

**Seeking (and Finding) *Ulysses*:
Some Positive Ageing Narratives in Recent Fiction and Film**

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ABSTRACT

The process of ageing is all too often seen as something to be avoided, feared or even, sadly, ridiculed. We are all familiar with literary and film narratives which portray older persons as either curmudgeons or crones, or personify them as being ugly or ill (*Up*, *Grumpy Old Men*, *Snow White's* stepmother in disguise, *Red Riding Hood's* grandmother) – images which often translate to real-life assumptions about older people, and ageist attitudes which are not conducive to individuals ageing well. Commentators within the field of Social Gerontology have noted with concern the dominance of such negative stereotypes, linking them to poor outcomes for real-life older persons.

Yet, instinct suggests that we are right to fear such prospects for our own ageing, and this raises the question: ‘With what can we replace these age-old models of decline and decay?’

A partial answer to this question can be found in a recent abundance of positive literary and filmic portrayals of older persons leading triumphant, vibrant and adventurous lives. Via a brief survey of some texts and films drawn from the recent past, which includes Joanne Harris’ novel *Chocolat*, Helen Simonson’s *Major Pettigrew’s Last Stand*, and the films *Skyfall* and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, this thesis examines some positive fictional portrayals of ageing in the light of contemporary research within the social sciences.

Taking as its inspiration the poem ‘Ulysses’ by Alfred Lord Tennyson, this thesis is intended to be neither exhaustive nor definitive, and has as its primary motivation the purpose of highlighting key attitudinal and practicable qualities demonstrated within these fictional contexts that are applicable to ageing well in the real world, as indicated within the relevant scholarship.

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INTRODUCTION

Works of fiction and real life have always, for me, been inextricably linked. So much so that I do not think the latter could be wholly itself if not for the former. As a child and teenager I spent many hours immersed in the pages of everything from Paddington Bear to Stephen King. Some might say far too many, judging from the amount of times that an adult would appear at my door, urging me to “go and get some fresh air”, or “do something constructive” just as I had gotten to a really good bit. Consequently though, when, half-way through high school, I went through some very dark days during which I could not really explain the chaos in my head to anyone, books spared me from imploding completely and became my way of mentally locating myself within the outside world again.

Granted, the characters in the books that saved my sanity were not real, but someone, somewhere had written them, and those people had thought that they were possible. If I, in my turn, could relate to the characters - their thoughts, pain, triumphs, longings - and go with them on their adventures, then, to my mind, by a process of extrapolation, I was possible too. According to the things I read, there was definitely still room for me to carve out a space to exist in the real world, working from the models I found within the fictional one that showed me different potential ways of being than I had hitherto been educated in. And, for that matter, once I began to have freedom regarding what I could watch, films also allowed me the same kind of scope.

A doubled life-span later, in November of 2012, having succeeded in adding a graduate qualification in teaching English language to my BA in English Literature for financial safety's sake, I realised that all of my class would be looking at the same time for the exact same jobs as me (which wouldn't be available until the following February anyway). I opted to look for part-time work over the holidays, and found employment as a private caregiver. The purpose of my role was helping ‘older old’, physically challenged individuals to remain in their own homes, as much on their own terms as possible, with whatever support they needed, for as

long as possible.¹

At around the same time (as a further safety measure against potential insolvency) I applied for a Master's Degree scholarship. Since I cringe a little every time I have to admit to my major subject, I promised myself that, should I win, I would not take it up unless I could find a topic that had some real-world applicability as well as allowing me to get paid to read books, watch films and write for a year. As the time for pinning down a topic narrowed, I noticed that - owing to my work - I was both looking at the real world from a distinctly elderly perspective, and looking at the elderly from a distinctly literary perspective. This latter fact seemed to argue strongly against some people's pronouncements about the general uselessness of studying fiction.

Fragments from Shakespeare's *King Lear*, and Tennyson's 'Ulysses' floated into my mind on different days in the lounge of the 90-year-old man I helped to care for, and I was reminded of Joanne Harris' character Armande from her novel *Chocolat* every time the 91-year-old lady I looked after decided to entrust me with the knowledge that she would rather be dead than dealing with the myriad difficulties and heartaches that constituted her life. The comparison was not least in my mind because every month her doctors graced her with the ability to make an end to it all by means of the morphine in her pain medications, should her gloomy thoughts ever gel into a realisation of this potential and a resolve to make use of it. I realised that my topic was right in front of me. I decided that I wanted to find and examine some positive narratives of ageing, in order to get some clues as to how to do it better when my time came than I was seeing it done in the course of my caregiving.²

¹ Susan M. Hillier and Georgia M. Barrow note that '[i]f we are talking about a 95-year-old and a 68-year-old, we are speaking of people in profoundly different developmental places'. Susan M. Hillier, and Georgia M. Barrow, *Ageing, the Individual, and Society* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2011), p. 76. This variability has been acknowledged within the field of Social Gerontology by the creation of different categories of older-ness. Thus, as Emily Grundy explains, 'those over 85 are referred to as 'old old', while 65-74 year olds are sometimes described as the 'young old''. Emily Grundy, 'Age-Related Change in Later Life', in *Population Studies*, 45: Supplement (1991), pp. 135-156
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2175063>> [accessed 01/04/2013] (p. 133).

² With regard to spelling: As the use of British English is the convention in New Zealand, throughout the body of this thesis, the word 'ageing' will be spelled with an 'e'. In quotes, the spelling used by the original author will be preserved.

When I began this project, I was experiencing a certain amount of what is called ‘caregiver burnout’. This occurs when an individual who is responsible for the welfare of another begins to experience ‘physical, emotional and mental fatigue’ that is directly attributable to the stresses experienced in the caregiver role.³ I was not exactly physically burnt out or becoming ill because of my job, but I was definitely finding it less easy to shrug off the small frustrations I encountered during the course of my work, and I had begun to physically dread going to work for one of my clients in particular, experiencing anxiety symptoms before each one of my rostered days. I had also begun to be concerned about my own prospective quality of life as I aged, and felt that I must begin to prepare for it, so as to avoid the traps and pitfalls that my clients seemed to have fallen into. The only thing I could think of was to go back to books and films again, to see if I could find any clues.

The writer William Horwood states that ‘[w]e would be dull and dim-witted students of life if we did not find something of value for understanding and interpreting modern culture [...] from novels’. However, he goes on to observe that ‘unfortunately [...] novels as such do not offer a [...] guide to [...] contemporary issue[s]’, acknowledging that this ‘is not their individual or collective purpose’, rather that ‘[t]heir job, broadly, is to tell a good story and keep us turning pages to the end’. He therefore goes on to state that ‘[w]e [...] need a focus and a reference point if our discussion [of novels] is going to be useful [to our everyday lives]’.⁴ I needed to find this focus outside of the literary. Positive narratives might be very cheering in themselves, but ageing positively is very much a contemporary issue, and, as such, I needed to seek for elements of the answers I was looking for within the scholarship of the people who study real-life ageing. I therefore turned to the field of Social Gerontology to find a theoretical basis for the answers I was seeking. No sooner had I, than I found that many of the writers there were also talking about the power of narrative to build and shape our lives, and the need to create positive perceptions of ageing.

³ Mathy D. Mezey, and others, eds, *The Encyclopedia of Elder Care* (New York: Springer, 2001), p. 114.

⁴ William Horwood, ‘The Novel and the Safe Journey of Healing’ in *The Novel, Spirituality and Modern Culture*, ed. by Paul S. Fiddes (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), pp. 143-157 (p. 143).

I was, for example, pleased to find Amelia De Falco's published PhD thesis *Uncanny Subjects: Aging in Contemporary Narrative* (2010), which had been inspired, in part, by her observation of the ageist treatment of an older family member in a public setting.⁵ Whereas I was simply looking for more positive models of ageing than the ones I had seen, for the purpose of exploiting what I could learn from them for my own use, De Falco's thesis is an examination of 'the experience of aging into old age' and 'the meanings that arise from [...] changes of age'.⁶ Nonetheless, she was confirming - via her own examination of both fictional written texts and film - that fictional narratives of ageing are pertinent to the real life issues of ageing.

Other scholars have suggested that not only do art and thought imitate life, but that the reverse scenario is a problematic possibility. A decade ago, researcher and academic Margaret Morganroth Gullette asserted in her book *Aged by Culture*, that '[i]t matters whether a given society permits dense, interesting, encouraging narratives about aging, [...] [because] [o]ur age narratives become our virtual realities'.⁷ She went on to observe that 'decline is an authoritative narrative' of ageing.⁸ Peter Lloyd-Sherlock (commenting in research commissioned by the UN) said the same thing in the same year, but instead referred to the prevailing situation as 'a negative paradigm'.⁹ A decade earlier, in 1994, academic and respected commentator on ageing Haim Hazan had made the statement that 'knowledge [...] is shaped by perceptions, beliefs, rationalizations and other non-rational forms of imagery', noting that, consequently, 'attempt[s] to formulate a [new] model of ageing [are] [...] confounded by [...] the [...] demonic role played by ageing in our

⁵ The term 'ageism' was first coined by physician and academic Robert N. Butler in 1968, to describe 'a deep and profound prejudice against the elderly and a systematic stereotyping of [...] and discrimination against people because they are old', which he had noticed during his medical training was a feature of the healthcare (or the lack of it) provided to older people. *Encyclopedia of Ageism*, ed. by Erdman D. Palmore, Laurence Branch and Diana K. Harris (New York, Haworth Press, 2005), p. 310.

⁶ Amelia De Falco, *Uncanny Subjects* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010), p. xvii, and p. xi, respectively.

⁷ Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Aged by Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 11.

⁸ Gullette, p. 13.

⁹ Peter Lloyd-Sherlock, 'Ageing, Development and Social Protection: Generalisations, Myths and Stereotypes', in *Living Longer: Ageing, Development and Social Protection*, (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development), ed. by Peter Lloyd-Sherlock (London: Zed Books, 2004), pp. 1-7 (p. 5).

consciousness'.¹⁰

My own experience, over the summer, of working within environments where decline and isolation were huge parts of my clients' existence, goes to show that ageing is still far from being necessarily a positive experience, despite the intervening years between these researchers' observations and my own. My clients were 'older old', aged 90 and 91 respectively, and both were frail and largely cut off from the world around them, with mind-sets fixed and bodies failing. As such, there did not seem to be much scope for improvement in their respective situations. However, at the other end of ageing, things are definitely beginning to change. Professor Amanda Smith Barusch, commenting in her 2008 book *Love Stories of Later Life*, observes that the baby-boomer generation is '[n]ow [...] redefining the latter half of life and expanding the possibilities in many realms [...] it will take the media [...] a while to catch up'.¹¹

A brief survey of a recent evening's television ad breaks unfortunately attests to this, as young people sell everything from shampoos and make-up to fashion, cars and alcohol, while older faces usually only appear in ads for things like life insurance (otherwise known as death), or any number of depressing products from incontinence pads, through impotence pills, to arthritis creams. Even so, now that we are being slated to live much longer at the further end of our lives than the human race has ever been able to do before, I have noticed a concurrent emerging trend within the creative arts of film and literature toward celebrating older characters as being clever, adaptable and empowered, and as living meaningful lives on their own terms – outcomes which the characters take steps to facilitate for themselves.¹²

¹⁰ Haim Hazan, *Old Age: Constructions and Deconstructions*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 2 and 4, respectively.

¹¹ Amanda Smith Barusch: *Love Stories of Later Life: A Narrative Approach to Understanding Romance* (New York: Oxford Uni Press, 2008), p. 3.

¹² Ann Bowling and Paul Dieppe comment that '[t]he substantial increases in life expectancy at birth achieved over the previous century, combined with medical advances, escalating health and social care costs, and higher expectations for older age, have led to international interest in how to promote a healthier old age and how to age "successfully"'. Ann Bowling and Paul Dieppe, 'What is Successful Ageing and Who Should Define It?', in *BMJ: British Medical Journal* 331: 7531 (2005), 1548-1551 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25455762>> [accessed 01/04/2013] (p. 1548).

Reinforcing Barusch's observations about the baby boomer generation shaking things up ageing-wise, the actress Lindsay Duncan proposes that part of the reason that we are seeing more films written around older characters is because the people making these films are in the process of growing older themselves:

“Obviously young people wouldn't necessarily be drawn to a film about people in their sixties, but our generation is the first generation, really, to get to this point. We started off thinking that we would rule the world, that we'd change everything. We invented sex, drugs and rock and roll. We did all of that. So, in a way, we're redefining old age.”¹³

I therefore suspect that the writers' motivations are much like my own in wanting to explore the possibilities of ageing vibrantly. It seemed that my elderly clients were constructing their lives within the parameters of unconscious and negative narrative patterns that often left them seemingly feeling distressed, isolated and hard done by, with no real expectations of life beyond such a state of being. Their lives were marked by a habit of reminiscing about what was no longer, rather than any practice of dreaming of or pursuing what might yet be. They exhibited a sort of stagnant determination to keep on holding their place in the world, despite the obvious attendant miseries entailed in this, that I would neither describe as good quality of life, nor successful ageing. My clients seemed to have been relegated to the edges of existence – breathing, but not truly living or participating in the life that was going on around them (which is a distinction that is also noted by Ulysses).¹⁴

For example, during the course of my caregiving work I have seen that it often does not take much for an older person to give up driving their vehicle after an illness or an injury, and then never take the slow way back, in quiet streets, to re-gain the confidence that was knocked out of them. I have seen others refuse to downsize their houses and so stay stuck in one place until they find themselves eventually trapped down long driveways which must then be painfully negotiated with the aid of walkers, or living with far too many stairs – a fall down which could easily see

¹³ Lindsay Duncan, interviewed by Michael Leader, in 'Jim Broadbent and Lindsay Duncan on Le Weekend', Film4.com, 11 October 2013 <<http://www.film4.com/special-features/interviews/broadbent-duncan-week-end>> [accessed 19 May 2014] (para. 6 of 10).

¹⁴ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, 'Ulysses', in *The Poetical Works of Tennyson* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), pp. 89-90, 'as though to breathe were life', l. 24, p. 89.

them landing in a rest home, or worse. Such lackadaisical inaction towards determining one's own life outcomes and maintaining one's independence seems like very risky behaviour, unless one considers that these people are ageing according to a script which tells them that life is not really meant for them anymore and it is alright to just quietly resign from it and grow no further.

In fact, historically, this was considered within the field of Social Gerontology to be a suitable approach for the older person to take toward life as they aged.¹⁵ It is still implicit in the commonly used term 'retirement'. Disengagement Theory posits that decreased engagement in the social aspects of life is both natural and necessary for the benefit of both society and the older person. It is acknowledged that, within such a paradigm '[a]ging individuals, wishing to escape the stress of recognising their own diminishing capacity, collaborate in the withdrawal'.¹⁶ I believe that the principal reason I found working with the older people that I was caring for so dispiriting at times was precisely owing to their state of disengagement from the world and their resulting isolation. However, to be old without the resources at one's disposal to continue to have agency within the world, seems to me, instinctively, a situation that should be avoided at all costs. The notion is accompanied by the same sort of visceral reaction that is conjured by the idea of being buried alive, as well as an urgent curiosity to know how such a thing can occur, and, thereby, how to keep it from doing so.

In the course of my caregiving, I have heard older people ruefully declare things like "the world has changed", and "nothing is the same anymore", and have often wondered how they can state such an obvious thing and view it as a negative. How can the world be so very different for them, so dramatically, and seemingly all of a sudden? I believe the answer lies not in their suggestion that the world has all of a sudden changed, but in the reality that the change has taken place day by day, as is

¹⁵ Bjorklund and Bee explain that '[t]he term disengagement was first proposed by gerontologists Elaine Cumming and William Henry (1961) to describe what they saw as a key psychological process in old age. This process was seen as having three [...] aspects: (1) adult's social "life space" shrinks with age [...] (2) [...] the aging person becomes more individualized [...] (3) the aging person anticipates this set of changes and actively embraces them, disengaging more from roles and relationships (Cumming, 1975)', (p. 357). Barbara R. Bjorklund, and Helen L. Bee, *The Journey of Adulthood*, 6th edn (Upper Saddle River, N.J: Pearson Education, 2009).

¹⁶ Hillier and Barrow, p. 77.

the normal way of change in the world, and they have simply failed to keep pace of it because they have, literally, retired from it. Just as we find an ageing face unseen for a long time to be more drastically changed than if we have seen it age day by day, so the face of the world must needs appear vastly different if one has lost touch with it for any length of time. Under such circumstances, the present must become a foreign country, where things are done very differently from the ways they were in the past.¹⁷

However, as Ovid observed eloquently, change is a constant of life:

In all creation
Nothing endures, all is in endless flux,
[...]
And time itself glides on in ceaseless flow,
A rolling stream – and streams can never stay,
Nor lightfoot hours. As wave is driven by wave,
And each, pursued, pursues the wave ahead,
So time flies on and follows, flies and follows,
Always, for ever new. What was before
Is left behind; what never was is now.¹⁸

Therefore, a large part of negotiating life successfully must be adapting to its twists and turns and changes of shape.

From my childhood I can recall milk (but never groceries) being delivered to our house, and that it used to cost a mere ten cents a bottle. I remember my parents joking about it being a good thing that landline phones (the only kind that anybody had back then) had no cameras if they had to answer a call when just out of the shower. I recall it being impressive that my friend's mother had a computer at home, even though it only had a tiny screen that displayed rows of orange text with not a single image in sight. The television images I watched for the first part of my childhood were in black and white. Holiday films often stayed for months in dresser

¹⁷ 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.' L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1953), p. 9, paraphrased.

¹⁸ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. by A.D. Melville, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), XV, ll.180-189, p. 357.

drawers until somebody could be bothered to take them to an actual photo shop to have them developed. When my best friend moved to Gisborne, I had to write a letter in pen, on paper, and walk to the corner and post it if I wanted to stay in contact with her.

Credit cards, EFTPOS, cell phones, email, laptops, tablets – none of these things were commonplace when I was small. Yet I am certainly not shattered by the fact that I can now send my letters electronically and often receive a reply within seconds; that I can order any number of different kinds of food to be delivered to my door (excepting, apparently, milk in glass bottles) and pay by credit card. Nor does it dismay me that I can see people I am talking to miles away on the screen of my laptop or my mobile phone. My only complaint is the current price of said milk. Perhaps the answer in my own case is that I have had to deal with such a lot of change in my life so far, or (inconceivable) risk not being able to conduct many of the everyday functions of life that my peers can. Research shows that the more we acquire new skills throughout our lives, the more apt we will remain to keep doing so.¹⁹

Further to the specifics of my own case – in the interests of disclosing bias and lending perspective - this year I will turn 40, but, as I have not yet had my first child and cannot afford to have a mortgage, in these respects I feel not very far removed from people in their mid-twenties who are just starting out in life. My tertiary studies and the completion of my first degree were delayed by 10 years, between dropping out of university, aged 19, and a head injury that occurred not long after I had decided that I needed to drop back in again several years later. In large part owing to that dislocating circumstance, I only got married two years ago, to someone at the opposite end of their thirties, whose friends have since become mine. As I look around, we all just seem to be in the same boat: finding our respective paths in life, marking small

¹⁹ Bjorklund and Bee observe that ‘demanding job environments (Scholler, Caplan, & Oates, 1998) and life with spouses who have high levels of cognitive functioning (Gruber-Baldini, Schaie, & Willis, 1995) help to ward off cognitive decline. [...] A number of studies have shown that cognitive processes are preserved in later adulthood for people who exercise those processes regularly through such activities as playing chess (Charness, 1981) or bridge (Clarkson-Smith & Hartley, 1990), doing crossword puzzles (Salthouse, 2004), or playing the game of Go (Masunaga & Horn, 2001)’, (p. 125).

milestones, dreaming about the things we want to do one day, and grabbing any chances that come our way that look like they will take us closer to our goals.

