, mandatory retirement requirements in occupations such as airline pilot or police officer. The influence of one’s significant other and the lure of recreation and/or family activity can also factor in (85). While some gleefully enjoy “freedom fifty-five,” others lose their sense of self and suffer decline without the

opportunity to work. Manheimer suggests that retirement for many people is “a journey into the vortex of nothingness” (92).

In “Discovering What Matters: A Focus Group on Retirement,” Gatch, Katz, Saunders, and Schwartz discuss the non-financial effects of retirement, stating that people miss the workplace’s external structure, challenges and accomplishments, opportunities for approval, and sense of community amongst colleagues (279-80). A leisurely retirement remains the ideal for some, yet an increasing number of people of retirement age need to earn money, wish to remain socially connected, and/or want to continue to contribute something worthwhile to the world. I suspect that many readers would say that they would prefer to work at a circus ticket booth rather than live in Jacob’s care facility. Thus, whether readers perceive his actions as feasible or fanciful, Jacob Jankowski could be construed as a poster boy for a contemporary positive-aging work ethic.

Jacob begins the narration (following a prologue that provides a teasing glimpse of the flashback narrative’s climax) by exercising little poster-boy aplomb – telling us nothing about who or where he is and merely saying that he has forgotten exactly how old he is (5). Thus from the outset the reader is made aware that he is forgetful: “You start to forget words: they’re on the tip of your tongue, but instead of eventually dislodging, they stay there” (5). However, throughout the rest of the first chapter, he proceeds to present himself as a fairly reliable narrator, describing in lucid detail the care facility in which he is living and some of his interactions with the nurses and other residents. Jacob then ends the first chapter by suggesting that the stories to follow are some combination of dreams and memories, saying that “the ghosts of [his] past rattle around in [his] vacuous present. They crash and bang and make themselves at home, mostly because there’s no competition. I’ve

stopped fighting them” (13). By introducing his daydreams in this manner, the text suggests that the flashback portions of the narrative consist of his willing but unintentional ruminations about the past. After the next three chapters detailing his time in the circus, Gruen opens the fifth chapter depicting Jacob waking from sleep in his bed in the care facility, crying and unable to remember the name of his nurse – and with his reader once again querying his reliability as a narrator.

Jacob’s children pressured him into leaving his home and entering an assisted living facility when he broke a hip and they determined that he was no longer self-sufficient. The author leaves room to interpret Jacob’s return to work as merely a fantasy on his part because she mentions repeatedly that he is forgetful (5, 64, 105, 217), and also that he requires an anti-depressant in order to behave amicably in the institution (68). The author mentions too that his children have assumed a financial power of attorney, which could suggest a loss of mental acuity on his part (108). However, Gruen hints that Jacob might exhibit more competency than his children suppose if his circumstances were different: “I wasn’t aware of dozing, but that’s how it goes these days. I seem to slip in and out of time and space. Either I’m finally going senile, or else it’s my mind’s way of coping with being entirely unchallenged in the present” (173). Long-term-care culture has done little to provide him with mental stimulation.

On the day of his escape, Jacob recognizes that he is now merely an obligation to his children and grandchildren, and, when they forget to show up to take him to the circus as promised, he decides he prefers to manage without them (258). This failure to show on the part of his children is important as a plot device because it leads to Jacob’s decision to

leave the facility and go to the circus on his own, but it also points out that Jacob is not the only human being who occasionally experiences forgetfulness.

The narrator's self-identification as an educated professional and the realist style in which Gruen weaves this fascinating and detailed story about life working on a travelling circus in the 1930's both serve to encourage the reader to suspend their disbelief and accept the veracity of Jacob's story. Since his admission was precipitated by an accident rather than by chronic illness, and since he has now shown that he is well enough to walk unassisted out of the building and into the circus, readers have the option to accept the story and to determine that he has recovered sufficiently to work again, despite the assumptions of his children and the facility staff. Gruen gives readers a choice. They can read the story as a decline narrative or as a progress narrative.

Western society's ubiquitous and insidious decline narrative suggests that, following middle-age, downfall is both inevitable and continuous, when in fact, most people experience intermittent periods of decline and progress on an ongoing basis throughout their entire lifetimes. In the late-life portion of the text (frame narrative), Jacob resists this ageist ideology and opposes the people in his life who assume that he must now be in permanent decline.

The set character of the "insensitive administrator" (as seen in the novels discussed in earlier chapters) is missing from this novel, but the family, staff and facility regulations fulfill the spirit of the trope and provide the major conflict in the late-life story. Jacob points out to a nurse that, although he has all of his teeth, the kitchen offers him "nursery food" (67). He angrily demands to receive something that he can "sink [his] teeth into" and denies the presence of any fruit or vegetables in the supposed salad set before him (67).

Eventually he must accept the administration of pills and injections that control his assertive behaviour and temporarily render him docile, in his words, a “Jell-O-eating sheep” (69).

In the article “‘It’ll remain a shock for a while’: Resisting Socialization into Long-Term-Care in Joan Barfoot’s *Exit Lines*,” Ulla Kribernegg critiques the techniques by which some care facilities routinely socialize residents following admission, silencing them as individuals and rendering them malleable institutional bodies that, in worse case scenarios, become little more than bed, bath, and feeding duties to the staff (2). She points out, as an example, that a deliberately slow response to a resident’s next call for nursing assistance is sometimes used as a “consequence for residents who did not conform to staff requests” (13).

Best practice is not in effect when an institutional living space tends to shape the residents rather than be shaped by the needs of the individual residents. Elaine Wiersma and Sherry L. Dupuis conduct research into the “lived experience of moving to a long-term care facility and the process of socialization for new residents into the nursing home culture and environment.” They summarize the problem as follows:

Other studies have supported the ‘bed-and-body’ approach to care in long-term care settings. Paterniti (2000) described how residents were viewed as routine work, scheduled by workers’ agendas. Within this approach, staff related to residents by their categories of deficiencies. Some residents were seen as ‘time consumers’ by demanding staff help. Others who needed help eating were labeled as ‘feeders.’ ‘Troublesome’ behaviours were those residents who increased the work burden, increased tasks, and usually involved extra time. Because of the need to keep

information and documentation on the residents and staff tasks, residents were viewed as bed-and-body information. As such, any self-definition by the residents tended to be dismissed. (278)

Facilities run more efficiently when residents adhere to a system and a routine, but this style of management has serious repercussions, such as “a disregard of the psychosocial needs of residents, a diminishing of the humanness of residents, and an erasure of residents’ identities” (Wiersma 279).

Gruen’s depiction of Jacob’s grievances points out the homogenizing nature of long-term care institutions, where set menus and routines often govern rather than enable the residents. Jacob struggles to maintain simple personal freedoms, such as the ability to control the amount of light in his room, chastising one of the nurses: “Correct me if I’m wrong, but isn’t this my room? What if I don’t want the blinds open? I tell you, I’m getting mighty sick of everyone thinking they know better than I do about what I want” (105). By his performance of ongoing resistance, Jacob rejects the decline narrative imposed upon him by family, staff, and circumstances, and he escapes to the circus before he is rendered an entirely institutionalized body. As Kribernegg points out, however, staff can resist the institutionalizing of the individual by doing little things to affirm the identity of the resident.

In contrast to the generally impersonal face of the long-term-care institution, two characters in the frame narrative see Jacob and affirm him as a person. The second is the circus manager who agrees to take Jacob into his community. The first is Rosemary, the nurse chastised by Jacob for opening the blinds without his permission. Following his comment, Gruen indicates: “Rosemary gazes at me. Then she drops the blinds and marches

from the room, letting the door shut behind her. My mouth opens in surprise” (106).

Rosemary then says “Good morning, Mr. Jankowski” and asks to come in. Despite his cantankerous behaviour, Jacob apparently has jolted her into an awareness of his situation because she tells him that she had “never thought of it that way before” and she sincerely thanks him for “opening [her] eyes” (106). Jacob’s resistance initiates a relationship between the two that is based on more than his bodily functions. His ongoing insistence that his identity be defined not by the chores he necessitates but rather by his humanity is indicative of the strength that later enables him to walk out the door of the institution.

Gruen clearly champions the rights of aged people in this novel. The novel is, however, particularly interesting as an age studies illustration because the author takes the further step of paralleling the rights of the old with the rights of such others as animals, workers, women, and African Americans. Through parallel structures, which place this long-term-care-facility resident in juxtaposition with other oppressed individuals, *Water for Elephants* explicitly challenges readers to consider the rights of the powerless of just about every description.

The first most obvious parallel compares the problems of the old Jacob to the problems of the young Jacob. They are both in a decline period: Jacob of the frame narrative is an old veterinarian whose wife has died and who has broken his hip and thus has had to leave his home; Jacob of the flashback narrative is a young student veterinarian who has just been orphaned and who has lost his home due to subsequent bankruptcy. Both have lost their family and their home. Old Jacob has no money because his children have power of attorney. Young Jacob has no money because his parents went into debt to put him through veterinary college. In both instances, when the author first introduces the

reader to the protagonist, he is in a decline, and then he solves his problems by running away to join the circus, allowing him to resume a successful progress narrative. These parallels between the young Jacob and the old Jacob offer the suggestion that life, across the entire life course, consists of alternating periods of decline and gain.

The text's second and most obvious structural parallel places human animals in juxtaposition with non-human animals. Jacob narrates both the frame and flashback narratives from a first-person perspective. Since he is a retired veterinarian, he comments on animals and often compares people to them. For example, he mentions a nurse who has a "horse face" and a lawyer who has ears like an elephant and chews like a cow (66, 8). When admitted by his children to the facility, Jacob describes how he was "bundled up like a cat on the way to the vet" (109). When he sees that he has recovered well from his hip fracture, he comments: "there may be life in the old dog yet" (6).

