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Old Age and Doris Lessing

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ABSTRACT** ................................................................................................................................. 4

**INTRODUCTION** ...........................................................................................................................5

**CHAPTER I** .....................................................................................................................................12

1. An Increased Interest in Old People: A Brief History of Geriatrics............................12

2. Humanistic Gerontology: A Literary Perspective..............................................................17

3. Old Age In Literature................................................................................................................21

4. Breaking the Silence: Simone de Beauvoir and the Aging Experience.........................26
   4.1 Aging as Decline...................................................................................................................27
   4.2 Old Age as the Other...........................................................................................................29
   4.3 Sexuality and the Elderly..................................................................................................30
   4.4 The Role of Memory..........................................................................................................32

5. Gramiccia and Social Homicide: The Massacre of Innocents.......................................35

**CHAPTER II** ..................................................................................................................................40

1. Doris Lessing’s Renderings of Middle and Old Age.........................................................40

2. Jane Somers: Middle-Age at the Mirror..........................................................................42
3. Maudie: A Fierce Angry Old Woman.................................56

4. Defence.............................................................................63

5. Intergenerational Exchange.............................................65

   5.1 Jane and Joyce...............................................................65

   5.2 Jane, Jill and Kate.........................................................67

6. Love in Middle Age............................................................70

7. Doris Lessing and the Midlife Progress Novel....................76

8. Doris Lessing and the Reifungsroman...............................78

9. An Old Woman and Her Cat: an Example of Social Homicide...80

10. The Grandmothers: Sexuality in Middle-Age......................90

11. Lessing’s Style.................................................................100

CONCLUSION............................................................................110

BIBLIOGRAPHY......................................................................114
ABSTRACT

My thesis explores the realm of middle and old age from a medical point of view as well as from social and literary ones. I first chose to consider two important contributions in this field of study: Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Coming of Age* and Antonio Gramiccia’s *La Strage degli Innocenti: Anatomia di un Omicidio Sociale*. My work focuses then on Doris Lessing’s representations of aging through her works. Her novel *The Diaries of Jane Somers* depicts a woman, Jane, who, at the age of fifty, reconsiders herself and her life. The relationship with the ninety-year-old Maudie, moreover, helps her to age more consciously and helps Maudie to find the love of a friend. *If The Old Could* sees Jane dealing with a new, more mature love and the problems connected with it. Lessing’s stories, *An Old Woman and Her Cat*, *Flight* and *The Grandmothers* give other realistic examples of aging. Her autobiographies, finally, enhance the importance of the role of memory in life. The works of Doris Lessing can fit new literary genres. These give their protagonists the chance to find affirmation and the possibility to progress even in later stages of life. Doris Lessing can also give us a picture of old men and women in society and the chance to change and adapt as life continues. My purpose is to enhance the importance not to forget the past in order to face the present in a society where old age is seen as a condemnation rather than an unavoidable stage of life.
INTRODUCTION

Those Hours, that with gentle work did frame
The lovely gaze where every eye doth dwell,
Will play the tyrants to the very same
And that unfair which fairly doth excel;
For never-resting Time leads summer on
To hideous Winter and confounds him there,
Sap checked with frost and lusty leaves quite gone,
Beauty o’ersnowed and bareness everywhere.
Then, were not summer’s distillation left,
A liquid prisoner pent in walls of glass,
Beauty’s effect with beauty were bereft,
Nor it, nor no remembrance what it was.
But flowers distilled, though they with winter meet,
Leese but their show; their substance still lives sweet1.

In this sonnet by William Shakespeare, the “never resting-Time” is an enemy that consumes and destroys. Time pushes summer into the “hideous Winter” and death, but the flowers will be distilled, they will lose their beautiful appearance but they will never lose their essence. Shakespeare is trying to find out a way to make youth and beauty immortal, through poetry.

Likewise, Doris Lessing has maybe found this elixir of life through her works. As Shakespeare suggested in the sonnets, poetry and literature in a wider sense, can give immortality. Since the ancient civilizations, men have always searched for the elixir of life; the Greeks had many Fountains of Youth located all over the country. Nowadays, in the world there are 901 million people over 60, representing 12.3% of the global population. These numbers will increase to 2.1 billion of the total population worldwide in 2050.\footnote{2}

This means that the world today is facing a potentially problematic situation: by 2030 old people will exceed the number of children under 10.\footnote{3} We will have more


and more people over sixty-five and also over eighty-five. Centenarians are celebrated through social networks and media all over the world. Different reasons have relevance for this phenomenon: a fall in the birth rate; improvements in hygiene conditions; nutrition changes; a decline in mortality. We have thus more chances to grow old to middle and later life, nevertheless old age can be associated with depression, decline and fear of death. It also has a strong impact on the family, on social costs and on health care. Cultural and social issues are therefore arising: can old age be a period of participation and activity or can it be only associated with illness, disease and dependency? How does our society sustain the situation? What does it mean exactly to be old? How do we grow old? How is old age socially constructed? In Italy, human life expectancy has reached 84,7 years old for women and 80,1 for men. The elderly need social and familiar assistance but this is possible only if the culture of capitalism that makes us put aside everything that is no longer considered useful does not prevail and if families are able to face all social changes. If old people remain alone, the risk is social marginalization and isolation. The younger generations tend to dismiss it, as if it weren’t their future condition. Doris Lessing said in an interview: “Lucky the culture where the old can talk to the young and the young can talk to the old” but this results very difficult, almost impossible.

When Doris Lessing won the Nobel Prize for Literature she was turning eighty-eight years old. It was thought she was no longer writing, as if a woman of

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that age could just knit or mend. She came out of a cab in London with her shopping bags and in front of her house she found a crowd of journalists ready to interview her: “Oh Christ! (...) This has been going on for 30 years.” She said smiling. “I’m sure you’d like some uplifting remarks. They can’t give the Nobel prize to someone who’s dead, so I think they’d probably better give it to me now before I’ve popped off.”

This was her reaction when winning the Nobel. This was Doris Lessing: natural, sharp, intense, even at eighty-seven of age. And this is why I chose to write my dissertation on her. She won all European and no-European prizes for literature; her novels shift from realism to science fiction to her metafictional masterpiece *The Golden Notebook*. She wrote collections of stories, essays, autobiographies. The Nobel prize motivation states: “That epicist of the female experience, who with scepticism, fire and visionary power has subjected a divided civilisation to scrutiny.” She left school at fourteen, she moved from home, trying to escape from her mother with whom she had a strongly conflictual relationship, she worked as a baby sitter, a telephonist, a dressmaker, and meanwhile she observed her world, the world of Persia when she was a child and of South Rhodesia in which she grew up. She posed her sight on what was around her, fixing it in her books. She began to write when she was only twelve and from that first attempt she never stopped. The versatility of her writings can be seen through her themes, from the African landscapes to Communism, which she embraced to reject it later, from the Islamic Sufi doctrine to the inquiry in Anna Wulf’s mind in *The Golden Notebook*.

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6 Video British Author Doris Lessing reacts to Nobel’s Win (2007). Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VuBODHFBZ8k
My first reading of Lessing was *The Good Terrorist*, the story of a young incoherent woman fighting the imperialistic society in which she lives, becoming a terrorist. I was really impressed by this political novel and the way Lessing depicts the protagonist, Alice, a girl whose contradictory personality represents not only the human being but also the contradictions of the society where we all live. I later read *The Diaries of Jane Somers*. Here I was struck by the way she depicts the main characters and her realistic view of society: Jane is a woman who at the age of fifty, reconsiders herself and her life through the relationship she undertakes with Maudie. Maudie is a lonely, old and scorbutic woman, desperately in need of affection and help. Doris Lessing describes these mature women, their feelings, the bond that connects the two, the way old and poor people are forced to live and the ever-lasting power that only love can provide.

Similar topics about old age are present also in the short stories I chose to explore. *The Grandmothers*, published in 2003, is a very intense story about two middle aged women who have been best friends since their adolescence. Apparently, at the beginning of the story, the image of these two women with their respective sons and their nephews, gives the idea of a perfect family; as the story continues, the reader discovers their true feelings: Lil and Roz had been lovers of their reciprocal teenage sons, even though they are now married and fathers. The theme of sexuality in middle aged women, and the topic of love for younger people often occur in her later works. *An Old Woman and Her Cat*, on the contrary, is a picture of an old woman living alone, with the sole company of her beloved animal. *Flight* is a short story published in 1957 in a collection of stories titled *The Habit of Loving*. In the story an old grandfather gets angry when he realises that his little
granddaughter aged eighteen wants to get married; it seems too hard for him to accept life’s changes.

Her autobiographies, moreover, were written when she was seventy-seven years old; they provide a complete description of her life until 1962, when she was forty-three. They are so detailed, it seems as if Doris Lessing was scared to forget something and wanted to have it written on paper to rebuild her life through her memories. Strangely enough, after these two autobiographies, she didn’t write about herself anymore. A lot was left out, considering that she died at ninety-four years old. Lessing said that old age is:

presented to us as a long descent after the golden age of youth (...) But now start the delightful surprises. (...) Best of all, not ever predicted nor, I think described, as fresh liveliness in experiencing. It is as if some gauze or screen has been dissolved away from life, that was dulling it, and like Miranda you want to say, What a brave new world! You don’t remember feeling like this, because, younger, habit or the press of necessity prevented. You are taken, shaken, by moments when the improbability of our lives comes over you like a fever. Everything is remarkable, people, living, events present themselves to you with the immediacy of players in some barbarous and splendid drama that it seems we are part of. You have been given new eyes. This must be what a very small child feels, looking out at the world for the first time: everything a wonder. Old age is a great reviver of memories, in more ways than one.8

In an interview for The Progressive by Jonah Ruskin in 1999, Doris Lessing admits that she hates the physical suffering and loss of energy that aging involve but,

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she says “a certain equanimity sets in, a certain detachment. Things seem less desperately important than they once did, and that’s a pleasure.”

However, before analyzing Lessing’s works in depths, I chose to introduce a short survey on geriatrics and gerontology. In addition, the existentialist philosopher and writer Simone de Beauvoir and, as a more recent and practical voice, the Italian geriatric Antonio Gramiccia, delved into the theme of old age. Simone de Beauvoir in 1970 broke the silence and the taboos that surrounded old age, with the book *La Vieillesse*, translated into English in *The Coming of Age*. She focused her study from the biological and historical point of view. Gramiccia, on the other side, wrote a book titled *La Strage degli Innocenti: Anatomia di un Omicidio Sociale*, an inquiry on the social conditions in which most old people live nowadays.

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CHAPTER I

1. An Increased Interest in Old People: A Brief History of Geriatrics

Old age has been defined in many different ways, depending on the historical period and place. A 40-year-old woman in the sixteenth century may have been considered old, on the contrary a 40-year-old woman nowadays is considered just mature. Pat Thane has given important contributions in this field of study; as historian, she noticed the need for a more comprehensive study of the history of old age. The Long History of Old Age represents a significant research on the attitudes of Western societies about old age and elderly in general and in her essay Social Histories of Old Age and Aging, she states:

Old age is defined chronologically, functionally or culturally. A fixed threshold of ‘chronological’ old age has long been a bureaucratic convenience, suitable for establishing age limits to rights and duties, such as access to pensions or eligibility for public service. It became more pervasive in the twentieth century, when societies became more rigidly stratified by chronology, especially earlier and later in life, as ages were fixed for attending and leaving schools, for retirement and receipt of pensions. ‘Functional’ old age is reached when an individual cannot perform the tasks expected of him or her, such as paid work. ‘Cultural’ old age occurs when an individual 'looks old', according to the norms of the community, and is treated as 'old'.

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She gives a complete definition of old age and she affirms that it varies from individual to individual, from different places and different times. Old age, as a matter of fact, can be viewed according to different perspectives: we can consider either the biological aspect which evolves in physical changes and the social and cultural aspects. These have a strong impact on the life of older people.

Middle and later life represent a large portion in all Western societies. Sharp divisions of life stages, though, can no longer match with present day reality. Life stages blur and mix with each other. If life expectancy has reached eighty-four for women and eighty for men, it is clear that the age of sixty is generally no more considered simply old age, and the so called maturity stage comprehend many shades that previously were not even recognized. After childhood and adolescence, today we can distinguish nine other stages. There are the young-people (21-25 years old); the young-adults (26-34 years old); the adults-tout court (35-54); the late-adults (55-64); the young-olds (65-75); the true olds (76-84) and finally the great olds (85 and over).11

Improvements in medical care have led to the development of a specific branch of medicine to analyze the last three stages named above. Geriatrics or geriatric medicine is defined as a sub-specialty of internal medicine and family medicine dealing with the care of elderly people.12 Geriatrics has become extremely important. It focuses on the medical and biological aspects of old age. About aging

12 The definition and more information on the subject can be found at https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/geriatrics
and old age, however, also philosophy and magic have always given their contributions during the centuries, enhancing the concept of remaining young as long as possible. In his work *Cure of Old Age and Preservation of Youth*, dating back to the thirteenth century, Roger Bacon, a Franciscan friar, sees old age as a disease and pretended that with good diet, physical exercise and through the inhaling the breath of a virgin, people could combat aging. The idea of preventing aging through various methods powerfully resurfaces in the nineteenth century, when Kellogg and Post invented the cornflakes as the first dietary regime that could slow down physical decline; among other theories on preventing aging, the most convincing are Brown-Sequard's. In 1856, he was the first to recognize the existence of hormones and proposed testicular injections for rejuvenation, a historical precursor to combat andropause.

The true birth of geriatrics, though, can be dated back to the beginning of the twentieth century, when Ignaz Leo Nascher, an Austrian pharmacist, invented the word geriatrics, which derives from *geras*, in Latin meaning “old.” In 1914 he wrote *Geriatrics: The Disease of Old Age and Their Treatment*. It is a study about physiological aging, home and institutional care and medico-legal relations. Aging is, in fact, a biological process of decline and geriatrics deals with all the problems related to old age such as physical instability, due to a decreased muscle strength and power, a lower metabolic rate, longer reaction times, decline in memory

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functions and sexual activities, in kidney, pulmonary and immune functions and multiple endocrine changes.\textsuperscript{14}

From Nascher on, the medical study of old age has continued in a systematic way. In England Marjory Warren was one of the most important geriatricians to give an important contribution to this new branch of medicine. She thought that environment and motivation were very important for old people, and introduced the concept of rehabilitation. Lionel Cosin, an English orthopedic surgeon, introduced rehabilitation after surgery of older persons under the motto “bed is bad”. Many doctors and researchers have enhanced the medical study of senility. These medical studies will proceed and will allow us to age more and more successfully; techniques such as coronary by-pass surgery, joint, replacements have allowed great benefits. In 1949 Ana Aslan invented Gerovital H3, a medicine to inhibit aging process; in 1996 medical progress enabled the cloning of a sheep and from that time on numerous animals were cloned.\textsuperscript{15} The progress made by cloning could lead to new therapies to prevent and cure also human diseases. Kazuo Ishiguro, who just won the Nobel Prize for Literature, in his book \textit{Never Let Me Go}, speculates on a possible future in which human beings will be created as clones to become donors of their corresponding person in order to lengthen their lives and preserve them from diseases. The Holy Grail of Immortality has not been found yet but they will surely keep trying. The last International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics Congress, held in San Francisco on the 23\textsuperscript{rd} of July, demonstrates a greater interest from the entire world and the involvement of the whole medical

\textsuperscript{14}Joao Pedro de Magalhaes, \textit{What is aging?} The website gives a complete panoramic on aging and old age. Available at \url{http://www.senescence.info/aging_definition.html}

\textsuperscript{15}John E. Morley, \textit{A Brief History of Geriatrics}. 

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branch in old age studies. More than six-thousand participants from seventy-five countries took part. Nevertheless, Pat Thane noticed that the success of geriatrics has been only partial, it “remains in most countries a low status medical specialty and older people without personal power still suffer from exclusion.”

The American doctor William Osler is considered the father of modern medicine. His interests were not limited to the field of medicine, he highlighted the fundamental importance of the care of patients. His speech of farewell was highly provocative: he argued that people after forty were useless, people after sixty were absolutely useless. Considering old people totally useless and therefore euthanize them has been passed in history with the verb ”oslerize”. Osler in reality was referring to a dystopian satirical novel appeared at the end of nineteenth century *The Fixed Period* by Anthony Trollope. In the novel, men and women live in a colony on an island free from the British sovereignty, trying to create a fair and practical society. Here people who have passed the so called fixed period, the age of sixty-seven, are monitored and forced to die. This story anticipates old people’s frequent position in society nowadays. Abuses in old age are a matter of fact and stereotypes surrounding old age have always been present, as this study will underline in the next chapter.

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2. Humanistic gerontology: A Literary Perspective

In 1909 Elie Metchnikoff invented the term *gerontology*. He was a Russian researcher, father of the theories on immunology, which brought him to win the Nobel prize for Medicine in 1908. Gerontology can be defined as a comprehensive study of all the aspects of aging and as a relatively new field of study, it can give an important contribution to the study of old age. I have mentioned, in fact, the study of the biological aspects of aging, the progress made by science to combat age and have a flourishing period. The social, cultural, psychological aspects of aging are essential, since attitudes and views of old age can have an influence on how we get old. “If people are culturally conditioned to expect to be dependent and helpless past a certain age, they are more likely to become so, with consequences for their own lives and those of others”¹⁸ suggests Pat Thane. There are many differences between how we see ourselves, what we feel, and what society expects from us, and this includes how we feel when we get old. As already highlighted, aging is not merely a biological fact. It occurs in a given social and cultural context and the views and perceptions of aging represent a system of ideas and values of a specific culture. In a study carried out in 2009, the perceptions on old age of more than three-thousand students under 25 years old coming from twenty-six different cultures were collected and in summary these proved a strong perception with “(1) perceived declines in societal views of aging, physical attractiveness, the ability to perform everyday tasks, and new learning, (2) perceived increases in wisdom, knowledge, and received respect, and (3) perceived stability in family authority and life

¹⁸ Thane, *Social Histories*, p. 94.
satisfaction.”19 The results sound stereotyped and reflect the traditional view of young people about old people.