I do worry, though, that I have noticed lately a certain peevishness creeping in when I see twenty year olds on television carelessly flaunting streamlined bodies in the sorts of tiny bikinis I used to be able to wear effortlessly too. On the other hand, I have realised that I would not swap my extra curves now and the life experience that goes with them for all the tiny bikinis in the world. I get annoyed when boy racers speed down our street, and when I see teenagers in school uniform brazenly destroying their lungs on street corners. I am certain that there has been a general proliferation of evil, as well as new breeds of idiot, in the world. While I enjoy driving fast on motorways, I find that I am firmly in favour of 40 kilometre speed limits on suburban residential streets, and I mind bad English being used in advertisements and by journalists, even though my own everyday speech is not always perfect.

When I look in mirrors now, because this year I am acutely aware of the numerals involved, I often think in sentences that end with some variant of a phrase ending in the words “my age”. Yet still, just as much as when annoying adults would ask me questions like “and what does it feel like to be ten?”, I honestly do not know what being 39 should feel like any more than I ever knew how being 10 should feel. As I take another mental survey of the people I spend my various days and hours with, I note that my once-baby cousin is, confoundingly, 30 this year and having her own second baby. An even younger cousin of ours got married in January. They are ageing in my wake, these used-to-be-children, but it is clearly no cause for mourning. We grow, we change. We must if we are still alive. Hopefully, doing so makes our lives richer and better, yet this is, apparently, how we grow old. So, it may very well be nothing but a commonplace, the passage of time and our own passage through it, but I do personally find it to be at least mild cause for concern. I want to survive the rest of my life at least as well as I have managed to do so far.

Therefore, taking as my primary inspiration for this thesis the poignant and

inspiring musings of Alfred, Lord Tennyson's eponymous 'Ulysses', I have searched out recent film and literary examples of positive, successful, and forward-looking ageing, and, among them, found the occasional cautionary tale. I have sought to find examples of older people rejoicing in the on-going possibilities of life, rather than wishing it away, as I had watched one of my clients regularly do. Quite early in the process, I realised that I had as long ago as my early twenties registered Tennyson's king as presenting a winning example of a productive mind-set in ageing. However, if one is to bandy about words such as 'positive' and 'successful' with regard to the ageing process as I have been doing, then, as William Horwood proposes, it will serve to have some way of qualifying what I mean when I use these terms, rather than just relying on my own judgement. Within the field of Social Gerontology there exists evidence of meaningful consensus as to what successful ageing means among older persons themselves. There are also several important theories of ageing.

In a short article in the *British Medical Journal* in 2005, Ann Bowling and Paul Dieppe highlighted the fact that while there are recognised biomedical frameworks of looking at ageing that regard 'the absence of chronic disease' and 'the minimisation of physical and mental deterioration and disability' as being the prime indicators of successful ageing, in reality there are other facets of the phenomenon that clinically observable criteria and parameters such as these simply do not address satisfactorily. According to available research, older people tend to count psychosocial factors as being of equal importance to the physical, acknowledging that the two facets interact to a large extent.²⁰ Bowling and Dieppe sum up the reported 'components' of conceptualised successful ageing as being related to: 'zest, resolution and fortitude, happiness, relationships between desired and achieved goals, self-concept, morale, mood, and overall wellbeing'. They go on to note that '[s]uggested psychological resources for successful ageing include a positive outlook and self-worth, self-efficacy or sense of control over life, autonomy and independence, and effective coping and adaptive strategies in the face of changing circumstances'.²¹

²⁰ Bowling and Dieppe, p. 1548.

²¹ Bowling and Dieppe, p. 1549.

To me, those first three requirements of ‘zest, resolution, and fortitude’ in the first grouping above, and the ‘positive outlook’ suggested in the second list, seem to go a decent way to summing up the overarching attitude of Ulysses. For that matter, my guess is that if you can speak positively of ‘seeking a newer world’ (l. 57), as he does, the chances are that you can also address yourself to living within one. So I am inclined to credit the fictional Ulysses with implied adaptive strategies as well. The other qualities on the above lists are often not things we necessarily have complete determination over ourselves. Acknowledging this, Gullette states that ‘whichever accounts [we] find ourselves living with and seeing the world through make a fundamental difference to the quality of our lives’.²²

If we have been inculcated with negative narratives of ageing, then a negative perception of our self-worth when we are older can lead to a low quotient of self-efficacy, and from there to a lack of autonomy. From then on, morale and a lot of the other desirable qualities listed above can quite understandably exit the stage of older life. It has not ever been my experience that you can merely duct tape resilience onto the habitually unempowered, nor a positive outlook onto someone who is wallowing in self-pity. As Bowling and Dieppe point out: ‘[s]uccessful ageing is [...] a dynamic process [...] the outcome of one’s development over the life course’.²³ This is an extremely important notion to bear in mind, since, as Gullette puts it: ‘as we age, Life storytelling becomes more edgily poised within the binary of progress versus decline’.²⁴ It is, as mentioned above, how we are able to deal with the changes and challenges of ageing that tips the balance. How we are able to deal with ageing depends on how many skills we have developed to deal with all of the other demands of our lives.

The point about Ulysses is that he is ‘not’, as he admits himself, ‘that strength which in old days | Moved earth and heaven’ (ll. 66-7). He is not any longer one of life’s movers and shakers; semi-retired and relegated to observing from the sidelines. He is now, unhappily, ‘an idle king’ (l. 1), whose duties his son Telemachus is in the process of taking up and carrying forward. He is ‘aged’ (l. 3), and so is his

²² Gullette, p. 11.

²³ Bowling and Dieppe, p. 1549.

²⁴ Gullette, p. 19.

wife Penelope. He describes his daily existence as ‘rust[ing] unburnish’d’, and no longer ‘shin[ing] in use’ (l. 23). However - and it is a big however - all of these things allowed, he continues to view ‘every hour’ (l. 26) as being ‘something more, | A bringer of new things’ (ll. 27-8), and the scope of his imagination extends ‘beyond the sunset, and the baths | Of all the western stars’ (ll. 60-1). He still believes that, with his life experience and his ‘strong ... will’ (l. 69), he remains capable of achieving ‘some work of noble note’ (l. 52) and discovering new things even as ‘[t]he long day wanes’ (l. 55). He bucks against his enforced inactivity. Ulysses has not given up on life, and has no plans to give in to old age. I believe the reason for this is that in his earlier days, he has been both active and adventurous, and these remain his instinctive attitudes toward life.

My topic is therefore not defying age in the sense of Botox and the eccentricities of mid-life crises. It is rather how to live every day well in its company (since, really, we are ageing every single day from birth onward), acknowledging, as Ulysses himself does, that, for every one of us, inevitably ‘Death closes all’ (l. 51). It is how we live ‘until’ (l. 61) we die, as he says, that very much matters. Gullette recognises that ‘[p]eople need to feel they can ‘colonise the future with some degree of success’’, as Ulysses himself clearly does.²⁵ I believe, based on my own earlier life experience, that positive narratives can help to create this kind of belief where it does not already exist.

With regard to the study of ageing in real life, I will be paying specific attention to two opposing theories of ageing that exist within the field. The inverse of Disengagement Theory (as described above), Activity Theory posits that ‘personal adjustment correlates highly with activity; the more active people are – mentally, physically, socially – the better adjusted they are’. In other words, the more engaged in the varied aspects of a full life that people remain as they age, the more this will have a positive effect on their ‘self-image, social integration, and satisfaction with life [...] [and] they will [...] age successfully’.²⁶ I believe that this type of approach to life is the perfect prophylaxis to the dysfunctions of Disengagement Theory (as

²⁵ Gullette, p. 18, quoting Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1991), p. 202.

²⁶ Hillier and Barrow, p. 77.

described above), as I will highlight in the examination of my chosen texts.

Other important theories of ageing are Continuity Theory, and Exchange Theory. Continuity Theory proposes that the type of person we are before we become old is likely the type of old person we will become - for example, with regard to personality traits such as optimism, adaptivity, and temper - although I will show that this need not in fact be true.²⁷ Exchange Theory holds that older people are valued by society in proportion to the amount they are able to contribute to it, since 'interaction will be maintained if it continues to be more rewarding than costly'. This contribution is not necessarily financial, but pertains more to what is called 'the norm of reciprocity', which holds that for any relationship to work, there must be equal, or more, benefit than detriment to be had from it.²⁸ Therefore, for example, constantly complaining or cruel older persons, or those who are unable to engage with emerging technologies are likely to be the recipients of less time-investment on the part of family and carers, while those who retain an active and positive role the lives of those around them are likely to experience positive experiential returns on these investments of their time, emotion and effort.

Turning now to my chosen fictional sources: I have drawn my primary sources from novels published and films produced during the 1990s and 2000s, a period concurrent with the growing consensus of a need for changing attitudes toward ageing (as related above) within the field of social gerontology. Coincidentally, these have also been the years of my own early adulthood, during which I realised that I have been absorbing notions and unconsciously creating my own ideas about what I think positive ageing is. I first met Ulysses when I was 24, and Armande when I was 26, and now, at 39, just as I am told it is wise to provide for my future financially, I am trying to consciously amass a fund of positive role-models of ageing; squirreling away ideas and inspiration against the days that I will need to draw on them.

A third reason that I have chosen this period is because these time limits of publication run concurrent with an increasing social focus on projected generations

²⁷ Hillier and Barrow, p. 79.

²⁸ Hillier and Barrow, p. 80.

of older people being much older for much longer than any preceding generations. This possibility is owing to various factors, including better knowledge of what constitutes good nutrition and healthy lifestyle practice, better understanding of the causes and prevention of serious diseases and better medical interventions.²⁹

Finally, I chose this timeframe simply because the pickings lately are so rich. This is not to say that there are not a lot of novels about ageing that have been written before this time that are not wonderful or that do not have very valuable things to say about ageing. There were, they do, and other people have already written about them because of this.³⁰

My own thesis is divided into four chapters; each taking as its inspiration and title an extract from Tennyson's poem. In Chapter One, I examine the characters M from the film *Skyfall*, and Sheriff Ed Tom Bell from Cormac McCarthy's novel *No Country for Old Men* in order to challenge the assumption that to be older necessarily means becoming obsolete or out of touch with the realities of the world around us.³¹

In Chapter Two, I examine the choices made by two older female characters, Evelyn Greenslade and Muriel Donnelly from the film *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (and Deborah Moggach's novel *These Foolish Things*, on which it is based), as they each travel to India, confronting personal fears and limitations as they do so, and evolving as a result.³²

In Chapter Three, I examine narratives that show that retirement and older age can, and should, be a time of personal opportunity to do new things, finish old business, and pass on knowledge and wisdom. I also pay attention to the notion of narrative integrity; the taking of a life story to its best possible end point, in keeping with the life that has been before. The characters examined are Santiago in Aleksandr

²⁹ Bowling and Dieppe, p. 1548.

³⁰ Jennifer Mary Irving, 'Reading the Ageing Woman: The Crone in Fiction' (unpublished MA thesis, University of Waikato, 2000), and Amelia de Falco, are two excellent examples of such writers.

³¹ *Skyfall*, dir. by Sam Mendes (MGM, Twentieth Century Fox, 2012) [on DVD]; *No Country for Old Men*, dir. by Ethan and Joel Coen (Paramount Vantage, 2007) [on DVD]; Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men* (London: Picador, 2007).

³² Deborah Moggach, *These Foolish Things* (London: Vintage, 2004); *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, dir. by John Madden (Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 2012) [on DVD].

Petrov's ink-on-glass film version of Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1999), Selma in *Guppies for Tea* by Marika Cobbold (1993), Noah and Allie in Nicholas Spark's novella *The Notebook*, Fiona in Alice Munro's short story 'The Bear Came Over the Mountain', Graham Dashwood in the film *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, and Harold Fry in Rachel Joyce's novel *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*.³³

In Chapter Four, I celebrate characters who fulfil Ulysses' own determination to live life to the fullest, both emotionally and sensually – in most cases embracing the 'more' that they are unexpectedly presented with, but in one notable case - that of Armande Voisin in Joanne Harris' novel *Chocolat* - eating, drinking and being merry before meeting death on their own terms rather than choosing to drain the dregs of suffering. The other characters focussed on in this chapter are Allan Karlsson from Jonas Jonasson's novel *The 100-year-old Man who Climbed out the Window and Disappeared*, Major Pettigrew from Helen Simonson's novel *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*, and Arthur in the film *Song for Marion*.³⁴

³³ *The Old Man and the Sea*, dir. by Aleksandr Petrov (Filmoption International, 1999) [on DVD]; Marika Cobbold, *Guppies for Tea* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993); Nicholas Sparks, *The Notebook* (New York: Warner Books, 1996); Alice Munro, 'The Bear Came Over the Mountain', in *The New Yorker*, 27 December 1999
<http://www.newyorker.com/archive/1999/12/27/1999_12_27_110_TNY_LIBRY_000019900> [accessed 20/03/2013]; Rachel Joyce, *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry* (New York: Random House, 2012).

³⁴ Joanne Harris, *Chocolat* (London: Transworld, 1999); Jonas Jonasson, *The 100-year-old Man who Climbed out the Window and Disappeared*, trans. by Rod Bradbury (New York: Hyperion Books, 2013); Helen Simonson, *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010); *Song for Marion*, dir. by Paul Andrew Williams (Entertainment One, 2013) [on DVD].

CHAPTER ONE

Much have I seen and known; cities of men
And manners, climates, councils, governments.

(‘Ulysses’ ll. 13-14)

‘Old people are “fuddy-duddies”... “Over the hill”[...] [t]hey’ve “gone to seed”’.¹ Thus, Sam Snape highlights some of the prevalent attitudes held toward the elderly in a world that is interested in moving forward, and doing things bigger (or is it just smaller now?), better, and above all faster. But then, old age has long been defined and attended by both hopelessness and obsolescence. Shakespeare’s poor wreck of humanity, trapped in an effete ‘second childishness’, robbed of all faculties, and consigned to ‘mere oblivion’ implies that the slow disintegration of both the body and faculties is all that is to be expected as the years advance.²

This chapter examines the narratives of two strong and competent older characters at the height of their careers - M from the movie *Skyfall*, and Sheriff Ed Tom Bell from Cormac McCarthy’s novel *No Country for Old Men* (and the Coen brothers’ film of the same name) - who give these old stereotypes the lie, showing that being older – rather than necessarily being a liability - can just mean being smarter and having more experience of life - and a more expansive knowledge-base - when it comes to seeing the big picture in times when judgement is critical and good decisions are vital. I begin with an examination of the ageist prejudices that M encounters in *Skyfall*, which are a perfect example of the negative skew that Margaret Morganroth Gullette and Peter Lloyd-Sherlock, among others, note continues to be dominant in discussions of ageing.³

¹ Sam Snape, ‘Ageism in Popular Culture’, in *Old Age and Ageing in British and American Culture and Literature*, ed. by Christa Jahson (Münster: Lit, 2004), pp. 213-229 (pp. 213-4). p. 216.

² Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act 2, Sc.7, ll.165-6, in *Shakespeare: Complete Works*, rev. edn (London: Arden, 2011), p. 173.

³ Gullette, p. 13, and Lloyd-Sherlock, p. 5.

M

A Bond film may not seem the most obvious of places to look for or find examples of positive ageing, unless of course one were to view the multitudinous on-screen sexual conquests of the actor Sean Connery in the title role as being evidence of such. However, even though the classic older man-younger woman, May-to-December scenario does speak to the possibility that the prospects of love and sex need not necessarily vanish as the years draw in, the Bond franchise has never really been about love, or anything else of real worth for that matter. Since the mid-1990s, though, the character M, as played by Dame Judi Dench, has lent a quantum of gravitas to the films. The initial casting of Dame Judi opposite Pierce Brosnan's Bond in *Goldeneye* (1995) seemed to signal that the franchise had moved on at least a little in terms of no longer just being a men's club incapable of considering penetrating issues beyond the realm of the trouser regions. It is in particular the farewelling of Dench as M in the 2012 film *Skyfall* that I will be focussing on here, because it is very definitely 'M's film' and not simply an ordinary, run-of-the-mill Bond film.⁴

Dame Judi as M has appeared as a supporting character in the Bond films *Goldeneye* (1995), *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997), *The World Is Not Enough* (1999), *Die Another Day* (2002), *Casino Royale* (2006), and *A Quantum of Solace* (2008). In *Skyfall* (2012), however, her character is pivotal, as a close examination of several of the motifs and tropes used in the film will show. In the film there is, of course, the usual violence (with about the usual quota of it being directed towards the 'Bond girl' character), the usual villainous plot, and plenty of shooting. However, alongside of all these obligatory franchise hooks, the film also presents a thoughtful consideration of what it can mean for one's career, when one is seen to be ageing, and questions of competence arise.

⁴ *Skyfall* is the final Bond film to feature Dame Judi Dench. Interestingly, this is quite possibly because in real life she has been contending with macular degeneration - a fact which may have caused her to be viewed as a liability to the franchise. Press Association, *The Guardian*, Sunday 23 February, 2014, 'Judi Dench 'can't read anymore' due to failing eyesight' <<http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2014/feb/23/judi-dench-failing-eyesight>> [accessed 20 March 2014] (para. 2 of 10).

In *Skyfall*, the theft of classified information is what ostensibly leads to the questioning of M's competence in her role as the head of MI6. The stolen intelligence is a list of the real identities of MI6 undercover agents, which Bond is then sent on a mission to retrieve. It is Bond's failure to do so which occasions a meeting between M and Gareth Mallory, who is 'the new chairman of the Intelligence and Security Committee'.⁵ At this meeting, M is informed that she will go into 'voluntary retirement' at the end of her current contract in three months' time. A detail which is pivotal to the film is that Bond's lack of success on the mission is the result of an order given by M to the field agent Money Penny to 'take the shot' that she has lined up at Bond as he wrestles with the enemy operative Patrice atop a train for possession of the flash drive which contains the list of names.⁶

M has already pointed out to Bond and Money Penny that they 'both know what's at stake here. We cannot afford to lose that list'.⁷ She later reiterates to Bond at their first meeting after his return that she 'made a judgement call', saying to him that 'it was the possibility of losing you or the certainty of losing all those other agents'.⁸ She also points out to him that he knows 'the rules of the game' regarding the sorts of situations that agents find themselves in, pointing out that he has 'been playing it long enough'.⁹ When Bond suggests that maybe he has been playing it 'too long', M's rejoinder, 'Well, if you believe that then why did you come back?' reinforces her personal emphasis on full commitment to getting the job at hand done.¹⁰

Directly following the meeting between M and Mallory described above, we find that the villain of the piece, Silva, has orchestrated the bombing of M's office while she is absent - an act of terrorism which results in the death of eight MI6 employees and is part of a series of sophisticated technological attacks designed to both unnerve M and attract her attention. It emerges that Silva is the person who commissioned the theft of the list of names, and that he has since launched an

⁵ *Skyfall*, 28:6-7.