More significantly though, Gruen portrays similarities between Jacob's life caged within the care facility and the animals' lives caged within the circus. Old Jacob compares himself to a herd animal when he says, "I'm so used to being scolded and herded and managed and handled that I'm no longer sure how to react when someone treats me like a real person" (176). Rosemary, the nurse who has begun to treat him as a person, is aware that he dislikes the food in the facility, and so kindly offers to feed him a bowl of fruit from her own lunch. Jacob notes that it "actually looks appetizing, with strawberries, melon, and apple" (12).

The text parallels this scene depicting the nurse's kindness as Jacob's keeper with another scene in the flashback narrative depicting young Jacob's kindness as keeper of a caged orangutan:

I open the orangutan's door and set a pan of fruits, vegetables, and nuts on the floor. As I close it, her long arm reaches through the bars. She points at an orange in another pan.

'That? You want that?'

She continues to point, blinking at me with close-set eyes. Her features are concave, her face a wide platter fringed with red hair. She's the most outrageous and beautiful thing I've ever seen.

'Here,' I say, handing her the orange. 'You can have it.'

She takes it and sets it on the floor. Then she reaches out again. After several seconds of serious misgivings, I hold out my hand. She wraps her long fingers around it, then lets go. She sits on her haunches and peels her orange.

I stare in amazement. She was thanking me. (118)

In this way, the text invites readers to compare the reduced rights and freedoms of the old to those of non-human animals, raising the salient question of whether all human and non-human animals should receive equivalent respect and care on the basis of a personhood defined merely by sentience rather than by status as humans.

Readers can infer that Gruen alludes to arguments by animal rights activists and philosophers such as Peter Singer who query such topics as the impact of belief in a mind/soul duality, the role of intelligence and moral community in determining rights, and the significance of supporters and friends who carry individuals' identities in their memories and thus act as their champions. Although Gruen avoids didactic belief statements, readers could infer that she deliberately portrays a difference in the consciousness and agency of human animals and non-human animals. While the orangutan

manages to express her needs and appreciation, she does not demonstrate the depth of consciousness and agency that old Jacob does as he struggles to maintain his self-awareness and to assert his rights in the face of the institution's attempted domination of him.

It is also noteworthy that Gruen depicts the young protagonist Jacob eating "a burger," which precludes any intention on her part to accuse or to alienate meat-eating readers (2). The author aligns the rights of animals with the rights of humans with dementia, yet her goal does not seem to be to impose extreme animal rights dogma but instead to encourage her readers to think about the issues for themselves. Gruen presents young and old Jacob as her protagonist and hero, but she does not suggest that he is a model of perfect behaviour, only that he is admirably compassionate towards all of those weaker than himself and that he is willing to take action on behalf of himself and others.

Readers could also see a parallel between the rights of animals (and thus, as established above, the rights of the aged) and the rights of workers. By naming the worker who befriends young Jacob with the animal name "Camel," Gruen suggests that the disadvantaged workers of the circus are in a situation similar to that of the animals. The text is set up in many small ways to speak against speciesism – that is, undue prejudice due to the species barrier between human and other non-human animals – but a startling inversion also draws attention to the topic.

While young Jacob is clearly a model of appropriate behavior in that he sees both animals and humans as worthy of consideration, Uncle Al, the cruel circus owner, cannot be accused of speciesism either. He does not treat animals as being inferior to humans in status; he treats humans and animals with equal disregard, blithely ordering the ejection of any non-producers from the community, even if it means their death. This satirical reversal

of the typical pattern of speciesism allows the text to query further the validity of the species barrier. As well, similarity across species is stressed by the circus's categorization of performers as distinct from nonperformers, thereby grouping important performing animals with important performing humans and distancing both groups from the less important "workers" category, which is also made up of animals and humans. The text makes clear that, as in real life, in the circus environment, some animals and humans are afforded elite status.

Gruen also parallels abused women with the disadvantaged. Marlena, the female protagonist and battered wife of the animal trainer August (and the eventual wife of Jacob), is of elevated status as a performer, but, because August covets her sexually and is possessive of her, he trains her with the same cruelty he applies to the animals: "He looks down at her. His nose twitches. Then he shoves her so violently she crashes back onto the overturned platters and food. He takes one long step forward, leans down, and tries to rip the necklace from her throat. The clasp holds, so he ends up dragging her by the neck as she screams" (246). He controls her by her collar as if she were an animal (232).

The text avoids trite binaries of the good and the bad, though, in that August, while portrayed as an oppressive husband and employer, is also portrayed as a struggling schizophrenic who is trapped by his illness just as others are trapped within their respective cages. As in her presentation of animal-rights issues, the author paints a world where right and wrong cannot be readily discerned, and she paints a protagonist who is clearly human and open to criticism. Gruen leaves room for readers to imagine a story depicting August as betrayed by an adulterous wife having an affair with Jacob, to see him struggling in vain with his mental health while oppressed by the circus owner Uncle Al.

Gruen even leaves room for the reader to realize that, although Al's actions are unnecessarily violent, he must bow to the demands of the market system in order to avoid bankruptcy of his circus. He demonstrates little concern for the wellbeing of any particular individuals, whether human or animal, because he must exert a great deal of concern for the survival of the circus as a complete entity. When his circus is in danger of going into red ink, he continues to feed most of his workers but stops paying the salaries of those who are of least use to the community – regardless of their individual needs. When he is risking bankruptcy, he authorizes his enforcer Blackie to red-light any individuals who are not pulling their weight. That is, he tosses them off the train while it is moving (26). And he has no qualms about denying food and drink to animals in order to pressure officials into the hasty sale of the assets of another defunct circus at a price favourable to himself (114).

Yet by such sacrifices of the well-being of animal and human individuals, he ensures the survival of the whole community. If Al were to meet more humane standards of accommodation for humans and animals, his circus would very likely not be able to compete successfully against other circuses in the 1930's collapsed financial marketplace, and every individual in the community would suffer greatly as a result. Gruen may be presenting a laundry list of left-wing social complaints, but she acknowledges the challenges of the free-market society in which the disadvantaged live. She could be perceived as making a comment on the challenges faced by governments in determining social programs within the context of global fiscal realities.

One of the most complex of Gruen's structural parallels identifying the oppressed links Marlina, the abused wife of the animal trainer August, and Rosie, the performing elephant, to Rosemary, old Jacob's friendly nurse. Elsewhere in the story, the text creates a

parallel between Marlana's persecution and that of the elephant when she indicates that Marlana has sewn for Rosie a sequined pink headpiece to match her own costume (233). The text's use of these pink sequins is a key device. Suspense begins in the prologue with a minimal depiction of the climax of the story – a spectacular circus-animal stampede – and a minimal identification of August's murderer. Jacob says only that she is wearing pink sequins. He tells readers: "I opened my eyes again and scanned the menagerie, frantic to find her. How hard can it be to find a girl and an elephant, for Christ's sake? When I caught sight of her pink sequins, I nearly cried out in relief" (3). Readers have to wait until the end of the text to find out whose pink sequins he has spotted and whether Marlana or Rosie is guilty of the crime.

The parallel between these two female performers and Rosemary the nurse is drawn when Gruen refers to her as a "black girl in pale pink" and then again as "the girl in pink" (10). In case the reader misses her point, she then refers to her "pale pink bosom" (11) and later to "the plump one in pink" (64). The parallel is also drawn by the presence of the "Ros" of "Rosie" and the "Mar" of "Marlana" within the name "Rosemary." The connection in the names is reinforced when Jacob calls his nurse "Rosie" by mistake when he is absent-mindedly reminiscing about the circus (216). Rosemary is a worker like Camel, but she deserves special mention because, like many of the workers in long-term-care facilities, she is an African American serving a white consumer and employer.

Jacob decides to walk to the circus on his own directly after Rosemary tells him that she has phoned his son Simon and that his family has forgotten to come for him. When Jacob, crying, tells her that she is a good girl and says that he would not know what to do without her, Rosemary gives him the bad news that she will be discontinuing employment

in his facility: ““We’re moving to Richmond. To be closer to my mother-in-law. She’s not been well”” (258). Jacob and the reader are left to contrast his family’s failure to provide care to him with Rosemary’s dedication to her family.

Gruen presents a world where tooth-and-claw competition rules and only the human capacity for compassion offers protection for the weak. Fortunately for Old Jacob, although his favourite nurse is leaving and his children have lost interest in him and taken control of his money, he prefers to work and apparently now has a job.

Flee, Fly, Flown

Janet Hepburn’s 2013 novel *Flee, Fly, Flown* resembles *Water for Elephants* in that it depicts the most recent plot line to characterize the nursing-home-narrative genre – geriatric escape from a care facility – and in that it mixes fantasy with realism. In Hepburn’s story, two female residents, Lillian and Audrey, flee their lock-down unit, steal a car, pick up a young man to act as driver, and take to the road to tour Canada. This first-person story narrated in the voice of Lillian could be considered to be either the dementia-induced fantasies of a fictional woman or the accurate report of a fictional woman only partially disabled by dementia. Either way, the story embodies the dreams and desires held by many aging people for endless youthful wellbeing and avoidance of institutional living while also subtly acknowledging the unlikelihood of those wishes coming true. Like *Water for Elephants*, *Flee, Fly, Flown* concludes without absolute closure but with a suggestion that reality is likely to intrude on any escape plans hatched by fleeing care-home residents.