In this context, humanistic gerontology comes to help to interpret and contextualize human experience. I will sustain that literature, in particular, can play an important role in revealing the aging experience. Old age, according to Pat Thane: “encompasses greater variety than any other. It can be seen, in any time and any period, as including people aged from their fifties to past one hundred; those possessing the greatest wealth and power, and the least; those at a peak of physical fitness and the most frail.”20 Either totally negative or positive images of old age cannot represent the greater variety of individuals entering in their middle-later life.

Humanistic gerontology developed from the 70s, when a social and political movement arose with the aim of creating an “ageless society.”21 Literary gerontology, in particular, has developed when literary scholars decided to focus on aging, since Anne Wyatt- Brown recognized “it was a missing category in current literary theories.”22 She is a valuable leading researcher in literary gerontology and her works offer an important overview on the subject. Analyzing the literary aspects of old age, she theorizes that literary portrayals of old age fall into certain categories that I will explore later and develop writing about Doris Lessing. In particular, she

20 Thane, Social Histories, p. 93.
refers to the analyses of literary attitudes towards aging, the explorations of literary works and their authors and the applications of the gerontological theories about autobiography life review and midlife transitions. Another scholar, Diane Wallace, underlines in her essay Literary Portrayals of Old Age of 2011 the importance of literature in answering the question: what does it mean to grow old? In order to describe the modern human development that can reach an older age, new names have been created to describe new literary genres. Margaret Gullett observes the development of a new literary genre, the “midlife progress novel” in which she affirms the possibility, especially for women, of progress from the middle of the life course. This chance opens new sceneries: the woman can free herself from the conditions of society; aging is not just getting old and direct to decline, but the woman, now aware of herself, can take advantage of her position, more conscious of her power.

A similar concept has been developed by Barbara Frey Waxman, who used the term “Reifungsroman” to address the novel of ripening. The Reifungsroman corresponds to the new needs of a society that is becoming older and older and gives “a sense that even in frail old age, there is the possibility of an opening up of life.” It can be considered the alter ego of the Bildungsroman, written and thought in a different era. The Bildungsroman’s protagonist is usually the young male; in the Reifungsroman the protagonist is the older woman; coming to terms with her past,

23 Thomas Cole adds other categories to describe Anne Wyatt-Brown’s fields of study. For more information see Thomas Cole, Humanist Gerontology, pp. 253-254.
26 Diana Wallace, Literary Portrayals, p. 394.
she explores her life and herself, establishing new relations, especially with other younger or older women, having the chance to grow again. Coming to terms with the past brings instability, but what counts, though, is finding a sort of affirmation despite the numerous changes. The works of Doris Lessing can fit these new genres; Lessing draws a picture of old women in our modern society, but she also gives her characters the chance to change as life continues. Aging is not merely a path to desegregation, decline and death but a new way to address life, a chance to underline the continuity of existence, and I think Doris Lessing will help us to see life in a totally new way.
3. Old Age in Literature

Old age has always been a recurring motif in literature of all ages and it has always had an ambiguous status. If we consider classical works, starting from the Greeks and the Latins, old people are represented either as the old fool or the old sage. The figure of the *senex amans* and the *senex iratus* can be interpreted as the first one. In the comedies of Plautus, for instance, there are a great variety of these old compassionate characters. They represent the miser, the old man who pretends to compete with the younger, creating hilarity in the audience. In the fourteenth century, Chaucer in the *Canterbury Tales*, continues on this line and depicts January, an old foolish man married to a much younger girl. Here the old is seen as a piteous character, ridiculed in all possible ways. The wise old is the other stereotype of literature. Homer associated old age with wisdom and he does it through the figure of Laerte. Again in Plautus we can find lovable old wise man, such as Euclion, a tender father, honest and generous. A more deeply layered representation of old age is present in Shakespeare. In *King Lear* the hero is a “poor old man”, as full of grief as age, wretched in both.”

Old Lear is the incarnation of human solitude, abandon and madness in old age. At the beginning of the play he decides to divide his power and his reign among his daughters; he is no longer adapt to reign and his wrong choices and blind views will lead him to madness and despair. The foolishness of this old, “I am a very foolish fond old man” Lear states, will lead him to better see the reality, even if it will be too late. “Ripness is all” tells Edgar to

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27 The *senex amans* and the *senex iratus* are comic archetype characters in Latin and Greek theatre. The first represents the old man contrasting the hero; the second one is the greedy old with a strong desire for young lovers but often he is tricked by them.

Gloucester. The character of Jaques, in the play *As You Like It*, makes a monologue in which he describes all men and women as players, whose exits and entrances represent the seven stages of life. In Shakespeare we find a cynic and merciless view of old age. The infant, "Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms"; the schoolboy, “with his satchel And shining morning face, creeping like snail Unwillingly to school”; the lover, “Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad Made to his mistress’ eyebrow”; the soldier, “jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel Seeking the bubble reputation Even in the cannon's mouth”; the justice “In fair round belly with good capon lined, With eyes severe and beard of formal cut, Full of wise saws and modern instances”; the pantaloon “With spectacles on nose and pouch on side; His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice, Turning again toward childish treble, pipes And whistles in his sound”; the last scene, the old, “That ends this strange eventful history, Is second childishness and mere oblivion, Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.”

The “sad decline” says Thane, has always been represented predominantly under a negative way "in any age or culture, with good reason" but if in Shakespeare the man is raised as representation of human condition, for the others how real are the representations of the elderly? Do they represent societies as they were? Of course these contribute to our imagery of old people of the past and represent real fears of aging and death. Thane noticed that the complete history of old age must comprehend all histories, from individual experiences to grand narratives.

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Something, in fact, began to change in the eighteenth century, when improved hygiene conditions and medical progress lengthened life expectancy. Industrialization and the development of commerce reshaped society: the merchants began to have an important role. Social mobility was now possible. The middle class raised its power: it was made up by merchants, professionals among the richest; craftsmen, shopkeepers also entered in the social class. In England and throughout Europe coffeehouses spread, sixty-year-old men gathered together to discuss about politics and social issues. The satirist Johnathan Swift wrote a guideline on how to behave once reached old age: the rules go from not to marry a young woman or not to keep young company, unless they desire it, to not to tell the same story over and over to the same people. Culture in this period became a commodity\(^{31}\) and the novel began to appear, giving a more realistic view of society. In the nineteenth century, then, novelists could give a complete representation of society. Emile Zola for instance, in his novel La Terre, could describe the difficulties of the peasants’ life in France at the end of nineteenth century. The old fathers were often forced by their biological weakness to give their properties to their children, they were considered a burden for the family and mistreated. The story of the old farmer Fouan gives an example of how life in the country was. He shared his property with his children and they agree to pay him a pension in exchange. They began, though, to ill treat him. Each sees him as an obstacle and at the end, they set him on fire, without any concern of the local community. The story is often compared to King Lear, which was written centuries before. Like Lear, Fouan shared his possessions with his prole, like Lear he was neglected and one stormy night, we

see him wandering, escaping from his son. They both represent the relationship between fathers and sons, old and young and the threats of exchanging the power with the prole. The majority of the children was affectionate to parents and the “exchange relationship”\textsuperscript{32} took more and more importance over time. The elderly could look after the children, supported the younger both economically and physically. “In times older people who retained economic or any other form of power, along with their faculties, could command, or enforce, respect. At all times also poor and powerless older people have been, though not universally, marginalized and denigrated.”\textsuperscript{33} The real line of demarcation is, in reality, between those possessing money and properties and the impoverished and poorest people who are the most fragile. In all places and times, this line results to be the most significant. The novel has offered many examples of explorations in the human souls and new forms of writing.

However, in the majority of the classics old people are men; there is no old woman with a significant role in any work. In Great Expectations by Charles Dickens, Miss Havisham lives a self-imprisoned life in the room where old clocks are stuck on the same time, the hour when the bridegroom did not come. She is aging full of hate for men and disgust for society. This representation is typical of a society where a woman without a husband has no social importance. This kind of behavior is dictated by social rules and roles: she is aging in the worst possible ways. A literary work represents a particular moment of history in a given society. We have to look at the twentieth century to discover the novel as a way of exploring the human souls

\textsuperscript{32} Thane, Social Histories, p. 101.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid. 105.
and new forms of writing. Writers, such as Margaret Atwood, Doris Lessing or May Sarton could give a complete insight picture of the female aging experience.
4. Breaking the Silence: Simone de Beauvoir and the Aging Experience

In *The Coming of Age* (1973), we can find the same energy and boldness through which Simone de Beauvoir lived her whole life. The female editor of *Les Temps Modernes*, marched against every form of imperialism, of suppression and for the rights of women and finally she posed her attention to the field of gerontology, breaking “the silence surrounding old age.”

She claims old age has been always considered a taboo, and in her study she analyzes all the biological, historical, cultural, literary and economic aspects that embrace the aging experience. What emerges is an accurate and comprehensive account of old age. She addresses old age from an ambivalent point of view: on one side the angle is “from without”, that is from the point of view of those who have not aged yet; on the other side the perspective is “from within”, considering therefore the true individual experience of getting and being old, how you live it and how you feel it. In the first approach, she collects scientific and historical perceptions of old age; she considers, besides, the attitudes of society towards old people deplorable and, to use her words, “not guilty but downright criminal.” She mobilizes her readers to stand up and act against injustice. Old age is seen, in fact, as a “dismal subject” and the society views the elderly “as outcasts.” They are seen by younger and adult people as another kind of being. Moreover, in a capitalistic society, old people are no longer productive; they are no longer an economic strength, and therefore they are not able to enforce their human rights. “There’s no one to protect them” she insists; the word “scrap” expresses their condition of loneliness and poverty and it represents the failure of

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34 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, p. 2.
pour civilization. In the perspective “from within” De Beauvoir anticipates the historian Thane in defining old age as a plurality of experiences that cannot be summed up in a single notion. As a result, what is taken into consideration is the individual’s experience with the biological change, with time and with society. I will consider some of the concepts concerning old age developed by De Beauvoir. In particular, the idea of aging as decline; old age as the Other; sexuality and the disgust for sexuality in the elderly; the role of memory.

4.1 Aging as Decline

The concept of aging as decline comes natural: “the organism declines when its chances of continuing to live are reduced.” De Beauvoir lists a decrease in sight and hearing, manual strength and precision, physical resistance and suppleness, memory, creativity, energy, sociability. These biological changes can give a sense of “insecurity.” Old people no longer work, and this condition of inactivity is not always positive. They can feel a sense of usefulness and disorientation. “The disaster that has broken over their heads consists of their having suddenly passed from the status of a responsible adult to that of a dependent object” she states. This is why the elderly’s attitude towards closure is to be interpreted as a defense, they are afraid of being manipulated. They seek a kind of security through their habits and the daily routine becomes comforting. All the energies are directed to their person, there is therefore a reduction in sensibility in most cases and the rise in hostility

35 Diana Wallace lists some of these aspects in her work Literary Portrayals of Old Age, p. 390.
36 Simone de Beauvoir, The Coming of Age, p. 17.
37 Ibid. 231.
38 Ibid. 464.
towards the others. Resentment, a feeling of injustice for their condition, arises; they feel "victims of the fate, of society and of those around them."\(^{39}\)

When the old become dependent on others, they lose their freedom. In addition, they know the time they have is shortening, and facing death becomes a painful experience. Illness and infirmity can worsen the situation and when they are conscious that this decline will not stop, they become afraid of ending up in an institution. A good health can help to maintain a strong and positive attitude towards life, since the old persons are able to live their daily activities with dignity. Some recent studies, though, demonstrate how, for instance, creativity and imagination do not cease, on the contrary they remain the same or even increase.\(^{40}\) Moreover many older adults remain engaged and productive, they continue to work as volunteers or care givers. The older adults statistics have also shown a continuing interest in sexual activities. Favorable conditions, social, cultural, economic and biological can help to maintain ambitions and identities alive.

"The misfortunes dreaded by the old" writes De Beauvoir "are all the more feared since they may also bring disastrous alterations in the behavior of others."\(^{41}\) The olds are no longer capable of what they desire, they are afraid of losing the "grasp" on themselves and this changes the way they face the rest of the world. Simone De Beauvoir wonders whether it can be, on the contrary, a feeling of liberation from past social duties, enrichment, freedom or irresponsibility? The

\(^{39}\) Ibid. 477.
\(^{40}\) In Aging and Gender in Literature: Studies in Creativity we can find numerous essays considering creativity in older age: even the proximity to death writers can inspire new creativity.
\(^{41}\) Simone de Beauvoir, The Coming of Age, p. 465.
greatest fortune, she says, even greater than health, for the old person is to have his world still inhabited by projects but this possibility is refused to the majority of old people.

4.2 Old Age as the Other

Simone De Beauvoir noticed that younger and busy adults tend not to think about old age, as if this were not their business. That is why, maybe, when we recognize we are growing old, we are struck. What we see through the looking glass is not what we feel we are. Our image has changed and this fact changes our position in society as well. In Western societies looking old does not always give a positive idea to others. Simone de Beauvoir introduces the concept of the Other: “within me it is the Other – that is to say the person I am from the outsider – who is old: and that Other is myself.”42 Old age is perceived as a stranger, a ghost that takes possession of us. The spirit and the image we have of ourselves remain attached to youth. “We remain what we were, with rheumatism as something additional.”43 Most people today tend to hide The Other, to mask their appearance and their growing old as long as possible. Western societies are oriented towards the veneration of youth and beauty; growing old without sadness and nostalgia becomes really hard. For these people the aging experience involves the concealment of the self. Society tends to consider the olds as part of a particular category rather than an individual with aspirations and desires. A process of depersonalization takes place.44 The old man, continues De Beauvoir “is defined by an exis, not by a praxis: a being not a doing”

42 Simone de Beauvoir, The Coming of Age, p. 284.
43 Ibid. 285.
44 Ibid. 217.
and the elderly’s state is similar to the state of the child “with whom the adult does not establish any reciprocal relationship.” They can even become objects of exploitation of the capitalistic society that offers them nursing homes, rest homes and residences. The process of depersonalization caused by "The Other" worsen if loss of memory, of energy and strength occur. If poverty and loneliness are added to the list, the results are social marginalization and the complete loss of self. The elderly are conditioned by the images that dominate our society. Heterogeneous socio-cultural images of aging change the uniform perception of older people; the great variety of individuals in their middle and later life is better represented and old people could finally feel free to express themselves.

4.3 Sexuality and the Elderly

Throughout the ages, in literature, the lustful old seeking the company of a younger girl was ridiculed; the idea of sexuality in the old creates a feeling of shame and a sense of repugnance. Where does this feeling come from? Simone de Beauvoir’s answer is simple: younger and middle-aged people think about older people through stereotypes. Moreover, they are influenced by the respect they have for their grandparents. Common images represent older people as sexless; lack of sexual desire, interest and ability are frequent. In addition, having sex involves physical elements such as sweat, substances, odors. It is not difficult to imagine how

45 Ibid.
46 A German Government Report on the Elderly of 2010 analyses images of aging in contemporary society. Social images of old age assume a vital role in the elderly's lives and are responsible for the way society addresses the new demographical changes. For more precise information on the topic the report is available at https://www.bmfsfj.de/blob/93188/729a35d76df46edf3aba263085b2e121/6--altenbericht-eine-neue-kultur-des-alterns-englisch-data.pdf
sex between older people can be perceived. In any case, if we begin to consider the elderly as human beings and so their individualities, we discover how they continue to have a sexual life, and how they feel the need to maintain it as long as possible. Simone de Beauvoir, in 1970, explores a matter that can be considered controversial. Research in sexuality in old age is a relatively new field of inquiry today as well. She gives statistical data on the elderly sexuality and she examines how sexual activities decline over time. Physical problems, dysfunctions, and general health have to be considered, but also psychological concerns. A recent study on the sexuality of persons age 45 and over shows that sexual desire among the elderly does not cease; it can be, however, reduced by bio-psychological factors. The results demonstrate how desire decreases as people age, but not as fast as society may believe. In particular, despite the fact that biological factors including hormonal systems dysfunctions and illnesses may occur, what impacts most old people are psychological influences (sexual information and attitudes), the availability of a partner and an adequate income for a better living standard. What Simone de Beauvoir underlines in her examination matches the results of this study of 2005. The elderly remains slaves of the public opinion, ashamed of desire and afraid of scandals. If they are married, things get easier: spouses can protect each other from the outside world, they know each other and their long intimacy enables them to overcome physical decline and psychological barriers. The situation differs for bachelors or widowed, since establishing new relationships and exposing

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themselves to society can result painful. When desire, she continues, does not arise spontaneously, often old people simply “desire to desire”\(^{49}\) as this feeling takes them back to their youth.

4.4 The Role of Memory

The theme of memory is one of the most interesting part in *The Coming of Age*. We have already realized that old age is a complex and unique experience, that the perceptions of old age often influence their behavior and that the needs of the elderly are many. The studies on the memory in old age add another important contribution in understanding their life. “They live more by memory than by hope”\(^{50}\) and De Beauvoir asks: “what does having one’s life behind mean?” The old are projected to their past, and they do it through their memories. “There is a kind of magic in recollection, a magic that one feels at every age” but in old age this assumes an extremely important sense. Most old people live in the past; this concept is linked with the concept of old age as the Other: they define themselves with their younger I “each in his heart preserves the conviction of having remained unalterable: when they summon their memories they justify their assertion. They set up a fixed, unchanging essence against the deteriorations of age.”\(^{51}\) They try to live in a timeless zone, they is why she explains, old people tend to repeat endlessly the same stories and anecdotes of their past. They remain “ex-serviceman, or an adored, run-after woman, or a wonderful mother.”\(^{52}\) The I of the present and the I of the past become

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\(^{49}\) Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, p. 319.