⁶ *Skyfall*, 11:31.

⁷ *Skyfall*, 4:04-4:06.

⁸ *Skyfall*, 25:22-25:29.

⁹ *Skyfall*, 25:40.

¹⁰ *Skyfall*, 25:52.

internet campaign to expose the identities of the undercover agents. The execution-style deaths of the first five agents whose names have been published are then broadcast on YouTube. The deaths of these agents and the bombing of the MI6 headquarters lead to a government enquiry into both the competence of M, and the overall effectiveness of MI6, which is led by MP Claire Dower, the Minister for Security.

Dower's agenda at the enquiry is clearly to pin the entire crisis on M, as she accuses her of having 'old fashioned belief[s]', as well as a 'reckless disregard' for her responsibilities towards the staff under her care.¹¹ She also alleges that M has allowed 'monumental security breaches' to occur under her jurisdiction.¹² The clear implication of the first accusation is that it is M's age that has landed her in the metaphorical hot seat, and not anything that she has overseen, done, or neglected to do. She is simply being treated as a scapegoat, based upon an unproven and ageist assumption that she is too old to do the job.

The tenor of Dower's accusations implies that it is a question of anybody being able to make an error of judgement in the heat of the moment (as with the shot that hit Bond), but only those with white hair being deemed capable of putting a whole government department in jeopardy, and, by association, causing it to be deemed 'irrelevant' and anachronistic.¹³ Granted, any head of a government department would be facing an enquiry under similar circumstances to the ones M finds herself in in *Skyfall*, but it just so happens that the hair on M's head is white, and so, rather than looking for the true causes of the problem and the facts of the matter, the government finds it easier to just cull perceived dead wood, even in the absence of any evidence of actual incompetence. As Mowl, Pain, and Talbot note, '[o]n the basis of physical appearance, we read and label age in others'.¹⁴ However, M's declaration that she will 'find whoever did this', although unheard by Dower, is further proof of her commitment to, and clear understanding of, her role, providing

¹¹ *Skyfall*, 1:33:05-08.

¹² *Skyfall*, 1:24:35.

¹³ *Skyfall*, 1:35:12.

¹⁴ Graham Mowl, Rachel Pain and Carol Talbot, 'The Ageing Body and the Homespace', in *Area*, 32: 2 (2000), 189-197 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20004057>> [accessed 01/04/2013] (p. 190).

yet another clear argument against Minister Dower's accusations of her lack of regard for the gravity of her decisions and her alleged unsuitability for her position.¹⁵

Following the enquiry, Money Penny is disciplined for obeying M's order to shoot, while M is in effect held responsible for the actions of Silva. We later learn that he was once an MI6 agent, gone rogue, who M sacrificed to the Chinese in the interests of the agency's integrity and 'a peaceful handover' of Hong Kong – a decision which she later explains to Bond gained her 'six agents in return' and was therefore a politically sound strategic manoeuvre.¹⁶ Silva's psychopathic revenge agenda is his own issue, and nothing to do with M's competence.¹⁷ Both directives of M's, along with her later declaration to Silva that '[r]egret is unprofessional', background effectively the notion that M is a woman who both has been, and still is, firm in her decision-making in the line of duty, who is not afraid to take charge and, when necessary, take responsibility for the things that go wrong on her watch.¹⁸

As she makes clear in her interview with Mallory, she will continue to do so until she is ready to leave her position according to her own lights:

M: 'I'm not an idiot Mallory. I know I can't do this job forever, but I'll be damned if I'm going to leave the department in worse shape than I found it'.

Mallory: 'M, you've had a great run. You should leave with dignity'.

M: 'Oh, to hell with dignity! I'll leave when the job's done'.¹⁹

M's emphasis on commitment to service is underlined many times throughout the film, and the importance of Mallory's acknowledgement of her history of successful leadership here is not something to be ignored in an assessment of her competence.

¹⁵ *Skyfall*, 24:04.

¹⁶ *Skyfall*, 1:22:09-23.

¹⁷ Something has been made by critics of the Freudian aspects of both Silva's obsession, and Bond's relationship with, M in *Skyfall*. I do not propose to address these issues here, since, within the context of my own topic, that would compare to writing about the small bridge in the background of the Mona Lisa. There is indeed one there, but it would be a shame to get distracted by it when the main subject is so compelling. I would direct anyone interested in reading an accomplished commentary on Freud and the subject of ageing to Amelia de Falco's published PhD thesis *Uncanny Subjects*.

¹⁸ *Skyfall*, 1:19:02.

¹⁹ *Skyfall*, 18:27-42.

A poignant motif that reoccurs in three separate scenes in the film (when Bond is first shot, when she is drafting his obituary, and when he returns to London from his retreat into anonymity and presumed death and awaits M in her flat), is heavy rain forming tears that trickle down the window panes in close proximity to M, while she remains inside and separate from it in the first two of these three scenes. In the scene where she is working on the obituary the camera further reinforces the distinction between private grief and public duty by panning down from M's impassive face to the bulldog on her desk, implying that British fortitude must come before all else, and, for her, does.²⁰ In the third scene, when she must confront Bond - symbolised by her having to walk through the rain – she berates him for his absence from his duties.

However, by contrast to these clear indications of M's correct focus, in the film the notion of her being past it, and her department irrelevant to the modern world is embodied in the motif of J.M.W. Turner's 1838 oil painting of the battleship HMS *Temeraire*, 'The Fighting Temeraire Tugged to Her Last Berth to be Broken Up'. Sam Willis describes Turner's painting as 'a sophisticated comment on past, present and future', portraying as it does a steam tug hauling a de-masted sailing warship away for scrapping. Here it is employed as a metaphor for M's imputed age-related incompetence, her prospective forced retirement, and the alleged obsolescence and ineffectuality of MI6.²¹ However, in addition to this reading of the painting, it is of note that HMS *Temeraire* was one of Admiral Horatio Nelson's ships at the Battle of Trafalgar. Turner's painting therefore serves a more complex function in the film and has its accepted symbolism turned on its head. It is not coincidental that the Battle of Trafalgar saw the death of Nelson, while *Skyfall* farewells Dame Judi Dench as M. Furthermore, just as Nelson was noted for his 'courage, leadership [...] and tactical skill', in *Skyfall* M is seen to take decisive tactical risks - also on behalf of England - while simultaneously demonstrating a superb understanding of her times, in the crisis of national security that she is facing.²²

²⁰ *Skyfall*, 1:45:55-57.

²¹ Sam Willis, *The Fighting Temeraire: Legend of Trafalgar* (London: Quercus, 2010), p. 265.

²² Mark Adkin, *The Trafalgar Companion: A Guide to History's Most Famous Sea Battle and the Life of Admiral Lord Nelson* (London: Aurum Press, 2007), p. 8.

That this denser reading of the painting's significance is not merely construed to suit, or accidental, is demonstrated by the fact that in the final scene of the film (which takes place between Bond and Mallory in the latter's office after Mallory has taken over M's role), another painting of a ship is juxtaposed on the back wall between the two men. Upon closer examination, this painting turns out to be 'HMS *Victory* Heavily Engaged at the Battle of Trafalgar', attributed to the painter Thomas Buttersworth.²³ The painting captures the moment in the Battle of Trafalgar when Admiral Nelson is informed that the British have won, before he himself dies. The implication is made doubly clear when we consider that Silva, the villain of the piece, just happens to be Spanish.

In the film, the first rendezvous between the characters Q and Bond takes place at the National Gallery in front of Turner's work. Observing the painting, Q comments that it 'makes [him] feel a little melancholy – a grand old warship being ignominiously hauled away for scrap'.²⁴ He then suggests that the painting is a symbol for 'the inevitability of time' ('time' here by clear implication correlating to M's age and her impending forced retirement).²⁵ Bond replies that all he sees is a 'bloody big ship'.²⁶ As he stands up, uninterested, to walk away, the following exchange takes place:

Q: 'I'm your new quartermaster.'

Bond: 'You must be joking.'

Q: 'Why, because I'm not wearing a lab coat?'

Bond: 'Because you still have spots.'

Q: 'My complexion is hardly relevant.'

Bond: 'Your competence is.'

Q: 'Age is no guarantee of efficiency.'

Bond: 'And youth is no guarantee of innovation.'²⁷

The scene is a beautifully orchestrated comment about the reliability of judging books solely by their covers as both Mallory and Dower are doing to M.

²³ Judith I. Bridgeland, 'Skyfall and the Painting in M's Office' <<http://jibridgeland.blogspot.co.nz/2012/11/skyfall-and-painting-in-ms-office.html>> [accessed 15 June 2013].

²⁴ *Skyfall*, 37:25-8.

²⁵ *Skyfall*, 37:28.

²⁶ *Skyfall*, 37:45.

²⁷ *Skyfall*, 37:53-38:08.

Q goes on to boast to Bond that with all of the technology he has at his disposal he can do far more damage ‘before [his] first cup of Earl Grey’ than Bond could ever achieve one-to-one in the field.²⁸ In ironic testament to this assertion, a little while later Q obligingly facilitates a breach of MI6 security that is second only to Silva’s hacking incursions, and, in doing so, allows Silva to escape custody. In a display of pure and simple incompetence, let alone inefficiency, Q plugs Silva’s laptop into the MI6 mainframe instead of linking it to an isolated computer in order to examine its contents. This is a rookie move not at all in keeping with even the most basic knowledge of anti-hacking protocols that someone at Q’s clearance level should have. Apparently, despite his callow confidence, *youth* is no guarantee of efficiency, or competence either, and, as Silva points out to Q via a graphic on his laptop screen following the hacking, he is ‘not such a clever boy’ after all. However (highlighting again the injustice of the accusations against M) no mention is made of Q being disciplined as a result of this glaring error. Yet he has been seen to have failed in basic protocol.

Returning to Q’s observation about time, we see a socially fatal presumption at work in his attitude. Haim Hazan points out that ‘[f]or the physician, senile dementia is a condition in which the blood vessels in the brain become clogged, reducing the supply of blood to the brain cells [...] leading to the [...] consequent loss of certain emotional and cognitive capacities’.²⁹ He goes on to observe that the ‘[f]ailure to distinguish genuine psychological senility from imputed social senility reinforces the notion that gradual biological deterioration (resulting in mental erosion) is inevitable, uncontrollable, and irreversible’.³⁰ He notes that the result of such assumptions is that ‘[t]he concept of senility, supported by the image of ageing as an illness, serves as an umbrella interpretation so wide that few old people can escape its range’.³¹ In *Skyfall* we definitely see M trapped beneath the shadow of this unhelpful umbrella.

²⁸ *Skyfall*, 38:12-13.

²⁹ Hazan, p. 29.

³⁰ Hazan, p. 30.

³¹ Hazan, p. 30.

The implication of Q's words is that the passage of time must naturally lead to the obsolescence, not only of machines, but also people. Paul Ricoeur however comments that 'time becomes human time to the extent that it is organised after the manner of narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience'.³² Amelia de Falco, who is quoting Ricoeur in this instance observes that '[i]n other words, human temporality makes self-understanding the result of narrative, a causal relationship that becomes increasingly obvious as subjects age'.³³ Time not only promotes 'self-understanding', but understanding of many other things as well. Time can add wisdom and insight that someone lacking those years of experience has not yet had the opportunity to develop, as is demonstrated by both Q's bumbling idiocy and M's ability to take the long view of the current crisis.

Since Mallory refers to the plan to remove M from her role as 'retirement planning', it is safe to assume that she is somewhere in her early sixties.³⁴ Not only does this not even begin to qualify M as 'old old' (with that term's associated implications of increased frailty), there are other factors that seemingly ought to militate against M's competence being questioned. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word 'senile' as meaning 'having or showing the weaknesses or diseases of old age, especially a loss of mental faculties'.³⁵ However, though these criteria - weakness, disease, loss of faculties and old age - collocate nicely on the page, it should be noted for practical purposes that not all older persons exhibit these debilities, as M herself demonstrates.³⁶ Sam Snape observes that ageism often plays an important role as a deciding factor in how we as a society assess the worth of an individual, and points out that although it is primarily based upon the outward and observable indications that a person is older (such as grey hair and wrinkles), it is in fact a multi-criteria judgement system.

Snape relates an encounter he witnessed in a German supermarket between a young

³² De Falco, p. 22.

³³ De Falco, p. 22.

³⁴ *Skyfall*, 18:05.

³⁵ *Oxford Dictionaries* <<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/senile>> [accessed 19 May 2014].

³⁶ Bjorklund and Bee, p. 125.

checkout operator and an older woman whose ‘clothes were threadbare [...] [and] comfortable’, and who exhibited ‘anxiety about [...] euro coins’ (a currency just then coming into use in that country). The checkout girl repeatedly rolled her eyes at the waiting line of customers, sighing audibly as the woman struggled to find the correct change. Snape explains that, in this particular case, it may have been particularly easy for the checkout girl to justify her public humiliation of the old woman because, in addition to her age, her manner of dress demonstrated that she was also evidently at the poorer end of the social strata, and, in addition, did not pay attention to her appearance, two factors that Western society discriminates against even in the young.³⁷

It is interesting to note the strength of just this one criterion - observable age as discussed by Snape - in relation to how M herself is publicly humiliated by the Minister at the enquiry. In terms of showing her age outwardly, M does have wrinkles and white hair, but her character does not personify any of the other social indicators that made that real-life instance of the discrimination and humiliation of the older lady in the supermarket so easy. M dresses in snappy suits; without fail, looks elegant, and speaks authoritatively with an upper class accent.³⁸ And, with that authoritative voice, she effectively counters the Minister’s accusation that both she and her department are out of touch with the current realities of global terrorism by observing that:

‘our enemies are no longer known to us. They do not exist on a map. They’re not nations. They are individuals [...] Our world is not more transparent now. It’s more opaque. It’s in the shadows. That’s where we must do battle. So, before you declare us irrelevant, ask yourselves, how safe do you feel?’³⁹

Bearing in mind that this speech in the film is being watched by a real-world audience that has witnessed the likes of 9/11, the London bombings that followed and, more recently, events such as the bombing of the Boston marathon, M’s line of

³⁷ Snape, pp. 213-4.

³⁸ It is worth noting that, although it is easily discoverable online that the designer Tom Ford dressed the actor Daniel Craig as James Bond in *Skyfall*, or, for that matter, who designed the dresses for Naomi Harris (Money Penny), and Berenice Lim Marlohe (Severine), it is an altogether more difficult task to divine who designed M’s suits.

³⁹ *Skyfall*, 1:35:31-1:36:05.

argument is difficult to refute and proves that she in fact does have her finger very much on the pulse of modern times.

It is also - to briefly revisit Bond's comment about only seeing 'a bloody big ship' in Turner's painting - an oddly comforting detail in the film that, in a society that so frequently tends to collocate older age grammatically with inevitable insanity and folly - 'stupid old man', 'silly old cow', 'stupid old bitch', 'stubborn old fool', to pluck just a few insulting epithets from the ether - that, Bond simply calls M a plain 'bitch' when the examiner mentions her name during the word-association psychological test that forms part of his assessment for service fitness following his return to London, and not an old one.⁴⁰ Even in the insult is betrayed Bond's ongoing respect for M as a force still to be reckoned with. To Bond she remains a woman who wields power, and over him, a much younger man, at that. To Silva, whose opinions we cannot respect, because of his agenda, his actions, and not least for the fact that he is a psychopath, M is merely an 'old woman' giving orders.⁴¹

In actual fact, venerable is what M is. She dies following a drawn out battle at Skyfall Hall, after facing Silva down with dignity for the third time in the film, and after Bond has killed him, thereby effectively rendering the job that she had referred to in her first conversation with Mallory finished. Although she never lives to receive the award that Mallory had proposed as a compensation for the loss of her job - 'GCMG with full honours' - M is shown as a heroic figure.⁴² Mallory's intentions, although unfortunately patronising, were clearly designed to be kind, and to save M from the kind of humiliation that she was later subjected to at the Ministerial enquiry - 'dignity' versus the ignominy referenced earlier by Q - the audience is left in no doubt that M has in fact retained her dignity, if not become a little bit shrouded in glory. In a rooftop scene near the end of the film, in which Moneypenny delivers to Bond the china bulldog from M's old desk, Trafalgar Square and Nelson's column lie geographically behind Bond, while in the view he surveys, the Union Jack flies high above Whitehall, with Big Ben and Westminster in the distance. The shot creates another subtle link between the Battle of Trafalgar

⁴⁰ *Skyfall*, 30:48.

⁴¹ *Skyfall*, 1:10:16.

⁴² *Skyfall*, 18:13-14.

and the present, strongly implying that M has died vindicated as having been a capable, clever commander who, just as she promised Mallory, did not leave until the job was done, and, as she desired, has left MI6 and Britain in good shape to advance into a changing future.

ED TOM BELL

A stark contrast exists between M in *Skyfall* and Sheriff Ed Tom Bell, the protagonist of Cormac McCarthy's 2005 novel *No Country for Old Men* and the 2007 film of the same name directed by Ethan and Joel Coen. Although, on the surface of things, both are older authority figures confronted by crises that fall within their professional purview, both make very different decisions about continuing in their roles, which, although diametrically opposed, are nonetheless equally expressive of the personal integrity of the respective characters. Whereas M is driven by a belief in duty before all else and refuses to retire until the crisis triggered by Silva has been resolved, Ed Tom is engaged in a more spiritual consideration of the potential consequences of continuing to do his duty and decides to retire from his post, having realised that his current case is one among many similar instances of a new breed of crime that he does not wish to confront any more every day.

Therefore, whereas M's determination to see Silva brought to justice is comparable to Ulysses' resolution 'to strive [...] seek [...] find [...] and not [...] yield' (), Ed Tom embodies Ulysses' realisation that 'of one [life] [...] | Little remains: but every hour is saved | From that eternal' (), inasmuch as he relinquishes his responsibilities after realising that life holds things of real value that the constant horrors he encounters in his work threaten to destroy. The nature of his job is becoming problematical to him and he realises that it will potentially corrupt his soul.