Hepburn’s novel is set initially in a lock-down unit in a nursing home in Ottawa. The story opens with the protagonist Lillian saying to her friend and fellow protagonist

Audrey, “I can’t eat one more bite of this tasteless mush. I need giant chunks of toffee” (3). Although the first-person narrator Lillian acknowledges at different times that Tranquil Meadows Nursing Home is “very comfortable and secure” and that both residents have problems with memory, the two women are compelled by a strong sense of dissatisfaction with their living situation to leave for a vacation just like everyone else would do in August (32, 29). Lillian asserts, “I said I’m gonna move out, pull up stakes, hit the road if I don’t get something decent to eat soon” (3).

Both women are also dissatisfied because they believe that they receive infrequent visits from family members, but this claim is suspect. In the second chapter, Lillian’s daughter Carol arrives by plane from Toronto for a visit and shopping trip that has, according to her, been discussed and preplanned with Lillian. Lillian apparently has forgotten that they had arranged this, so her claim that the visits are infrequent is questionable. She may be less neglected by her family than she recalls.

Regardless of what may in truth be happening, Lillian’s narration reveals that the women feel isolated and lonely. Although the two women share a close and sustaining friendship, the attending staff’s perceived coldness towards them is expressed by the narrator’s use of physical characteristics rather than names to depict them: “Pastel uniforms with white sneakers perch on stools, spooning food into random open mouths like mother birds feeding their young. They write on clipboards, recording how we eat, how much we leave behind” (4). *Flee, Fly, Flown* illustrates the problem Wiersma and Dupuis identify, as previously noted in this chapter in relation to *Water for Elephants*, which is: “a disregard of the psychosocial needs of residents, a diminishing of the humanness of residents, and an erasure of residents’ identities” (279).

While the unappealing food, mindless busy-making activities, and disinterested staff comprise part of their motivation, these two spirited old women primarily crave adventure and an opportunity to make their own choices (27). In meeting these goals, they are wildly successful.

That is, they are wildly successful if the narration is accepted by the reader as true. If the reliability of Gruen's narrator Jacob is questionable, then the reliability of Lillian must be considered to be even more unreliable since the text includes obvious admissions of fallibility made directly by the narrator herself: "My doctor has told me I'll have good days and bad, and I know he's right. People tell me stories about things I say and do; things I don't remember at all. I don't always believe them. I call these my fog days. I try to let them go" (22).

Lillian's interactions with others, in particular with Audrey, produce a mix of humour and poignancy. Like Lillian, Audrey struggles with dementia and periods of memory loss but also with deafness, an example of which is her interpretation of Lillian's question "Do you have a car?" as "Do I hafflegar?" (5). The authorial voice also reveals the protagonists' deficiencies in less direct ways. For example, when Lillian goes shopping with Carol, she states that she is convinced that she knows the young salesclerk, but her daughter says "No, Mom. Barbara's much older now, older than me" (18). Regardless of this correction, Lillian continues to call the clerk Barbara, much to the young woman's confusion.

Although the text makes their limitations clear, these protagonists are also remarkably capable in some ways. If the narration is to be believed, like Jacob, they are more proficient than family and facility have anticipated. Together, Audrey and Lillian

calculate that the facility's required wrist band or "SafeChip" sets off an alarm when they attempt to enter the elevator, and so they arrange to cut theirs off while at a craft session, thus ensuring that they will be able to walk out the front door uncontested (26). Lillian cannily manipulates the unsuspecting Carol into helping her buy sneakers and a backpack that will be needed on the trip, and she unobtrusively observes how to access the bank account, for which her daughter has power of attorney, so that she can return there to withdraw money with which to bankroll their getaway (15-19). And Audrey, searching in the bottom of her purse, locates a key to her old car, now owned by a young neighbour living next to her former house (6). Once all of these steps have been accomplished, the women escape by taking a taxi to the house to boldly reclaim Audrey's car and by driving effectively, though badly, to a bank to get Lillian's money. They successfully acquire money from the bank, but then have the good sense or bad judgment – reader to determine which – to invite a young male drifter to drive the car for them as they head off on their adventure.

Their new friend Rayne takes them at face value and treats them as capable adults, and so the three of them enjoy a cross-Canada adventure that includes eating a variety of good foods in restaurants, being adopted by a dog, camping in beautiful natural settings, and smoking some marijuana (115-17).

Although their adventures present some jolly entertainment, the text also asks a serious question: when someone else can remember for you, should memory loss still be considered a problem? Like Barfoot's *Exit Lines*, Hepburn's *Flee, Fly, Flown* suggests that the embrace of a community rather than an individual identity has the potential to help a person struggling with losses associated with aging to retain some of the benefits of their

previous lifestyle. Sylvia, George, Greta, and Ruth of *Exit Lines* combine their strengths to overcome their individual weaknesses, with the end result that they find a restored satisfaction with life. Audrey and Lillian adopt a similar strategy.

Early in the story, Hepburn introduces a governing metaphor for the text: a torn table napkin shared equally between Lillian and Audrey, serving to represent the two halves of their joint identity as a team of two. In order to help them accommodate their disabilities and successfully remember their adventure plans, Lillian writes their plan on a serviette and then tears it in half so that each of them is responsible for remembering only half of the time: “On a napkin, I scribble the word *vacation*. Twice. I tear the napkin in two and give one piece to Audrey. I fold the other and place it carefully in my pocket” (6). She hopes that the disadvantage of their memory loss can be diminished by this technique of writing their plan down, thinking that they will be able to share the responsibility of remembering to look at the napkin. As Lillian explains, each is accountable for being competent only half of the time because they can rely on each other: “Audrey has to come with me. It wouldn’t be any fun without her and besides, together we’ll have better luck sorting things out” (50).

Unlike Lillian’s daughter Carol, Rayne seems to understand and accept that this technique of sharing memory on paper and/or with others provides a valid way for the ladies to remain sufficiently competent. He sees no problem with letting them use his memory as an extension of their own, and thus considers that it is reasonable for them to have left the dementia unit. When he eventually has to take Lillian to the hospital, he explains to the “uniform” that “she may need help remembering” (231). Significantly, he does not say that she does not remember, merely that she may need help to remember.

The other salient question Hepburn presents to her readers is whether Rayne's or Carol's attitude towards the ladies is the most appropriate. She depicts Rayne as an unemployed dope-smoking ruffian with questionable judgement as regards the ladies' wellbeing, yet also as someone who respects the ladies' autonomy and right to make choices: "If we're gonna be travelling together, we need to be equals. No acting like my guardian, telling me what I can and can't do. You treat me with respect and I'll do the same for you" (54). He also genuinely expresses affection towards them, as illustrated, for example, by his invitation for them to stay with him at his father's place in British Columbia.

In contrast, Hepburn depicts Carol's behaviours towards her mother as concerned and caring but also perhaps as overly controlling. While Lillian is living at Tranquil Meadows, she visits her to take her shopping, and later, upon finally locating the runaways, she expresses deep concern for their safety and immediately flies to Calgary in order to pick them up. However, she comes to their aid with the intention of forcing them to return to lock-down care.

Hepburn brings realism to her story through Carol's attempt to rescue her mother and friend from what could be construed as a kidnapping, but she counters this realism with forays into the genres of adventure and romance. The text blatantly informs the reader of its embrace of a little Kerouac-style adventure by its inclusion of Lillian's comment: "It'll be an adventure – no expectations. We'll be like Jack Whatsisname. You know, *On the Road*? Or Bob Hope and Bing Crosby in *The Road to...* wherever? We'll just see where we end up" (30).

Assigning the name 'Rayne' to the handsome-young-man character in the text also clearly announces Hepburn's intention to borrow from the romance genre, the name obviously alluding to reigning royalty. At one point Lillian refers to him as "a prince all right" – in case the reader is slow to pick up on the trope (137). When the ladies need help to park their newly acquired stolen car at the bank, they notice a homeless musician, hanging about outside the bank with "a sleeping bag, an enormous backpack, and a guitar case" (45). Audrey's cliché pickup line makes Hepburn's reference to the romance genre blatantly obvious: "Audrey glances again at the young man on the bench and back at me. I see the look in her eye. Lord have mercy! The world does not need an eighty-year-old flirt. She rolls down the window. 'Excuse me, Handsome. Could you help us, Dear?' she asks. 'We're having a little trouble'" (42).

Lillian is conflicted about whether or not they need a driver badly enough to trust a disreputable-looking young man like him: "I watch him inhale, watch his yellowed finger twitch slightly. His skin is sallow, and his eyes are rimmed with dark shadows. Still, he has a boyish look; a look of innocence, like my son, Tom" (45). Hepburn assigns maternal feelings to Lillian in this quotation and implies the attitude again when the ladies counsel him to reconcile with his father and return home to British Columbia (172-79). Rayne's role in the story is complex. Hepburn presents him as a son figure in need of guidance, a handsome chivalric prince who sweeps in to rescue the damsels from the distress of living in a nursing home, and also as a Byronic 'bad boy' who encourages the ladies in their wild adventures. For example, despite their obvious health limitations, he goes camping with them by a lake and shares some marijuana with Lillian (115).

The ladies are aware that Rayne has a different attitude towards them than Carol. When he encourages them to call home to reassure Carol, Lillian tells him: “I don’t think we should call yet. They don’t see us like you do. They’d never trust us to finish the trip. They think we’re helpless” (199). Audrey warns him that “They’re gonna blame you for this. They think we’re just clueless old ladies,” but Rayne is willing to support them in their goals (200).