\(^{50}\) Ibid. 361.

\(^{51}\) Ibid. 362.

\(^{52}\) Ibid.
in some cases strangers and the process of depersonalization continues and will lead to a spoiled I. Simone de Beauvoir considers three forms of memory:

- The sensor-motor memory
It is the memory of actions, an automatic form of behavior that obey to habit.
- The autistic memory
It is the memory that remains in the unconscious, the memory that psychoanalysis tries to reveal.
- The social memory
It is the memory that collects and contextualize past experiences. This is the memory we use to remember the past.

Forgetfulness is essential, we can’t remember everything and in most cases, what we remember is not always what really happened. “The past” reports De Beauvoir, “is not a peaceful landscape lying there behind me (...) Most of the wreckage that can still be seen is colourless, distorted, frozen: its meaning escapes me.”53 The images we have, in addition, not always reproduce “the warmth of the past.”54 We are the ones who decide what weight to give to the different materials. Moreover, leaving the past behind means also leaving many people behind; through memory you can keep people you loved alive, albeit melancholy and grief sometimes can take advantage of this. An old person can look back to the past with pride and this happens, she says, if the present is disappointing. Sometimes memories are also exaggerated, people do not always enjoy their past so much, but memories become

53 Ibid. 365.
54 Ibid.
a weapon a defense for the present. Experiencing the past can therefore take images and emotions that depend on how one lives the present and the past can become, in certain situations, paralyzing. “There might even be progress” states De Beauvoir, “But progress at this stage of life is of a disappointing kind: a man keeps going, certainly, but only by marking time.”

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55 Ibid. 409.
Old age is generally perceived as decline and a sort of precursor to death. This predominant image of old age results in risks for old people: the processes of marginalization and depersonalization occur. Roberto Gramiccia examines the condition of old people and their different situations in capitalistic countries, with a particular insight on Italy. The demographical changes pose a problem on economy and welfare systems. A primordial form of welfare can be traced back to the beginning of the seventeenth century: in 1601 Elizabeth I released Poor Laws, in order to give assistance to poor and older people. Other measures of assistance to poor people followed, favored by a philanthropic attitude. Insurance policies were introduced later, and they covered occupational illness, old age and invalidity; family allowances appeared and the concept of pension was being considered. Capitalistic countries could benefit from a continuous economic growth, that enabled the states to sustain the costs of the welfare. Old age became a matter of policy. Today societies are tested; financial speculations generate profits but not an effective prosperity. In North America and Europe, the 2008 economic crisis affected the populations: reductions of GDP, rising costs of raw materials, life costs increase, competition with emerging countries have worsen the situation of the frailest part of society, old and poor people in particular. A terrible scenario of poverty and need is making its way. Austerity measures hit older people; the freezing of pensions is reality, private pensions are therefore encouraged, cuts in healthcare and homecare deeply influence the life of the elderly. There is a strong need of supportive measures to enable the older generations to feel safe and independent as long as possible. As Gramiccia noticed, old people increase in
number but the quality of their life is getting worse. The elderly cannot afford goods and services they need and this can lead to social exclusion. Gramiccia refers to the “massacre of innocent people”\(^5^6\): our society is overloaded with images, information, new technologies but the situation in which these elderly live remains invisible. They cannot afford the costs of life, they remain abandoned, lonely, sick in proximity to death. We march for life-defense, against abortion, even an embryo is more valuable than an old man living alone, claims Gramiccia. This is the absurd contradiction of our society. Basic needs such as heating, a complete diet (meat, fish, fruits and vegetables), clothing, glasses, periodic visits to the doctor and following check-ups are important and at the same time difficult to be afforded. Financial difficulties arise if we consider also rents, loans, or the payment of an unexpected expense.\(^5^7\) In Italy during the last ten years, private care have raised of 25%. These data mean more suffering and a rise in the number of deaths among the older population. Gramiccia points out how the hospital recovery for old people with diseases that could be cured at home as well, actually worsen their conditions. They lose their usual domestic anchorage; they worsen senile dementia, depression and along comes what Gramiccia calls \textit{immobilization syndrome}. Immobilization can be dangerous, since it arises from a difficulty in moving, and taking into consideration also biological and psychological and social factors, it can lead to disability and death.\(^5^8\) Gramiccia mentions also the \textit{fragility syndrome}, which is a complex clinic


\(^{58}\) Gramiccia, \textit{La Strage degli Innocenti}, p. 256.
condition of physical, mental and social instability.\textsuperscript{59} In these cases, even a neglected bronchitis can result in the death of the old.

The idea of home care has developed in Europe in recent years; the medium percentage of people cured at home in Europe is 10\%. In Italy, states Gramiccia, we are far from this result since only 4,9\% is cured in their domestic environment. It is the routinization of death and the regulation of older people which facilitates the potential for abuse.\textsuperscript{60} The European Union, and the United Nations as well, have adopted many measures, policies and programs, directed to improve the life of old people. These organizations recognize the need for a better understanding of the global demographic changes and have begun to encourage the Member States to find adequate solutions for pensions, health care and long-term care.\textsuperscript{61} What Gramiccia, with his medical experience suggests, is to develop a complete action plan to get an adequate social justice. The proposals start from the change of the figure of the family doctor, that according to him, has recently become a mere bureaucrat; geriatrics as a branch of medicine, should assume more importance; there is the need for a strengthening of the territory, not to congest hospitals; importance has to be given also to medical paths to promote mobilization, prevention and rehabilitation; daily social centers where older people can meet become essential to avoid social exclusion and last, the primary importance of the house as the main

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid. 247.


\textsuperscript{61} A European Parliamentary Research Service Briefing of 2014 addresses the EU Policies and Programs on Older People in Europe. The Report is available at http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/bibliothque/briefing/2014/140811/LDM_BRI(2014)140811_REV1_EN.pdf Moreover, DESA is the UN Department of Economic and Social Affair which deals with aging programmes.
place to cure old people, since the recovery should become the last chance in pathological extreme cases.

Despite many old people living alone in the worst condition, a new generation of elderly is rising: they have more interests, they have the opportunity to travel and enjoy their hobbies, especially those living in the cities, coming from middle upper classes. Also for them, though, their needs and expectations grow but their incomes remain low. A perverse mechanism occurs: our needs grow but our chances to satisfy them decrease. What should remain invariable are the basic fundamental human rights of all people. Old people should be able to access healthcare and correct practices; they should not become invisible and every person should be able to live his or her age at best. Gramiccia reports the point of view of James Hillman: he believes the human condition nowadays is marked by an anesthetic feeling; we watch TV, we work, we do the shopping and we don’t notice birds singing, a beautiful day, or we are not ashamed in front of a badly designed building. We ignore the world we are living in. We can’t recognize what is ugly or unjust; we don’t see and help those who are in need. Moreover, if criteria to see old age are those of our Western societies, it is clear how it can be easily seen as a disease. The passage of time is not tolerated and the idea of death is really far from us. Old age becomes a burden, in some cases a fault. We do not even consider that the face of the old can be considered a “testament of the past, the memory of a culture.” Healthy aging is a luxury for the few. Two sociological approaches can help to destroy either too positive or too negative stereotypes of old people. The

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62 Gramiccia, La Strage degli Innocenti, p. 83.
socio-environmental approach underlines the importance of the context to improve the life of the elderly; the continuity theory considers old age not as a unique and different period but as the natural continuity of life.63 These concepts should emphasize the importance of empathy and intergenerational exchange to better confront ourselves as well with our own old age. In Italy, nowadays can we say that society is really prejudicing old people’s situation? No answer is certainly in. In Italy a sort of “gerontocracy” has been established. In politics, in the media, in the world of work it is difficult for the younger generation to find place in this context: older people hold the power and often they are not inclined to stand aside. The government is mainly composed by middle-aged people and elderly. Our social structure safeguards those who are already integrated in the world of work, and this is to the detriment of the younger; this social injustice excludes generational exchange. Western societies are characterized by the coexistence of different generations; generational identities strengthen and the imaginary bounds among generations blur: we have to think about new generational exchanges: on one side young people can take interest in the past and in the elderly’s experiences, on the other side older people can benefit from the exchange with the younger, listening to their proposals, their innovative ideas. The young and the old have something to learn from each other and this collaboration should be at the base of a new society.64

CHAPTER II

1. Doris Lessing’s Renderings of Middle and Old Age

In the previous chapters I tried to illustrate the various aspects of old age, from a social and psychological point of view and in literature as well. Old age, in fact, has recently become a matter of great importance, especially from a social point of view. I would say that Doris Lessing, through her works, has often anticipated cultural trends, in this case as well. Her portraits of middle-aged and older women have enriched the new field of age studies\(^65\) paying a particular attention on the personal experience of aging and change that the passing time demands. Lessing will go beyond the usual literary stereotypes of aging as decline or wisdom, giving voice to real intimate and different life experiences.

Lessing’s narrative begins in 1952 with the series *Children of Violence* which reveals rebel daughters fighting for freedom from their social roles in South Africa. The Golden Notebook in 1962 has later been used by the feminist movement as a representative novel for the women condition, though Lessing objected to the fact of being classified as a feminist writer. However, the narrative technique in describing the protagonist’s life shows Lessing’s unrestraint in narrating the feminine experience. What is worth is the form: the story of Anna Wulf is narrated through four notebooks which show not only a more comprehensive style for narrating the feminine experience, but also the limits of the novel in describing the

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\(^65\) Humanistic studies on age and aging have been carried on by different scholars, as explained in chapter "Humanistic Gerontology" and will be further analyzed in Doris Lessing’s approach as well.
human condition. She moves then into science fiction and later she comes back to a more realistic technique with *The Diaries of Jane Somers*. *The Diaries* are divided into two parts, *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* and *If The Old Could...* They contain the life of Jane Somers who acquires self-awareness after experiencing the sorrows of life, such as the deaths of her husband and her mother. Lessing chooses to use the form of the diary in order to narrate Jane’s experience of change and growth. In the preface Lessing herself states: “it did turn out that as Jane Somers I wrote in ways that Doris Lessing cannot.”66 Lessing is referring here to the fact she decided to publish the book under pseudonymous; what I suggest, moreover, is that she is also trying to see how the form of a diary can better fit self-representation, giving a middle-aged character the chance to analyse herself and her past, a chance given to Jane and to Lessing herself as well. In writing Lessing’s biography, Carole Klein asserts that it seems reasonable to think that in these *Diaries* Lessing could rewrite her “life’s guilt producing scenes” and behave through Janna in ways that Doris Lessing could not.67

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2. Jane Somers: Middle Age at the Mirror

According to Simone De Beauvoir, old age is a terrible secret that our society tries to hide. However, Jane Somers’ self-growth represents how Lessing views old age and how women, in particular, deal with it and with death. The first approach with Jane encompasses the idea of change. The reader enters her life without deception. She results honest in writing a diary and the reader believes her almost immediately. Jane Somers left home at the age of nineteenth to pursue her self-realization. She moved to London in 1949 and she started to work for a fashion magazine, Lilith. The name of the magazine Lessing chooses reminds the ancient feminine demon associated to the tempest and death of the Jewish tradition. Lilith has become the symbol of the woman who does not bend to men’s power especially in the eighteenth century with the rise of the feminist movement. Through hard work and commitment, in fact, Jane rapidly becomes one of the major journalists of the magazine. She is a successful and beautiful journalist, committed with clothes, social events and pleasures. Yet, despite her efficiency and self-confidence at work, when her husband falls seriously sick and going to die of cancer, she can’t accept reality and help him, as she is used to thinking just about herself: “When Freddie began to be so ill my first idea was: this is unfair. Unfair to me, I thought secretly.”

And again: “He looked dreadful” but Jane knows that Freddie dealt with his cancer alone: “He was protecting me. Now, I can see it. Because I could not take it. Child-wife.” Calling herself a “child-wife” she demonstrates at least a sort of self-analysis. About the death of her mother, one year later, she says: “She went to pieces so fast.

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69 Ibid.
(...) I hate physical awfulness. I can’t stand it. (...) I could not kiss her. (...) I couldn’t touch her, not really. Not with kindness. The smell... and they say it isn't infectious, but what do they know?"[70]

She knows she could not give her mother support, her mother was so brave in facing illness and death and she behaved as a “child-daughter.” When the reader first meets Jane Somers, she is impeccable, strongly committed to her clothes and appearance and the image she wants to give; her feelings seem outwardly empty even when her husband Freddie and her mother die for cancer. She is unkind, inadequate to deal with cancer and coward by her own admission. At the age of forty-nine she thus realizes her behavioural inadequacy and her journey to become a more autonomous and emphatic person begins. Jane starts to question her image, her life and people surrounding her: “Suddenly (so it seemed) a middle-aged woman. Smart. Handsome. It was hard to take. It is still hard. A handsome, middle-aged widow with a very good job in the magazine world.”[71] Having been so committed with her image, now she finds herself dealing with a new appearance; she will change more deeply and the process of transformation will occur through a new perspective of life. She realizes she had disappointed both her husband and her mother; actually she has always rejected her mother’s life as a middle-bourgeois house wife, devoted to the family and husband. At the end of the sixties, Jane can embody the icon of the feminist movement: she is the new woman, self-centred and independent who puts in the foreground her career, before her marriage and her

[70] Ibid. 15-16.
[71] Ibid. 17.
family.\textsuperscript{72} I think Lessing’s rejection of this kind of feminism lay in the idea of this independent woman, fighting against men’s power, totally detached from the family life. After letting her family down, Jane can finally consider her life from a new point of view. Jane, analysing herself through her diary, states:

I was so involved with my image, how I projected myself. My image first was light-hearted, funny Janna with her crazy clothes, ever so clever and Girl Friday. Then, after Joyce, very expensive and perfect and smart and dependable, the person who had been there longest, with her smart trendy husband off-stage.\textsuperscript{73}

She understands she has always lived for the image she wanted to give to society and after the losses in her life, she starts thinking about herself in a brand new way:

Until then I thought of myself as a nice person. Like everyone, just about, that I know. The people I work with, mainly. I know now that I did not ask myself what I was really like, but thought only about how other people judged me.\textsuperscript{74}

She rethinks about her marriage and finally sees it just a convenience one:

We did not have the sort of marriage where we talked about real things. I can see that now.

We were not really married. It was the marriage most people have these days, both sides trying for advantage. I always saw Freddie as one up.\textsuperscript{75}


\textsuperscript{73} Doris Lessing, The Diaries of Jane Somers, p. 17.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid. 13.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.
Sex was the only thing that could keep the marriage together and it was seen by Jane as something to consume, like many other objects. After Freddie’s death, though, something changed. Freddie starts to become more and more important to Jane than what he was during their marriage. A sort of ghost following Jane, who is now full of regrets:

When he died, and I found I was missing him so much, I wanted to know about times in his life he hardly ever mentioned. Like being a soldier in the war. (…) And yet we were close. We had all that good sex. (…) Yet we could not talk to each other. Correction. Did not talk to each other. Correction. He could talk to me because when he started to try I shied away.76

When later she decides to move into another flat, of her own, she realises she had never felt at home. Her home was her office: “If I lost my job, there wouldn’t be much left of me.”77 In this moment of her life, when she begins to see things differently, she understands she has to change something in her life and she has to rearrange her life after the losses she experienced. After a first false attempt, she meets Maudie Fowler, a ninety-two Londoner woman who lives in an old and dirty basement near her beautiful and perfect flat. At the chemist’s Jane sees her for the first time:

I saw an old witch. I was staring at this old creature and thought, a witch. It was because I had spent all day on a feature, Stereotypes of Women, Then and Now. (…) Among them, a witch, but I had discarded her. But here she was, beside me, in the chemist’s. A tiny bent-over woman, with a nose nearly meeting her chin, in black heavy dusty clothes, and

76 Ibid. 14.
77 Ibid. 18.
something not far off a bonnet. She saw me looking at her and thrust at me (...) Fierce blue
eyes, under grey craggy brows, but there was something wonderfully sweet in them.78

Jane remains involved in Maudie's life and in a world of misery and old age. When Jane and Maudie walk home Jane sees for the first time a different world outside:

I adjusted my pace to hers and went out of the shop with her. (...) I walked beside her. It was hard to walk so slowly. Usually I fly along, but did not know till then. She took one step, then paused, examined the pavement, then another step. I thought how I rushed along the pavements every day and had never seen Mrs Fowler, but she lived near me, and suddenly I looked up and down the streets and saw-old women. Old men too, but mostly old women. (...) I had not seen them. That was because I was afraid of being like them.79

This passage is essential since it marks the beginning of Jane's change, the relationship with Maudie and the assumption of time. At the beginning Jane is a self-centred woman, feeling guilty for her behaviour towards her mother and her husband; she gradually starts examining her life and she will become a more self-conscious woman and therefore more empathic towards the older generation. Jane Somers will change her attitude towards loss, illness and death; she will go through a difficult process of reflection and search of a new feminine subjectivity. At the end of The Diaries she will be able to abandon societal conventions and roles and will feel totally free to express herself and her new personality.

78 Ibid. 20.
79 Ibid. 21.
Maudie is an old and poor human being, Jane, a handsome and brilliant middle-aged woman; the sharp contrast enables both women to manage life and death. The relationship with Maudie enables Jane to build a new midlife identity; this new identity turns out to be a compromise between the career woman without the love of a family and the stereotype of the lovable and caring mother. Lessing demonstrates how a human being, woman in this case, can embrace so many attitudes and behaviours. At the beginning it is just the guilt for her mother, then Jane will totally care for Maudie, she shops for her, she cleans her house, talks and discusses for services with social agencies, cleans and takes care of Maudie’s physical decay as well.