'It aint just bein older. I wish that it was. I cant say that it's even what you are willin to do. Because I always knew you had to be willin to die to even do this job. That was always true [...] I think it is more like what you are willin to become. And I think a man would have to put his

soul at hazard. And I wont do that. I think now that maybe I never would'.⁴³

The words of the title of McCarthy's novel are borrowed directly from the start of William Butler Yeats' poem *Sailing to Byzantium*. The lines refer to a world preoccupied with the here and now, '[t]he young | In one another's arms' (Stanza 1, ll. 1-2), seduced by the rhythm of the zeitgeist, and with no heed of anything beyond the moment 'neglect[ing] | Monuments of unageing intellect' (Stanza 1, ll. 7-8)⁴⁴. Yeats said of the reasons why he wrote the poem that 'I am trying to write about the state of my soul, for it is right for an old man to make his soul'.⁴⁵ In the poem, the narrator has arrived at a stage of life where he feels his own insignificance: that '[a]n aged man is but a paltry thing' (Stanza 2, l. 1).⁴⁶ He also experiences a conscious need to be part of something that comprises of what Klaus Peter Jochum describes as 'enduring values'.⁴⁷ The narrator describes himself as having 'come to Byzantium' (Stanza 2, ll. 7-8), a city which, as Yeats explained, symbolised to him 'civilisation' and 'spiritual philosophy' and in the poem stands for 'the search for the spiritual life', hoping that the sages who reside there will teach him timeless wisdoms.⁴⁸

In McCarthy's novel, Sheriff Ed Tom Bell is , as Yeats was when he wrote *Sailing to Byzantium*, an older man trying to fathom his own soul - weighing what he values most and recognising in the process that the world is changing, and that traditional moral values are passing away -

'People anymore you talk about right and wrong they're liable to smile at you'.⁴⁹

The new crimes that he encounters, both at first hand and via the articles he reads in newspapers, are unmistakably attended by new levels of wanton death and a

⁴³ McCarthy, p. 4.

⁴⁴ William Butler Yeats, 'Sailing to Byzantium', in *Poems of W.B. Yeats: A New Selection*, Intro. by Norman A. Jeffares (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 249-50 (p. 249).

⁴⁵ Alexander Norman Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1968), p. 253.

⁴⁶ Yeats, p. 249.

⁴⁷ Klaus Peter Jochum, "'Old Men Ought to Be Explorers': The Poet and Old Age', in *Old Age and Ageing in British and American Culture and Literature*, ed. by Christa Jahnsen (Münster: Lit, 2004), pp. 15-28 (p. 26).

⁴⁸ Jeffares, p. 254.

⁴⁹ McCarthy, p. 158.

quantum of premeditated evil that he finds it hard to take the ‘measure’ of.⁵⁰

Ulysses’ declaration ‘I mete and dole | Unequal laws unto a savage race, | That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me’ (ll. 3-5) finds an uncanny echo in Ed Tom’s assertion that the criminals he deals with now

‘dout have no respect for the law? That aint half of it. They dont even think about the law [...] ‘I think for me the worst of it is knowin that probably the only reason I’m even still alive is that they have no respect for me’.⁵¹

Just as Ulysses questions the relevance of continuing in his kingly role, Ed Tom finds himself pondering his efficacy as Sheriff in the face of what seem to him to be constantly breeding evils.

Possessed of the cumulative wisdom of his many years in his role as a lawman, yet struggling to comprehend the ways that the criminal world has changed during his career, people tell Ed Tom that he is just ‘gettin old’ when he comments on shocking events in the news (however, unlike M, his competence is never questioned).⁵² His observations are, actually, an indication of a highly reflective mind, a trait that is in fact likely due to Ed Tom’s advancing years. Robert J. Sternberg and Elena L. Grigorenko point out that:

intelligence during adulthood is characterized [...] by gains in the metacognitive ability to integrate cognitive, interpersonal, and emotional thinking in a synthetic understanding of the world, self, and others.⁵³

Ed Tom Bell is a perfect example of this synthesis of different types of intelligences. On the other hand, it could simply be the case that, as Ed Tom says, ‘[c]ommon sense aint changed’.⁵⁴

For all that Ed Tom claims to be mystified by some of the criminals he has begun to

⁵⁰ *No Country for Old Men*, dir. by Coen Bros. [on DVD], 1:59. (Further references to this film will be prefaced by the abbreviation ‘NCFOM’.

⁵¹ McCarthy, p. 217.

⁵² McCarthy, p. 196.

⁵³ Robert J Sternberg and Elena L Grigorenko, ‘Intelligence and Wisdom’, in *The Cambridge Handbook of Age and Ageing*, ed. by Malcolm Johnson, and others (New York, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 209-215 (p. 209).

⁵⁴ McCarthy, p. 62.

encounter (which include the murderer of a 14-year-old girl who claimed he had always wanted to kill someone), his lack of understanding is not the result of any kind of dullness or stupidity on his part:

‘I thought I’d never seen a person like that and it got me to wonderin if maybe he was some new kind [...] They say the eyes are the windows to the soul. I dont know what them eyes was the windows to and I guess I’d as soon not know’.⁵⁵

It is instead a matter of the murderer and his act being at vast odds with Ed Tom’s own levels of emotional and interpersonal intelligence. Even though he is incapable of empathising with the depravity and cruelty inherent in the new crimes he is seeing, he nonetheless has the acuity of insight to recognise that ‘there is another view of the world out there and other eyes to see it and that’s where this is goin’.⁵⁶

Amelia de Falco remarks that ‘age functions very much like other categories of difference, such as gender, race, and sexuality: older subjects are largely straitjacketed by their supposed otherness, offered simplistic, restrictive identities overly determined by their bodies’.⁵⁷ Thus, just as M was accused of having old-fashioned beliefs when she manifestly did not, Ed Tom’s concerns are dismissed as a by-product of ageing when he comments on the way the world is changing:

‘ever when I say anything about how the world is goin to hell in a handbasket people will just sort of smile and tell me I’m gettin old. That it’s one of the symptoms’.⁵⁸

Yet, as is clearly evidenced in the novel, the instances to which Ed Tom is reacting are not in any way related to his ageing. They are real insomuch as they are occurring in the news in the novel, and they should, by rights, shock anyone.

He reflects on having read in a newspaper about two recent crimes. The first is a story about ‘a woman [who] put her baby in a trash compactor’.⁵⁹ The second features a ‘couple out in California [who] would rent out rooms to old people and then kill em and bury em in the yard and cash their social security checks. They’d

⁵⁵ McCarthy, pp. 3-4.

⁵⁶ McCarthy, p. 4.

⁵⁷ De Falco, p. 17.

⁵⁸ McCarthy, p. 196.

⁵⁹ McCarthy, p. 40.

torture em first'⁶⁰, and Ed Tom's response, 'Who would think of such a thing?' is the type of comment that a lot of people might make when confronted with such gruesome details in the news. Although he is clearly unable to comprehend the kinds of minds that would lead people to behave in such ways, Ed Tom is not actually out of touch with the world at all. If anything, he sees it more accurately for evidently not having become desensitized to its horrors. In defence of his position, Ed Tom refers to an experiment he read about, in which a historic survey of teachers was found and the blank survey sheets copied and re-sent to schools with the teachers surveyed reporting a whole new class of problems with student conduct:

'my feelin about that is that anybody that cant tell the difference between rapin and murderin people and chewin gum has got a whole lot bigger of a problem than what I've got'.⁶¹

It is difficult to fault such logic.

Set in contrast to the accumulated wisdom evinced by the Sheriff, another main character in McCarthy's novel, Llewelyn Moss, embodies the 'live for the now' attitudes of the young in Yeats' poem. One day while out hunting antelope, Moss happens upon the remains of a drug deal gone wrong and finds a document case 'level full of hundred dollar banknotes' which he takes back to his trailer with him, seduced by the idea of a debt- and work-free life.⁶² The sort of wisdom that both Yeats and Ed Tom recognise should tell him that this is a recipe for trouble, and indeed it does, as evidenced when he asks his wife the question 'Baby, at what point would you quit bothering to look for your two million?'⁶³

However, with a laissez-faire attitude similar to that of the young generation in Yeats' poem, he chooses to ignore this instinctive knowledge and ends up dead. His theft of the cash, which has a tracking device hidden in amongst it, sets the psychopathic hit-man Anton Chigurh on his trail. Bereft of conventional morals and yet pedantically obsessed with executing his own brand of justice, the carnage which Chigurh leaves in his wake embodies Yeats' meditation on the omnipresence

⁶⁰ McCarthy, p. 124.

⁶¹ McCarthy, p. 196.

⁶² McCarthy, p. 17.

⁶³ *NCFOM*, 25: 22-25.

of death, and its capacity to devalue life.

The world that is shaping up to be the future in *No Country for Old Men* can be seen by even the not-old-yet to be potentially problematic. Leaving aside the more dramatic and sordid crimes in the novel, the more basic problem of the tendency of some youth towards self-gratification in the now at the expense of investing in things of true importance is alluded to when Ed Tom mentions a conversation between himself and his wife, having read about the numbers of children being raised by their grandparents:

‘[w]hat we thought was that when the next generation come along and they dont want to raise their children neither then who is goin to do it? Their own parents will be the only grandparents around and they wouldnt even raise them’.⁶⁴

This phenomenon argues for the continuing usefulness of the old values and wisdoms that Ed Tom so often finds people derisively dismissing. The growing anomie that Ed Tom observes in the world around him is predominantly noticeable to him because of his job. If he were not a lawman, then he might well read as simply a stereotypical grumpy old man, lamenting that the world is no longer as it was - which gives pause for thought as to the potential value of lending an open ear to the observations of curmudgeons and also not necessarily labelling them as such. As it is, Ed Tom’s professional status lends him credibility in the eye of the reader, and so the world is seen for what it actually is, as becoming a crazy place, rather than simply Ed Tom losing the capacity to deal with it.

In the course of his job, he has seen carnage that most people do not get to and could not handle well if they did. Armed mostly just with his own reason in the face of all this craziness he has come to certain realisations, among which is his conclusion that:

‘It takes very little to govern good people [...] And bad people cant be governed at all. Or if they could I never heard of it’.⁶⁵

Faced with such a revelation, it would take a belief that a greater good was being achieved to keep going to work day after day, but, clearly, Ed Tom no longer feels

⁶⁴ McCarthy, p. 159.

⁶⁵ McCarthy, p. 64.

this way. The duty with which he is tasked is akin to both the punishment of Sisyphus and Hercules' battle against the Hydra. Both Ed Tom's common sense and his years of experience allow him to see the potential danger in trying to keep saving his small corner of the world but forfeiting the things that he holds dear in the process. There is a saying that 'it takes a thief to catch a thief', and we have been shown that Ed Tom does not think like the people he is expected to bring to justice. This is what he means when he talks about having to become someone different in order to do the job.

For Ed Tom, that is too high a price to pay, even though, as one of the more humorous scenes in the Coen brothers' film shows, his prospective retirement will deprive law enforcement in his local area of a much-needed fund of observational skills and therefore a valuable resource:

Ed Tom: 'Now that's aggravating'.

Deputy: 'Sheriff?'

Ed Tom: [Looking at milk bottle on table] 'Still sweating'.

Deputy: 'Oh, Sheriff. We just missed him. We gotta circulate this on radio'.

Ed Tom: 'Alright, but what do we circulate? Looking for a man who has recently drunk milk?'⁶⁶

The final scene of the film finds Ed Tom retired and at home eating breakfast, his wife strongly hinting that he had better not begin to get under her feet. In such a setting, Ed Tom initially seems all of a sudden powerless, having gone from being a wise man in a position of power to a man with no defined role in life. He recounts to his wife a dream he had the night before, in which his father 'carryin fire in a horn, the way people used to do [...] was goin on ahead [...] fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold'.⁶⁷ The imagery in the scene implies that it will always be respect for some of the old things - basic courtesies, respect for your fellow man - that is the key to shining a light in the darkness of the way the world is becoming.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ *NCFOM*, 35:11-29.

⁶⁷ McCarthy, p. 309.

⁶⁸ *NCFOM*, 1:52:17-19.

In refusing to meet evil on its own terms and surrender to it, and deciding instead to hold fast to believing that things should be different, Ed Tom has made an heroic stand against the encroaching dark, by refusing to accept it as normal. Ed Tom's reaction to the gruesomeness in life is shining a light just as much as his father does in his dream. It has been made clear that he could not guarantee to do this in his job, since by the end of the novel Chigurh is still on the loose and there is no suggestion that justice will be served in any sense beyond the kill-or-be-killed ethos of the druglords' gangs, and the implication is that the newspaper stories will continue to proliferate in all their bizarre sordidness. Beyond having some big shoes to fill, what will happen to the local Sheriff's department in Ed Tom's absence is not clear, but it is clear that something will need to change now that he has drawn his line in the sand. Not least, Ed Tom himself will need to find new ways of filling his days.

In Chapter Two, I pick up this theme of finding new ways of living one's life in older age. I explore Ulysses' assertion that in our advanced years it is 'not too late to seek a newer world' (l. 57), via an examination of two older female characters – Evelyn Greenslade and Muriel Donnelly from the film *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*. Just as both M and Ed Tom have demonstrated the value of a lifetime of knowledge and perspective, these two characters find themselves drawing on the skills that they have accumulated – in Evelyn's case some that she did not even know she had. Both characters show that a willingness to abandon old mind-sets and treat life as an adventure full of possibilities is essential to tipping the balance, that Margaret Morganroth Gullette posits is poised so delicately between 'progress and decline' as we age, in favour of the former outcome.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Gullette, p. 19.

CHAPTER TWO

‘Tis not too late to seek a newer world
(Ulysses, l. 57)

Ulysses, prior to making the decisive declaration quoted above, notes the distinction between mere existence and real living, observing that the one is not the other:

How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust, unburnish’d, not to shine in use,
As tho’ to breathe were life. (ll. 22-24)

In these lines we see Ulysses mentally wrestling with the frustrating limitations of what Margaret Morganroth Gullette refers to as the ‘authoritative narrative’ of ‘decline’ regarding ageing, which expects that, upon the attainment of a certain age, or a related stage of life such as retirement, one reaches a point where one is almost duty-bound to do nothing further in life except moulder and die.¹ It is easy to imagine how such an expectation could reduce one to a state where the disparity between breathing and truly living would become manifestly obvious to a very dispiriting degree.

Haim Hazan, referring specifically to retirement - the same issue that Ulysses is contemplating - observes that it ‘might be conceived as [...] a rite of passage [...] but it confers [...] no social future’.² In this regard it therefore differs markedly from those rites of passage that serve as gateways to the excitement and potential of life, such as sweet-sixteens, twenty-first birthday parties, weddings, and the first ultrasound scans of new babies, to name a few life events that hold significant promise for those experiencing them. Gullette sums the overall situation up by saying that, as we age ‘[l]ife storytelling becomes more edgily poised within the binary of progress

¹ Gullette, p. 13.

² Hazan, p. 66.

versus decline'.³

It follows from the nature of precipices that such a state could be immensely frightening, and the accompanying nervousness potentially counterproductive to efforts to sway the balance in favour of one's progress. The goal then, drawing from the accepted wisdoms that deal with encountering precipices, is to walk so that one does not find oneself too close to the edge. In practical terms, this means having a suitably large, hitherto acquired and cultivated collection of transferable skills and helpful attitudes towards life, such as a willingness to embrace new things rather than seeing change as something that must be resisted or complained about. As Christine Overall observes:

So-called heroic measures to keep very elderly persons alive in their last months or years, when they may be suffering from advanced cases of cancer, Alzheimers or heart disease cannot have a retrospective effect on the earlier stages of individual lives.⁴

Therefore, one cannot begin ageing well once one has already become old and infirm. Brita Larenz agrees that the whole of life is a process of continual ageing, and, in order to aim to live out a long and 'dependence-free life', ageing well must be done throughout one's life.⁵

Ulysses also specifies that the voyage of old age is best undertaken if one is well-prepared for it. One should be 'sitting well in order' (l. 58) first. We should live our lives in such a way that advancing age, in and of itself, should be no barrier to continuing achievement or new learning, but rather, a spur to it. As Haim Hazan observes:

³ Gullette, p. 19.

⁴ Overall, Christine, *Ageing, Death, & Human Longevity – A Philosophical Enquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 8.

⁵ 'Growing old is a period of life which one can actively and positively influence if one starts early enough [...] [it] has as much to do with personal responsibility, in the sense of positive anti-ageing, with nutrition, adequate exercise, mental flexibility and making the best of the problems of ageing'. Brita Larenz, 'Old Age and Ageing in Medicine', in *Old Age and Ageing in British and American Culture and Literature*, ed. by Christa Jahanson, (Münster: Lit, 2004), pp. 9-14 (p.14).

notwithstanding motoric and sensory deficiencies associated with the ageing process [...] when equal opportunities are granted to elderly students and personal motivation meets with social approval, they are capable of pursuing any course of study.⁶

Therefore, in many cases, it is merely society's attitudes that bar the way to new ways of thinking about ageing.

We have spent so long cultivating, accepting and perpetuating negative narratives of the ageing process that, as Christine Overall points out:

we do not [...] fully comprehend what is possible from those who are enabled to live healthy longer lives. Nor do we know what human lives would be like if they were not inevitably structured by 'stages' replete with an ideology of expected decline.⁷

As a society, we should be seriously interested in finding out what these possibilities are, and as individuals, we have the absolute right, as well as a bounden duty to explore them and, in the process, shatter redundant definitions of what it means to be older.

As Amelia de Falco notes:

the comparative adjective 'older' reflects the constancy of ageing, and as a result it is a perpetually accurate description of ourselves and others. But the absolutism of the noun 'old' enforces the stratification of time and identity which is arbitrary yet formative. When we are designated 'old' ... we are fixed and determined by the classification.⁸

De Falco's use of words such as 'stratification' and 'fixed and determined' creates echoes in the mind of specimens hoarded forgotten in the musty back rooms of museums; layers of long ago populated by old bones and fossils, rare butterflies pinned to a museum board with all of their once-

⁶ Hazan, p. 29.

⁷ Overall, p. 36.

⁸ De Falco, p. 127.

vivid colours faded, the dusty relics of a life that once was, wrapped up in cotton wool and warehoused. Ageing successfully in later life requires the same scope for personal growth that is taken for granted during all of the earlier stages of life, as well as the willingness to engage in it, as will be seen in this chapter.

However, an encouraging real life example of an older person who has rejected being defined by the mere factor of her advanced age can be found in Virginia, the subject of two YouTube clips that have garnered substantial views⁹. At the age of ninety-nine, still highly articulate and alert, but suffering from glaucoma, Virginia received the gift of an iPad from her family. By virtue of the greater contrast between ink and background offered by the backlit screen as compared to ink-on-paper books, this new piece of technology has enabled her to enjoy reading again, in a new way. The keypad on the iPad has also allowed her to produce poetry again, even though she cannot see her own writing. Because Virginia has been both able and willing to embrace something new, she has regained a part of her life that the physical complications of ageing had robbed her of. As she puts it “you’re never too old to take advantage of something that’ll help you”.¹⁰ Perhaps the most important part of this story is that Virginia’s family, despite her advanced numerical age, considered her to be capable of learning how to use an iPad, since she presents as a woman who is very much still mentally active, creative, and keenly interested in life. Virginia is living proof of Amelia De Falco’s assertion that ‘reassigning the cultural meaning of aging into old age is possible, and necessary.’¹¹

In this chapter, I will be examining how two characters ‘seek a newer world’ (l. 57) in John Madden’s film *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, which is based upon Deborah Moggach’s 2004 novel *These Foolish Things*. The first character I focus on is Evelyn Greenslade, a recent widow who is forced, by

⁹ ‘Virginia’s new iPad’ <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ndkIP7ec3O8>> [accessed 6 June 2013]; ‘iPad Helps 99-Year-Old Woman Rediscover Writing’ <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YqZpHTUhSYs>> [accessed 6 June 2013].