Hepburn portrays Rayne as neither wholly good nor bad. When he finds out that the car in which they are driving does not actually belong to Audrey, he refuses to continue driving it and instead rents a white van, which indicates that he has a moral conscience while at the same time reinforcing his princely role with an implicit allusion to a knight’s white steed from medieval chivalric imagery (141).

However, Hepburn soon shows Rayne in a questionable light once again. When she depicts an officer in a “white, unmarked police car” pulling him over for speeding, she introduces another candidate for the role of prince (160). This second potential prince, Sargeant Christensen, reveals to the ladies and the reader that Rayne’s real name is actually “Wayne Carpenter” and that he has had “a few minor brushes with the law,” thus suggesting that he is only masquerading as a prince and is in truth a bad-boy character. The officer connects a missing-persons report with the ladies and assumes that Wayne is up to no good. However, once the ladies convince the officer that they are competent enough to make their own choices as regards to where and with whom they wish to travel, he determines that he cannot contact Carol: “That’s the law. I can’t divulge anything without your permission because you’re adults. But the fact that they’ve filed a report tells me that they are very concerned. Why don’t you call them from here to tell them yourselves?”

(167). Thus Hepburn positions the officer's attitude towards the ladies' competence as somewhere between that of Rayne at one extreme and Carol at the other. Ultimately, Lillian resists the officer's well-meaning encouragement to call her daughter because she knows that Carol would promptly put an end to what she would consider to be an inappropriate adventure.

The story's climax occurs when Lillian falls in a river and is rescued heroically by Rayne: "Rayne runs towards me. He doesn't even slow down at the water's edge, just wades in, untangles me from the tree's hold, and pulls me to the shore. I'm amazed at his strength" (228). At this point, the adventure must come to an end because Lillian becomes so ill that Rayne realizes that he must take her to a hospital in Calgary. He recognizes that he is now not capable of giving the ladies the care that they require, and so he finally joins the ranks of those willing to make decisions on Lillian's behalf. He drives her to an Emergency Room, calls Carol to come and attend her mother, and then leaves to go to his father in British Columbia.

The reader is left to determine whether Carol or Rayne offers the most appropriate assistance to Lillian and her friend, that is, to determine whether safety and maintained health are more important considerations than the right to retain agency and to experience whatever adventures might be deemed important. The two ladies sum it up themselves: "Do you feel different since we left Tranquil Meadows?" asks Audrey. Lillian assures her, "I'm never bored, and I like not having everything decided for us" (86). When they are camping by the lake, Audrey exclaims, "I can die happy now" (116). Lillian adds, "It's funny; I'm not afraid of dying anymore" (116). Lillian and Audrey view their adventure in a completely different light than Carol does.

As I have discussed in the second chapter of this thesis, when Hagar of *The Stone Angel* and Daisy of *The Stone Diaries* stare into their mirrors, they despair over the changes aging has made to their images. By comparison, Lillian stares into a mirror inside a hotel bathroom and feels good about what she sees:

The full-length mirror inside forces me to stand up straighter. I examine my reflection, starting with the flashy shoes and moving up to the little bulge that swells under my shirt at the tummy, the rounded shoulders, gray hair, and sagging skin on my face.

‘You look old, Girl, but not half bad. I’d have to say you look better now than you have for months.’

The splash of warm water on my face is like a long, firm hug. The towel is plush and smells of fabric softener. I hold it on my face and breathe deeply. I love this place. (198)

In this passage and elsewhere, Hepburn’s *Flee, Fly, Flown* asks readers to weigh the relative merits of freedom and safety in the lives of aging adults. How much risk is appropriate, and at what point does someone lose the right to assume that risk?

Like most of the texts discussed in this thesis, Hepburn does not provide closure. Laurence’s *The Stone Angel* has become iconic for its depiction of nursing-home horror and for Hagar’s failed escape narrative. Hepburn’s *Flee, Fly, Flown* may become iconic for its portrayal of escape, romance, and adventure, with Lillian and Audrey speaking for all of those who want to maintain the freedom to seek a future of their own choice.

Summary

In this thesis, I have shown that the nursing-home-narrative genre finds its beginnings in *The Stone Angel* and other similar texts of the same time period, texts characterized by realism shadowed by the gothic. I have shown how Shields's *The Stone Diaries* adds post-modern self-reflexivity, redefining identity as multiple and changing, and how *Sunset Manor* and *Exit Lines* push the genre towards levity by adding slapstick, dark humour and mystery. I have suggested that "The Bear Came Over the Mountain" and *The Other Sister* depict homes where residents might consider that moving to a nursing home represents opportunity rather than horror. And the recent escape narratives in texts such as *Water for Elephants* and *Flee, Fly, Fown* reveal the genre's new embrace of fantasy, romance, and adventure.

Fast changes are happening in the nursing-home-narrative genre, and the number of texts published is growing, probably as a result of the growing interest in aging in our Canadian society. Other art forms are showing similar trends. For example, in the 2011 Canadian film *Cloudburst*, two women, Dot and Stella, who have been together for thirty-one years, face being forcibly separated when the grand-daughter of Dot places her in a nursing home. Stella rescues Dot from the home and together they flee to Canada in the hopes of being married so that they have the legal right to care for one another. As in *Flee, Fly, Flown*, they are joined by a handsome young man who assists them in their escape, both texts thus similarly reminiscent of the well-known 1991 movie *Thelma and Louise*.

The tendency towards escape, romance and adventure is also not just a Canadian phenomenon. Cora, the first-person protagonist of the 2010 American novel *Escape from Bedlam*, makes plans with a handsome new boyfriend to escape from her care home. She is

betrayed by him, but then eventually escapes through her own newly discovered strength and through the support of a less handsome but more trustworthy male friend. Jonas Jonasson's 2009 Swedish novel, *The 100-year-old Man Who Climbed Out the Window and Disappeared*, resembles the texts in this chapter in that the protagonist, Allan Karlsson, climbs out a window to escape from the "Old Folks' Home." If he were to use the door, "Director Alice" who might be nosing around the institution, could catch him. Jonasson's 2009 text was translated from the original by Rod Bradbury and published by HarperCollins in Toronto in 2012.

Hope has joined horror in nursing-home narratives. Mystery, humour, and now adventure, romance, and fantasy have pushed gothic realism out of the spotlight. However, to date, none of the new texts of the nursing-home-narrative genre solely offer successful progress narratives or eradicate completely the familiar presence of realism and the decline narrative.

Chapter Six

Outside the Nursing-Home-Narrative Genre: Race and Gender Exclusions in *Green Grass, Running Water*

In Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*, four elderly men walk away from a mental institution to resume their place as elders in the Indigenous community to "fix the world" (123). Like Sara Gruen's Jacob Jankowski, King's protagonists reject retirement and go back to work, but these four Indigenous characters participate in a different type of escape narrative than those depicted in Gruen's and Hepburn's novels. When King's characters walk away from a mental institution, where the administrator has cared for them, or incarcerated them (depending on whom one asks), they are not just escaping from an institution but from the dominant Judeo-Christian culture that they believe is responsible for breaking their world (2). In *Green Grass, Running Water*, King suggests that while white culture sees four useless old men with dementia, Indigenous culture sees wise and capable old leaders who have the ability to transcend earth's limitations and provide leadership to their people.

The nursing-home-narrative texts discussed in this thesis, in the second through fifth chapters, have been about white straight people of Judeo-Christian and Anglo-Saxon descent living in nursing homes that they may or may not be willing to call home. Just as the first chapter of this thesis discusses two early Canadian texts that are excluded from the genre by virtue of depicting protagonists who never receive institutional late-life care, this chapter considers a text that does not form a part of the nursing-home-narrative genre. While Chapter One analyses two texts that were published prior to the time when institutional care became common in Canada, Chapter Six presents an analysis of King's

text in order to consider people who have excluded themselves, have been excluded, or who have felt excluded from living in white institutional care, either because their ideology precludes residency or because they are deemed unentitled by typical care-facility cultures.

King's endowing of the four protagonists' with otherworldly attributes, his use of myths borrowed from Indigenous culture, his multiple narrative voices, and his postmodern reflexivity combine to create a fantastical yet thought-provoking text with both magic realist and oral narrative characteristics. Like Gruen's *Water for Elephants*, Thomas King's 1993 novel addresses the topic of age, and several paralleled story lines compare ageism to a variety of other injustices. However, in *Green Grass, Running Water*, race, and in particular Indigeneity, is of primary concern. King makes fun of all of his characters, including the Indigenous ones, but he sends cutting verbal barbs towards Western culture and its history of persecution of Indigenous tribes.²⁴

Through its escape narrative, the text changes the protagonists' roles from passive to active, metaphorically suggesting the wrongful imprisonment of Indigenous peoples in places like Fort Marion, white misunderstanding of Indigenous knowledge, and the challenges Indigenous peoples have in attempting to remain true to their own identity while caged within a world run by white cultures and governments.

Although there are numerous story threads centred on specific characters, there is no single protagonist in this text. Instead, a community of mythical and real characters representing the Indigenous acts as protagonist in conflict with white people and their culture. King's title references the United States government's promise to respect the

²⁴ NB: Thomas King is of Cherokee and Greek/German descent. (Thesis author is third-generation Canadian of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant descent.)

Indigenous peoples' rights to their land "as long as the grass is green and the water runs." Patricia Linton has aptly explained: the "title of the novel is itself a metonymic allusion to the bad faith that separates Native and European Americans. It is a coded reminder of a history of appropriation and the instability of European intentions" (217).

