



ESSE-8: LONDON 2006

29 August – 2 September 2006

S2. Stories of Ageing - Cultural Histories of Age

Wednesday 30 August: 2.30-4.30pm

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Starting with the premise that age - similar to race, class, and gender - does not flow naturally from the individual's anatomical body, literary and cultural scholarship can analyse the way age identity is constructed in literature and in society, for both young and old. We invite contributions that investigate representations of ageing from all ranges and periods of literary and cultural production. The aim is to explore the ways in which this category of difference affects familiar ways of reading culture, and to initiate new intersections of theory and cultural politics.

Transatlantic Conceptualisations of Ageing through Nineteenth-Century Narratives: Edgar Allan Poe and Sheridan Le Fanu Writing the Old Age

Marta Miquel Baldellou (University of Lleida)

According to Teresa Mangum, old age aroused ambivalent feelings of both veneration and contempt in Victorian times, leading writers to render differing, and often contradictory, representations of male and female ageing characters. In Victorian times, old men embodied authority, and consequently, male youngsters were advised to show them respect and devotion, whereas young women treated ageing invalid relatives with their utmost care. Old women firmly advised their young counterparts to choose their prospective husbands, while they remained embodiments of traditional and highly-respected values of domesticity and family for young men. With a view to unveil different archetypes of aged characters, it is the aim of this paper to analyse four transatlantic gothic narratives of the nineteenth century whose plot revolves around aged male and female characters: Sheridan Le Fanu's "Uncle Silas" and "Carmilla" and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Spectacles." Through the analysis of these stories, we may come to terms with differing nineteenth-century gothic representations of male and female aged individuals on both sides of the Atlantic.

Hanging Up Looking-Glasses at Odd Corners - Virginia Woolf and Ageing

Elfi Bettinger (University of Munich)

The exploration of modern consciousness is Virginia Woolf's great subject in her novels and essays. In her texts, a multiplicity of perspectives produces a dynamic sense of reality which renders any fixed notion of experience limiting and futile. A sense of self emerges

in communication with others, an exchange in which the life of the mind is solidly grounded in the body's life. Literary character is thus dissolved into a subject in process, an unstable identity, criss-crossed by the effects of class, gender and age. In looking at two of Woolf's novels, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *The Waves*, this essay attempts to show how ageing is constructed by both memory and the body. Within the context of the Bloomsbury group which defined itself as avant-garde against its predecessors, there was a strong sense of generational belonging. Regular meetings of the friends' Memoir Club, formed as early as 1920, kept up their bonding into old age. Photographs were regularly taken at visits and meetings, marking their growing old together. With a life-long interest in life-writing and biography, Virginia Woolf's diary, essays and letters provide ample material for her reflection on and search for narrative models which could capture the specifically gendered experience of ageing.

The Madwoman in the backyard: a postcolonial journey to the chora in Githa Hariharan's "The Warden"

Maria Sofia Pimentel Biscaia (University of Aveiro)

At the basis of the debate of this panel is the issue of old age, in the instance of Githa Hariharan's "The Warden" working as a specific interpretation of the "madwoman in the attic" leitmotif through the device of senility. The issue is contextualised considering gender roles in postcolonial societies, affinities and resentments in inter-gender relationships, patriarchal authority, neglect and sexual abuse, association between mental and physical decay, images of female grotesqueness, marks of abjection, and dialogism as Hariharan explores potential meanings through Western and non-Western canonical hypertexts as well as through her own fiction.

"Female Ageing Bodies in Margaret Atwood's Fiction"

Teresa Gibert (Spanish National University of Distance Education)

Margaret Atwood's fiction reveals various ways of approaching the process of female aging. In her early works, young female characters merely observe the ravages of time from the outside, and project stereotypical negative images of corporeal representation, characterized by biological decay and faded beauty. In Atwood's later works, however, older female characters not only pay attention to other people's external appearance, but also concentrate on how they experience the passage of time and feel the approach of death. These mature women conceptualize themselves innovatively through multiple metaphoric mapping systems, and visualize themselves from within in terms of painful but aesthetically rewarding images.

Old Women as Storytellers in Postcolonial Fiction

Monika Gomille (University of Düsseldorf)

While getting older is a basic anthropological condition, cultures of ageing and the modes of their narrative representation vary considerably. My paper will show that the connection between women's ageing and the narrative transmission of cultural memory is a central theme in the fiction of postcolonial women authors. In these texts, the construction of identity takes place in a structure of family relations and narratives, and orality is important. My paper will discuss new paradigms of narrative based on old(er)

women's cultural and literary authority and describe their main features from the point of view of both contents and form.

Beyond Dis-Ease: Positive Female Ageing against the Cult of Invalidism in Ellen Glasgow's Last Two Novels

Emma Dominguez-Rué (University of Lleida)

In the early twentieth century, middle age tended to be associated with physical as well as mental decline: conversely, other novels of the same period featured ageing women who developed as women and artists. According to most critics, Ellen Glasgow (1873-1945) produced her best novels during the second half of her life. This essay is concerned with her last two novels, *In This Our Life* (1941) and its sequel *Beyond Defeat* (1966). The author's painful experiences during her long periods of illness seem to be the main reason why illness, especially illness as metaphor of female *dis-ease*, is such a persistent element in the novel. However, despite her poor health and after the writing of a novel pervaded with illness, in *Beyond Defeat* Glasgow was capable of imagining a fictional homeland where both men and women could finally overcome both sickness and *dis-ease*.