¹⁰ ‘iPad Helps 99-Year-Old Woman Rediscover Writing’, 2:16-2:20.

¹¹ De Falco, p. 128.

her husband's lack of financial provision, to create a new life for herself in order to keep living on her own terms without sacrificing her independence. For Evelyn, achieving this goal includes having to adapt to new technologies, a new culture, and also the need to find employment in order to maintain her financial independence. The second character I will examine is Muriel Donnelly, a prickly and outspoken older woman who is forced - by virtue of having her hip replacement operation outsourced to a hospital in India - to confront her racism, and also to realise that her ability to make an important contribution to the lives of others has not been lost, despite having been recently retired against her will from a long-term post as nanny and housekeeper to a young family.

I will be alluding to the characters as they appear in Moggach's novel for the purposes of contrast. I have noticed that the characters as they appear in *These Foolish Things* are negatively stereotyped, unlike the characters in the film, and fit quite comfortably within Gullette's archetypal 'narrative of decline'. By the end of the novel, Moggach's original characters have not really achieved any personal growth or forward-looking change in their lives, whereas the characters as they have been re-created for the screen transcend their initial circumstances and emerge triumphant and re-vivified by their Indian adventure at the end of the film, with new lives opening up before them.

EVELYN GREENSLADE

In Deborah Moggach's novel *These Foolish Things*, Evelyn Greenslade is introduced to the reader as a passive character, who has 'demoted' the laptop she has been given by her son 'from the dressing-table to the floor' owing to the fact that on the visit when he gave it to her, he only had a half-hour to give her a lesson in how to use it, which:

[s]he had pretended to understand – she knew how fussed he became – but for the past six months it had sat there, reproaching her for her ineptitude.¹²

As a result, she is notable for the fact that she writes her applications for the Indian retirement home ‘in longhand’.¹³ She is described as being ‘[s]uch a self-effacing woman, it was as if she were already a ghost’.¹⁴ We are informed that she has lived in Sussex all her life. However, despite this clear portrayal of her as a stereotypical older lady who doesn’t want to be any trouble to anyone, she is forced, because of her lack of initiative, to live her life in an old-fashioned way that makes her dependent on others to cater to her ways of being able to communicate. This sort of dalliance with obsolescence in today’s communication-driven, virtually-networked society courts the real possibility of her being completely socially side-lined.

Haim Hazan notes that:

In complex societies, social death precedes biological death. A person begins to lose social roles and cultural identity prior to the termination of biological existence. The interval between social death and physical death may span a period of many years, and it is one of the fundamental elements of our culture in relation to the aged.¹⁵

In Western society today, the ability to engage with technologies such as Evelyn’s discarded laptop plays an enormous part in maintaining both personal ‘social roles’ and ‘cultural identities’. Technological literacy now plays a huge part in the ability to easily and successfully negotiate many different types of everyday transactions independently - from staying on top of small financial details, to keeping up to date with what is happening in the world at large. Also, increasingly importantly in a global economy, it plays a role in maintaining connections to people with whom we are close emotionally, but who are physically located at a distant remove.

¹² Moggach, p. 38.

¹³ Moggach, p. 57.

¹⁴ Moggach, p. 89.

¹⁵ Hazan, p. 69.

Novel-Evelyn is already living in a rest home, and the only people she interacts with on a regular basis are the staff. However, despite being so dangerously poised toward ‘decline’ rather than ‘progress’, she is aware of the state of things, and, as such, we see that her situation is not beyond hope: ‘Evelyn thought suddenly: This life, it’s as if I’m dead already’.¹⁶ As Oscar Wilde once wrote: ‘[d]iscontent is the first step in the progress of a man or nation’.¹⁷ Following a conversation in which she finds out that the rest home she is living in will be closing down, she is shown a brochure by one of the staff members she has befriended, and we are informed that ‘[t]he very word *India* sharpened her senses’.¹⁸ She takes the momentous decision to make the move from England to the retirement home that she has seen advertised.

Later, once she is actually in India, she registers a recognition of the prevailing and limiting attitudes towards ageing that she has been living with at home, while she is watching the servant Jimmy, observing that ‘[i]n England, no doubt, he would long since have been put out to grass. In India, however, people seemed to carry on until they dropped.’¹⁹ A different horizon results in the assumption that being old equates with reduced capability and relevance being challenged. However, despite these insights, novel-Evelyn Greenslade never really moves beyond reflecting on the things she observes in the world around her to actually changing her life or becoming productive in any meaningful way. Therefore, while it does call attention to negative stereotypes of the elderly, and thus provokes thought, Moggach’s novel does not really offer any solutions to the problems of ageing that are observed within the narrative of the novel, and so these negative stereotypes simply end up being reinforced by the novel.

By contrast, film-Evelyn Greenslade is feisty, not afraid to speak her mind,

¹⁶ Moggach, p. 45.

¹⁷ Oscar Wilde, ‘A Woman of No Importance’, Act II, in *The Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: Collins, 1957), pp. 416-466 (p. 441).

¹⁸ Moggach, p. 46.

¹⁹ Moggach, p. 105.

and not afraid to try new things, despite the fact that her husband has hitherto managed all the practical details of her life. In the opening scenes of the film we see her struggling through a conversation with the telecommunications provider he has had an account with. As she is put on hold during a phone call which she has made in order to try and learn about accessing broadband, the music playing in background is ‘Strangers in the Night’, while outside her lounge window we see people going places, parents and children playing on a green, and people walking dogs – a rich panoply of life going on at a remove from Evelyn who is alone. The scene sadly illustrates the fate of many older people who cannot connect with society.

The choice of tune serves to highlight the disconnectedness of the corporate entity from the concerns of the recently bereaved Evelyn as an older would-be consumer. Playing music that is presumably supposed to be suitable for older customers, and yet, at same time, not relating at all to Evelyn’s situation and simply stating repeatedly that they cannot help her because she is not the account-holder, the company’s protocols show how easy it potentially is for older people to be stonewalled when they are trying to help themselves and not become dependent upon other people. The phone company’s customer service policy does not quite amount to social or institutional *disapproval* of the kind that Hazan obliquely references, but nor is it in any way helpful or encouraging to someone in a position such as Evelyn’s. However, presumably through the sort of bloody-minded persistence that sometimes prevails in such corporate-versus-individual types of stand-off, Evelyn eventually does get the broadband she was originally trying to apply for, and by the time she boards the plane to India we learn that she has successfully set herself up with a blog, posts from which feature as voiceover narrative in the film. It turns out that, despite the dismal possibilities of the opening scene, Evelyn is in fact not going to be cut off from the richness of life; she is instead going to immerse herself in it.

The character in the film retains some of the reticence of the original version

in Moggach's novel. For example, we see Evelyn apologising meekly several times as she attempts to negotiate her new life in India, and learn that she too has 'never done anything like this in the whole of [her] life', just as novel-Evelyn has always lived in the one county. However, film-Evelyn is characterised by a real determination to try new things, despite the fact that her son, who has wanted to take care of her has expressed his concerns about her exotic journey:

Son: 'You've never done anything at all without Dad. I don't think you'll be able to cope'.

Evelyn: 'Well, let's just find out, shall we?'²⁰

Evelyn clearly feels that she cannot fail herself in any worse way through her own efforts than she has done by blindly relying on her husband to manage most things during their marriage. He has left her with nothing, and, therefore, an easily surmountable performance target. Under the circumstances, there are no really suitable censures that can be applied by anyone against Evelyn going out on her own, and her determination to venture forth without guarantees echoes Ulysses' acknowledgment of the uncertainty of outcomes:

It may be that the gulfs will wash us down,

It may be that we shall touch the Happy Isles. (ll. 62-3)

Either way, Evelyn recognises that she will never know unless she tries.

Despite her brave determination, Evelyn also evinces a certain amount of obvious trepidation that is not limited to the fear that shows on her face during the bus ride to the Hotel as the Indian driver swerves into the oncoming lane. Her question 'Do you think we'll be alright?', directed to the character Graham Dashwood, who is one of the Hotel travelling party, betrays the fact that the journey to India involves no small amount of courage on her part.²¹ However, she is also seen to view it as being an adventure that is full of possibilities. As she is climbing onto the crowded

²⁰ *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, dir. by John Madden [on DVD], 14:02-14:14. (All further references to this film will be indicated by the abbreviation 'TBEMH').

²¹ *TBEMH*, 20:50.

bus that is to take the guests from the airport to the Hotel, she paraphrases the character Joe from *Great Expectations*, saying with a smile to one of the other guests ‘What larks, Pip!’ thereby implying that she holds similarly high hopes for her own adventure.²² Furthermore, although she is taking a (primarily emotional, given her husband’s lack of provision) risk in leaving the world that she has known in England for a place that she has never been to before, she is doing it in a sensible and calculated fashion. When another of the guests comments to her that she doesn’t ‘look like an experienced traveller’ she replies ‘Oh, I’m not, but one has read one’s guidebooks’, and so she is ‘sitting’ as ‘well in order’ (line 58) as she can.²³

Evelyn’s blog commentary reveals her assimilation into the strange newness of India:

‘Old habits die easier than we think and new ones form. No longer do I reach out for Radio 4. My news comes instead from the Jaipur Herald. Soon, I might even grow accustomed to the storm of car horns and vendors. Can there be anywhere else in the world that is such an assault on the senses?’²⁴

Referring to Graham Dashwood, the fellow guest who had spent his childhood in Jaipur and so has been able to help the group by arranging the bus to the Hotel when they first arrived and has also reassured her that everything would be alright, Evelyn remarks in her blog commentary that:

‘Those who know the country of old just go on about their business, but nothing can prepare the uninitiated for this riot of noise and colour’.²⁵

This remark, given the challenges we have seen Evelyn encounter and triumph over, can also be interpreted as being allegorical for the disengaged and uninitiated older person drowning in a fast-moving technological age, and as arguing against embracing a gradual process of disengagement from the world at large as we age.

²² *TBEMH*, 18:24.

²³ *TBEMH*, 16:32-34.

²⁴ *TBEMH*, 29:41.

²⁵ *TBEMH*, 29:12-29:59.

In one of her later blog commentaries, again with specific reference to India, but also carrying the undertones of a cautionary tale, Evelyn observes:

‘Initially, you are overwhelmed, but gradually, you realise it’s like a wave: resist, and you’ll be knocked over. Dive into it, and you’ll swim out the other side. This is a new and different world, and the challenge is to cope with it, and not just cope, but thrive’.²⁶

Evelyn chooses to metaphorically dive into the wave, rejoicing in the variety of the new Indian foods she encounters, learning to correctly pronounce the names of the dishes she eats, adopting an Indian style of dress, and taking an interest in the exotic culture around her, and she appears radiant.

Evelyn also likens the guests at the Hotel to:

‘Darwin’s finches ... slowly adapting to our environment. When one does adapt [...] the riches that are available!’²⁷

Within the film, the antithesis to Evelyn’s adaptive attitude is found in the rage expressed by the character Jean Ainslie, who remains at the Hotel every day refusing to venture outside and complaining about the conditions within the walls.

When she finds she cannot cope with the new world she finds herself in, she rails that:

‘This whole trip is a grotesque fantasy. It’s time we went home [...] [l]ook at us: a group of self-deluding old fossils traipsing around as if we were on some bloody gap year, humiliating ourselves, [...] [w]e should just face up to the truth – that we’re all old, we’re all past it. That’s the real truth, the raw, unvarnished fact of the matter. All we’re good for now is a beige bloody bungalow with a sodding panic button in the sodding corner’.²⁸

²⁶ *TBEMH*, 30:36-31:19.

²⁷ *TBEMH*, 57:40.

²⁸ *TBEMH*, 1:08:00-1:08:33.

One could not really wish to find a more perfect representation of someone buying wholeheartedly into a ‘negative paradigm’ of aging’.²⁹

Evelyn, by massive contrast, has come to believe that:

‘You can have anything you want [...] [y]ou just need to stop waiting for someone to tell you you deserve it, or you can just go on failing yourself’³⁰

It is worth noting here that by the end of the film, the character Jean Ainslie has separated from her husband, who has tired of her constant negativity and her unwillingness to explore or find anything to appreciate within their new setting. Jean returns to England, and Douglas Ainslie remains behind in India to pursue a relationship with the far more positively-minded Evelyn, because her attitude to life makes her far more attractive to him than his wife.

It is worth noting that Evelyn’s metaphorical wave is of the same element as Ulysses ‘sounding furrows’ which require us to be ‘sitting well in order’ before pushing off and trying to smite them, and it is apposite to recall that Shakespeare also said something very similar about waves and embracing opportunity:

There is a tide in the affairs of men.
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat,
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures.³¹

Remembering that actual tides ebb and flow, just as opportunities present themselves and pass by if untaken, the measure of our success, as with Virginia in real life and Evelyn in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, is in the

²⁹ Lloyd-Sherlock, p. 5.

³⁰ *TBEMH*, 1:35:07.

³¹ William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act 4, Sc.3, ll. 218–224 in *Shakespeare: Complete Works*, rev. edn (London: Arden, 2011), p. 355.

extent to which we recognise that the current of things such as evolving technologies can, and should, be made to serve our purposes. Any instinct for survival on our part must at least encourage us to learn ways to stay afloat. It is also appropriate to remember that tides come again, and that there is something to be said for not giving up if at first one fails, as novel-Evelyn does when she finds that she does not really understand how to use her laptop. By being persistent and seeking a way to catch the tide of technology, film-Evelyn is able to communicate her experiences and perpetuate her own narrative. However, this new skill is really just a symptom of her wider attitude philosophy of life.

Fittingly, in a work that deals with the subject of either surviving or going under,

Evelyn's successful approach to life also involves exploiting the skills that she has, and being open to possibility. Because of her husband's disastrous mismanagement of their finances, she has to seek work in order to continue residing at the Hotel. Having seen an advertisement in a local paper which asks for 'people who have the ability to talk to older people', she sets out in search of the address provided, and finds herself in a bustling call centre.³² Upon meeting the young and sharply dressed manager, she is informed that 'this is a place for ambitious people, young people'.³³ However, it soon becomes apparent that owing to all the years she has spent in England, she in fact does have a commodity to supply within this competitive (and ageist) employment environment.

Evelyn's ability to explain the ritual of dunking biscuits, and to correct the manager on his use of the phrase 'building tea' for 'builder's tea' leads to his pronouncement that: '[p]erhaps you can help us after all'.³⁴ Evelyn leaves, having gained her 'first ever job' as 'a sort of cultural advisor' by virtue of her knowledge of how English people live, which has conferred upon her a

³² *TBEMH*, 36: 56-57.

³³ *TBEMH*, 37:13.

³⁴ *TBEMH*, 37:26-55.

sort of sage's mantle within her new context.³⁵ As Ulysses says: 'that which we are, we are' (l. 67), and it turns out that Evelyn is a person with knowledge to offer, despite being neither young nor ambitious. She has achieved an instance of de Falco's 'reassigning [of] the cultural meaning of [...] old age', and in her example we see that 'blue-sky thinking' (which is how the young dreamer Sunny, who is the manager of the hotel terms his optimistic dreams for its future) is an option that is legitimately open to anyone, regardless of age.³⁶ All it takes to make it work is an idea, the will, and the taking of the plunge.

MURIEL DONNELLY

The character Muriel Donnelly is primarily defined both in *These Foolish Things* and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* by her xenophobic attitudes with regard to people who have darker skin than her own. In both narratives, she has refused treatment by doctors of colour while in hospital. In the novel, the reason for her sojourn there is that she has been the victim of an assault and robbery. As a result of both this, and the fact that the thieves who stole her purse then broke into her flat and killed her cat, she no longer wishes to stay where she has been living. However, in the novel, the catalyst for her trip to India is that her son has fallen foul of the Police in England and has fled to India to evade arrest. Since he has always been a good son to her, Muriel follows him there in order to try and find the measure of security that she believes he can provide for her. At the end of the novel, mother and son are reunited and on the lam together.

However, while there is absolutely no debating that violence toward the elderly is of serious concern whenever it occurs, Muriel's narrative in the novel is hard to draw any positive transferable lessons from, beyond the fact that she exhibits the pluck to pack a bag and go to her son's house with no intention of returning to her home, which is an example of proactivity on

³⁵ *TBEMH*, 40:50-55.

³⁶ *TBEMH*, 46:55.

her part. The other details of her story are less translatable. Novel-Muriel's narrative presents very much as a fairy-tale story in which her son is cast as the rescuing knight. Once in India, her activities are centred around finding him, which means that, in common with novel-Evelyn Greenslade, she is largely a dependent character even though she is actively participating in facilitating that dependence by searching for her son.

By contrast, film-Muriel Donnelly has suffered a broken hip, and is made the offer of having her artificial implant surgery outsourced to a hospital in India, which she reluctantly accepts, in spite of her prejudices, because it will be quicker than sitting for six months on a waiting list in England. Her narrative within the film therefore becomes a much more broadly applicable lesson in facing one's fears and learning that one's long-held beliefs can change if one allows them to be challenged, and that new ways of thinking can open up new worlds of possibility.

The Muriel we see boarding the plane is attempting to transplant some of the comforts of home to India in order to make her stay there as bearable as possible. Questioned by a customs officer as to the contents of her excessively heavy luggage, she explains that it contains:

‘PG Tips [...] some brown sauce, thirty-four packets of chocolate Hob-Nobs, [...] pickled onions, pickled eggs, and [...] pickles’³⁷

For Muriel, unlike Evelyn, the trip to India is not an adventure that she has chosen to undertake for herself, but rather an ordeal that must be endured for the sake of a greater benefit to her – that of having a new hip and being able to be mobile again relatively quickly. We have already seen that she is keenly aware of the prospective brevity of life at her age when she tells the doctor who examines her x-rays that she does not ‘even buy green bananas’.³⁸

We learn that Muriel has until recently been accustomed to being a very

³⁷ *TBEMH*, 14:53-15:05.

³⁸ *TBEMH*, 10: 53-54.

busy and capable woman who has had charge of running the affairs of a whole household, having held down the simultaneous roles of housekeeper, nanny, and accountant for a family back in England, until being retired from her position in favour of a younger person. Consequently, she now feels that her life has no real purpose, which is a relatable post-redundancy experience for anyone in a similar situation – old or young. She has gone from spending whole days facilitating the smooth running of multiple lives, to living alone in a one-bedroomed flat which, as she notes ruefully, she can have ‘spotless in half an hour’.³⁹ Film-Muriel has a back story that makes her far more than simply an older victim of crime who needs her son to ‘look after’ his dear old Mum.⁴⁰ In turning her into someone who has been forced by circumstances outside of her control to wrestle with several deep-seated issues in her life, she becomes accessible and understandable, since she, like Evelyn Greenslade, and most people going through a change of life circumstance, is being faced with sink or swim decisions about attitude and actions that will determine the future course and quality of her life.