Linton argues that the text requires that "the truly competent reader is a member of a narrow group who, like the narrator, has insider-status in two cultural realms" (214). The non-Indigenous reader can appreciate many aspects of the text, but King makes exclusion clear by such techniques as the insertion of chapter headings in Cherokee²⁵ with no translation readily available (King 5). Linton argues that the text seems evasive to many because it addresses "at least four different categories of readers with some claim to insider knowledge," and any one reader would require knowledge of all four fields in order to access it fully. In brief these categories are: Indigenous people, feminists, Canadians, and literary and historical scholars (Linton 226). The text's intriguing complexity has prompted a flurry of illuminating critical interpretations, which I would encourage the readers of this thesis to access since I will focus primarily on the aspects of the novel that offer statements about age.

The plot of the novel is, to say the least, complex. As Greg Bechtel writes, there are "two distinct narrative streams within the text: a realistic, linear story of contemporary Blackfoot characters in an identifiably real-world setting, and a series of four Native myths that initially appear unconnected to the realm of the everyday" (1). The four old men participate in both narrative streams, thus connecting all the stories and indicating a comfortable and ongoing coexistence of material and spiritual worlds. When interviewed

²⁵ The copyright page indicates that the "part title calligraphy" by Chris Costello is in the Cherokee language.

by the authorities following the elders' disappearance, mental institution employee Babo insists that they are "four, five hundred years old," which suggests that, while they exist in the real world, they are also ancestors from the spirit world who walk alongside their descendants on earth and continue to provide them with assistance, a common trope in Indigenous cultural productions (51).

These four elders take turns narrating various versions of the stories along with the trickster Coyote and a sixth narrator referred to only as "I," effectively suggesting Indigenous oral story-telling traditions. The four old men lampoon historical accounts, creative literature, and Judeo-Christianity while assuming the names of four white male heroes of Western culture: Lone Ranger, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe, and Hawkeye (9). The other narrative stream consists of creation myth variations about four indigenous women: First Woman, Changing Woman, Thought Woman, and Old Woman (39, 104, 232, 328). King's blending of the two narrative streams unites the mythical stories of the distant past with stories of the more recent past. The eventual blending of the narrative streams into the new contemporary story suggests similarity between residency in the mental hospital and incarceration in Fort Marion, a prison in Florida to which the U.S. army sent any Indigenous "leaders opposed to the reservation system" in 1874 (18, 397). The text's combining of the image of the hospital and the image of the prison metaphorically suggests that Indigenous peoples may feel a type of imprisonment living within white society today.

The eventual juxtaposition of the narrative streams also blends the identity of the four old men into that of women, specifically First, Changing, Thought, and Old Woman. When interviewed by Sergeant Cereno about the "escapees" from the hospital, employee Babo reports that "they were women, not men," disputing his claim that the "files say the

Indians were men.” (53). This inconsistency suggests that the old women may have been attempting to masquerade as men, which in turn references the exacerbated injuries that can result when peoples’ identities involve multiple layers of otherness, such as being all of Indigenous, female, and old. A reader might surmise that the text may be referencing the felt need by Indigenous people to attempt to “pass” or survive within white culture by denying their heritage and pretending to be something acceptable to white society. Readers could also interpret that this confusion over identity references an inability on the part of white culture to accurately perceive the Indigenous, or they could alternatively interpret an elusiveness or preference for vague representation on the part of the Indigenous. King’s prose is merely suggestive in these areas, yielding no clear answers.

Eventually, the four oppressed women/men and their mythical world merge with reality when the renamed mental patients magically “fix the world” – at least a bit – by intervening in the life of the Lone Ranger’s misguided “grandson” Lionel, by helping their descendants to assemble as a community at the Sun Dance, and by reversing some of the humiliation felt by Indigenous peoples by, for example, using historio-graphic meta-fictional techniques such as re-filming a movie battle to show the Indigenous warriors defeating cowboy John Wayne (125, 322).

In King’s fictional world, the aged ancestors are not incompetent male mental patients, but instead knowledgeable yet humble elders out to “fix the world.” The four repeat this line a number of times: “‘We’re not on vacation....We’re working....We’re trying to fix up the world;’” “‘It’s a lot of work fixing up this world, you know,’ said the Lone Ranger; and “‘We are trying to fix the world’” (123, 416, 418). Although they are presented in a humorous fashion and make mistakes, King indicates that they do have

power to effect change. For instance, they talk to Coyote and are granted his cooperation in starting an earthquake to get them to the other side of Big Muddy River (418). The four Indigenous men, according to the institution administrator, have left thirty-seven times and each time their disappearance has coincided with major disasters in the world, such as the explosion of Mount Saint Helens (46-48).

The old men leave to “fix the world,” but they also leave because the facility is a non-home that isolates them from their own Indigenous community. King lampoons white care options by creating the most powerful “overbearing administrator” of all. He names the administrator “Dr. Joe Hovaugh,” thereby critiquing white care institutions by suggesting that Indigenous peoples are forced to live within a culture that is based on the Christian religion rather than on Indigenous spiritual traditions. The text includes the following line at the beginning and again at the end, satirizing the Christian creation myth, replacing Jehovah with Joe Hovaugh sitting in a Garden of Eden facsimile: “Dr. Hovaugh sat in his chair behind his desk and looked out at the wall and the trees and the flowers and the swans on the blue-green pond in the garden, and he was pleased” (16 and 425).

When he notes that the old residents are missing, Dr. Hovaugh consults with the physician Dr. John Eliot, a character named after a famous missionary who attempted to convert the Indigenous to Christianity in the 1600’s (Burke). Hovaugh and Eliot ineffectively muse that the old residents must be dead because “they should have died ... a long time ago,” thus making reference to the assumption of many that the Indigenous tribes would eventually die out or be assimilated into white culture (47). However, Dr. Eliot will not sign death certificates unless Dr. Hovaugh can produce four dead bodies: “What I can’t understand is how they escape. And where do they go? Have you ever thought about that

Joe? And why, in God's name, would they want to leave?" (48). Here the text pokes fun at the common white assumption that white culture is superior to Indigenous culture and that surely Indigenous people must realize this truth. King makes it clear that most Indigenous people avoid admission to white institutions such as late-life care facilities not just because they are made uncomfortable due to the racist attitudes encountered there, but because they prefer their own culture and consider it superior to white culture.

As I mention earlier in Chapter Five, *Water for Elephants* depicts as Jacob's champion the friendly nurse Rosemary, "a black girl in pale pink" (10). Gruen's text suggests by the inclusion of this character that African Americans often serve white residents in long-term-care facilities, and dressing her in pink aligns her with the other oppressed females identified within the text. King's text indicates that Babo Jones, an African American, has been Dr. Hovaugh's employee at the institution for sixteen years, suggesting that the author has apparently also noticed how frequently white care facilities employ African Americans as workers. As in Gruen's text, King's technique of paralleling stories suggests multiple meanings simultaneously. Thus his text suggests that, like the old men, Babo has had white culture thrust upon her.

The name "Babo" references an African character who violently resists being made a slave in Melville's *Benito Cereno*, a story wherein a captain and crew are overpowered by the Africans that they are transporting for the purpose of selling into slavery. King provocatively places this volatile character's namesake in the midst of Hovaugh's supposed Garden of Eden. Thus readers could interpret that the text is asking how this institution can be seen as being a god's ideal garden when there are obvious racial inequities between the management and the employee and inmates. By including the African American worker

Babo in the story alongside the Indigenous residents, King emphasizes the felt racial separateness of Indigenous and African American peoples and what he considers to be the oblivious ignorance of elite white management. King points out that Indigenous and African American people lack a respected place in this white institution or in any white institution, and that therefore they would rather exclude themselves from white culture.

The texts surveyed thus far in this thesis have depicted nursing homes inhabited primarily by relatively privileged, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant residents. In *The Other Sister*, Lola Lemire Tostevin depicts two Jewish residents, Lena Kohn and Daniel Browne, but in general residents of white Anglo-Saxon descent are the norm in Canadian nursing home narratives.

In the mid 1800's in Ontario, differentiation primarily occurred on the basis of religion, according to records of an early refuge house in Catharine Parr Traill's community of Peterborough. In *Anson House: A Refuge and a Home*, Elwood H. Jones explains that the opening in 1865 of the Peterborough Protestant Home (later renamed Anson House), served as "an extension of neighbourly concern" to provide food and shelter until residents could be restored to familial or self-support once more. He explains that this Peterborough home opened with the intent of offering relief to worthy people of the Protestant Christian faith, although it would not "refuse the same assistance and comfort to the Roman Catholic poor, provided they submit to the established Rules and Regulations which are printed and hanging up in several of its rooms" (Jones 8). A Catholic House of Providence was built in Peterborough in 1890 (Jones 28).

African Americans, according to American researchers Marguerite M. Coke and James A. Twaite, authors of *The Black Elderly: Satisfaction and Quality of Later Life*, often

avoid admission to care institutions, and instead rely on their own spiritual communities for help because they feel unwelcome or unsafe in typical long-term-care facilities. Coke and Twaite report that their own findings “support the conclusions of Taylor (1985) and Taylor and Chatters (1986) regarding the importance of the church and religion among many African-American seniors,” and that their findings “also support the assertions of Clavon and Smith (1986) and Morrisson (1982) regarding the significance of the family and extended family” (98). Low income averages and ties based on kinship and religion result in lack of patronage by the black community of late-life institutional care. Options such as three-generation family living or support by the church and community are often preferred. Coke and Twaite explain that “older blacks may be inhibited from using health care services, because facilities are often staffed primarily by white professionals who may appear intimidating and may lack the ability to communicate effectively with older blacks” (13).