When Jane first meets Maudie, she “was afraid, walking along there beside her. It was the smell of her, a sweet, sour, dusty sort of smell. I saw the grime on her thin old neck, and on her hands.”80 Jane feels disgusted by Maudie and by the conditions in which Maudie lives: “The whole place smelled, it smelled awful. (...) It was all so dirty and dingy and grim and awful.”81 Drinking tea from the old cup Maudie offers her “was the hardest thing”82 Jane ever did. Yet, there is something in Maudie, her fierce attitude, her dignity that makes Jane meet her again and commit herself. She is afraid and repelled by old people. Regarding old people a dualism arises: it is socially and morally fair to follow the pietas or solidarity, it is likewise true that it is hard to delete the repulsion, because it will mean ignoring the tragic character of old

80 Ibid.
81 Ibid. 22.
82 Ibid.
age and the fact that the old are the image of death.\textsuperscript{83} Jane starts asking herself how we value ourselves in society and what the use of Mrs Fowler is.\textsuperscript{84} She realizes how she has always lived and judged people and herself as well: through images. Until Freddie's death she always considered herself a "nice person."\textsuperscript{85} Her education was canon "you'd say it was a moral household"\textsuperscript{86}, yet the children like her have always had everything they wanted. She is making an account of her past life, a complete life review. She sees how she has never asked deeply who she really is, she only took into consideration other people's judgements. Important is the fact that the bathroom is the room she has spent most of the time in. She indulges in long baths, especially on Sundays nights:

What has made me, for so many years, that perfectly groomed person, whom everybody looks at and thinks, how does she do it? Has been my Sunday nights. Never did I allow anything to interfere with that. (...) On Sunday nights, after supper, for years and years I've chosen my outfit for every day of the week ahead, made sure there has been not a wrinkle or a crease, attended to buttons and hems, cleaned shoes, emptied out and polished handbags, brushed hats, and put anything even slightly soiled for the cleaner's and the laundrette.\textsuperscript{87}

Knowing Maudie has been like seeing into a crystal ball, and this lets her elaborate her past to better meet her future. She learns to behave like a "human

\textsuperscript{84} Doris Lessing, \textit{The Diaries}, p. 33.
\textsuperscript{85} \textit{Ibid}. 13.
\textsuperscript{86} \textit{Ibid}. 34.
\textsuperscript{87} \textit{Ibid}. 93.
being”\textsuperscript{88} rather than “a little girl”\textsuperscript{89}. That is why youth can be often associated, in our competitive Western society and where there’s a celebration of the eternally young body, to a sort of obsessive doing to fill the empty space of solitude; Jane was inclined to identify herself with what she did, rather than with what she really is. Moreover, she rescues herself from the doom of the ritual grooming. She changes her appearance and herself along. Gradually, Maudie herself becomes a true human being, a frail “tiny little bundle of black, with her white face sticking up out of it”\textsuperscript{90}. Jane couldn't stand physical decay, there are many examples of it thorough the whole book. She couldn't help her mother and even kiss or hug her during the illness. She couldn't stand the smell. With Maudie she has to overcome all these: she begins to walk more slowly, to admit the existence of old people. She enters Maudie’s life, a worn-out cold house with “two unbelievably ancient ragged armchairs (…) another nice old wood table with newspaper spread over it. A divan heaped with clothes and bundles”\textsuperscript{91} but what she thinks is how taste has changed during the years, how all people nowadays throw things out and get bored with everything. Lessing thus, does not spare criticism of our society. Jane commits to this old lady and begins to change:

\begin{quote}
I see that it will be a long time before my ignorance, my lack of experience, and her reticence, and her rages – for now I see how they simmer there, making her eyes light up with what you’d think, at first, must be gaiety or even a sense of comedy- a long time before how she is, her nature, and how I am, my rawness, can make it possible for me to form a whole picture of her.\textsuperscript{92}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid. 19. \\
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid. 55. \\
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid. 22. \\
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid. 25. 
\end{flushleft}
Another time she feels that:

the room, with the curtains drawn and the electric light, seemed quite cosy, not so
dreadfully dirty and grim. But why do I go on about dirt like this? Why do we judge people
like this? She was no worse off for the grime and the dust, and even the smells. I decided
not to notice.

Through Maudie’s memory Jane gets familiar with her, the two become closer. Maudie has the appearance of an old crabby woman, suspicious and reluctant
towards Jane. She never asks or say thank you, yet when Jane offers to do something
for her she is delighted. Their meetings are full of emotions “It is an up and down of
emotions, each meeting.” Jane knows Maudie’s happy childhood, Maudie’s as a
young girl and then a married woman with a drunk man. She lost her child and had
a very hard life. Jane realises how akin she is to Maudie. Like Maudie, she likes
watching horror movies, like Maudie she is alone and she likes being alone. She
kisses her, she collects bits of wood for her, she does the shopping, she listens to her
stories and her past life. She learns to know Maudie Fowler and while doing this, she
learns to better know herself: “My life, my real life is the office, is at work. Because I
have been working since I was nineteen, and always for the same magazine, I’ve
taken it for granted, have not seen that this is my life.” She sees how many common
grounds they share, actually more with her than with anyone else. She gets used to
the smells, the dirty and the grim and she understands how difficult it is for Maudie
not only to do the daily cleaning, but also to trust the others and let go love and her

93 Ibid. 26.
94 Ibid. 39.
95 Ibid. 50.
emotions (the only emotion she seems to have is rage!) that years of solitude have erased. Jane asks herself naturally if this destiny can be hers as well: "I have become used to drinking out of grimy cups, I noted that with interest. Once Maudie had been like me, perpetually washing herself, washing cups, plates, dusting, washing her hair." Jane is able to identify herself with Maudie especially when a lumbago forces her in bed for two weeks. She comes to experience physical dependency, solitude and pain. Jane lives for some days Maudie's routine life, in which simple needs old people have can become a burden. She experienced in a word the "helplessness" of old people who have to lean on others. She uses the same words Maudie uses and repeats: dreadful, terrible. She says: "what a privilege, what a marvellous, precious thing, that I don't need anyone to assist me through this day, I can do it all myself." She realises how precarious existence is, at any moment life can strike with illnesses or accidents and you end to live like Maudie, like all old people. But now she knows, she is ready and she lives life in a deepest way. She appreciates her life and independence. Now she: "no longer fear the old, but wait for when they trust me enough to tell me their tale, so full of history." She begins also to look after other old ladies like Annie and recognizes that the help she and other social assistances give to Annie:

is everything that is humane and intelligent. There she is, a derelict old woman, without friends, some family somewhere but they find her condition a burden and a scandal and

96 Ibid. 58.
97 Ibid. 139.
98 Ibid. 175.
99 Ibid. 174.
won't answer her pleas; her memory going (…) all the habits and support of a lifetime fraying away around her\textsuperscript{100}

Fostering the connection between middle and old age, Jane decides also to take Maudie out for a simple walk. Maudie is delighted, they spend the entire afternoon together at The Rose Garden Restaurant, she keeps staring at the flowers, the sparrows, and the people around them. Maudie eats very slowly and heart-breaking her creamy cake, smiling, “for she had forgotten it, down in that ghastly basement, in those dreary streets”\textsuperscript{101} insists Jane. When Jane, though, proposes the same experience, Maudie simply can't stand the newly spread emotions and refuses categorically. However, Jane understands what it can mean for an old lady to honour promises and this commitment that at the beginning was heavy like a boulder now has opened her to a new reality. She knows something different and she can therefore enjoy the new maturity and enrich herself by a new self-awareness facing also the physical decline of a body, Maudie in fact needs to be washed and Jane helps her:

I slipped the “clean” vest on over her head, and wrapped the “clean” cardigan round her, and then saw she was sliding down the thick bunches of skirt. And then it hit me, the stench. Oh, it is no good, I can't not care. Because she had been too weak or too tired to move, she had shat her pants, shat everything. Knockers, filthy... Well, I am not going on, not even to let off steam, it makes me feel sick. But I was looking at the vest and petticoats she had taken off, and they were brown and yellow with shit. Anyway she stood there, her bottom half

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid. 162.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid. 120.
naked. I slid newspapers under her, so she was standing on thick wads on them. I washed and washed her 102

Washing Maudie, Jane understands how the old woman must feel ashamed and humiliated, since “a stranger was invading her privateness.”103 Moreover, Jane tries to better comprehend Maudie:

She was chilly, she was sick, she was weak – but I could feel the vitality beating there: life. How string it is, life. I had never thought that before, never felt life in that way, as I did then, washing Maudie Fowler, a fierce angry old woman. Oh how angry: it occurred to me that all her vitality is in her anger, I must not, must not resent it or want to hit back. 104

Jane understands that this anger Maudie feels is the only way she has to save herself from humiliation and shame; Maudie needs to rage against Jane. She washes Maudie, she touches decline but she goes also to the essence of that old witch, or of that black bundle. She sees how Maudie must feel dependent on others and how this fact influences Maudie. Maudie’s dependency can be associated to a child’s “hoping you won’t wet your pants before you get to the lavatory” 105. Maudie depends totally on others and Jane better realises that also Maudie’s happiness depends on her visits: “She says she is happy now, because of me (and that is hard to accept, it makes me feel angry, that so little can change a life), and therefore she likes to think of happy times.” 106

102 Ibid. 59.
103 Ibid. 60.
104 Ibid. 59.
105 Ibid. 58.
106 Ibid. 96.
Jane as well depends on others, or better to say she has always be dependent on the others’ judgment “Oh how dependent I am on being admired, liked, appreciated.”

Thanks to Maudie, Jane can get to the essence of life and touch the essence of relationships. She understands what is wrong with her, she understands how to love deeply. She struggles, at the beginning, to face Maudie and her home and physical decay. She gradually overcomes the dirt, the smell and she discovers she likes her personality, her stories and she begins to love her deeply. She ends up meeting her unexpressed needs, caring for her and admiring her for her pride and her interior energy. Maudie helps Jane to take some time off from work; she could even write a historical romantic book about milliners, becoming therefore a successful writer. She will be able to emotional closeness, that she will use later towards Jill, Kate and Richard. There is an important development in the narrator, in the way she sees herself and the world. This development derives not only from the life’s experiences of illness and death, but also by caring for an older person. She tries to understand her family, her mother, in particular, and she insists with her sister Georgie to know more about the illness of her grandmother. She finds out the anger and the resentment her sister has felt for her for years of indifference. “Georgie” she said “I’m sorry. I am sorry I didn’t help” Now she knows what it means and she reconSIDERS the strength of her mother in caring for her father, for her grandmother and in facing death and illness so courageously. For the first time in her life she accepts grief, sorrow, illness, death and she is prepared for that. She will remain by Maudie’s side until her death, emotionally and physically present in her decay. She imagines herself in the same conditions Maudie is facing:

Ibid. 62.
Ibid. 67.
I make myself visualize me, Janna, sitting up on high pillows, very old, being destroyed from within. I reduce my outer boundaries back, back, first from my carapace of clothes, how I present myself; and then to my healthy body, which does not – yet – suddenly let loose dirt and urine against my will, but is still comely and fresh; and back inside, to me, the knowledge of I, and imagine how it is a carcass I am sitting in, that's all, a slovenly mess of meat and bones. But it is no good. I do not fear death. I do not.  

Jane is inspired by Maudie and their relationship will foster Jane's spiritual and emotional growth. She denied her husband’s illness and wasn't able to care for her mother, but now she questions about modern society, calling it “euthanasia society.” Paradoxically, watching Maudie dying, she fears less death itself: “Once I was so afraid of old age, of death, that I refused to let myself see old people in the streets – they did not exist for me. Now, I sit for hours in that ward and watch and marvel and wonder and admire.”  

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109 Ibid. 242.
110 Ibid. 245.
3. Maudie: A Fierce Angry Old Woman

The one described above is Jane’s attitude to old age and Maudie in particular; Jane throughout the story undergoes a complete inner and partially also outer change. It is interesting to analyse Maudie’s attitude to life in general and to the unexpected help from Jane. Maudie Fowler is a ninety-year-old woman living alone in a small rent-controlled flat, that costs her 22 shelling a week:

The house had a broken parapet, broken and chipped steps. (…) Although this door wouldn’t keep out a determined cat, she fumbled for a key, and at last she found it, and peered for the keyhole, and opened the door. And I went in with her, my heart quite sick, and my stomach sick too because of the smell. (…) I have never seen anything like it outside our Distress File, condemned houses and that sort of thing.111

Maudie lives in extremely poor conditions and she represents many old women living alone, in need of special care and social assistance. When the brilliant and high-living Jane meets Maudie, she opens her eyes on the world of old people and on the way poor old people is forced to live. Jane helps to improve Maudie’s living conditions but it results difficult. The owner of the flat where Maudie lives seems reluctant to renovate the building and hopes Maudie will die soon to benefit from other tenants: “And he wants me out, so he can get his blood money for this flat. But I know a trick or two”112 says Maudie. We come to know Good Neighbours, women who volunteer to keep company to these old lonely people; social assistances such as Vera Rogers, who very humanely tries to manage her own life and at the same

111 Ibid. 21.
112 Ibid. 27.
time to look after all these lonely women, providing them Meals on Wheels if they need it; Home Helps are equally important for cleaning and shopping. However, these volunteers have a family, their problems and though they offer their help willingly, it often results quick and superficial. In a dialogue with Jane, the young electrician she called to help Maudie says: “Why isn’t she in a Home? She shouldn’t be living like that.”\textsuperscript{113} Maudie, though, like many other old people absolutely refuses this idea, she prefers to stay at home, trying to maintain her autonomy and self-sufficiency. As Gramiccia noticed, the recent idea of home care meets the needs of the elderly who prefer to stay in their homes as long as possible and maintain their daily routine, rather than ending up in dreaded hospitals. Moreover, Maudie’s house is full of objects she has kept during her life: clothes, hats, newspapers, porcelains. Jane recognise it and says: “Everything is like this with her. A beautiful flowered Worcester teapot, but it is cracked. Her skirt is of good heavy wool, but it is stained and frayed.”\textsuperscript{114} Once beautiful objects now are ruined by time: “pretty old china cups and saucers”, a “big old cracked plate”, a “silk blouse.” Maudie herself seems to be ruined by time; her outer appearance is dirty, soiled and shabby and thinking about Maudie, Jane, says that there is a gradual deterioration about the cleaning of the house:

\begin{quote}
Maudie Fowler one day could not trouble herself to clean out her front room, because there was so much junk in it, and then she left it and left it; going in sometimes, thinking well, it’s not so bad. Meanwhile she was keeping the back room and the kitchen spotless. Even now
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid. 32.  
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid. 23.
she does her chimney once a week, and then scrubs the grate, brushes up the dust and cinders – though less and less thoroughly.  

This gradual deterioration has involved gradually Maudie’s personal care:

then she left longer and longer between washing her hair... and then she did not wash her clothes, only took out the cleanest ones there were, putting them back grubby, till they were the cleanest; and so it went on. And at last, she was upright in her thick shell of black, her knockers not entirely clean, but not so bad, her neck dirty, but she did not think about it, her scalp unwashed.

Jane is considering how the process of degeneration evolved and through the anecdotes that Maudie tells Jane, she is able to identify with Maudie’s life and thoughts. Age and deprivation have made Maudie’s personality sink but: “she, Maudie Fowler, was still there, alert, very much all there, on guard inside that old witch’s appearance. She is still there, and everything has collapsed around her, it’s too difficult, too much.”

Thanks to Jane’s help and true friendship built in time, Maudie reveals her true self, which is completely different from the “ Bundles of coats and scarves” and in another moment: “just old women” Jane saw at the beginning of her journey. Lessing, through the eyes of the Indian owner of the grocery where Maudie does the shopping, reveals her view on our Western society and on the way it addresses old age and the elderly. Mr. Patel talking to Jane, states: “I though everyone in this country was rich. (...) Once, with us, we would not let one

115 Ibid. 63.
116 Ibid.
117 Ibid.
118 Ibid. 111.
119 Ibid. 92.
of our old people come to such a life. But now – things are changing with us.”\textsuperscript{120} He is accusing society, Jane’s precious clothes and style, as if in this society only image counts. Moreover, Maudie’s family exists; Maudie has a sister Polly, who lives in a big home full of children and grandchildren. When Jane takes Maudie to visit them the reader realises how miserable these people are: they don’t care about Maudie, they are embarrassed by her person, they mock her. At the end of the passage, watching Maudie dying, Jane will evaluate modern society the same way Maudie did.