Muriel’s initial attitude towards everything to do with India and Indians is one of fear and avoidance. Even after accepting the offer of having her operation conducted in India, she nonetheless exhibits extreme discomfort at the idea, remarking to an ambulance officer that ‘[Indians] move in packs’, have ‘brown faces, and black hearts’ and ‘[reek] of curry’.⁴¹ On the bus from the airport to the Hotel, when she is offered some Indian food to try by one of her fellow travellers, her response is:

‘Nah, if I can’t pronounce it, I don’t wanna eat it’.⁴²

When she arrives at the Hotel, she is shocked, upon being shown to her room that there is ‘an Indian in there’.⁴³ This particular Indian is there since he is the doctor who has been put in charge of her surgery and convalescence. He speaks English very well, and is very kind to Muriel, but nonetheless she feels compelled to ask him if he has ‘got a marker pen’

³⁹ *TBEMH*, 1:12:33.

⁴⁰ Moggach, p. 67.

⁴¹ *TBEMH*, 12:57-13:00.

⁴² *TBEMH*, 19:54-56.

⁴³ *TBEMH*, 23:23.

because she wants to make sure that he does not operate on the wrong hip.⁴⁴ However, as the film progresses, we see Muriel slowly unfreeze because she has, in choosing to have her operation in India, immersed herself in an environment that forces her to face her fears every day that she is there. She is in effect undergoing a partially self-imposed course of exposure therapy for her xenophobia, and becoming less scared as the strange slowly acquires a familiarity.

As time passes, she comes to realise that the Indian doctors are just as competent at their jobs as those in England, and that she has things in common with the Untouchable maid, Anokhi, who brings her meals, having been in service herself, and also having been reminded of the family she used to look after when she is taken to visit Anokhi's relatives. As she begins to relax and accept that Indians are not the source of evil that she had once believed, she finds that life at the Hotel is 'getting better', and that in fact she now does not want to leave the new friends that she has found there.⁴⁵ Upon finding out that the hotel is about to be sold because it has been poorly managed, she contrives an opportunity to look through the books and meet with a potential investor, having used her accountancy skills to put together a viable plan for its continued running. Part of the plan is that she will be 'the new assistant manager' of it, lending her wisdom and skills to help bring the dreams of its young and inexperienced owner to fruition, while at the same time ensuring that her own life remains fruitful.⁴⁶ One of the most important lessons that can be drawn from the characters of Evelyn and Muriel in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* is that life should always keep moving forward, rather than becoming stuck in a groove.

Haim Hazan remarks that often:

Elderly people, finding themselves incapable of maintaining a link between their dwindling resources and ability on the one hand, and the universe of meaning on the other, simply abandon

⁴⁴ *TBEMH*, 25:10-13.

⁴⁵ *TBEMH*, 1:29:31.

⁴⁶ *TBEMH*, 1:46:40.

their resources and invest all their remaining strength in a world of meaning still within their control.⁴⁷

The context of this world of meaning is all too often the past – a radiant sometime where everything was right with the world, long-gone glory days.

This kind of thinking is an exemplar of Amelia de Falco's assertion that:

The preservation of personal narratives is often a defensive strategy that can temper the discomfiting changes of age ... without a story ... life is without explanation, without meaning.⁴⁸

If new chapters are not being added to a life narrative day by day, then personal narrative will naturally come to appear like the product of a blocked author quoting their best work in an attempt at self-justification.

As Evelyn observes in one of her blog posts:

'There is no past we can bring back by longing for it. Only a present that builds and creates itself as the past withdraws'.⁴⁹

However, I dispute that the present only builds itself in the absence of personal effort. We are forces that can either act, or not, upon our immediate circumstances, and it is thus both our presents and futures are constructed within the scope of our influence. To ignore this is to court a state of stasis that constitutes neither progress nor decline, but which is backward-looking, and backward thinking, and, as a consequence increases the likelihood of the person involved being seen as no longer relevant to the world.

What principally marks out both Evelyn Greenslade and Muriel Donnelly as success stories is that they are still adding to their narratives – Evelyn literally via her blog posts. They were, respectively, trepidatious and reluctant initially, but they learn to actively look for things that can be made into opportunities for on-going life growth, and they make use of them, rather than mouldering away sadly in the midst of their circumstances. In Chapter Three, I will further consider this issue of narrative integrity – the

⁴⁷ Hazan, p. 77.

⁴⁸ De Falco, p. 13.

⁴⁹ *TBEMH*, 57:50.

continued adding of meaningful chapters to a life narrative in a way that means that, at death, a person's life is seen as a meaningful whole and not as a story that has simply petered out before reaching its conclusion. I will examine Ulysses' assertion that in old age there is still 'work of noble note' (l. 52) to be done, as I look at several narratives of relationships, beginning with the symbiosis that is portrayed between the young boy Manolin and Santiago, the eponymous hero of Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, in Aleksandr Petrov's animated film adaptation of the original novella.

CHAPTER THREE

Old age hath yet his honour and his toil;
Death closes all: but something 'ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done
Not unbecoming men that strove with gods.

(*Ulysses*, ll. 50-53)

When considering Ulysses' words in the quote above, a question arises in the mind of the modern reader. Not only does Ulysses describe himself in retirement as being 'idle' (l. 1), but even now, as Barbara Bee notes, '[t]he hallmark of older adulthood is retirement', implying a release from employment.¹ Why then should 'old age' be imagined to involve 'toil'? It is, traditionally, the time of life when we are judged to be least well equipped for the level of exertions that the word implies, and therefore, as noted, a time when we have traditionally been released from the societal expectation of earning our living. I believe the answer lies in the word 'honour' with which Tennyson here precedes his use of the word 'toil' (l. 50), suggesting that old age is an 'honourable estate' which behoves those living in it to continue to construct meaning, and thereby affirm that it is a valid life-space and not a junkyard or wasteland where obsolescence reigns. Although, as Bee continues, '[m]ost older adults spend this stage adapting to a new lifestyle and finding new roles to fill now that the role of a worker is finished', this is certainly not always perceived to be the case once people retire.² Victor W. Marshall and Philip Taylor point out that when it comes to thinking about retirement, 'at the societal level, we focus on transitions from [...] paid employment, into the status of recipient of a pension'.³

This change of status is sometimes interpreted as implying that the older person who has in effect just become unemployed themselves embodies this inevitable

¹ Bjorklund and Bee, p. 371.

² Bjorklund and Bee, p. 371. This is true even of people who may not have been 'workers' in the accepted sense, as was seen in Chapter Two in the narrative of Evelyn Greenslade, who had been a wife and mother all her adult life.

³ Marshall and Taylor, p. 572.

redundancy, in much the same insidious way that the term ‘retirement’ implies a quiet and seemingly exit from the stage of public life, as the result of no longer being deemed fit to fulfil a public role. Peter Lloyd-Sherlock notes that in the ‘later life is associated with dependency, vulnerability, and an inherent lack of capability [...] older people use up savings, are unproductive, and have expensive needs’.⁴ Fortunately, as Marshall and Taylor go on to observe, ‘[r]etirement is a socially constructed and evolving institution’ and is therefore capable of being redefined as necessary.⁵ This is both comforting as well as needful, since, as noted above, retirement represents a relatively vast opportunity of free private time during which the older person can contribute to society in a new role such as that of mentor or philanthropist, address unfinished personal business with life, or fulfil unrealised dreams. As Lloyd-Sherlock goes on to explain, the actual reality is that in ‘later life [...] some older people [...] may be making more social and economic contributions than at any previous time in their lives’ due to having more free time to focus on the interests they wish to.⁶

Ulysses’ words are definitely full of hope, implying strongly that the gap between the end of our working life and our physical one is a time in which meaningful achievement can still take place, and that this is how it should be viewed, as a time of opportunity and potential, and not as a curtailment of meaningful accomplishment. All the same, just as Ulysses’ calmly acknowledges that ‘Death closes all’ (l. 51), Amelia de Falco points out that ‘[d]iscussions of aging are always obliquely discussions of mortality’.⁷ As the relevant scientists point out, we all simply must die:

Whether the result of wear, tear, and exhaustion of resources or whether genetically programmed, all life has a finite span and each species has its own particular longevity. For human beings, this would appear to be approximately 100 to 110 years. This means that even if it were possible to prevent or cure every disease that carries people off before the ravages of senescence do, virtually no-one would live beyond a century

⁴ Lloyd-Sherlock, p. 5.

⁵ Marshall and Taylor, p. 573.

⁶ Lloyd-Sherlock, p. 6.

⁷ De Falco, p.137.

or a bit more [...] Though biomedical science has vastly increased mankind's *average* life expectancy, the *maximum* has not changed in verifiable recorded history. In developed countries, only one in ten thousand people lives beyond the age of one hundred.⁸

It behoves us then to give some thought to what we wish to accomplish while we are around.

Anecdotally, there is no greater spur to evaluating one's life priorities than a diagnosis of impending death, to which the now popular use of the term 'bucket list' to indicate the life-goals of even healthy people attests. Such usage indicates that we acknowledge, albeit obliquely, the finitude of our lives. Phenomena such as instant messaging, high-speed internet, and video-conferencing allow, even force, us to live our lives in terms of minutes, seconds and hours, focussing on the fleeting now on a daily basis. It is no wonder that we prioritise our personal goals under such circumstances. Yet, paradoxically, we prospectively now have much longer lifespans to be frenetic throughout. As Barbara Bee comments, we now have the luxury 'of having the opportunity to grow old and die slowly [...] [s]ociety has simply never been in this position before'.⁹

My focus in this chapter is split between Ulysses' conviction that older people still have 'work of noble note' (l. 52) to do, and his implication that the later part of a person's life narrative should be 'not unbecoming' (l. 53) to its subject. This latter concern is addressed by the notion of 'narrative ethics', which, as H.R. Moody explains, 'is a perspective that insists on the priority of [...] the wider picture, the longer story of which this episode [ageing] is just a small part'.¹⁰ Just as Ulysses draws a link between the future and the past, stating that the latter should befit the qualities of the former, the narratives I will examine all involve choices made with the purpose of preserving and perpetuating, or resolving, a character's life narrative in a meaningful way. In some cases these choices are executed by caregivers, on behalf of, or at the behest of, the individual concerned. I begin by looking at

⁸ Overall, p. 10, (quoting (Nuland 1994, pp. 84-85, his emphasis).

⁹ Bjorklund and Bee, p. 336.

¹⁰ H.R. Moody, citing Charon and Montello (2000), in 'Ethical Dilemmas in Old Age Care', in *The Cambridge Handbook of Age and Ageing*, ed. by Malcolm Johnson, and others (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 585-6.

Aleksandr Petrov's animated adaptation of Ernest Hemingway's classic novella of ageing and toil, *The Old Man and the Sea*, focussing on the symbiotic mentor-caregiver relationship between Santiago and Manolin.

The other character narratives I examine are drawn from the novels *The Notebook*, by Nicholas Sparks (Noah and Allie), *Guppies for Tea*, by Marika Cobbold (Selma), and Alice Munro's short story 'The Bear Came Over the Mountain' (Fiona). I will also focus on the character Graham Dashwood in the film *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*. The novel *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*, written by Rachel Joyce, is included here to serve as a cautionary tale against postponing death when there is no gain to be had in terms of quality of life, thereby underlining Ulysses' requirement for the missions undertaken during these leeway days to be truly noble, and for Death to be seen as a spur to life and its natural close, rather than as something to be avoided at all costs, no matter what the circumstances.

As Barbara Bee notes, when significant illness is a factor of individual instances of old age, '[m]ost [patients] reach a point when they choose not to continue with heroic measures that might give them a few more days at the expense of their comfort and dignity'.¹¹ This is in keeping with Cicero's wise pronouncement that:

if we are not going to be immortal [...] it is desirable for a man to be blotted out at his proper time. For as Nature has marked the bounds of everything else, so she has marked the bounds of life.¹²

When life is viewed in this light, as a valuable and finite opportunity (as it clearly is by Ulysses) Elizabeth MacKinlay posits that retirement and older age can be characterised as 'time for the successful negotiation of a final identity that gives retrospective meaning to life and prospective meaning to death'.¹³

¹¹ Bjorklund and Bee, p. 329.

¹² Cicero, Cato Maior de Senectute, in *Cicero on Old Age, On Friendship, On Divinity*, trans. by A.W. Falconer (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 2-99, quoted by Brita Larenz, 'Old Age, and Ageing in Medicine', in *Old Age and Ageing in British and American Culture and Literature*, ed. by Christa Jahnsen, (Münster: Lit, 2004), p. 14.

¹³ Elizabeth MacKinlay, 'Death and Spirituality', in *The Cambridge Handbook of Age and Ageing*, ed. by Malcolm Johnson, and others (New York, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 394-400 (p. 396).

SANTIAGO AND MANOLIN

Ernest Hemingway's eponymous Old Man, Santiago, comes closest of any of the characters that I examine in this chapter to being someone who has actually striven with gods. In the course of earning his daily living, Santiago has regularly had to outmatch creatures of the deep that are often more than his equal in weight and strength, and that also have the advantage of battling against him in their own element. Therefore, the old fisherman has amassed, just as much as M in *Skyfall*, Ed Tom in *No Country for Old Men* (Ch1), and Muriel and Evelyn in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (Ch 2), a wealth of wisdoms that enable him still, at an advanced age, to hook an 18-foot marlin and subdue it. Santiago's battle with the fish is the most literal embodiment in this chapter of Ulysses' suggestion that old age still has toil to perform. However, the principle reason for the inclusion of Hemingway's tale here is the beautiful model of a reciprocal relationship that is portrayed between Santiago and Manolin, the young apprentice hungry for knowledge.

In both the original novella and in Aleksandr Petrov's paint on glass animated adaptation of Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1999), Manolin provides an important source of support to Santiago who is an old fisherman in an environment where those who do not catch fish find it hard to live. Manolin takes on the duty of regularly bringing food to his former employer (who has fallen on hard times as the result of a run of bad luck), stating that Santiago 'will not fish without eating while I'm alive!', thereby making sure that his old boss has enough energy to keep on going out in his boat.¹⁴ At the beginning of the film, 'it has been 84 days since [Santiago] caught a fish'.¹⁵

Despite this misfortune, Santiago nonetheless retains all of his lifetime's worth of knowledge about the business of fishing for a living – the clues that are to be taken from the behaviour of birds and smaller fish, and the ways to win against a big fish. On the first day of the story, Santiago goes far out to sea, happening upon a shoal of small fish, and hooking a large marlin that is hunting at the edges of the shoal. Over

¹⁴ *The Old Man and the Sea*, dir. by Aleksandr Petrov [on DVD], 1:52-53. (Further references to this film will be indicated by the abbreviation 'TOMATS').

¹⁵ TOMATS, 2:22-3.

the course of a day and a night, Santiago keeps the huge fish on the line, owing to equal amounts of strength, faith, and patience, and eventually coaxes it up from the depths, subduing it, and tying it to the side of his boat. During the struggle and the wait, he reminisces on a similar contest of strength that he was engaged in as a much younger man – an arm wrestling contest in a bar in Casa Blanca, which he also won after having endured over the course of a day and night. In looking back on this triumph, he finds the strength to continue his present battle of wills against the fish, by extrapolating a linearity between the first narrative event and the present one.

Unfortunately, however, once the fish is lying tied beside the boat, its blood begins to attract sharks, which eventually leave the old man, despite valiant and inventive efforts, towing nothing much more than a skeleton back to shore. Tired out, Santiago manages to make it back to his hut, where Manolin finds him the next morning. Santiago mourns what he views as a defeat to Manolin, who replies ‘He didn’t beat you, not the fish’ - a truthful reminder of the actuality of things which allows Santiago to continue to justifiably view himself as a still-capable extension of the young arm-wrestling champion that he once was.¹⁶ He has won an honourable contest of strength, wit, and will against a worthy opponent, and has proved that he still has the skills and ability to do his job, and also that this most recent spell of ‘salao’ or bad luck has been simply a small part of the whole story that is Santiago.¹⁷ Thus, the integrity of Santiago’s continuing narrative is preserved.

Manolin’s reply ‘[o]f course!’ to the old man’s query as to whether the townsfolk had ‘searched for’ him while he was out at sea for so long further reinforces the notion that Santiago is still a valued member of the community.¹⁸ However, Santiago has lost faith in his own fortunes, telling Manolin ‘I am not lucky anymore’ when Manolin offers to fish with him in the future.¹⁹ Santiago’s depression is a symptom of Erik Erikson’s last stage of adult cognitive

¹⁶ *TOMATS*, 18:44-6.

¹⁷ Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and The Sea* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), p. 5.

¹⁸ *TOMATS*, 18:53.

¹⁹ *TOMATS*, 19:06-7.

development, 'ego integrity versus despair'. Bjorklund and Bee explain that 'ego integrity is achieved when people look back over their lives and decide whether they find meaning and integration in their life review or meaninglessness and unproductivity'.²⁰ In the closing scenes of the film, Manolin's injunction to the Old Man that he must 'rest well' because he 'can teach [Manolin] everything' validates beyond doubt that Santiago does have work of worth still to do in his later years.²¹

Not only has he shown himself still capable of fulfilling his role, but, far more importantly, now that he is old, he is a repository of knowledge that he can pass on to Manolin so that he in turn can become a successful fisherman. Santiago's wealth of knowledge in this situation constitutes a form of currency that he can exchange with Manolin in return for the care Manolin gives to him. The reciprocity inherent in this arrangement ensures that Santiago will always be valued and honoured as he is, for who he has been.²² Thus, Santiago is not a burden to Manolin, but, instead, the person responsible for his future success. This notion of placing value on the person, rather than on age or condition, and of preserving a sense of integrity between older and younger selves is a theme that is developed in the next group of narratives that I examine.

NOAH AND ALLIE

Nicholas Sparks' novel *The Notebook* tells the story of a couple, Noah and Allie, who fell in love as teenagers, married, and many years later now both live in a residential care facility. Just as Manolin goes to Santiago's hut every day to provide him with nourishment for his body, every day, Noah, who is suffering from cancer for the third time in his life, reads to Allie, who has Alzheimer's disease, from a notebook which contains a handwritten account of the story of how they met and the romance that ensued. Noah reads from the notebook with such commitment because, occasionally, hearing the story unlocks in Allie's mind her own personal

²⁰ Erikson (1950, 1959, 1982) as cited by Bjorklund and Bee, p.249.

²¹ *TOMATS*, 19:13-24.

²² This type of principle is known within the field of Social Gerontology as 'Exchange Theory'. Hillier and Barrow note that this theoretical model has been used to justify 'decreased interaction between the old and the young in terms of the older generation having fewer resources to offer in [...] social exchanges [...] that add to or subtract from one's store of power and prestige' (p. 80).

version of their joint narrative, allowing her to escape briefly from the confines of her illness and interact with Noah in a normal way, recognising who he is. During these brief interludes of lucidity new chapters are added to their narrative as a couple; new conversations and new acts of love. Noah is thus nourishing Allie's sense of self on an on-going basis.