In “Migration and Mental Health of Black and Minority Elders in the UK: The Forgotten Patients,” researchers Sofia Zarate Escudero and Ajit Shah report a similar lack of attention to non-white elders in Britain: “there are only a few population studies which look at mental disorders among BME elders in the UK” (122). These researchers suggest that little concrete advice to caregivers of BME elders has been given other than brief comments added onto published literature, such as “religious and cultural needs should be taken into account when providing service” (131). They conclude that “a multifaceted approach is required to overcome these difficulties; as well as ensuring that the design of future services is culturally sensitive, appropriate and capable to improve and facilitate access to services” (138).

Coke and Twaite also point out that, although governments do not officially endorse the practice, nursing homes remain segregated (13). Coke and Twaite claim that “the social history of African-American people in America suggests that church and family represent important sources of strength and support, and the results of this study show that involvement in church and family roles are associated with life satisfaction as well” (98). They come to the interesting conclusion that professional support workers should accept the unofficial segregation for practicality’s sake and channel their efforts through the networks already established by the churches serving the African-American communities.

This may strike readers as a notable failure on the part of these sociologists to maintain separation between the church and state and an odd endorsement of existing segregation. However, at a 2012 conference in Nova Scotia, Wanda Thomas Bernard of Dalhousie University also stated that, in her experience, family and church provided better supports for African-Canadians than mainstream white-culture care. She claimed that most felt that government-run late-life care facilities were an unacceptable option for them because of racial prejudice and a generally alien cultural environment. Her seminar addressing the needs of African-Canadians at the Nova Scotia conference made it apparent that racial separation in late-life care remains under-addressed in age studies scholarship and in our Canadian communities.

King makes it clear that Canada is not exempt from the charges of racism he has applied towards America. When Babo and Hovaugh cross the border into Canada to look for the old men, the border guard asks Dr. Hovaugh: ““Are you bringing anything into Canada that you plan to sell or leave as a gift”” and, pointing out Babo, says ““you’ll have to register her”” (236). Hovaugh agrees, saying, ““Yes, ”” and ““Of course.”” The border

guard insists ““All personal property must be registered, ”” thereby blatantly suggesting that Babo is property rather than a person. King then writes: “Babo looked at the American border station and then at the Canadian border station. ‘Where did you say we were?’ she said.” King continues: ““Welcome to Canada’ said the guard, and she handed Dr. Hovaugh her clipboard” (237). The text thereby suggests that, despite Canada’s touted policy of multiculturalism, a person with black skin can expect to be treated as property in Canada.

In response to this exchange, Katja Sarkowsky argues that, when Babo and Hovaugh cross the border into Canada to look for the old men, “gendered and racial hierarchies” are exposed as well as “stereotypes about Canada” (6). She argues:

Not only does this episode expose the hypocrisy of the official contemporary Canadian self-image as open, tolerant, and unbiased towards racial minorities; the questioning at the border also implies an assumption about a necessarily hierarchical relationship between white and black people as well as between men and women. The language of ownership deployed here refers ironically to (mistakenly assumed) marriage and takes up early feminist criticism of marriage as a societal institution that stripped women of their individual rights. Even more so, it refers to the history of slavery and hence the issue of literal ownership, and thus caricatures the historical Canadian self-image as a safe haven for fugitive slaves.

(218)

Although I agree that King suggests that when Babo crosses the border into Canada the border guard views her as “personal property” since she is an African American, I disagree with Sarkowsky’s interpretation regarding gender because King depicts the border guard as female. Therefore, King is not likely referencing archaic laws regarding male ownership of

women in marriage. However, I would argue that by placing this female African American as an employee alongside the old Indigenous male/female inmates in the institution and under the administrative leadership of the white male Joe Hovaugh, King aligns and speaks for the rights of oppressed Indigenous, old people, workers, African Americans, and women.

In an article entitled “Sometimes It Works and Sometimes It Doesn’t”: Gender Blending and the Limits of Border Crossing in *Green Grass, Running Water* and *Truth & Bright Water*,” Suzanne Rintoul argues that King alludes to gender rights more broadly: “The four old Indians ... expose the instability of the gender boundaries as established in European and North American culture: they are women who transition almost seamlessly to male figures” (239). One might assume that King depicts the residents as simply switching identities from female to male, but the text also reduces the distinct divide between maleness and femaleness, suggesting instead more flexibility in gender identity and generally championing LGBT rights. The text’s depiction of Moby-Jane’s and Changing Woman’s rejection of Ahab’s tyranny in favour of a relationship with each other is evident as they swim away together (187). As Rintoul points out, “the ‘swim’ is clearly a euphemism for sex as they ‘rock back and forth’ amid ‘rolling and diving and sliding and spraying’ and Changing Woman learns to ‘enjoy being wet all the time’ (245). And so, readers could add that the text champions broad gender rights along with those of the Indigenous, old people, workers, African Americans, and women.

Rintoul explains, however, that King’s discussion of gender is related specifically to Indigeneity and should be understood as being distinct from any general Western understanding of L.G.B.T. issues. She writes:

The importance of avoiding a universalizing or simplistic approach to thinking about First Nations gender identity cannot be overstated here, particularly since King reminds his readers repeatedly of the interrelatedness of race and gender. As each of the four old Indians assumes the identity of a white colonialist man to circumvent imprisonment, King aligns masculinity with European racism, and femininity with First Nations subordination. This process emphasizes the inadequacy of language that treats gender or race as discrete entities. (241)

I might add that, while the category of gender seems slippery in this text, most of King's categorizations are elusive in regards to boundaries.

Rintoul continues by adding that "King's four old Indians both trouble and reiterate European gender hierarchies," but she also states that she does not by this position intend "to displace readings of the Indians as part of the trickster or "two-spirit" traditions." She summarizes the text's style by saying that "in King's fictional worlds, we cannot attach solitary meaning to any phenomenon" (241). As established above, when King writes about four old Indigenous men in a mental hospital under the care of Dr. Hovaugh, he is depicting the oppression of Indigenous people by white governments and Judeo-Christian culture, and he is also depicting four old men in a care facility who may also be four old women. I would add now that the text is saying all of that while also suggesting that those four old people are multiple or flexibly gendered.

For flexibly gendered Indigenous and for non-Indigenous of general L.G.B.T communities, living in a late-life-care facility is a frightening prospect, and many prefer to avoid walking in the door. If residency is unavoidable, many retreat back into the closet, which means that they are then unable to receive visits from those people who are

important to them because they would cause them to be outed again. In response to this prejudice, major cities in Canada are beginning to offer L.G.B.T friendly late-life-care spaces.

In an article entitled “Gay seniors struggling to find 'safe' retirement housing: Inclusive projects developing slowly in public and private sectors,” Janet Thomson, Manmeet Ahluwalia and Sunnie Huang report that “LGBT seniors often lack the traditional support network – such as spouses and children – enjoyed by their heterosexual counterparts.” These reporters cite as their source a U.S.-based advocacy group called Services and Advocacy for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Elders (SAGE). They indicate that research conducted by the group found that “L.G.B.T seniors are twice as likely to age alone, four-and-a-half times more likely to have no children to rely on and five times less likely to access senior services.”

Green Grass, Running Water depicts four old people who for a variety of reasons walk away from a facility administered by white culture and government. Many aged people of a variety of descriptions are without a suitable support network to help them manage outside of an institution, and many are justly frightened at the prospect of admission to a culturally unacceptable facility.

Summary

Looking back over the chapters in this thesis, I find it appropriate to ask: whose stories about long-term care residency am I talking about? The answer seems to be: white people who are comfortable with Western culture and who are usually of Judeo-Christian heritage. While some people, like Gruen’s character Jacob, are attempting, as a result of the

influence of positive-aging ideology, to walk back out the L.T.C. door, many other types of people have always preferred never to walk in the door in the first place. Many have felt excluded and others have been excluded.

Since our government is supposed to represent all Canadian citizens, government administered late-life-care agents obviously should endeavour to make services more accessible to all. However, as Marguerite M. Coke and James A. Twaite (authors of *The Black Elderly: Satisfaction and Quality of Later Life*) and Wanda Thomas Bernard of Dalhousie University have indicated in their recommendation that social services to black elderly people might most effectively be offered in conjunction with their faith institutions, sometimes service agencies can be more effective if they cater to the already established patterns of specific community groups.

The National Academy on an Aging Society, a policy institute of The Gerontological Society of America, published a special issue of the *Public Policy and Aging Report* in 2011 entitled “Integrating Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Older Adults into Aging Policy and Practice,” edited by Robert B. Hudson. This issue reports, that in response to being *othered*, L.G.B.T and racially based minority groups have formed The Diverse Elders Coalition. Their hope is to offer safe options to those who need them.

At the 2012 *Our Future is Aging* conference in Nova Scotia (previously mentioned above), Hubert Alimezelli of the University of Saskatchewan reported findings that are similar to those of Wanda Thomas Bernard regarding the importance of family and community support for minority elders. In a talk entitled “The Health Status of Anglophone Seniors in Quebec and Francophone Seniors in the rest of Canada: Similarities, Differences and Comparison with the General Canadian Population,” Alimezelli concluded that “the

more a minority is concentrated, the better their health.” He attributed this fact to the group’s increased psychological wellbeing resulting from a sense of inclusion and from the group’s cumulative lobbying ability. Although in this case, he was talking about challenges to the wellbeing of minority language groups, his comments hold true for minorities such as African Canadians or Indigenous Peoples living within white culture.