Memories are important and Lessing divides Maudie’s life into specific emotions: “Happiness”\textsuperscript{121}, “Maudie’s very bad time”\textsuperscript{122}, “a nice time”\textsuperscript{123}. These are memories that mark human existence. Maudie tells Jane about her life, for she loves “thinking about those old days”\textsuperscript{124}; her happy childhood; her relationship with her father who was the owner of a shop; the relationship with her father’s lover who, according to Maudie, killed her mother and tried to kill her more than once; the relationship with her sister Polly who stole her inheritance; the hard work as a milliner and as a maid; the wedding which destroyed her life with Laurie, a drunk who beat her up and took her child away. Maudie reveals her real self, her “most marvellous merry smile, her girl’s smile”\textsuperscript{125} or again her “young fresh laugh, not an old woman’s laugh at all.”\textsuperscript{126} Gradually she has become an old lonely suspicious woman, in a word: a witch, that is how society sees her and old women like her. Maudie is grouchy, angry with everybody, she mistreats all the people of the social

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid. 115.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid. 96.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid. 105.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid. 108.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid. 36.
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid. 52.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid. 42.
assistance who come to visit her. She absolutely refuses to have around Good Neighbour or Home Helps. She is fierce and she wants to continue to live with dignity her last years, without the help of a person who actually doesn’t care for her. She doesn’t want to have strangers around, in her home. Maudie mirrors what De Beauvoir writes about the elderly’s attitude towards closure, because this closure becomes a defence against society. The anger Maudie feels is therefore a defence against strangers’ intrusion in her life until she becomes what Vera Rogers notices: “You have to laugh, or you’d go mad. They are their own worst enemies”\textsuperscript{127} referring to old people. Lessing thinks that rage very often is the only way for some people to survive, and surely this is the case of Maudie. Lessing traces Maudie’s ordinary day as if it was a struggle to survive: “She wakes inside a black smothering weight, she can’t breathe, can’t move. They’ve buried me alive, she thinks, and struggles.”\textsuperscript{128} When Maudie wakes up, her first thought is to be sure she is still alive. Thus, she tries to recover from the torpidity that the night brings along. Maudie, then, has to deal with her incontinence and with the torture of having a weak and ill body; getting to the toilet results a very difficult action: “At last, with such effort and trouble, she climbs out of the bed, and stands beside it, feeling in it to see what is there. She can’t be sure. (...) anxiously she inspects the bed, which is dry. But she has to get to the toilet.”\textsuperscript{129} Maudie’s day continues like this, she is too tired to get up, all the daily activities become heavy. The reader perceives the slowness of the normal movements and the effort to arrive at the end of the day. Yet she maintains her dignity and her pride, she waits for Janna to come, she would like Janna to go to live with her. The difference between the speed of Janna’s days and the slowness of

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid. 140.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid. 121.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid.
Maudie's is exemplifying: a society in which you cannot slow down. The elderly seems to live in a separate world, and they are invisible to younger generations. When Jane arrives, after helping Maudie with the housework, she falls asleep: “Maudie sees it, can’t believe it, knows it is so, and is in a rage, in a fury. For she has been waiting to talk, to listen, to have a friend and some ordinary decent communication, perhaps a cup of tea in a minute, never mind about her bowels, and her bladder ... And here is Janna, fast asleep.”

It is interesting to see this story as a journey of discovery: Jane discovers she has a human wealth, which is empathy; Maudie, thanks to Jane, unveils her secret essence and strong personality. In addition, Maudie receives joy from the relationship with Jane. Finally, Maudie has a role in someone else’s life, she is happy in sharing and recalling past times and, through these memories, she gives advice to her younger friend.

I can't help thinking that in this hard, and beautiful at the same time, relationship between Jane and Maudie, there is a reference to Lessing’s mother. Although Emily Maude McVeagh died in 1957, the book, in my opinion, may try to rebuild the relationship with her. In the Preface there is a clear connection: “Another influence that went to make Jane Somers was now: that practical, efficient, energetic woman, by temperament conservative, a little sentimental, and only with difficulty (and a lot of practise at it) able to understand weakness and failure, though always kind. No, Jane Somers is not my mother, but thoughts of women like my mother did feed Jane Somers.”

Certainly Jane Somers has the efficiency of Lessing’s mother; I would like to argue that also Maudie Fowler has a strong connection with her. First of all,

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130 Ibid. 128.
131 Ibid. 6.
the name: Maudie. Secondly, the relationship with their stepmother, difficult and cold either for Maude Tayler and for Maudie Fowler. Moreover, at the age of sixty-four, it seems as if Lessing is trying to catch up with the time lost in the relationship with her mother, with whom she always had a very conflictual relationship. Talking about her mother’s death, Lessing, in her autobiography Walking in The Shade, reveals that her mother was forced to enter a rest home, and argues that if she continued to be busy, looking after her nephews for instance, feeling useful in some ways, she would live at least ten years more. She adds:

There are deaths that are not blows but bruises, spreading darkly, out of sight, not ever really fading. I sometimes think, Suppose she were to walk in now, an old woman, and here I am an old woman… how would we be? I like to think we would share some kind of humorous comprehension. Of what? Of the sheer damned awfulness of life, that’s what.\textsuperscript{132}

4. Defence

Another important theme is the one of defence. All people build barriers as a defence from society; yet young people’s defence is completely different from old people’s. In *The Diaries* Jane uses nice clothes, cares for herself, has long baths, has her hair set, a sort of “bulwark against chaos”\(^{133}\) and these rituals help Jane to form a sort of image-armour for the world. For older people the problem is deeper and more complex; they can’t mask with clothes or make-up so their defence must be profound. Maudie’s defences are inner ones. She is despotic, angry, irritable; it’s the rage against the others, her being so unfriendly that enable Maudie to keep distance from the enemies, people who according to her paranoid feeling would like to see her dead in a hospital, or in other words, society.

Another kind of defence is the one we find in the short story *Flight*, published in 1957. In the story a grandfather does not understand why his granddaughter aged eighteen wants to get married. He gets angry at her, he shouts at her making her sad: “It’s not like that. Why can’t you see? Running and giggling, kissing and kissing. You’ll come to something quite different.”\(^{134}\) It seems the old man tries to stop the passing of time and the future disillusions, the decay while bound to the inevitable end which is old age. He feels “caught and finished”\(^{135}\) while the young girl is still “running free”\(^{136}\). The grandfather’s defence is his experience that he tries to impose on his granddaughter. The old, proud of their experience, do not understand the

\(^{133}\) Doris Lessing, *The Diaries*, p. 102.
\(^{135}\) Ibid.
\(^{136}\) Ibid.
young and try to impose their opinion; this creates a wider gap between the two generations, a gap that for Lessing seems unavoidable since it will be present also in her later production, as I will illustrate in the next chapter.
5. Intergenerational Exchange

Simone De Beauvoir notices how old people are seen as outcasts by society and Doris Lessing depicts the world of old age as if it is a completely separated from the youngest world, a kind of invisible parallel universe of decrepitude, poverty and loss in a modern world of appearance, production and speed. Yet, when these two apparently different worlds meet, Lessing shows how the match can become extremely fruitful for both parts. The intergenerational exchange between Maudie and Jane has not only been an enrichment in Maudie’s life, but has enabled Jane to better evaluate past experiences, human relationships and her future. Here I will illustrate the exchange between people of the same age or younger people.

5.1 Jane and Joyce

In *The Diaries*, intergenerational relationships are essential to better comprehend changes in life. The relationship between Joyce and Jane is important and changes throughout the whole book. At the beginning Joyce is presented as the only friend of Jane; they have worked together for years and it was Joyce who helped Janna to find a personal style, which has become “classical-expensive.”¹³⁷ Like Jane, Joyce is a middle-age woman dealing with her past life and her family crisis. People change, relationships change and life will interfere in their relationship. She won’t change as Jane has. The two become more and more distant. It seems as if Joyce doesn’t accept the idea of getting old, of death and remains stuck in her life. “We couldn’t be more

different"\textsuperscript{138} says Jane. And Joyce asks Jane “Have you ever had the experience, suddenly finding out that you didn't know yourself?”\textsuperscript{139} They both have to deal with identity crisis of middle age, their past and future. She, who has always been self-sufficient secure, finds out she cannot stand a divorce and the idea of getting old alone deeply scares her. That is why she accepts to move to in the United States, giving up what she has gradually conquered in her working life, she becomes a housewife and counsellor for students in need. Her children have grown and she sees them very little. Jane knows Joyce acts like a child, and that her attitude to death and old age is simply stupid. They made a long journey away from each other. Joyce will renounce to herself because she is too afraid of solitude. When they meet after years of phone conversations, increasingly rare, Joyce is a completely different person: “My wild romantic Joyce, high-class gipsy, has vanished”\textsuperscript{140} She has lost weight, she is spiteful, furious, old. Their meeting is full of resentment. They have no deep conversation, Joyce has a younger lover, that apparently makes her feel younger: “she says she has reached the age for this type of affair; all her women friends have one, or have had one, or plan one. She finds it rejuvenating.”\textsuperscript{141} Joyce begins to drink; Lessing as well experienced the addiction of alcohol, in fact, in her autobiography she writes: “There is probably a recognized clinical condition: the middle-aged woman who slides into drinking, feeling abandoned, unloved, unwanted. This is what I had become”\textsuperscript{142} Joyce represents the woman over a barrel, pressed under the weight of a family, focused on herself and on her unhappiness, so

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid. 74.
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid. 347.
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid. 348.
\textsuperscript{142} Doris Lessing, \textit{Walking in the Shades}, p. 262.
afraid of getting old: “When I get to that age I’m going to jump out of a window.”

In life, Lessing seems to say, sometimes there are not rational choices, just a psychological defence towards an emotion that you cannot face.

5.2 Jane, Kate and Jill

Generational gaps begin to appear in *The Diary of a Good Neighbour*, and become even more evident in *If The Old Could*, where Jane looks at her two nieces from a distance. In *If The Old Could*, then, Jane leaves the hard and pressing work time to take some time for herself. She goes out for long walks, she visits museums, exhibitions, she spends her time in the pubs of her city, London, watching people passing by. Lessing seems to admit the possibility for a change in middle life, a greater self-awareness and freedom. However, though she is ready to change and accept new possibilities life offers, she cannot share her niece’s behaviour even though it is the same as hers when she was young. Jill, Jane’s older niece, represents herself when she was her age:

> When Jill came to live here she was a tentative, watchful creature, all great eyes and apprehension (...) Very soon, she became me, put on my characteristics, my mannerisms, my walk. Her voice is mine. And I started to observe myself in her; this mirror, on the whole flattered, thinking: Well, I am, rather was not so bad! But then, seeing something else, trains of very different thoughts begin... A competent girl she is, every moment so right, her mind behind it. But controlled... over controlled? 144

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144 Ibid. 271-272.
Jill is young and Jane loves her freshness. She is also efficient but detached and Jane realises that Jill has chosen to have her as an example; she would like to tell her to let herself go and to open more to others, something that Jane has learnt only through her relationship with Maudie. Jill does not understand Jane’s relationship with Maudie. She cannot associate old age with the glamorous aunt Jane. When Jane is assisting Maudie at the hospital, Jill doesn’t comprehend why Jane is helping Maudie so deeply; Jane imagines what her niece is thinking because probably it was what Jane herself thought when she was younger:

No, no, I won’t, I can’t, keep it all far away from me. Above all: If you, who are so close to me, are prepared to accept this frightful, appalling ugliness as part of your life, then what is to prevent it all coming into my life too? 145

Jill’s distance from Maudie is the characteristic attitude of young people towards old people. To quote Lessing’s subtitle “If The Young Knew...If The Old Could...” Jane realises that not only the young do not know, but they do not want to know.

In If The Old Could readers know Kate, Jill’s younger sister and Jane’s niece. She goes to live with aunt Jane, looking for a kind of redemption like her sister did. Kate, tough, is totally different. She is a difficult adolescent, always sullen, indolent, distrustful, babyish. There are many characters like Kate in Lessing’s works and Lessing knows very well how to behave with this kind of young people, having experienced herself the cohabitation with problematic girls. Jane, therefore, behaves like an indulgent mother, patient and comprehensive. It seems as if in the Diaries

145 Ibid. 239.
the role of older people is to get the younger to avoid the mistakes they made as younger people, an evolution in humans’ roles but they rarely succeed. For one moment she also sees how Kate, her younger niece, must see her: “standing there so firm on the pile of her energetic and successful years. What a challenge, what a burden, the middle-aged, the elderly, are to the young.”

Besides, Jill doesn’t understand why Jane behaves so patiently towards Kate, but Jane has learnt more from her experience with Maudie, something Jill cannot understand as old people’s world and wisdom are not even considered by the young girl. It seems that awareness comes gradually and very slowly; in fact, Jane is no longer young but middle-aged and it takes time for her too, to learn the lesson the old can teach.

\[146\] Ibid. 294.
6. Love in Middle Age

In *If The Old Could* Jane falls in love for the first time in her life, at fifty-three. Gradually we see how Jane distances from the world of *Lilith*, albeit she continues to be an important pillar of the magazine. She becomes a more complex person, a middle age woman dealing with the first crush and her renewed freedom. Now, even working for *Lilith* represents a weight: “I enjoy being in my office, and my travelling and my business lunches, but the thing is, it’s all more of an effort. The effort is in always having to be in the show, presented, observed.”\(^{147}\) She continues:

At home I have been careful to be there for Jill; responsible, not a source of dread infection (...) sloppiness, whether of behaviour or of anything else. My place, my refuge, the only spot on this wide earth where I can be myself, do not feel the presence of possibly critical eyes, is - my bed. Not even my room, for Jill has needed to be able to come in and out, so that she may be reassured her rights in me are not restricted. Oh, not too often, not annoyingly: but the fact is, it is not when I have shut my bedroom door that I have felt responsibility take its weight off me, but when I turn off the light. I lie in the dark and look at changing skies over rooftops and trees.\(^ {148}\)

Jane and Richard meet by chance and undertake a relationship. They meet in London pubs; they don’t even know their phone numbers or surnames. They behave like two adolescents. They walk together, they seem in perfect harmony:

And then I realized I had used the words of Richard, ‘in love’, and this touched off a typhoon of contradictory emotions. First of all, I am afraid, pride: I, Janna Somers, in love, and in this

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\(^{147}\) Ibid. 276-277.  
\(^{148}\) Ibid. 277.
sudden inappropriate way, at first sight, with someone whose name I still don't know. I, Janna, always in command of my decisions... But all this was being put at nothing, quite simply, by an outrageous delight, an energy that made it hard even to sit still, and which was drawing the young Italian's eyes to me though he did not know why. A smart elderly? Middle-aged? Lady¹⁴⁹

Both of them feel inebriated by excitement:

When we meet at once springs up that reckless gaiety that characterize us: we hurry towards each other, looking to see if it is still there, if, as we approach, we can feel the energy of delight that carries us through our long days together, our long and energetic days¹⁵⁰

The “old” Jane would have never thought of being so happy with a man and she shares her solitude with a handsome man who loves her in return. Everywhere they go, they lose contact with reality. Yet, through the pages of this diary, that for some passages might have been written by an adolescent in love, a nostalgic, sad and full of regrets atmosphere emerges. Richard, the “old lion” is married with a woman who looks like younger Jane: dedicated to a successful career, controlled, detached. Their children, Kathleen and Matthew, in particular, interfere in their relationship. Jane is tormented by ghosts as well: Freddie, whom she dreams almost every night, appears embittered and oppressive. Can Jane have loved her husband like she now loves Richard?

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. 278.
¹⁵⁰ Ibid. 292.
'What a fool I’ve been, what a fool I was.’ (...) For it was Freddie I was thinking of. If I could separate them at all, Freddie, Richard. Richard put his arm around my shoulders and we walked past the lovers and towards a shop window where we saw ourselves. Some trick of the fading and changing lights in the glass that made it easy to see myself, the pretty fresh girl with the crisp light hair and smiling eyes; I saw him beside me, the young man.\footnote{151}{Ibid. 287.}

Even if they try never to talk about their lives:

At this point, when people fall in love, said he, it is customary to tell each other the story of their lives. Let’s not make a present to each other of our pasts. ‘So you have already asked’ I said, or queried. And he said, or stated, ‘It is signal of the entrance of responsibilities.’\footnote{152}{Ibid. 284.}

But their past and present responsibilities burst into their relationship and weigh like stones. It cannot be an adolescent, pure and innocent love, even if the emotions they feel enable us to think so. Their past is part of them:

I saw a man bereft of splendour, a middle-aged man, slightly stopped because of some invisible burden he carried, his tarnished locks adrift, a patient, quizzical face. I could see it all there, saw life the way it drags down, pulls low, weighs, tugs, erodes; and I was trying to make myself see, there, where he was, himself as the young man: for there are times I don’t know if it is this one I am seeing, my sudden companion who is battered and beaten like I am, or the young man I can see all the time more and more clearly: a light-stepping charmer, with a grave smile and blue eyes between fringes of sandy lashes.\footnote{153}{Ibid. 285.}
Jane, at fifty-three, has to manage tears and strong and contrasting emotions. One important event for the meaning of Lessing’s idea of getting old, is when Jane decides to give Richard her photo of when she was a girl. She decides to browse through old photos, finding only one when she was about twenty-three years old. She continues with an analytical view of the small photo: she was a very pretty young girl, wearing a “charming little flowered dress”, she sees herself full of freshness and vitality. Seeing herself much younger, she discovers she feels the “real” herself is she when she was a girl: “I never say to myself, as I know women of my age and old women do, ‘How beautiful I was,’ as I put out pictures of a younger self (the real one) on a shelf or table.”\(^{154}\) Moreover, she observes the changes that have occurred during the time:

> oh, that’s a very different thing and I have to face it; for the girl in the little photograph is so strong and assault on the senses, all dew and juices, that I can hardly believe I was unaware of it. And now, here is this solid woman with no light in her, no grace. It is all achieved, done for.\(^{155}\)

The passing time is again a burden, the young pretty girl and the middle-aged woman do not appear to be the same person. Who is the real one? When Jane gives Richard her photo, sadness, anger and bitterness emerge. Richard is really wounded, well beyond every expectation: he looks tired, drained, there was wildness, bitterness, “real pain in his face”. It seems even he wants to punish her for not looking at fifty when she was at twenty, she says. Would it be better if they had known each other when they were younger? Is their appearance so important? Is

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\(^{154}\) *Ibid.* 293.