Noah has resigned himself to his own condition:

'Although the Bible says man can live to be 120, I don't want to, and I don't think my body would make it even if I did. It is falling apart, dying one piece at a time, steady erosion on the inside and at the joints. My hands are useless, my kidneys are beginning to fail, and my heart rate is decreasing every month. Worst, I have cancer of the prostate [...] it will take me eventually, though not till I say it is time. The doctors are worried about me, but I am not. I have no time for worry in this twilight of my life'.²³

He is instead task-focussed on what has been the spiritual priority of his life's narrative since he met Allie, 'lov[ing] another with all [his] heart and soul' which he says 'has always been enough' for him in life.²⁴

In addition to staying true to his own idea of what his duty is, in the clinical terminology of the real world, what Noah is doing for Allie is accessing her remaining cognitive reserve by immersing her on a daily basis in a course of intensive 'reminiscence therapy', which the American Psychological Association defines as being 'the use of life histories - written, oral, or both - to improve psychological well-being'.²⁵ This is a therapy that has been shown to be useful in the maintenance of both identity and intimacy in cases like Allie's, and therefore the notebook is the perfect aid in helping preserve both of these things between the couple in the novel.²⁶

²³ Sparks, p. 162.

²⁴ Sparks, p. 2.

²⁵ APA Dictionary of Psychology, ed. by Gary VandenBos (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007), p 787.

²⁶ Webster, J.D., 'Construction and Validation of the Reminiscence Functions Scale', in *Journals of Gerontology*, 48 (1993), 256-262.

Both the fact that Noah persists, and that Allie responds to his efforts qualify Noah's devotion as 'work of noble note' (l. 52). As a side note, his determination that his cancer will not be allowed to win until he says it is time, is validated by real-world clinical observations that:

an important ingredient in a person's response to imminent death is the amount of social support that he or she may have available. High levels of social support are linked to lower levels of pain, less depressive symptoms, and longer survival times.²⁷

Noah's initiatives with regard to Allie are supported by the staff in the home, but by far his strongest emotional bolster is his continued interaction with, and proximity to, Allie herself, and his knowledge that she needs him.

The implication in Noah's words is that he wishes to, and will, stay around until Allie is no longer there to need him, and then, his duties discharged, he will surrender to the invading cells and join her. In his own way, Noah embodies the poet Dylan Thomas's injunction to 'rage against the dying of the light', doing this for Allie on a daily basis, albeit that he is not raging against death *per se* in her case.²⁸ He is however, through his efforts, allowing her to both preserve and continue to add new chapters to her own life narrative, as well as his, driven by his love for her and the conviction that his actions are "right" and part of "lov[ing] another with all [his] heart and soul".

SELMA AND AMELIA

Another example of a dedicated caregiver aiding, this time in resolving a life narrative in a way that befits what has been before, is found in the novel *Guppies for Tea*, by Marika Cobbold. The main character, Selma, has been neatly deposited in a retirement home called Cherryfield by her son. Her house has been sold, and her independence taken from her by reason of the onset of dementia. She is still, however, variously described as having 'eyes like pebbles' and 'a very strong grip', both of which physical characteristics underline her continuingly strong will despite

²⁷ Bjorklund and Bee, p. 331.

²⁸ Dylan Thomas, 'Do not go gentle into that good night', l. 3, paraphrased, in *Miscellany One* (London, J.M. Dent and Sons, 1974), p. 31.

the slow ravages of her illness.²⁹ Unsurprisingly, her dearest wish under such circumstances as she finds herself is to be able to return to her own home. So committed to this desire, and so persuasive is she, that with the assistance of Selma's daughter Dagmar, her grand-daughter Amelia checks her out of the retirement home and takes her home to live with her – a move which results in disaster as Selma suffers burns in a kitchen fire when Amelia over-estimates her grandmother's ability to still perform basic tasks unaided.

Upon her release from hospital, Selma is returned to the care of Cherryfield, where she remains unhappy, and eventually reaches an emotional breaking point,

‘I'm frightened, Amelia.’ Selma hung her head like a small child. When she looked up again she was pleading. ‘I'm frightened I'm going to die in this place’.³⁰

Following this crisis, Amelia makes Selma the knowingly rash promise that she will be in her own home again for Christmas. However, her house has since been sold, and the madcap scheme which follows is only rendered possible by the convenient device of the new owners' absence over the holiday period. Amelia arranges to get some pieces of Selma's old furniture out of storage, and, using an old key, arranges the lower rooms of the house to appear as they once had. Amelia says of her actions that ‘it will show her she's not entirely without say in her own life. When you have no control, you have no hope. When you have no hope, you're better off dead’.³¹

Although Selma is not dying when Amelia first takes her back to her old house, her condition deteriorates while there to the point where Amelia, who has already decided to make the most of the new owners' extended absence, realises that Selma may in fact realise her wish to die in her own home. Anecdotally, dying people have been known to cling to life until the arrival of a particular family member.³² In the novel it is clear that Selma takes advantage of the desired environment to let go her

²⁹ Cobbold, p. 3.

³⁰ Cobbold, p. 227.

³¹ Cobbold, p. 251.

³² I can supply one such anecdote: in my early twenties I awoke one morning with a distinct and unwonted urge to spend my day off in driving three hours to visit an extended family member who had dementia, and did so, only to receive a phone call the next morning to say that the person had passed away the previous night. I was told that no other family members had visited for the previous two weeks. I have therefore since wondered if I satisfied the person's wish to see someone from the family before dying.

hold on life. After many interruptions to Amelia's plan, Selma passes away in the place that she had wished. This being the case, Amelia, acting as Selma's proxy with regard to the physical requirements of the plan has, like Noah in *The Notebook*, been engaged in 'work of noble note' (l. 52), insomuch as she has facilitated the expressly desired end to Selma's life narrative.

GRANT AND FIONA

Unlike the two instances above, it is a decision to create a personal distance and avoid familiar surroundings in a case of Alzheimer's that is the subject of Alice Munro's short story 'The Bear Came Over the Mountain', which tells the tale of Fiona (who has begun to suffer from dementia) and her husband Grant, as Fiona moves from their home into a care facility called Meadowlake. Fiona leaves the relationship before her dementia advances to a point where it will completely tear it apart. By leaving both her home and Grant while she is still largely lucid, Fiona places her identity as a wife and lover in a sort of suspended animation before the disease robs both of them of this part of the integrity of her individual, and their joint, life narrative.

Following Fiona's admission into Meadowlake, she befriends a fellow resident named Aubrey, who had worked in her grandfather's hardware shop when she was young. During the 30-day settling-in period that is a requirement of Meadowlake's new residents' policy, Fiona forms an attachment to Aubrey such that she seemingly fails to recognise Grant when he finally is allowed to visit her. Considering the level of Fiona's remaining lucidity when she enters the home, it is open to question how much she has actually forgotten Grant as a result of the progression of her disease or has merely contrived to appear to have forgotten him as the result of her wish to spare him the pain of watching her inevitable deterioration.

We read early on in the story that:

Just before they left their house Fiona noticed a mark on the kitchen floor. It came from the cheap black shoes she had been wearing earlier in the day. "I thought they'd quit doing that," she said in a tone of

ordinary annoyance and perplexity, rubbing at the grey smear [...] She remarked that she'd never have to do this again, since she wasn't taking those shoes with her [...] She rinsed out the rag she'd been using and hung it on the rack inside the door under the sink. Then she put on her golden-brown, fur-collared ski jacket, over a white turtle-neck sweater and tailored fawn slacks. She was a tall, narrow-shouldered woman, seventy years old but still upright and trim.³³

Fiona here clearly retains executive control over her personal style, as well as demonstrating functioning abstract reasoning with regard to the problematical shoes.

Furthermore, the words she utters at the end of the tale, when Grant comes to visit her, argue that she still retains a strong awareness of the nature and consequences of her illness, as well as her own identity and the nature of their relationship as a couple:

'I'm happy to see you,' she said, both sweetly and formally. She pinched his earlobes, hard.

'You could have just driven away,' she said. 'Just driven away without a care in the world and forsook me. Forsooken me. Forsaken.'³⁴

Fiona has clearly taken upon herself the task of sparing Grant pain, as well as the accompanying emotional 'toil' that must be entailed in voluntarily sequestering herself away in order to attempt to censor out the worst of the effects of her dementia. However, she is also protecting herself from having to endure the erosion of her personality within a familiar environment, which would entail a more complete dissolution of all that the couple have had together before. For his part, Grant, who we are told 'never thought of' leaving Fiona in the midst of his philandering past, is still there for her in a real sense. He has not forsaken her, and replies 'Not a chance' to her assumption that he ever could have.³⁵ Through these combined efforts on the part of both Fiona and Grant, their relationship retains an emotional intimacy and sweetness despite their physical separation and the slow toll

³³ Munro, Alice, p. 2 of 22.

³⁴ Munro, p. 21 of 22.

³⁵ Munro, p. 22 of 22.

taken by Fiona's illness.³⁶

GRAHAM DASHWOOD

The narratives described above all move steadily forward, however it is sometimes necessary in life to, as the French say '*reculer pour mieux sauter*' – which is to say to run back further than where you are, in order to jump better. Imagining the need to cross a chasm without the aid of a bridge will here best serve to illustrate the saying's intended meaning. To imagine one step further that the need to 'successfully cross the chasm' figuratively represents the desire to only leave life once significant loose ends have been tied up will serve to illustrate mine. In the film *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, the character Graham Dashwood is a High Court judge, who, when we are first introduced to him, on his way to a colleague's retirement party, remarks that such events are rarely things that inspire a person to want to throw one of their own for fun. In the event, so stultifyingly boring does he find this particular gathering, that he resolves on the spur of the moment to retire, without any attendant pomp, and travel to India. We learn that he 'lived in India a long time ago' but that his closest colleague has never heard him mention the fact in all the time they have known each other.³⁷

Once in India with a group of other English retirees, he is able to use his knowledge of the country and its ways to help them get to their hotel when they are left stranded at an airport miles away, and he is also a source of reassurance to Evelyn Greenslade on her first journey overseas. Otherwise, he is notable for the fact that every day he leaves the Marigold Hotel, and goes nobody-knows-where. It is eventually revealed that he is religiously going to the Public Records Office. The character in the film is pantographed from the following three lines in Deborah Moggach's original novel:

In his room at the back of the hotel Graham Turner played Dinah

Washington, '*Mad about the boy*' at the lowest volume³⁸

and just as these lines hint strongly at a whole untold story, so we find that film-Graham has lived with one of these for many years.

³⁶ Munro, p. 5 of 22.

³⁷ *TBEMH*, 12:26.

³⁸ Moggach, p. 128.

The information he is seeking at the Records Office is the address of a man named Manoj, who was his best friend as a young man, and with whom he fell in love for the first time. Graham has spent all of his life since their parting worrying that Manoj was condemned to a life of shame and pariah-hood following the discovery of one of their trysts so many years ago, after which Graham was sent to England to attend university. His return to India has been with the sole purpose of finding Manoj and seeking his forgiveness. Eventually, having found the details he needs, he goes to Manoj's home - an ordinary house in an ordinary street - where he is greeted at the door by Manoj's wife. We see that she is beautifully dressed and, after she introduces herself to Graham, we are shown that Manoj is playing cards with a group of other older men a little further down the street. Graham and Manoj embrace, and spend the night talking, and it emerges that Manoj has led a happy life, married to a kind and understanding woman, and has 'never forgotten' Graham.³⁹ These revelations set Graham's mind at rest, and he returns to the hotel in the morning, and there passes away peacefully in a chair in the garden, having completed the task he had set himself in coming to India.

We shortly find out that he has been afflicted with a long-standing heart condition, and knew that he would likely die because of this. However, rather than this being seen as an excuse to slow down or stop, for Graham, the awareness that his existence is finite serves to sharpen his focus on what is most important in his life. Having taken the deliberate choice to retire from a job that no longer satisfied him, he uses his short retirement as a time of resolution and action. Marshall and Taylor note that '[i]nstitutionalised public and private provisions establish the standard against which individuals see retirement as early, on time, or late'.⁴⁰

To his colleague, Graham's retirement seems precipitate and ill-thought out, and therefore 'early'. To Graham himself, having knowledge of the state of his own health and the pointlessness, to him, of continuing in his job until the appointed day for his own boring retirement party, when weighed against his greater personal need to seek out his friend again, it is 'on time'. If he had not embraced the impulse to return to India when he did, his eventual retirement would have proved too late. As

³⁹ *TBEMH*, 1:22:03.

⁴⁰ Marshall and Taylor, p. 573.

it is, making the decision to leave when he does allows him enough time to make peace with Manoj, and leave life knowing that he has done so. In a further act of narrative resolution Graham is buried in the place where his tryst with Manoj was discovered.

HAROLD FRY

Not all altruistic journeys end so triumphantly. Rachel Joyce's novel *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry* tells the story of the eponymous Harold and his impulsive trip to visit an old work colleague who is dying of cancer and who once did him a mysterious favour for which he has never been able to thank her. Harold is motivated by a similar need to that of Graham Dashwood for closure of the kind that comes by being able to say goodbye to someone who has been important in his life. Queenie, his one-time assistant writes Harold a letter telling him that she is dying and that she is writing because she wants to say goodbye. Having struggled to formulate a suitable written reply in response to her news, Harold sets off to post the envelope, only to be seized by the conviction that he must in fact deliver it to Queenie himself – reasoning that to do so will enable him to thank her for the favour, and also that his walking will take time, which will be extra time added onto Queenie's life. He telephones the hospice where she is being taken care of, leaving a message that he is coming to see her and that she must wait for him, and then begins the long walk from Dorset to Berwick-Upon-Tweed.⁴¹

Venturing forth without any map, luggage or even suitable footwear, Harold encounters pain and discomfort, and makes questionable decisions. He eventually attracts newspaper publicity and is joined by a group of misfits. Time ebbs away, the original purpose of his mission is side-lined, and when he finally arrives at the hospice many months later, we learn that Queenie has indeed waited for Harold, but at hideous cost to herself and a massive decline in her quality of life. Having initially been told by a nurse that '[w]hen people have no one to stay for, they tend to pass quickly', the Queenie that Harold eventually finds has a face that is now

⁴¹ Joyce, p.19.

mostly tumour.⁴² She is ‘confused, and in some pain’, the cancer having kept on growing all the time he has been walking, to the point where she can no longer lift her head on her own and is almost completely disfigured.⁴³

Queenie enjoyed a pause in the course of her illness - concurrent with Harold’s initial phone message and the postcards he sent to her religiously at the beginning of his trip - that is described by one of the nuns at the hospice as being ‘a rather unusual kind of healing’.⁴⁴ This period of respite was, however, only that, and once Harold allows himself to lose his focus and delay his arrival, he in effect prolongs Queenie’s death rather than lengthening her life. While there is no doubt that Harold has spent considerable levels of energy along the way that would definitely qualify his journey as ‘toil’ (l. 50), his refusal to consider the realities and probabilities of the situation mean that ‘it does not end up qualifying as ‘work of noble note’ (l. 52) of the type Ulysses intends, but rather as a fool’s errand. In much the same way as Taylor and Marshall comment that retirement can be seen to be taken early, late or on time, so too we see that death also has its rightful time and that to delay beyond this constitutes an insult to life and a potential corruption of the narrative of the individual concerned. For Graham, it has come at a suitable time and is happy, for Queenie, it is too late, and a tragedy.

In Chapter Four, I examine the character ‘Armande from Joanne Harris’ novel *Chocolat*, which provides an opportunity for the consideration of the possibility of taking our deaths into our own hands when our quality of life is diminished. While this notion is often viewed as controversial, it bears examination, since Ulysses’ own declaration is that he will ‘drink life to the lees’ (ll. 6-7) I will examine the implication of his particular choice of words, and spend the second half of the chapter in celebrating several characters who, more subtly faced with the prospect of a potentially diminishing quality of life, decide to pursue love and adventure, taking advantage of the opportunities that come their way, and going on to live their lives fully and satisfyingly to triumphant effect.

⁴² Joyce, p. 196.

⁴³ Joyce, p. 298.

⁴⁴ Joyce, p. 196.

CHAPTER FOUR

I will drink | Life to the lees.

(Ulysses, l. 6-7)

*

‘Raffaele Panicucci stunned [...] Italian authorities when he made his escape from a residential care home - at the age of 87. Describing [it] as a place “full of old people”, the pensioner fled [...] in the middle of the night, making his great escape in his trusty electric wheelchair. He was found two hours later trying to drive the contraption down a busy motorway. When police rescued the man, he told officers he was bored [...] He said: “I could not stand it anymore. I just had to get out of there. If I stayed there any longer it would have driven me completely crazy and I don’t want them to send me back [...] Every day is the same. There is no adventure and I just had to get out and get some space of my own [...] I may have lost my mobility but I have not lost my nerve and my sense of adventure”.¹

“Am I careful what I eat? No, no. I do all the wrong things according to my doctor. I have lots of fruit and vegetables, but I’m a red-meat eater. I go through blocks of Cadbury’s chocolates – lots of sugar – and full-cream milk, and butter, salted. I’m supposed to have it in moderation. I don’t.”

- Evelyn Bovett (aged 100)²

*

In oenology, the ‘lees’ (l. 7) to which Ulysses alludes in the lines above is the residue of the wine fermentation process, the layer of sludge at the bottom of a vat that consists of the spent yeasts and other debris that have sedimented out of the

¹ Kerry McQueeney, ‘Man, 87, escapes a care home ‘full of old people’ and flees down a motorway in his electric wheelchair’, *Daily Mail*, 8 October 2012
<<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2214632/Man-87-escaped-care-home-old-people-trying-flee--motorway.html>> [accessed 28 September 2013] (paras. 3-11 of 20).

² Beck Eleven, Diana Dekker, and Denise Irvine, ‘NZ is seventh heaven for the elderly’, *Fairfax NZ News* <<http://www.stuff.co.nz/life-style/wellbeing/9381178/NZ-is-seventh-heaven-for-the-elderly>> [accessed Sat 9 November 2013] (para. 34 of 39).

wine. So, while one would not want to ‘scrape the bottom of the barrel’, to drain one’s barrel to the level of the lees would mean to enjoy every last drop of the wine that one possibly could. There is a distinct implication of voracity in Ulysses’ words. Also important when considering the concept of drinking to the lees is to note that the flavour of the wine would likely become more intense the closer to the lees one progressed. Most often in winemaking, the wine is decanted from atop the lees into a clean container (a process known as racking) and the lees left behind. The rest of the time, in the production of wines such as Muscadets, the wine is left in the barrel along with the lees (a process known as ‘*sur lie*’ fermentation) and bottled straight, without racking, and these wines are said to be some of the most excellent, complex and flavourful.³

Ulysses resolution suggests an unconquerable hunger for new encounters, new sights and new experiences that he expresses more directly in the lines where he states that he ‘cannot rest from travel’ (l. 6); that there is still time left in his life ‘to seek a newer world’ (l. 57); and, finally, when he expresses a hunger for living that ‘Life piled on life | Were all too little’ (l. 24-5) to satisfy. Therefore, to drink life to the lees is to live constantly in the neighbourhood of excess – open to new things, and always looking for more, until one has reached the limits of what there is to be enjoyed.