This input from researchers such as Coke, Twaite, Escudero, Shah, Thomas, Bernard, Hudson, and Alimezelli reveals an interesting point: if the four elders in King’s novel were indeed mentally ill, they would probably have had difficulty recovering while living in a mental institution where their culture and identity would not be respected.

Thus two difficult questions face policy makers: is it possible to make a late-life-care facility feel welcome to every minority group, and, if not, is it appropriate to deliberately key facilities to particular minority needs?

Gruen’s, Hepburn’s, and King’s texts provide readers with much to consider in regards to aging, culturally induced barriers, and the emerging variety of opinions in regards to institutional living. These texts depict protagonists who reject institutional living and who instead successfully seek meaningful engagement in the larger world. Thus they challenge readers to determine whether these authors’ rejection of the decline narrative is primarily influenced by the general rise of positive-aging narratives in society or whether there are other ideological reasons percolating within society that are prompting not just the ability to prevail against the horrific oppression of facility administrations but the outright rejection of residency within any long-term-care facility. While their fictional worlds are the works of the authors’ clever and entertaining imaginations, I would argue that their

portrayals reveal much about the rapidly evolving age ideologies of our Western society and that thus these texts are worthy of our concern and contemplation.

Conclusion

Age is a more significant and multi-faceted subject than is often consciously acknowledged by academia or by society at large, and multiple, sometimes contradictory beliefs about age and aging, such as narratives of natural-aging, progress, decline and positive-aging, affect all of our lives at every stage across the entire life course. The thirteen stories discussed in this thesis span more than a century of Canadian history, and analysis of them as a group facilitates understanding of the major trends in age-related beliefs that have circulated in our society during this time period. The emotional impact of literature such as these stories can stimulate readers in ways that scholarly, less creative readings cannot, and thus such stories serve the purpose of prompting conscious intellectual consideration of the issues surrounding age and aging. I hope that my work analysing these stories and discussing these issues will encourage the public visibility of both.

Each of the six chapters of this thesis analyses one or more literary texts for the purpose of demonstrating how they illustrate and investigate age-related beliefs and behaviours. In the first chapter, “Before Ageism: Measuring Maturity in *Pearls and Pebbles* and *The Innocent Traveller*,” I look at two texts which pre-date the common mid-twentieth-century practice of late-life institutional care and the extensive internalization of ageism that becomes apparent in Chapter Two. I present the ninety-two-year-old protagonist of Traill’s autobiographical 1894 collection of sketches as an inspiring model of an exemplary late life, using this text and the protagonist Catharine as a foundational template for my analysis. The author depicts her own situation as she confidently faces old age, still living independently in her own home, surrounded by the loving support of family

and friends, still enthusiastically engaged in the study of her Heavenly Father's natural world and in her life-long career as a writer.

Topaz, the protagonist of the first chapter's second text, *The Innocent Traveller* by Ethel Wilson, is similar to Traill's protagonist Catharine in that she approaches her late life and death with seeming contentment rather than dread or fear, both women being confidently grounded by the then-common religious belief in an after-life. Both of these texts are markedly devoid of any suggestion of ageism, of a decline narrative or of a positive-aging narrative, and both illustrate that religious beliefs can help to reduce fear of aging and death. A comparison between the first two texts provides a second notable age-related point: while both protagonists reach an advanced chronological age, Wilson's character remains child-like in her attitudes and behaviours and only Traill's character achieves wisdom or functional maturity, probably as a result of having received opportunities, unusual for a woman of her class and time period, to challenge herself through work and to bear the responsibilities of family life with little help from her spouse. Taken together, these two texts illustrate that aging can be measured on other scales than the chronological.

The second chapter, "Assembling Identity: Progress and Decline Narratives in *The Stone Angel* and *The Stone Diaries*," introduces two early texts of what I am naming the Canadian nursing-home-narrative genre. This chapter asserts two points about age and nursing homes. The first is that institutional nursing homes have long held a reputation as society's garbage cans for the elderly and as places where no one wishes to go, but that the positive-aging ideologies arising from the second half of the twentieth century are beginning to alter that image. The second point is that, taken together, the two texts

illustrate the influence of decline and progress narratives in their protagonists' lives and how those narratives relate to positive-aging ideologies. In *The Stone Angel*, Margaret Laurence's fierce protagonist Hagar sees aging as decline, where any departure from an initial fixed sense of self is considered to represent a loss. She strives to maintain the autonomous identity achieved when she first reached adulthood as she resists the male authority figures in her life, the changes that occur with aging, and finally her family's attempts to admit her to the dreaded nursing home Silverthreads. By comparison on both points, Carol Shields's character Daisy accepts aging-induced changes and her eventual residency in a late-life care institution, and models a progress narrative wherein her fluid and multiple identity is always evolving towards a larger though not necessarily happier state. While Laurence's text epitomizes the decline narrative, Shields's text illustrates a combination of decline and progress narratives.

In Chapter Three, "From Horror to Hotel: Transforming the Nursing Home in *Sunset Manor* and *Exit Lines*," the nursing-home-narrative genre's prevailing negative image of living in a care home is challenged by Richard B. Wright's and Joan Barfoot's protagonists as they pit themselves against the oppressive administrations of their late-life-care facilities and as they ultimately manage to maintain personal control over their own evolving selfhoods. These texts illustrate competition between the decline narratives of Hagar's world and the positive-aging ideologies that arose in the second half of the twentieth century. Recent literature such as Wright's and Barfoot's has softened Laurence's gothic realism with mystery and humour and has reimagined late life and the home as potential sites of new friendships, personal agency, and meaningful identity development.

However, the growing propensity for third agers to cleave to youthfulness and to attempt to distance themselves from the potential hardships of late life may in part account for these optimistic depictions of late life. A second explanation is that positive stories that are set not in nursing homes but rather in retirement homes may be displacing the earlier, more negative stories because an increasing variety of late-life care facilities now caters to all needs and all financial statuses. Unfortunately, where some aging people claim to age successfully by maintaining agency and independence and by distancing themselves from those who are *truly* old, others by inference age unsuccessfully. This chapter illustrates that, by the advantage to some, those who are perceived as truly old may increasingly become the victims of positive ageism. Today new and more cheerful narratives of aging are surfacing, yet I would assert that they are joining rather than replacing the more negative types of narratives already in circulation.

Alice Munro's and Lola Lemire Tostevin's stories are discussed in the fourth chapter, "Shaking off Shackles: L.T.C. Havens in 'The Bear Came Over the Mountain' and *The Other Sister*." These two authors illustrate the influence of both decline and progress narratives and are elusively suggestive in their meaning rather than clearly didactic. Both can be interpreted to imply that, in circumstances where prior living conditions were unfortunate, admission to a late-life-care facility could lead to an improved lifestyle. These authors suggest that while the care institutions deprive residents of contact with the outside world, they also offer shelter from it. They also suggest that, in certain cases such as in these texts, some forgetting as a result of dementia might provide the resident with the benefit of lessened stress. Thus, these texts suggest that real-life residents outside of fictional stories might benefit from forgetting certain memories – perhaps, for example,

forgetting about a frightening experience that had occurred earlier in life. Significantly, these two texts add aging-as-opportunity narratives to the nursing-home genre.

In the fifth chapter, “Walking out the L.T.C. Door: Cages, Fantasy, and Freedom in *Water for Elephants* and *Flee, Fly, Fown*,” I argue that Gruen’s text explores a topic salient for the twenty-first century: since society has moved away from the era wherein many worked in the same career and possibly even for the same employer for their entire career, abrupt retirement is no longer in anyone’s best interests. Gruen’s somewhat inscrutable plotline shows the retired veterinarian Jacob walking away from his L.T.C. and getting a job as ticket-seller at the circus. Today, contract employment and multiple career changes have become more common, company pensions have become less common, and abrupt retirement is giving way to a phased-in retirement where workers often choose to continue to contribute to society and to receive remuneration on a scale that diminishes only when the capacities of the worker do. Today, part-time work allows for a pleasantly gradual progression towards retirement for some and a much-needed ongoing income for others. Gruen’s text may merely be reflecting this change in working realities. However, it may also be suggesting that society’s return-to-work narrative may represent wishful thinking on the part of aging people who in truth would not be able to find work since such jobs do not exist in reality and are merely the dream of a society and a government hoping for seniors to remain financially independent in old age.

Flee, Fly, Flown presents an escape narrative similar to the one in *Water for Elephants* but explicitly acknowledging the dementia of the protagonist escapees. Hepburn suggests that where memory can be supported by the assistance of friends, it does not constitute as catastrophic a loss as Western society construes. This text also queries the

right of those with dementia to continue to exert some agency in their lives, to assume risk, and to participate in the world outside of a lock-down unit.

Chapter Six, “Outside the Nursing-Home-Narrative Genre: Race and Gender Exclusions in *Green Grass, Running Water*” addresses the people who are not included in the nursing-home-narrative genre. Like Gruen’s protagonist Jacob and like Hepburn’s protagonists Audrey and Lillian, King’s elderly Indigenous protagonists walk out the door of their care facility, but their leaving constitutes a rejection of white authority and a resumption of their place as leaders in their own Indigenous society. While Gruen’s text may be making the point that some residents may recover sufficiently from health issues to walk away from the care facility, King’s text makes the point that some people, such as these Indigenous old men, have never been included, felt included or wanted to be included by white institutions. King’s text makes the reader aware of the missing narratives of those whose age-related stories fall outside of the mainstream late-life-care alternatives.