\(^{155}\) *Ibid.*
the photo, like Freddie, another ghost in their life? Physical decline seems to have an extremely important meaning; their love remains platonic, they are not able to overcome the changes in themselves and in their bodies. The dinner at Jane's reveals a complete disaster: she is used to seeing Richard as “an electric extension of herself”\textsuperscript{156} but in this case they seem strangers. They are embarrassed, she wishes she were dead, they consider the attempt to have physical intimacy a “dreadful mistake”\textsuperscript{157}, and they do not know why. The fight against a common enemy, may it be themselves? Age? Both? “We were stricken, shocked, shaken, but it would not have been possible for us to go into our bedroom, take our clothes off and make love.”\textsuperscript{158} And of course she dreams Freddie, longing for him like she never did when he was alive. It is clear they love each other and they desire each other, but it is likewise clear how the ghost of their past blocks them. In Jane’s life, sex changes value. It has always had been extremely important in her life as a girl, when she was married with Richard it was the only thing they were able to do well. Now it becomes a burden. When (in Richard and Jane’s relationship), Matthew, Richard’s son, intervenes in their relationship, Jane remains bewitched. She sees in him a younger Richard: “Wow! Blam! I fell in love. I am poisoned. I am possessed by a sickly sweet fever. I am obsessed.”\textsuperscript{159} The arrogant son tries to seduce her and she capitulates. She finds out she would let herself carried away by emotions, feelings: “No one under the age of forty could understand this one! If not older...” \textsuperscript{160} she says. She wakes up in the middle of the night: “I rage and burn, and wake in the night, pulled up into the sitting position, my arms out, my breasts burning, for him. Who? Him.

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid. 314.
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid. 315.
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid. 318.
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid. 469.
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid. 470.
Who?” Past and present blur. And it is for this reason that Jane contemplates the young women surrounding her from a different perspective: “I am sick with concern over Kate, and helpless. When I think of Jill, it is as if I want to put my arms around her, shielding her from – herself. I admire and rely on Hanna.” Richard moves from England, giving Kathleen to the care of Jane. Jane comes back to her true life in London, the city that according to Lessing, seems to be a stage, with its views and streets and the unaware pedestrians as background actors of the comedy of life.

To recognize the *puer* but also the *senex* inside every one of us is part of a process that we all have to face at a certain of our life. Another important concept in aging studies is the one developed by Maria Zambrano: she refers to *desnacimento*, the passage of birth and rebirth in one’s own existence to better fit the human condition of change. In Jane it seems that there has been this “rebirth” and it seems she will start a new life, but conventions, personal fears, self-criticism do not allow the enjoyment of this rebirth.

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Margaret Gullette extensively explains the birth of a new literary genre, the “midlife progress novel” of which Doris Lessing has become one of the major representative. Since the mid-seventies, Gullette argues, readers can identify with the representation of midlife female protagonists. In my opinion The Diaries can perfectly fit the elements that characterize this new genre. Lessing distances from the stereotype of literature that sees women declining after their middle-age. She pictures different types of women dealing with their middle and older age and readers can enrich their life by reading it, they can shape their identities and see the different possibilities that aging involves: “Midlife progress novels” states Gullette “permit readers to compare the values and options of heroines, stabilizing, expanding, altering, and/or overthrowing their own sense of self; developing their dreams, ambitions, decision; revising and renaming their very feelings; finally, narrativizing their life-course.”165 In this sense Lessing through The Diaries helps readers to confront with new and different ways of aging. In the midlife progress novels, the heroines have strength and power they haven’t known to have; although not younger, they can inspire love naturally. The memories are important since they can explain their current identities: “By this means, we have depictions of the social history of women in England and America, as life was lived by women who moved through the decades during the post-war era, particularly since the late sixties.”166 When characters look back, youth and young adulthood become a “dangerous age”:

166 Ibid. 18.
bad marriages, abuses, economic difficulties, inadequacy and it turns out that being young was not that fun. Of course in *The Diaries* Maudie and Jane's past can fit the description, but in my opinion, Lessing wants to highlight the fact that there is not a better age because each age implies problems, either emotional or psychological or physical. Jane did not have the difficulties that Maudie had but she too was in a marriage without love and in this kind of mid-life progress novel both women re-emerge.

Moreover, the progress novel doesn't emphasize the idea of the loss of beauty in aging. Often characters' loss of beauty and physical change occupy a small place in the protagonists' life. Gullette takes as an example Jane Somers in *If The Old Could*, who, while looking at herself in the mirror she still sees a rather good-looking woman. The episode already mentioned of the old photo represents just a momentary shock. This is true, attractiveness has nothing to do with age, it's mostly the energy, the love we share. Jane as well seduces Richard but in my opinion the burden of passing time, old ghosts and the new physical appearance weight a lot in Jane's life and in the relationship with her new love. What is sure is that aging looks not so bad an experience as in the past stereotyped characters, and Lessing offers us a wide array of aging possibilities.
8. Doris Lessing and the Reifungsroman

Analysing Lessing’s fiction, Barbara Waxman traces the contours of a new genre, the Reifungsroman. The so called Bildungsroman narrates the growth of a young hero who acquires an adult status. During the twentieth century, though, middle-aged and young old readers appear, asserts Waxman. Many of these readers are women, for whom aging implies changing and rearrangements in their lives. Writers therefore, aging themselves, begin to depict older heroes, and heroines in particular, struggling with psychological and physical transformations, rearrangements after loss, proximity to death and illness. Characters can grow up even after middle-age, they can mature and acquire a new form of self-confidence, self-respect and a new courage and awareness to face life and change. Writing on strong middle-aged and older women, Lessing destroys, according to Waxman, the old stereotype that sees a woman done when she is forty. Lessing provides a real social service: readers can be inspired by characters and try to emulate them. In the Reifungsroman middle-aged women are more free than younger women because they no longer worry to impose self-assured image to the world. In The Diaries, Jane Somers perfectly meets the process of ripening and maturing of the Reifungsroman: “At the beginning we detest her, then “we rebound next into liking her for the small overtures she begins to make toward Maudie, and finally we wind up applauding her for the increasingly generous and courageous kindness that she freely performs for Maudie.” Jane Somers at the beginning is a self-centered, childish career woman, incapable of being emotionally close to her husband and her mother even when they fight against

cancer and death. This represents a “false start”, typical also of the Bildungsroman, and later, meeting Maudie she undertakes her true journey toward a complete Reifung. Suddenly on the threshold of fifty she realises she wants to become a different person. The diary reports her relationship with Maudie, first the disgust, later the love that develops between the two and the interest she feels for her stories and her past. Lessing shows a perfect Reifungsroman, giving a character the chance to reborn in middle age, more emotionally close to others, and freeing herself from the fear of death and living her future senescence with “courage, dignity, hope and joy.”

168 Ibid. 333.
9. An Old Woman and Her Cat: an Example of a Social Homicide

Doris Lessing’s second collection of stories is The Temptation of Jack Orkney, first published in 1978. Compared to her first book of stories, This Was the Old Chief’s County, which comes from her African experience, these new stories are set in metropolitan backdrops and represent Lessing’s provoking sight on our Western societies. An Old Woman and Her Cat is no exception; this story is of great interest to analyse the conditions of old people who are poor and have nobody to look after them. While Maudie in The Diary of a Good Neighbour is alone and isolated but finds in Jane support and friendship which in the end will make Maudie’s last years acceptable, in this story the focus is surely on Hetty, the wild mad lady who refuses everything and everybody, yet the main point is the spotlight on the role of authorities’ social help and the complete disinterest of the family.

In the story, Hetty Pennefather is a wild woman of seventy who dies of cold and malnutrition in the modern and civilized London of the seventies. Hetty raised four children, she had a husband who died middle-aged of pneumonia “in a bad winter soon after the Second World War.” The family has always been poor, they lived in a Council block of flats, “standing up grim, grey and hideous” in an awkward situation, yet, the Pennefathers were respectable people, they paid their rent and they had no debts. Lessing focuses on the last years of Hetty, who dies alone in a totally indifferent world. It is a story of abandon and solitude, but also it is the story of an old woman who decides not to bend to what society expects from her.

170 Ibid. 147.
Lessing describes Hetty as an ordinary person, no “evidence then of Hetty’s future
dislocation from the normal”\textsuperscript{171} The only eccentricity she has is the passion for
watching the trains come and go at railway stations, daydreaming “foreign”\textsuperscript{172}
people from Ireland, Scotland or Northern England; this harmless excitement is seen
as strange by society and maybe a connection to the gipsy-blood that flows in her
veins. Fred, her husband, loved his wife for being slightly different from the rest of
the women, but her children were afraid and ashamed and they: “were fearful that
her gipsy blood might show itself in worse ways than hunting railway stations.”\textsuperscript{173}
When their father dies and they get married, the children abandon their mother,
leaving her completely alone in a small flat the Council chooses for her in the same
building. Hetty's story of gradual isolation and marginalization begins, so this is how
a once handsome and honest woman will become an old mad tramp. Hetty is not
respectable like her children, with “homes and good jobs and cars.”\textsuperscript{174} and this is
what also society thinks about her. Social rules decide what can be accepted and
what it is not. She had a job as saleswoman in the local store, but she “found it
boring.”\textsuperscript{175} She went through what Lessing calls “traditional occupations for middle-
aged women living alone”\textsuperscript{176} that is: drinking, gambling or looking for another
husband. Hetty tries all these, and all seems to be better accepted by society than
her true passion, that is buying and selling second-hand clothes in the lively streets
of London. Since she does not have a shop, she begs old clothes from householders
and sells the clothes to stalls or second-hand shops. She loves “the gossiping, the

\textsuperscript{171} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{172} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid. 148.
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid. 147.
\textsuperscript{175} Ibid. 148.
\textsuperscript{176} Ibid.
bargaining, the wheedling”\textsuperscript{177}. She gradually loses her friends; for her neighbours she was already strange, but this occupation is “the thin edge of the wedge” since begging was no decent. Hetty prefers “the lively streets” the bargain; she is attracted by this activity because she can get “something for nothing by the use of her plaintive inventive tongue, her still flashing handsome eyes”\textsuperscript{178} Her house is full of clothes, dresses, furs, laces and she can fancy on it. Neighbours say she “has gone queer” despite the fact there are other traders in the streets, but there is something in the way Hetty behaves that slowly distances people. It is her perambulator full of second-hand things, it is her shouting in the streets, it is her begging. Yet, Hetty does not care about that, she lives the way she likes, with a little kitten she has saved and that will become her best friend.

When the Council decides to change the rules on keeping animals in the building she decides to leave. She goes through a “time of bad luck” \textsuperscript{179} Lessing says. She has flu so she cannot go back in the streets to sell. She cannot get her pension and she runs into debts. Moreover, she has gone more and more savage, since she is forced to eat the pigeons that Tibby, her trusty cat, brings to her. “Filthy old thing” Hetty talks to her cat “Eating that dirty old pigeon. What do you think you are, a wild cat? Decent cats don’t eat dirty birds. Only those old gipsies eat wild birds.”\textsuperscript{180} So, afraid that authorities can take her reliable Tibby away and “frightened to go near them to re-establish pension rights and her identity, because of the arrears of rent she had

\textsuperscript{177} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{178} Ibid. 151.
\textsuperscript{179} Ibid. 150.
\textsuperscript{180} Ibid.
left behind”\textsuperscript{181} she decides to give up her daily life and the place where she has lived for thirty years and she settles in a single room, in a building doomed to be done up:

She started training again, and the little room was soon spread, like her last, with a rainbow of colours and textures and lace and sequins. She cooked on a single gas ring and washed in the sink. There was no hot water unless it was boiled in saucepans. \textsuperscript{182}

Hetty and her cat live five years in this old building condemned to the demolition, despite the dismal condition she is forced to live. There are other old ladies living there and for Hetty the time she has here, with her cat, is great, she can make good deals on the streets and become friends with the other old women. The reader perceives that this old, mad lady is a generous woman, more than the society where she lives; she cares for her cat as no one has ever done for her; she sells her television set for a trip to the coast, paying also for her friend, an old woman living upstairs. Hetty's home looks like Maudie's: they both live in a crumbling basement; the officer who comes to visit her and force her to move is disgusted by the condition of dirt he finds, he:

sitting on the very edge of the only chair in the crammed room, because it was greasy and he suspected it had fleas or worse in it, breathed as lightly as he could because of the appalling stink: there was a lavatory in the house, but it had been out of order for three days, and it was just the other side of a thin wall. The whole house smelled.\textsuperscript{183}

\textsuperscript{181} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{182} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{183} Ibid. 153.
Yet, this house represents a safe place for her and her cat and again the authorities decide what is better for these old ladies and the end of the little poor community where Hetty lives arrives: a notice comes to tell them they have to move since many middle-class people come to live in the street and this old ugly building will be demolished. Usually, Lessing says, the shortage of housing force poor people to care for themselves, but in this case, since there is a municipal election, officers come and ask these old women to go to live in a Home. It seems as if there is no space for old and poor people in a society where appearance is more valued than human life. The five old women have therefore no other alternatives than to accept and leave their homes and the lively streets of London they are used to. They are deported, they fall in a “saddened and sullen state.” and they are forced to die in the North of London. Hetty, though, protects her freedom:

And while perhaps she was an urban soul even than the others, since she had walked up and down so many streets with her old perambulator loaded with rags and laces, and since she knew so intimately London’s texture and taste, she minded least of all the idea of a new home ‘among green fields’

She decides, again, not to conform to what society wants for her and she rebels, hiding herself when the van comes to take the old ladies to die in a Home. She knows that “houses have been emptied for redevelopment they may stay empty for months, even years.” So, she is determined to continue to live there until the arrival of the builders. She prefers to live like “her gipsy forbears”, without a proper house and a proper bed to follow her freedom and to keep the love of her cat. It begins therefore

184 Ibid. 152.
185 Ibid.
her journey towards death, suffering from the cold of winter and wandering like a vagabond. When the builders come, she moves to a big empty old house, “among the homes and gardens of Hampstead, where live so many of the rich, the intelligent and the famous.” Hetty finds a place protected from the rain and the snow in the tumbledown home, afraid of being discovered by the men who: “between the hours of two and five in the morning, when the real citizens are asleep, who should not be disturbed by such unpleasantness as the corpses of the poor, make the rounds of all the empty, rotting houses they know to collect the dead.” Among the dead, covered by newspapers and rags, there will be also Hetty. From the handsome and attractive woman she was, a: “tall woman with a lot of glossy black hair, a skin that tanned easily, and dark strong eyes” she turns into “a tall gaunt woman, with a white face that had flaming red patches on it, and blue compressed lips, and restless black eyes”. She turns into a tramp and to have a place in society, she is forced to say: “Give me your old clothes, darling, give me your old pretties, give Hetty something, poor Hetty’s hungry.” It is a social fault, “decent” people allow the old and poor people to become invisible and let them die miserably. Society, indeed, tries to keep them out of sight, and get rid of them.

Tibby, the cat, seems to be the only creature in the world that loves and helps Hetty. Although they both have no interest in cleanliness and social decency, they show more empathy and humanity than the society where they live. Cats represent an important aspect in Lessing’s works. She is fascinated by cats and wrote many stories about them, including The Old Age of El Magnifico, describing the old age of

186 Ibid. 155.
187 Ibid. 158.
188 Ibid. 159.
her beloved cat who suffered until the end with great dignity. Lessing was very fond of him and her other cats. In my opinion the choice of a cat for Maudie and Hetty is because they share same characteristics: independence and fierce individualism. Cats can perceive affinity with some human beings and the cat in the story is the only creature who cares for her. When she and Tibby go to live in that abandoned room with a window opened to a desolate and ruined garden, Tibby was “happy in a hunting ground that was a mile around this house where his mistress was so splendidly living.” 189 When she feels lonely he “purred and nestled when she grabbed him to her bosom at those times she suffered loneliness.” 190 The cat and the old woman become so close that often they assume the same appearance and attitude towards authorities; the cat soon becomes a “scarred warrior with fleas, a torn ear, and a ragged look to him.” Far from being a pedigree cat, yet, he is “independent, and often caught himself pigeons when he could no longer stand the tinned cat food” 191. Like Hetty, he despises social rules, and the moment the housing officer comes to visit them, Hetty and Tibby “sat stiffly still, bright-eyed with suspicion, hostile, watching the well-brushed tidy young man from the Council.” 192 After Hetty dies, shivering from the cold and dietary deficiency, Tibby, this old amiable cat who just wanted to have a family and “be liked by the human race” 193, begins his wild life in a wild community of cats into a churchyard. When the catcher of stray animals captures him and “put him to sleep” 194 the man recognises a soldier, “a real tough one, a real tramp.” 195

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189 Ibid. 151. 190 Ibid. 149. 191 Ibid. 192 Ibid. 153. 193 Ibid. 162. 194 Ibid. 195 Ibid.
The Home in the story is described as a place where the old lose their identities and their personality but Hetty is fierce like Maudie and she refuses to bend to what society wants for her. The idea of institutions as prisons or reformatory is present also in *The Diary of a Good Neighbour*: Maudie refuses many times to be imprisoned and treated like a child or as a human condemned to death, even when she knows to be deeply ill and in need. Lessing quite openly criticizes institutions for how they behave towards old people; they don’t understand or don’t care about their personality. I would say that in Italy the situation is not that bad; old people’s homes are decent places, with professional staff and if old people cannot afford the costs of living, social security and family will intervene.