Although these chapters to some extent follow a chronological progression, beginning with Traill’s 1894 *Pearls and Pebbles* and concluding with Hepburn’s 2013 *Flee, Fly, Flown*, I am not arguing that each age-related belief has been replaced by the next. I would assert instead that over time Canadians have accumulated an assortment of age ideologies, some of which mesh and some of which duplicate or even contradict those previous. For example, although a common belief in a spiritual afterlife in Catharine Parr Traill’s and Topaz’s time assisted people in approaching old age and death without fear, today, although fewer people may hold this belief, it is still a commonly held conviction. As well, although many people have embraced some aspects of the new positive-aging ideologies, the decline narrative still circulates strongly.

Arguably, of all of the characters presented by the stories, Catharine Parr Traill's complete absence of internalized ageism could best serve to model exemplary aging. I would argue, however, that aging today presents more confusions and challenges in regards to self-image than it did in her time, and so pioneers of aging today may struggle more and achieve a less impressive result. In response to the advent of positive-aging and nursing-home escape narratives, third agers have felt empowered to maintain their physical health and to continue to contribute actively to society, all of which benefits both the seniors and the society. However, this assigning of increased agency to the old has had repercussions since society now increasingly views the very old as responsible for their own failure to remain independent. The Boomer cohort's perceived maintenance of physical, mental, and financial autonomy has perhaps reduced the ageism society directs towards them, but it has also in some ways simultaneously increased the ageism directed towards the very old.

The third-age cohort has been heartened by the new narratives in which long-term-care facilities have morphed into amusement parks for the old. Yet it is important to note that often these are not publically funded nursing homes, but instead expensive privately run retirement homes. Those circumstances and facilities that so frightened Hagar unfortunately still exist. I invite readers to consider two recent news stories. The first occurred in April 2013 when a Peterborough man installed a hidden camera in his mother's room after he had become concerned about the quality of care she had been receiving as a dementia patient at St. Joseph's at Fleming Long-Term-Care Facility. To his horror, he discovered that he had captured images of an aide threatening his mother by holding a feces-smear cloth in her face, of multiple aides involved in instances of rough handling, and of some staff members' inappropriate sexual behaviour in her proximity (McCormick).

The second story comes from Lethbridge Alberta where mice were found nibbling a dementia patient's face at the St. Therese Villa (Cndn. Press). Due to disability, she was unable to push them away. While these examples are extreme – and thus considered worthy of media publication – they do point out that Hagar's nursing-home nightmares are still with us.

Age-related narratives about life outside of care facilities abound as well, perhaps the most prominent current one being that the government-endorsed “aging in place” mandate and home care programs will allow the next generation to remain comfortably at home, thus able to avoid completely the dependence and vulnerability associated with living in a care institution. Yet, in the 2009 article “Less Money, More People: Implications of Policy Changes in Long-Term Care,” Evelyn Shapiro and Morgan Seeley warn that

When we hear about the provinces and territories closing long-term care facilities and replacing them with assisted-living, supportive housing models and investments in home care, we need to be critical of claims to de-institutionalize seniors. Long-term care policy changes tend to be motivated by cost-cutting, not by attempts to increase the independence, health and well-being of seniors. This means that when we are promised ‘more choices’ for ‘aging in place’ we need to ask which seniors will have these choices.

While some elderly people may receive care more happily at home from relatives or friends well supported by professional expertise, others may be subjected to intentional or unintentional neglect. Shapiro and Seeley further warn that

We should also be aware that moving care back into the community and the home has a particular impact on women. Shifting from facility-based to home care means

many of the costs of care are no longer covered by public insurance. In addition, limitations to the provision of paid home care mean that women, who provide about 80 percent of unpaid care, may experience increased demands on their time and resources. (65)

With these thoughts in mind, I would conclude that a living situation in one's own or a relative's home dependent on unpaid caregivers may or may not be superior to a residency in a government-funded L.T.C. dependent on their typically underpaid caregivers.

Clearly, the decline narrative has not been eradicated, yet many new narratives of a more encouraging variety are also regularly entering circulation. The science fiction genre in particular, while probing the problems of the present, offers many uplifting narratives about the future, one of its most common tropes being technology's potential to reduce the effects of aging. Robert J. Sawyer's 2009 novel *Rollback*, for example, allows readers to imagine a future where technological advances facilitate the surgical and medical repair of bodies to the extent that the characters can effectively "rollback" the aging of an octogenarian, returning him to the biological status of a twenty-five year old. Although the extent of the rollback is futuristic, the concept of renewed functionality of the body through surgical and medical repair is becoming more and more of a reality for us today.

Sawyer also depicts futuristic technological aids for the home in the form of an endearing blue robot named Gunter who is fully trained in such things as phone answering, door opening, food and housekeeper services, and chauffeuring. This robot can carry its person up and down stairs and is also trained in medical services such as CPR and the Heimlich maneuver: "I'm fully trained in first aid. I can even perform an emergency tracheotomy, if need be, and my palms have built-in defibrillator pads" (195-96, 211, 216).

Yet reading this text also reminds us that many of the miraculous technical advances it depicts are already in existence, although in other formats. We have doors, vehicles, and appliances that open and operate in response to voice or body scanning and consequent recognition of users deemed appropriate. Although Gunter the robot provides in one attractive blue body just about everything someone could need, many of its services are available for home use in the real world.

A new technology called Lively, for example, created by the age innovator Iggy Fanlo, is now capable of helping partially disabled people who are willing to submit to an unobtrusive surveillance system to continue to live alone safely (Thomas). This system involves the placement, on surfaces such as the person's refrigerator door, pill bottles, stairways, car keys, and/or doorways, of sticky-backed motion-sensor devices that electronically trigger an ongoing report of normal and irregular activities to an off-site caregiver, who can then monitor whether the person is coping well or is in need of assistance. While some positive-aging narratives are suspect, others, such as these advances in 'smart' things, have the potential to truly help make people's lives safer and happier.

Inspired first by the needs of the elderly, various types of innovative design have proven to be transferrable and have led to the creation of products and systems beneficial to all ages of people. For example, architectural community designs prompted by consideration of aging issues have been applied to the needs of other communities of people. As Judith Ann Trolander has pointed out in *From Sun Cities to the Villages: A History of Active Adult, Age-Restricted Communities*, the creation of retirement communities has had a significant impact on the design of all planned communities:

To summarize the significance of age-restricted, active adult communities, they have changed the physical and social landscape of the United States. They deserve much more credit than they have received for such planning innovations as golf courses winding throughout communities, gated communities, and amenity-rich communities with homeowner associations maintaining extensive recreational facilities and clubhouses and giving the community's residents exclusive access to them. These are innovations that age-restricted communities have helped to popularize and that subsequently have been fairly extensively applied to intergenerational communities. (289)

Designers of such communities as Liberty Village in Toronto have concluded that the needs of busy young professional people living alone are not that different from those of older people, and so they are building new condominium complexes for people who want centralized access to such services as dining, cleaning, and recreation facilities.

Gadget designs originally created to target older or less able consumers are now often included in marketing directed to all ages and types. In *Zoomer Philosophy*, Moses Znaimer points out that today the preferred business model rejects disability products in favour of inclusive-access products that meet the universal design principal, "the brainchild of an American architect named Ron Mace," offering "barrier-free design" "to the greatest extent possible" (C9 5). Even though only some people will want them, universal design products provide for everyone such features as hand grabs or easy accessibility, which facilitate targeting as large a market as possible, thus benefiting the producer, the retailer and the consumer. Inspirations prompted by the needs of the elderly have led to the creation of products and services beneficial to all types of people.

While most of the functions Sawyer assigns to his fictitious robot enable him to provide technological aids and household services, the robot is also programmed to have the ability to detect emotional needs and to provide comforting actions such as back patting to the humans in its care (289). This robotic behaviour would have once seemed fantastical, yet the real world now markets similar products. One item of particular interest is a cuddly robotic seal named PARO that has been designed to comfort dementia patients. This advanced interactive robot was developed by AIST, “a leading Japanese industrial automation pioneer,” and has been used in Japan and across Europe since 2003. It looks like a furry white baby seal, can imitate a baby seal voice, will respond to the user’s chosen name for it, and is capable of learning behaviours in response to the reactions of its users. If stroked by its user, it will repeat the initiating behaviour; if beaten, it will thereafter avoid the initiating behaviour. According to the web site, interaction with the seal reduces the stress of dementia patients, stimulates interactive behaviours, and improves socialization between patients and with staff. PARO’s makers claim that the robot “allows the documented benefits of animal therapy to be administered to patients in environments such as hospitals and extended care facilities where live animals present treatment or logistical difficulties.” While some may wonder whether such products allow the dementia patient to retain any dignity, the benefits of the practical outcomes are difficult to dispute. Robotic devices capable of providing pseudo-empathetic responses to people in need are a helpful addition to care-facility services, but only if their use is coupled with the genuine kind concern of the society that produces them.

Sensitive critical enquiry into the issues surrounding age and aging and attention to the practical needs of society’s aged and dependent populations are necessities in any

society that professes to consist of compassionate and caring people. Currently, the public views age as a contentious topic, and media coverage is frequently inflammatory. Margaret Morganroth Gullette argues that ageism has the potential to be as divisive an issue in the 21st century as sexism, racism, homophobia and ableism have been in the twentieth (*Agewise* 15). I agree with her. Consequently, I would argue that more attention needs to be addressed towards age-associated issues by academics charged with critically assessing their society and by teachers charged with developing the next generation of young people into thoughtful and competent adults. My hope in writing this thesis is to increase the visibility of age as a category of difference and as a topic worthy of serious consideration.

In the future, narratives about age, aging, and late-life care homes will continue to arise, transform, and multiply. Undoubtedly, these narratives will also continue to horrify, delight, and surprise us.

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