To represent authorities, the officer who forces Hetty to live in a Home is presented as a “well-brushed tidy young man” in contrast with the appearance of dinginess of Hetty and her cat. Still, appearance in Lessing doesn’t count, since Hetty and Tibby love and respect each other and show signs of generosity, compassion and understanding that the society where they live does not have. The man is used to the situation of these old, and abandoned women who live in misery, he therefore:

could not help feeling that this wreck of a human being could count herself lucky to get a place in his Home, even it was – and he knew and deplored the fact – an institution in which the old were treated like naughty and dim-witted children until they had the good fortune to die.\textsuperscript{196}

In addition, the authorities in the story do not consider that she has stopped receiving her pension and no one shows any interest in it. Even though the condition of pensions in general in Italy, for a great number of people, is complex, we can say that there is support and interest in old people’s condition. If an old person is no longer able to live alone in a house or becomes physically or mentally disabled, and to be hosted in a Home is an unavoidable necessity, the problem of money is not fundamental because the family members have to intervene and if they cannot, the State will support the costs. Hetty's invisible situation of abandon and social marginalization reminds one of Antonio Gramiccia’s words: social homicide. Lessing gives voices, emotions and real settings to what people like Gramiccia strongly affirm; many old people cannot often afford the costs of life, they worsen their physical condition and end up to be isolated by the rest of society. Institutions rather than helping Hetty and understand her personality and her situation, hunt her and force her to leave the homes she has, and a safe place. She is swallowed up in the indifference and incapability of institutions and society that should help her. When Hetty approaches death, she thinks about her life, she has been considered strange by her children and society but she seems to be the only reasonable person, for instance:

it seemed to her an impossible and even a silly thing that her life, or rather, her death, could depend on something so arbitrary as builders starting work on a house in January rather than in April, she could not believe it: the fact would not stay in her mind.197

And in a harsh of rage, Hetty shouts:

197 Ibid. 160.
I've been a good mother to you, she shouted to them before invisible witnesses – former neighbours, welfare workers, a doctor. 'I never let you want for anything, never! When you were little you always had the best of everything! You can ask anybody, go on, ask them then!' 198

It is understandable the children can be busy and worried about the new family they have formed; Lessing, though, highlights that they not only ignore their mother but they are also ashamed of her and completely indifferent to her fate and death.

198 Ibid. 161.
The Grandmothers: Sexuality in Middle Age

*The Grandmothers* is a collection of short stories published in 2003. In the story I will explore, titled precisely, *The Grandmothers*, the theme of sexuality is fundamental throughout it. However, here there are shades of sexuality unexplored before. In fact, the theme of a mature man who falls in love with a young girl is not a novelty but the opposite, that is a mature woman in love with a young boy has not been explored before in the terms present in the story. The fact that a mature woman feels sexual impulses and attraction for a young handsome man is natural, even though not accepted by society. Yet, in this story the situation is far more complex and intricate. Two mothers, Rozeanne and Liliane, called Roz and Lil, friends for a lifetime, get married, have children and when the two sons, Tom and Ian are adolescents, each woman falls in love with her friend’s son.

The story opens with a beautiful and wild landscape, the ocean lashes savagely against a cliff and on the top of the promontory, through a little path surrounded by trees and shadows and gardens, a relaxing café, where a family is having a break:

one afternoon six people were making the gentle ascent, four adults and two little girls, whose shrieks of pleasure echoed the noises of the gulls. Two handsome men came first, not young, but only malice could call them middle-aged. One limped. Then two as handsome women of about sixty – but no one would dream of calling the elderly. 199

The family, the sons, their two little girls and their grandmothers, seems the image of happiness and beauty. This idyllic scene ends when Mary, Tom's wife, arrives and blinded by fury and grief, takes away the little girls. This first scene arises curiosity and the reader wants to go on to understand why this idyllic scene is wasted by an angry Mary who leaves the scene uttering “Evil” addressed to her mother in law. Doris Lessing begins a long excursus on the past of this apparently beautiful family. Roz and Lil, the grandmothers, have been close friends since their childhood:

Two little girls arrived at the big school on the same day, at the same hour, took each other's measure, and became best friends. (...) They were doughty, quick with repartee, and soon lived down the bullying that greeted new girls; they stood up for each other, fought their own and each other's battles. 'Like sisters,' people said, and even, 'Like twins.'

Lessing briefly describes their adolescence and the years at university: Lil, "the athlete, excelling in every sport, and Roz in the school plays, with big parts, making people laugh, extrovert, large, vital, loud: they complemented each other as once they had been as like as two peas: 'You can hardly tell them apart.'"

Lil becomes a swimming champion, Roz begins to perform at theatre and directs plays. They get married and they have two beautiful little boys, Thomas, Roz's son and Ian, Lil's son:

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200 Ibid. 4.
201 Ibid. 11.
202 Ibid. 12.
Two little boys, fair-headed and delightful, and people said they could be brothers. In fact Tom was a solid little boy easily embarrassed by the exuberances of his mother, and Ian was fine drawn and nervy and 'difficult' in ways Tom never was.203

The mothers and the boys are part of an extended family, they live close, go on holiday together and spend their time on the beach or having lunch dinner together until Roz’s husband decides to divorce and Lil’s husband dies in a car accident:

two women in their mid-thirties, and two lads who were not far off being young men. The houses, so close, opposite each other, seemed to belong to both families. ‘We are an extended family,’ cried Roz, not one to let a situation remain undefined. The beauty of young boys – now, that isn’t an easy thing.204

The situation changes completely when both Roz and Lil remain alone with their children; their closeness, even more intense, almost morbid, creates a separate world where only the four of them exist. In the meantime, the boys grow up and begin to look like young beautiful men and when they are about sixteen or seventeen they are just like young gods: “There is a time, a short time, at about sixteen or seventeen, when they have a poetic aura. They are like young gods. Their families and their friends may be awed by these beings who seem visitors from a finer air.”205

Roz and Lil look at their photos album when they were adolescent and see how beautiful they were, but although they cannot find the same fascinating aura of their

203 Ibid. 13.
204 Ibid. 20.
205 Ibid.
sons, they are conscious they are still beautiful and sexually attractive at mid-thirties, as Tom and Ian will confirm. Lessing takes the reader step by step, to what seems unavoidable. The starting point is when Lil's son, Ian, is suffering for his father's death. Roz will comfort him and their closeness will become a sexual encounter, as if it were natural. This causes Tom's anger and he decides to do the same with Lil. Even if, at first, Tom reacts against with anger, it seems more jealousy towards his mother, than disgust for what happened. However, his act of revenge, which revenge is not, starts a *ménage à quatre* with surprising consequences. It seems in a very short time they accept the situation just as normal and symbolically Roz cuts an apple in four and shares it with the three others. The apple is the apple of sin but there is no guilt at all. Yet they are aware that society cannot accept their behaviour. That is why they begin to lock the door of their houses for the first time in their life to isolate themselves from the rest of the world. When the neighbour Saul, whose plan is to marry Lil, knocks at the door, they understand how important it is to preserve appearances: “Off he went and Roz rang Lil, and said, 'We've got to be seen about a bit more. Saul dropped in.' ‘I suppose so’ said Lil, her voice heavy, and low. ‘We should be seen at the beach, all four of us.’”206

Still, the women decide to abandon themselves to desire and seduce the boys they have known since they were born, remaining at the same time very careful not to show these relationships to society. The hidden spaces where they meet, their homes, create a morbid and incestuous atmosphere. Their houses turn into “fortresses against delirious and desirous young women. But inside these houses,

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open to sun, sea breezes, the sound of sea, were rooms where no one went but Ian and Roz, Tom and Lil.”

Something changes when the boys grow up and when they reach the suitable age for marriage they find a girl and get married. They do it because of social conventions, to save appearances but clearly the bond with the older women is indestructible. Roz and Lil, when their sons have children, give their homes to their sons and the women go to live together in a big house on the beach. They decide, thus, to become “respectful ladies, yes, your disreputable mothers are going to become pillars of virtue. We shall be perfect mothers – in – law, and then we shall become wonderful grandmothers to your children” but this is a temporary pause, since when the four remain alone together in Roz’ former house “the sound of the waves said that nothing had changed, nothing...” The sound of the waves remind them of the power of natural impulses.

It is the story of two women, mothers, and as the title suggests, grandmothers who break taboos and fall in love with their respective sons. Regarding sexuality, in fact, there is a gap between the role of mother, especially when they become older and women’s sexual desire, a “problematic popular engagement with the intersections of motherhood, femininity and sexuality” states May Friedman in her essay. According to her, from a social point of view, women are expected to be sexual-free creatures, who love platonically others and put their children first. Yet,

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207 Ibid. 32.
208 Ibid. 45.
209 Ibid. 51.
the archetype of the older woman, MILF nowadays, or femmefatale, involved in sexual relationships with younger boys is not new in literature, from The marriage of Figaro by Mozart to The Graduate. Lessing expands the archetype and let two mothers have sexual relationships with their respective sons. Moreover, Lessing underlines their age titling the short story The Grandmothers. When we first meet them, the women are described with a strong accent on their sexual appeal; they have “brown and silky legs ending in negligent sandals, their competent hands temporarily at rest.”

or again: “The grandmothers, Roz and Lil, in their bikinis” and for instance, Ian thinks about Lil sexually:

He was thinking of Lil’s body that always smelled of salt, of the sea. She was like a sea creature, in and out, the sea water often drying on her and then she was in again. He bit his forearms, remembering that his earliest memory was of licking salt off Lil’s shoulders. It was a game they played, the little boy and his mother’s oldest friend.

Tom’s father, Harold, disappears from the text at the beginning, but has a good relationship with his son and tries to warn him about the “femmes fatale”. Roz and Lil are wealthy, successful and beautiful women, even when they age. They have always had an easy life:

Not many people in the world have lives so pleasant, unproblematical, unreflecting: no one on these blessed coasts lay awake and wept for their sins, or for money, let alone for food. What a good-looking lot, smooth and shiny with sun, with sport, with good food. Few people anywhere know of coasts like these, except perhaps for brief holidays, or in travellers’ tales

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211 Doris Lessing, The Grandmothers, p. 4.
212 Ibid. 53.
213 Ibid. 41.
214 Ibid. 37.
like dreams. Sun and sea, sea and sun, and always the sound of waves on beaches.²¹⁵

I think this passage can be considered fundamental: they don’t want to renounce anything, and when they remain without their husbands, they want it more. Aging can be a difficult experience, involving the loss of beauty and physical decay. For Roz and Lil, though, it seems easy. They try to stop time, and they try what for them is the extreme happiness: the body of a young man and the personality of a best friend:

Lil said to Roz she was so happy it made her afraid. ‘How could anything possibly be as wonderful? she whispered, afraid to be overheard – by whom? No one was anywhere near.
What she meant was, and Roz knew she did, that such an intense happiness must have its punishment. Roz grew loud and jokey and said that this was a love that dare not speak its name.²¹⁶

They know they are aging, but they want to “grow old gracefully” and “fight every inch of the way”²¹⁷ The boys do not allow them to get old; in an episode, Roz is looking at her down loose aging skin over her forearms and Ian suddenly says:

No, don’t, don’t, don’t even think of it. I won’t let you grow old.’ ‘Well’ said Roz, ‘it is going to happen, for all that.’ ‘No’ And he wept, just as he had done when he was still the frightened abandoned boy in her arms. ‘No, Roz, please, I love you.’ ‘So I mustn’t get old, is that it, Ian?
I’m not allowed to? Mad, the boy is mad,’ said Roz (...) But perhaps lunacy is one of the great invisible wheels that keep our world turning.²¹⁸

They look like two mermaids, who put a spell on their young boys and the atmosphere Lessing creates is dreamlike: if Tom and Ian are two ancient gods, Roz

²¹⁵ Ibid. 11.
²¹⁶ Ibid. 32.
²¹⁷ Ibid. 36.
²¹⁸ Ibid. 37.
and Lil are divine creatures who seem not to age:

‘What did you think? We'd all just go on, indefinitely, then you and Tom, two middle-aged men, bachelors, and Roz and me, old and then you two, old, without families, and Roz and I, old, old, old... we're getting on for old now, can't you see? ’No, you aren't,’ said her son calmly. 'Not at all. You and Roz knock the girls for six any time.’

The relationship looks like a youth elixir and the grandmothers have power on their sons. Tom and Ian’s wives will recognise it: “‘They've got them, don't you see?” says Mary talking to Hannah. When the relationship stops for a moment, the boys feel the loss, the emptiness, and the anger for what the mothers have decided. The men cannot have a life of their own, the two women forbid their sons to grow and steel them their youth:

The young couple with their children: interesting that, the turning point, the moment of change. For a time, seen, commented on, a focus, the young parents, by definition sexual beings, and tagging alone or running around them the pretty children. ‘Oh, what a lovely little boy, what a pretty little girl, What's your name? – what a nice name?’ – and then all at once, or so it seems, the parents, no longer quite so young, seem to lose height little, even to shrink, they certainly lose colour and lustre. ‘How old did you say he is, she is...’ The young ones are shooting up and glamour has shifted its quarters. Eyes following them, rather than the parents. They do grow up so fast these days, don't they?’

Falling in love, Lessing says in an interview, is a strong, destructive and violent force. She talks about physical desire, the need to “submerge yourself in someone

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219 Ibid. 50.
220 Ibid. 55.
221 Ibid. 20.
else"222 that has nothing to do with reproduction or getting married. “I talk to older people” she continues “and when they’re being truthful, they’ll confess that they fall in love at the most inappropriate ages, and often with people much younger than themselves. (...) Of course, a lot of them just keep quiet because older people aren’t supposed to fall in love.”223 Lessing writes about these women and the uncontrolled passion for younger men, described as an illness. Roz and Lil are fascinated by the fresh and young, carnal beauty of their sons and remain fascinated also when the boys become older: “The women stared at these two young heroes, their sons, their lovers, these beautiful young men, their bodies glistening with sea water and sun oil, like wrestlers from an older time.”224 Their feelings are far from being perceived as maternal. The pleasure is carnal and the emotions are strong and violent:

Ian looked long and intently at Roz and said, ‘take your glasses off.’ Roz did so. He said, ‘I don’t like it when you hide your eyes from me.’ She snapped the glasses back on and said, ‘Stop it, Ian. You’ve got to stop this. It’s simply not on.’ He was reaching forward to lift off her glasses. She slapped down his hand. Lil had seen, from where she stood to her waist in the sea. The intensity of it, you could say, even the ferocity...225

Older people are not supposed to fall in love, Lessing remarks; if they fall in love with younger people society can hardly accept it. I think for Lessing there is nothing sinful in the relationship with younger people, even if society condemns it. In this case, however, two mothers fall in love with their sons, breaking all kinds of social and moral standards. If we decide not to condemn the relationship according to

223 Ibid.
225 Ibid. 53.
moral standards, it is unavoidable to ask how such passionate relationship can forge and condition the mind of teenagers and their future life. Lessing does not seem worried about the reactions of readers, of people for her breaking taboos; she describes a reality that exists even though few people are ready to accept or admit it.
11. Lessing’s Style

Doris Lessing gives the reader a realistic picture of aging and old age. In *The Diaries of a Good Neighbours* but also in the stories *An Old Woman and Her Cat* and *The Grandmothers*, the writing is rich in details; in *The Diaries* for instance, the reader faces the reality of the ordinary life of the ninety-year-old Maudie. Setting, and characters are described in crude details. To me, next to this realism, there is symbolism too.

In *The Diaries*, there is a first person narrator, Jane Somers who, keeping a diary, describes her own experience of aging and the old age of Maudie Fowler whom she helps and supports. The realistic view of everyday life, of ordinary and pragmatic elements becomes even more intense through a sort of interior monologue Jane offers: this will render the picture of aging women in a more powerful realism, since what Jane describes is not imagined but daily experienced and written down.

The first pages the reader approaches explain briefly the cancer of Jane's husband, Freddie, so illness and physical decay are associated from the beginning with aging: “He looked dreadful. Yellow. Sharp bones under yellow skin. Like a bowling fowl.”226 Jane’s mother as well: “almost a skeleton with yellow skin over it.”227 She “went to pieces so fast. Went to pieces – that was it. I hate physical awfulness.”228 These crude descriptions are important because they clearly show

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227 Ibid. 17.
228 Ibid. 15.
Lessing and Jane's attitude to illness, decay and death.

Maudie's house is described in all its details; the kitchen for instance, has:

an old gas cooker, greasy and black, an old white china sink, cracked and yellow with grease, a cold-water tap wrapped around with old rags and dripping steadily. A rather nice old wood table that had crockery standing on it, all “washed” but grimy. The walls stained and damp. The whole place smelled, it smelted awful... She did not look at me while she set down bread, biscuits and cat food. The clean lively colours of the grocery packages and the tins in that awful place.\textsuperscript{229}

The living room contains:

an old black iron stove that was showing a gleam of flames. Two unbelievably ancient ragged armchairs. Another nice old wood table with newspaper spread over it. A divan heaped with clothes and bundles. And a yellow cat on the floor. It was all so dirty and dingy and grim and awful.\textsuperscript{230}

Maudie's objects are all “old”, “cracked”, “stained” or “frayed”\textsuperscript{231}. The long list of nouns and adjectives enhance the decline of the whole. Moreover, there are specific passages where Lessing’s realism is reinforced by the use of the sensory language, lines in which sight, smell, hearing and touch are invasive and wrap up both Jane and the reader in a claustrophobic atmosphere. In describing Maudie's ordinary day, Lessing not only gives a realistic description of old age and physical weakness, but she involves the reader in the scene through the powerful use of the sensory language: “Almost she sinks back into the black bed, black sleep, but her bowels are moving and she smells a bad smell. Oh no, no, no, she whimpers, sitting there in the

\textsuperscript{229} \textit{Ibid.} 21.  
\textsuperscript{230} \textit{Ibid.} 22.  
\textsuperscript{231} \textit{Ibid.} 23.
dark, No, dreadful, for she believes she might have shat in the bed.”232 You can see the darkness of her room, her “black bed”, “black sleep”, Maudie needs a torch to light up her room but the batteries run low. Outside there is light but since it is summer “it could be the middle of the night still”233 and this gives the reader a sort of disorientation; you can smell a “bad smell” because she might have “shat” in the bed. Lessing insists:

she can’t breathe, can’t move. (...) The weight shifts. Oh, it’s the cat, it’s my pretty, she thinks, and heaves. The weight lifts, and she hears a thud as the cat arrives on the floor. Petty? She asks, for she is not sure, it is so dark and her limbs are so stiff. She hears the cat moving about and she knows she is alive. And warm... and in bed... Oh, oh, she says aloud, I must get to the toilet or I’ll wet the bed again. Panic! Have I wet the bed already? Her hand explores the bed. She mutters, Dreadful, dreadful, dreadful, dreadful234

You can touch the stiffness of her limbs, the warm of the bed, the numbness and the wetness of her bottom; you can hear the thud of Maudie’s cat, the turmoil of her bowels and her muttering “dreadful, dreadful, dreadful, dreadful”: “But there is a hot wet thrusting in her bowels and she gets herself to the commode, just in time. She sits there, rocking herself, keening. Dreadful, dreadful (...) Her bottom is numb.235 When Sister Georgie, talking to Jane, explains what it was like when her mother was ill: “It was all awful, Jane. Do you understand? It was dreadful”236. “Awful”, “Dreadful”, “Terrible”, Lessing’s repetitions throughout the whole novel would not be so effective if not joined to the visual she gives and the senses she involves. The repetitions have a hammering effect which, added with the images the reader stores,
complete the picture of desolation. When Maudie is hospitalised and in proximity to death, she asks Jane continuously: “Lift me up, lift me up!”\textsuperscript{237}, this enhances the idea that Maudie does not want to die and feels the injustice of existence.

In contrast, the reader discovers the glossy life of Jane; when she was young; she used to indulge in long foamy baths; she was obsessed with cleanness, order and precision. Joyce and Jane’s clothes are elegant and “cost the earth”\textsuperscript{238}. Jane wears silk shirts and silk stockings, not nylon\textsuperscript{239}. She wears cashmere sweater, she looks for “special buttons in markets, and handmade lace”\textsuperscript{240}, her hair is “perfect, a silvery gold”. When Jane first meets Maudie, the old woman is buying painkiller and pills at the chemist’s, while Jane buys: “nail varnish, blusher, eye liner, eye shadow, lipstick, lip gloss, powder, mascara.”\textsuperscript{241} It is clear that on one side there is the world of the “young, the attractive, the well-dressed and handsome”\textsuperscript{242}; on the other “the old, the infirm”\textsuperscript{243}. Realism, but sensory language again; silk, cashmere involve both sight and touch, the pleasant sensation of silk on the skin, the warmth cashmere is associated with. All this gives the contrast with the “untouchable” Maudie great impact.

In \textit{An Old Woman and Her Cat}, Hetty’s room is “greasy”, the stink is “appalling”\textsuperscript{244}, Hetty’s eyes when she was young were dark and strong, when she gets older they become “restless”, her hair once glossy now are IS white and escapes

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item \textsuperscript{237} \textit{Ibid.} 240.
\item \textsuperscript{238} \textit{Ibid.} 73.
\item \textsuperscript{239} \textit{Ibid.}
\item \textsuperscript{240} \textit{Ibid.}
\item \textsuperscript{241} \textit{Ibid.} 21.
\item \textsuperscript{242} \textit{Ibid.} 29.
\item \textsuperscript{243} \textit{Ibid.}
\item \textsuperscript{244} Doris Lessing, \textit{An Old Woman and Her Cat}, p. 153.
\end{thebibliography}
“from a scarlet woollen cap”\textsuperscript{245} her skin once easily tanned, now has the marks of coma from cold. These words enhance the idea of deterioration, which is physical and social, and underline the new state of invisibility of old women in society as there is no place in our modern society for something that reminds us people’s ultimate destiny.

The realism Lessing uses is disarming. Yet, I would suggest that along with this intense realism, Lessing adopts a sort of symbolism. In my opinion, some elements in the stories and in the novel are strongly meaningful. One of these element is food, and how Lessing connects different kinds of food to characters and age.

In \textit{The Diaries}, Maudie’s dietary is inadequate; she has difficulties in preparing some healthy and complete meals, she cannot afford the costs of fruit or vegetables, and her energy allows her only to prepare some tea, which is problematic since it makes you “run”\textsuperscript{246} to the toilet, or drink a glass of cold milk, almost expired. She waits for the Meals on Wheels and she eats everything without even looking what is in them. She is not able to prepare a lunch or dinner, her energies and her illness do not allow her. When Jane first visits her, she brings her a “cake with real cream” that Maudie puts “on a big old cracked plate”\textsuperscript{247} and Jane understands she has overdone. When Maudie eats the cake: “Oh, this is real cream”\textsuperscript{248} she states, and she remembers her summers spent in the Essex when she was a child. Food has the power to let memory re-emerge and the reader understands that Maudie has not always lived like she lives now, in her old age. When she was a child she ate properly,

\textsuperscript{245} Ibid. 161.
\textsuperscript{246} Doris Lessing, \textit{The Diaries}, p. 124.
\textsuperscript{247} Ibid. 23.
\textsuperscript{248} Ibid.
carrots, potatoes, porridge, vegetables, meat, fruit: Maudie and her sister “licked that clean as washed.”

Another time Jane brings Maudie some fruit, but Maudie utters that her teeth do not allow her to eat fruit. Bananas and grapes are too expensive: “she said, with humour, that the pension did not run to grapes.”

When Jane takes Maudie out for a walk, at the Rose Garden Restaurant, she eats again a cream cake “she ate and ate, in her slow, consuming way, which says, I’m going to get this inside me while it is here!” Yet, Maudie will refuse to come back and eat again those wonderful cakes. The cakes represent the opulence she cannot afford.

In *An Old Woman and Her Cat* Hetty is forced to eat the pigeons that Tibby brought to her: “the cat had brought up the stairs and along the passageways a pigeon he had caught, shedding feathers and blood all the way” Hetty shares the wild birds with her cat, becoming to the eyes of her neighbours, a savage. It is total degradation, Hetty eats like animals, but the judgment is not on animals, only on how some old people are reduced to. The pigeon is the image of dirt and degradation. Hetty falls ill but in her last attempt to move and eat something else, a woman gives her a handful of small change, and thanks to this small amount she can eat a roll filled with tomato and lettuce and a hot cup of tea and some milk, she is so happy that: “she felt she might survive the winter.”

The contrast between the picture of opulence of food in *The Grandmothers* and the degradation of Hetty results amazing.

In *The Grandmothers*, in fact, food is the image of luxury, sex and sin. The

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249 Ibid. 24.
250 Ibid. 25.
251 Doris Lessing, *An Old Woman and Her Cat*, p. 120.
252 Ibid. 150.
253 Ibid. 160.
mothers and their sons at the beginning of the story eat a “tray where fresh fruit juices and wholemeal sandwiches asserted that these were people careful of their health”\textsuperscript{254} on a verandah “sausages and cheese and ham and bread, a big dish of fruit”\textsuperscript{255}; when they share an apple into four, “Roz pushed a quarter each at the others, and bit juicily into her segment.”\textsuperscript{256} Even without comments, observations, remarks, the description of what the protagonists eat would make readers classify and categorize them. Lessing insists again and again on food details which thus become the protagonists themselves.

A further element full of symbolism is nature. In the short story \textit{Flight} there is again realism with the use of sensory images and the world of nature deeply connected with the old. Lessing’s realism puts emphasis on the visual; in this passage, at the beginning of the story, she anticipates the contrasting aspects both in nature and in life:

\begin{quote}

\begin{itemize}
  \item leaned against a tree, gazing out beyond the dovecote into the landscape of a late afternoon.
  \item in folds and hollows of sunlight and shade, the dark red soil, which was broken into a great dusty clods, stretched wide to a tall horizon.\textsuperscript{257}
\end{itemize}
\end{quote}

There are “folds and hollows of sunlight and shade”: nature can stand as symbolism for the road of the future, a road that he can no longer tread upon and which he fears his granddaughter will walk: “Trees marked the course of the valley; a stream of rich green grass the road.”\textsuperscript{258} The road is a symbol of fear for the grandfather, while it is a symbol of a luminous future for the granddaughter. To

\begin{footnotes}
\item[254] Doris Lessing, \textit{The Grandmothers}, p. 4.
\item[255] Ibid. 31.
\item[256] Ibid.
\item[257] Doris Lessing, \textit{Flight}, p. 147.
\item[258] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
highlight the enormous generation gap, the grandfather “muttered”, “shouted”, “mourned”, “growled”, in contrast with the happy, free and cheerful attitude of the girl who sings and laughs, her hair falls “in a wave of sunlight” and her “long bare legs” imitate “the angles of the frangipane stems”\(^\text{259}\). Nature, in the form of animals, results a comforting element for old people, being it a bird in the case of \textit{Flight} or a cat in \textit{The Diaries of Jane Somers}: “Pretty, pretty, pretty”\(^\text{260}\) are the words that Lessing uses for the old when they address their pets: in nature they find an escape from reality and consolation too.

A last example of symbolism is present in the last lines of the story. The daughter and her boyfriend bring him a little bird as a gift for him to breed with the others. The grandfather puts it in the dovecote but then takes his favourite and sets it free: “Now you can go, he said aloud.”\(^\text{261}\) It is as if he is addressing his granddaughter who is crying. It is not clear whether she understands the symbolic gesture of her grandfather, his letting her free to make her own choices and thus she is moved and cries or whether he is doing it in defiance or spite.

In \textit{The Grandmothers}, in particular, the description of nature helps to give the idea of passions, desire and sexual impulses. The story begins with a natural description: “On either side of a little promontory loaded with cafés and restaurants was a frisky but decorous sea, nothing like the real ocean that roared and rumbled outside the gape of the enclosing bay and barrier rocks known by everyone”\(^\text{262}\) The real ocean roars and rumbles, under the tidy cafés and restaurants of society, that

\(\text{259}\) \textit{Ibid.}  
\(\text{260}\) \textit{Ibid.}  
\(\text{261}\) \textit{Ibid. 4.}  
\(\text{262}\) \textit{Ibid. 3.}
passions and the order society puts on human instincts. Moreover, there is a contrast of lights and shadows. The setting is full of lights, the beach, "sun and sea, sea and sun"263, inside their house the atmosphere changes, shadows and darkness appear:

When she woke, in the night, ready to go off to the fridge for a drink, or just to wander about the house in the dark, as she often did, she did not go, afraid of hearing Ian crying, afraid she would not be able to stop herself going into him. But then she found he had blundered through the dark into her room and was beside her, clutching at her like a lifebelt in a storm.

And she actually found herself picturing those seven rocks rotten teeth in the black night out there, the waves pouring and dashing around them in white cascades of foam.264

On the contrary when the four decide to go more often to the beach to hide their relationships, the morning was hot, the sea “shimmered off light. The sky was full of a light that could punish the eyes, without dark defending glasses."265 There is an overabundance of lights; shadows are all projected by society since they know they are breaking all the rules.

The natural setting, the sea, the waves and the beach create a sort of dream, of magical and mysterious atmosphere. Nature supports primordial instincts. When the four meet again after the marriage of the boys and the birth of their children, the waves “said nothing had changed, nothing...”266 The contrast between lights and shadows helps Lessing to skip the details of the encounters, enhancing the idea of secret.

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263 Ibid. 11.
264 Ibid. 25.
265 Ibid. 28.
266 Ibid. 51.
In *An Old Woman and Her Cat* it is nature again that sets tone and atmosphere. The setting is the grey urban London of the twentieth century: “The blocks of flats were pioneers in that area, standing up grim, grey and hideous (...) all soon to be demolished by more tall grey blocks.”

Hetty lives in a “conglomeration of staircases and lifts” and “grey cemented corridors.” The “green fields” the women image when they are forced to live in a Home, is a dreaming scene that does not enchant Hetty.

Moreover, the cat as part of the natural world, plays an important role both for Maudie and for Hetty. The old ladies have cats who comfort and alleviate their existence. Both cats are yellow, the colour of deterioration, they are shabby and four smelling. Yet, the cats sincerely love their mistresses and do not abandon them until the end. By contrast, society ignore the old women, Hetty in particular, while cats understand their situation, they are patient and more human than people. Lessing will say: “If a fish is the movement of water embodied, given shape, then cat is diagram and pattern of subtle air.” This explains why the cat is present in many Lessing’s stories and become a co-protagonist, if not the protagonist.

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267 Doris Lessing, *An Old Woman and Her Cat*, p. 147.
268 Ibid. 49.
269 Ibid.
Conclusion

In my study I have illustrated how a twentieth century writer such as Doris Lessing deals with the theme of aging and old age, since in Western societies, Italy in particular, old people are going to increase in number. Medicine has, in fact, made important steps ahead to slow down the biological process of physical decline that aging involves. Nowadays middle-aged and old people can enjoy benefits from medical researches and can live an active life in spite of age. Actually, it seems that the centenarians are the eighty-years-old of twenty years ago and, if in good health, they can lead an acceptable life. However, there are old people who have economic and physical difficulties, the so called great olds who need social help or specific medical assistance and they risk marginalization which accelerates their decline and death. Western societies have to deal with this new reality, creating structures suitable for them and trying to sensitize the younger to the new problem.

What emerges, is that old age, like all the other stages of life, seems to be marked by differences and contradictions; what is sure, is that aging results a painful experience, especially in Western societies where there is a celebration of youth and anti-aging methods have such a big success. Yet, stopping the aging process results impossible; women, in particular, feel the burden of the passing of years, they are more imprisoned in the trilogy of youth-seduction-physical attractiveness and most are ready to do anything to keep up youthful appearance.

Different kinds of novels help to project the new woman, a woman who is aware of her value and of what she wants and expects without relying so much on the physical aspect. A process of maturing which does not erase the worries about
aging but gives the woman this new awareness based on self-acceptance, ability and more freedom. Socially and morally speaking women overcome taboos which limited their attitude to relationships and sexual life. The image of life as an arch (birth-peak of adulthood- descendant to death) can be replaced by the image of a stair for aging can be seen as a path of reviewing, of taking consciousness of who you really are, not what others expect you to be, to authenticity and acceptance of taking part in the faith of humanity.

In her works Doris Lessing seems to suggest that the biological process of decline, physical decay and the loss of sexual appeal, especially for women entering their middle or later life, is inevitable. Lessing’s heroines give us a wide scope of the stage of life; in the works I have analysed there is a full spectrum from childhood, youth, middle-age and old age. They are unforgettable characters who for different reasons manage to proceed in life. Though Lessing does not dwell much on young people, they are present in the stories, Jill in The Diaries of Jane Somers is described in juxtaposition both to Jane and Maudie. Jill identifies herself with her aunt Jane who is the successful woman who helps her to find her place in society. On the contrary the gap between Jill and Maudie is enormous; not only does Jill reject Maudie, but she cannot understand how her aunt can bear this old dirty witch. This non-relationship highlights the separation not only of two people but of two worlds. On the other hand, Jane can understand, accept and overcome the dirt and the squalor of the old woman and at the end she feels affection for this old witch. As a middle-aged woman, Jane becomes aware of herself, of her needs and of her

271 In Jane Fonda’s Speech Life Third Act at TedxWomen 2011, the actress addresses the theme of aging and old age trying to re imagine it from a totally new perspective. The speech is available at https://www.ted.com/talks/jane_fonda_life_s_third_act
mistakes. Through her relationship with Maudie she becomes more humane, more aware of herself as being not a unique entity but part of a greater whole. Maudie and Hetty are two examples of old age in the worst possible conditions. They are socially marginalized, poor, neglected by family and society and yet, they survive keeping the core of what they were. Pride, stubbornness and courage let them face all difficulties and refuse the charity that they find humiliating. The meeting and the relationship between Jane and Maudie helps the latter to have a happy period, to find friendship thus showing the possibility to create a bond between generations. Hetty has chosen as her only friend and companion an old cat; she will die in total desolation and solitude, cared about only by her cat. This female figure represents really the worst aspects of old age in an indifferent society. The grandfather in Flight emphasises the generational gap: in 1957, Lessing describes the relationship between a grandfather and his granddaughter and the difficulties of communication. In The Grandmothers which, according to Lessing is a true story, there is the projection of the new woman who breaking all taboos, social conventions and prejudices, lives her sexual life with complete freedom and this gives Roz and Lil, the protagonists, the impression to be young forever. The negative side of the story is that they condition the young men’s lives creating a sort of slavery which will not let them live a normal life with wives and children. There is no condemnation of

272 The relationship between the individual and the collective in the works of Doris Lessing has been more deeply analyzed by Billy Gray in “Lucky The Culture where the old can talk to the young and the young can talk to the old: Narrative, Biology and Aging in the later works of Doris Lessing”, in Worsfold, Brian J., Nhongo, Tavengwa M., Women Ageing through Literature and Experience, Lérida, Department d’Anglès i Lingüística, Universitat de Lleida, 2005. Pp. 43-50. In this essay Gray argues that Lessing’s later works have been influenced by her own experience of aging; she seems to consider the different stages of life as experiences not unique for the individual but as part of the life cycle.

such behaviour on Lessing’s side\textsuperscript{274} and the reader is free to interpret the story as he/she pleases.

Although Simone de Beauvoir, in 1972, breaks the taboos of writing about old age in all its aspects and Antonio Gramiccia gives a social account of the dangers that old people can meet in modern society nowadays, according to me, it is Lessing who through her fictional characters and stories, involves the reader in the world of middle-aged and the older. “Time becomes fluid.” Lessing explains talking about old age and aging: “And inside this fluidity a permanence, for the person who looks at the old face in the mirror is the same as the one who shares your earliest memories.”\textsuperscript{275} The challenge seems to be the capacity to keep the child’s core which is in everyone. In her first autobiography, indeed, Lessing describes herself as: “an oversensitive, always observant and judging, battling, impressionable, hungry for love child.”\textsuperscript{276} And I think she never betrayed herself.

\textsuperscript{274} In the above mentioned interview Lessing said that it is society that has the most suspicious conscience.
\textsuperscript{275} Doris Lessing, \textit{Time Bites}, p. 216.
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