Since enjoyment of life and the notion of avidity is clearly so much a part of what Ulysses is saying, I propose that to drink of life to the level of the lees also means to draw a line, beyond which one decides one’s life would no longer be enjoyable. If we allow that wine made on the lees is wine made in the awareness of death (the spent yeasts signifying death) to achieve the fullest flavour possible, and that the left lees signify the fullest appreciation of that savour, then we can assume that both of these connotations apply to Ulysses words, given his clear-eyed acceptance that ‘Death closes all’ (l. 51). In Joanne Harris’ novel *Chocolat*, the character Armande openly defies the respective expectations of her daughter, her doctor, and the local priest, as well as, more subtly, railing against the limitations imposed upon her by her society’s etiquettes of mourning and politeness, in order to live the most

³ Jancis Robinson, *Jancis Robinson’s Concise Wine Companion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 264.

enjoyable and fulfilling life that she is able to in the face of an advancing illness, and face death on her own terms.

All of the characters discussed in this chapter have made a decision to break out of a mould and pursue life to the full, valuing self-defined quality of life either over the expectations of others, or, in one case, the character's own prior limiting attitudes. They are all therefore prime examples of what Jerome Bruner terms the issue of 'canonicity and breach'.⁴ In each of the stories a 'canonical script has been breached', with the characters treading ground that has been implicitly delineated as 'beyond the Pale' within either the dominant surrounding social discourse, their own preceding narrative, or the opinions of interested others.⁵ In the works on which I focus, the theme of enjoying life to the fullest is often accompanied by the presence of the exotic, as well as imagery of feasting, that connotes a hunger for life itself in all its variety.

In Helen Simonson's novel *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*, the title character finds emotional fulfilment and joy in an exotic and unexpected friendship that is regarded askance by many of his contemporaries. In Jonas Jonasson's *The 100-year-old Man who Climbed out of the Window and Disappeared*, Allan Karlsson violates the canon tenets of being a good and obliging rest home resident in a similar way to that of the real-life Raffaele Panicucci. Finally, in the film *Song for Marion* the lifelong curmudgeon Arthur comes to see, like Ulysses, that it is 'vile' to 'store and hoard' himself (l. 49), and, following the death of his wife, he learns that life is better lived to the full rather than in a spirit of emotional abstinence.

ARMANDE VOISIN

Chocolat is set against a backdrop of the traditional Catholic celebration of Lent, a time of year well-known for abstinence from the enjoyments of the flesh in remembrance of the sufferings of Christ. Armande is described as being a 'tiny old woman' dressed in a '[b]lack skirt [and] black coat, grey hair coiled and plaited into a neat, complex bun', and possessed of 'a brisk voice'. She also has a ready smile

⁴ Jerome Bruner, 'The Narrative Construction of Reality', in *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1991), p. 11.

⁵ Bruner, p. 11.

‘which work[s] her apple-doll face into a million wrinkles’, and an overarching attitude of ‘half-laughing fatalism’.⁶ She lives in the small town of Lansquenetsous-Tannes (‘two hundred souls at most, no more than a blip on the fast road between Toulouse and Bordeaux’), determined that life itself should not pass her by, and she craves vibrance.

When she first meets Vianne Rocher, the owner of the new chocolate shop that has just opened in town in flagrant defiance of the dour spirit of the religious season, she observes that: ‘You don’t get much entertainment around here [...] [e]specially if you’re old’.⁷ She routinely asks that people ‘Call me Armande ... it makes me feel young’.⁸ Her mourning attire is testament to the fact that, as she says, ‘every time I can decently wear colours someone else drops dead’. However, in silent protest against this limitation to her external wardrobe, she has taken to wearing lively petticoats and ‘[r]ed silk undies’ that she buys at great expense via catalogue from a shop in Paris.⁹ She also refuses to part with her pets, since she values their company more than her health:

‘I’m supposed to be allergic,’ said Armande. ‘Asthma or something. I told them I’d rather choke than get rid of my cats’.¹⁰

She is a subversive character, unwilling to merely exist within the confines of the lifestyle that her daughter Caro, her doctor, and the local priest respectively believe to be most fitting for someone of her age and with her health problems:

‘Oh, I’m not allowed *chocolate* ... [o]r anything else I might enjoy, she added wryly. ‘First smoking, then alcohol, now this [...] God knows, if I gave up breathing perhaps I might live forever.’ She gave a snort of laughter, but it had a tired sound, and I saw her raise a hand to her chest in a clutching gesture [...] ‘I’m not blaming them exactly,’ she said ‘It’s just their way. Protection from everything. From life. From death’.¹¹

Having been diagnosed with diabetes, because of which her eyesight is rapidly failing and for which she must self-inject insulin, she does not want to have to

⁶ Harris, p. 43.

⁷ Harris, p. 44.

⁸ Harris, p. 45.

⁹ Harris, p. 135.

¹⁰ Harris, p. 172.

¹¹ Harris, pp. 45-6.

‘take [...] medicine every day’ or ‘follow endless diet sheets’.¹²

Nor does she want to be forced into the local retirement home - Les Mimosas - or, as the locals have long called it, ‘*Le Mortoir*’, declaring ‘mutinously’:

‘I don’t want to be waited on by kind nurses who talk to me as if I were in kindergarten. I’m eighty years old, for crying out loud, and if I can’t be trusted to know what I want at my age’ [...]

‘I have everything I’ve ever wanted right here and now. My house, my friends, Luc [...] I’m not going to have any of that taken away from me’.¹³

Determined instead to enjoy her remaining life to the fullest on her own terms she embarks on a regime of excess that is partly the product of her own bloodyminded determination to enjoy life, mixed with a good dose of the philosophy of her favourite poet, Rimbaud. She reasons that ‘[w]hen you get to my age ... things start to break down. If it isn’t one thing then it’s another. It’s a fact of life’.¹⁴ Expressing her resolve to experience life to the full Armande declares to Vianne that, henceforth, she is ‘going to be immoderate – and volatile – [...] enjoy loud music and lurid poetry [...] [and] be rampant’.¹⁵

Despite the inevitable consequences to her failing health, Armande decides to indulge her physical appetite for flavourful food, as well as her emotional appetite for the forbidden. Her reasoning for doing the former is cogently expressed:

‘After a five-course banquet you’d want coffee and liqueurs, wouldn’t you? You wouldn’t suddenly decide to round it all off with a bowl of pap, would you? Just so you could have an extra course?’¹⁶

She accomplishes the latter in the form of new friendships with Vianne and the gypsy Roux, who are considered outsiders by the village, as well as a surreptitiously renewed relationship with her estranged grandson Luc (who is described as being ‘a colourless boy, too correct in his pressed flannel trousers and tweed jacket [...] such a polite, well-mannered boy’), whom she has been forbidden by her daughter

¹² Harris, p. 259.

¹³ Harris, p. 259 and 273, respectively.

¹⁴ Harris, p. 174.

¹⁵ Harris, p. 174.

¹⁶ Harris, p. 274.

to see.¹⁷

Armande's coffee and liqueur metaphor is an extremely apt one for her situation. For her, a continued existence with diabetes will mean becoming resigned to eating only bland foods, having to have daily injections, and eventually going blind – all within the confines of *Les Mimosas*. We learn from anecdotes throughout the novel, just as much as we gather from her manner that, prior to the interferences of Caro and her religious and medical off-siders, Armande has been accustomed to lead a vibrant, rebellious, mischievous, and happy life, and does not want to go out on a dull note.

She begins to frequent the chocolaterie, where she engages in secret discussions of Rimbaud's poetry with Luc, as well as indulging her cravings for Vianne's hot chocolates with a Bacchanalian enthusiasm:

'Mmmmmmm. She had closed her eyes as she tasted the drink. Her pleasure was almost frightening. 'This is the real thing, isn't it?' She paused for a moment, bright eyes speculatively half-closed [...] 'this' – she sipped again, greedily – 'is better than anything I remember, even from childhood'.¹⁸

Her scheme to wring every drop of enjoyment from life while she is still able to culminates in her decision to throw an extravagant birthday party for herself as a prelude to her suicide:

'My last course,' explained Armande. 'I'll take my medicine till then, like a good girl [...] I want to see my eighty-first birthday, Vianne, with all my friends around me [...] Not everyone gets this lucky,' she observed. 'Getting the chance to plan everything, to tidy all the corners'.¹⁹

She attends with her 'hair smartly cropped [...] new hat, new gloves, new shoes [...] all the same shade of cherry red, [her] favourite colour'.²⁰ Among the gourmet treats the guests indulge in are 'foie gras, champagne, truffles and fresh chanterelles

¹⁷ Harris, p. 93.

¹⁸ Harris, p. 91.

¹⁹ Harris, pp. 276-7.

²⁰ Harris, p. 334.

from Bordeaux, plateaux de fruits de mer from the traiteur in Agen [...] cakes, and chocolates'.²¹

As Neimeyer and Worth note:

Communication is an important aspect of many end-of-life decisions; however, open discussion of relevant considerations may not take place for any number of factors related to the dying person, loved ones, healthcare providers, and the intersection of these individuals.²²

Armande finds herself able to confide in Vianne (who is an outsider and has violated the social order by establishing her chocolate shop during Lent) in a way that that she is not able to with her daughter, doctor, or priest, who all have their own respective agendas and a collective wish for Armande to conform to them, regardless of her own wishes. We see in the actions of Armande that, once having smashed the confines of the canon 'should', the world is one's oyster insofar as the paths one can tread regarding one's own life.

With Vianne's collusion, Armande is able to, as Hazan says: 'match control to meaning [...] rather than [accept other people's] images' of how her ageing should take place.²³ This is especially relevant to her relationship with Luc, who she is supposed to be forbidden to see. Despite her early departure from his life positive corollary to Armande's whims is that Luc, who under his mother's control leads a dull life, discovers new horizons through his brief friendship with his grandmother. The effect on him of Armande's attitudes is 'generative', according to Erickson's categories of later-life review.²⁴ The chocolates that she buys for him are a metaphor for the flavour that she adds to his hitherto straitened life, while their study of Rimbaud's poems symbolises the awakening of Luc's awareness of the fact that one should have an appetite for life and its delights.

In conceiving her plan to die at a time that she has nominated, Armande is able, in

²¹ Harris, p. 279.

²² Robert A. Neimeyer and James L. Werth, Jr., citing Quill (2000), in 'The Psychology of Death', in *The Cambridge Handbook of Age and Ageing*, ed. by Malcolm Johnson, and others (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005) pp. 387-393 (p. 390).

²³ Hazan, p. 82.

²⁴ Erikson, (1950, 1959, 1982), quoted in Bjorklund and Bee, p. 248.

Haim Hazan's words, to 'arrest the change that spells deterioration and inevitable death' by choosing to skip the deterioration part and embrace the inevitable on her own terms, so that, for her, 'control' becomes 'completely congruent with [meaning]'.²⁵ As Robert A. Neimeyer and James L. Werth, Jr. point out, the topics of euthanasia and assisted suicide are 'controversial'. However, since the lack of such legal options often leads to people who have lived vibrant and meaningful lives draining the dregs of existence during their last days, and suffering unnecessary physical pain and mental anguish, it is past time for room to be allocated within the canon of the accepted narratives of ageing for more proactive attitudes.

As Neimeyer and Werth go on to observe, 'research on why people have requested and received assisted suicide and euthanasia indicates that control and dignity are [...] important factors'.²⁶ It is surely better to die with what Haim Hazan calls 'the portfolio of the self' still intact.²⁷ Hazan's words echo the idea of Erikson's notion of 'ego integrity' and are in keeping with Charon and Montello's concept of 'narrative ethics' (both noted here in Chapter Three), both of which are concerned with individual life narratives being viewed holistically as in progress and ongoing - each stage not viewed in isolation, but as following from all the previous events that have led a person to their current life-stage.²⁸

Although, as Jerome Bruner notes, self-evidently 'narrative constructions can only achieve 'verisimilitude', the actions of a fictional character such as Armande violating the accepted canon tenets of good healthcare and responsible living raises important questions about the issue of longevity, or simple quantity of life, versus actual quality of life.²⁹ It is observable from the words of the centenarian Evelyn Bovett, and the actions of Raffaele Panicucci, that being able to enjoy the good things in life is still very important to older people. In *Chocolat*, what Father Reynaud deems 'killing herself with gluttony', constitutes for Armande a both

²⁵ Hazan, p. 83.

²⁶ Neimeyer and Werth, p. 389.

²⁷ Hazan, p. 97.

²⁸ Erikson (1950, 1959, 1982), quoted in Bjorklund and Bee, p. 248., and Charon and Montello (2002), as cited by H.R. Moody, p. 585-6.

²⁹ Bruner, p.13.

figurative and literal enjoyment of ‘coffee and liqueurs’ at the end of life, which she likens to a multi-course meal.³⁰ Put this way, her wish to enjoy as much as she can of life and quit on her own terms with a minimum of discomfort immediately becomes less paradoxical than it is when viewed through a mind-set that holds that mere longevity is an intrinsic good.³¹

The ideal is obviously to achieve both quantity and quality, but when living a longer life simply implies passing more days breathing yet unable, as Armande would be unable, to indulge in the things that really make one’s life satisfying, this is not ideal. As Christine Overall notes:

The other-things-being-equal provision is essential [...] a longer life with the following proviso: the longer life would not be lived with severe illness or unrelieved pain or a disablement that undermined the individual’s capacity to pursue his or her life projects [...] [a]lthough one must be cautious about judging when life is no longer worth living, it is implausible to suppose that such a point is never reached – for example, by beings in an irreversible vegetative state, by beings in irremediably severe pain, and by beings in an irrevocable condition of physical and mental deterioration.³²

To go to Shakespeare, we are still, in the absence of laws that allow otherwise, tacitly reinforcing that it is in fact ‘nobler in the mind’ to suffer every single sling and arrow that the diseases that can hang upon old age can throw, while we merely medicate the attendant ‘heartache’ and ‘shocks’ that result.³³ As a society, we still,

³⁰ Harris, p. 265.

³¹ The New Zealand Parliament will, in the near future, be considering a private member’s bill sponsored by the MP Marion Street which focuses on the issue of euthanasia. Her introduction of the bill to the House after the next elections will follow calls from at least one Coroner for the government to reconsider the current laws and create new ones which will allow for the freedom of personal choice, and also assistance, to end life in cases of afflicted old age or terminal illness. This comes in the wake of several high profile assisted and voluntary active euthanasia cases in this country. Isaac Davison, ‘Labour: Euthanasia bill will return’, *New Zealand Herald*, 16 October 2013 <http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11140630> [accessed 3 March 2014].

³² Overall, p. 96, quoting Williams (1975, p. 417) ‘all things being equal...’ as found in Overall, p. 126.

³³ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 3, Sc. 1, ll. 56-64, in *Shakespeare: Complete Works*, rev. edn (London: Arden, 2011).

excepting in the case of our pets, purposefully blind ourselves to the possibility that ‘there are worse things, *much* worse things than dying’.³⁴ Yet, as noted, we consider euthanasia of animals to be a humane act. In the event, Armande dies ‘smiling in her bed’.³⁵ The sad counterpoint to Armande’s own happy death is that of Charly the dog, who is kept alive for his owner’s comfort beyond the point where he should have been allowed a peaceful death via euthanasia. One senses that, to Harris’ credit, the contrast in the novel is not accidental.

Lastly, it is interesting to contrast Armande’s happily transgressive attitudes with the effect of doing what they feel they should on other characters in the novel. While Armande has succeeded in assembling a full and brightly coloured ‘portfolio’ of herself through the appropriation and usage of ‘tokens of cherished identity, and freely constructed life materials’ such as red petticoats, hot chocolates, cats, grandmaternal trysts, and plates piled high with lobster, others are not having nearly so much fun.³⁶ Her daughter, observing Lent, ‘will dream of cinder toffee ... and wake hungry and irritable’.³⁷ The priest, who disapproves of actual gluttony is nonetheless driven to distraction by ‘the maddening smell of coffee and hot bread’ caught through an open window.³⁸

ALLAN KARLSSON

Just as Armande actively chooses death because she knows she cannot continue to live a life that will be to her satisfaction, the central character Allan Karlsson in Jonas Jonasson’s novel *The 100-year-old Man who Climbed out the Window and Disappeared* starts out wishing to die by means of vodka, also for the reason that his life is no longer satisfying to him. However, he instead finds that he still has much living to do. On the eve of his one hundredth birthday, not wanting to be ‘looked at, sung to, and fed with a birthday cake’, he makes an escape out his rest home bedroom window.³⁹ Over the months since moving in, his attitude has been

³⁴ Harris, p. 275.

³⁵ Harris, p. 347.

³⁶ Hazan, p. 8.

³⁷ Harris, p. 61.

³⁸ Harris, p. 265.

³⁹ Jonasson, p. 379.

that he ‘was done with life, because life seemed to be done with him’ – a disengaged state resulting in large part from the fact that he is not allowed to have any fun at the Old Folks Home.⁴⁰ However, once having made his decision to break free of the confines of the Home with all its rules about ‘showers and brushing your teeth, [and] visits from outside’, and where ‘smoking [...] drinking, and TV [...] after 11’ are all forbidden ‘he thought that he had probably been mistaken [...] [in] feeling that he might as well be dead’.⁴¹

With no other thoughts when he makes his escape beyond simply wanting to get away, Allan becomes unwittingly caught up in the business of a drug dealer, and an adventure follows, during which he makes some new and oddly-assorted friends while his past life is recounted for the reader. His biography is an improbable tale of perpetually being in the right places at the right times to help out various world leaders and influence major political events in the twentieth century. The end of the book finds him living happily ever after, flush with money, and enjoying a flourishing sex life with a younger wife in an exotic location. I had therefore not intended to write on *The 100-year-old Man Who Climbed out of the Window and Disappeared*, until I realised that the very reason I was dismissing it was the reason that I should be paying it attention.

As happy as I was for the hero, I had a problem with believing in the happy ending of the story. Jonasson had asked me to suspend my disbelief to an extreme while reading the rest of Karlsson’s tale, and so the novel’s closing chapters seemed like simply an unlikely, fairy-tale ending to a collection of historical untruths. It seemed far too feel-good to be true - risibly so - until I realised that what the end of Jonasson’s tale in fact is, is a possibility set against the fictional background of a whole host of unbelievable scenarios which make it seem like a natural continuation of them, when, in fact, it is plausible.

In my imagination, I realised, old men of one hundred years of age who have been consigned to rest home care are not adventurous. Nor do they fall in love. Nor do they have rollicking sex lives. But why should a man who has managed to live to a

⁴⁰ Jonasson, p. 377.

⁴¹ Jonasson, p. 377.

hundred not in fact find love at that late age if his good fortune has carried him thus far? And why should I assume that, if he did - having been healthy enough to get to a hundred by some means - that he would not be able to consummate such a romance? After all, as Jonasson writes ‘even being a hundred is pretty rare’.⁴² Yet such is often the assumption. As Amanda Smith Barusch points out, ‘[p]opular romance novels and daytime soaps still perpetuate the myth that only the young and the unwrinkled can enjoy romance’.⁴³

The real-life truth, however, is different, as witnessed by Barusch’s account of attending the wedding of two octogenarians, one of whom was her father-in-law, where ‘the bride and groom glowed and when the toasts were over ... drove off in a well-decorated car for their honeymoon in the Sierra Nevada’.⁴⁴ She makes the salient observation that in the year 2000, ‘over 25 million Americans were 70 [...] or older’, noting that the next in line to be in that age bracket - the baby-boomer cohort - have, over the course of their lifetimes so far, already seen and created important changes in education styles, sexual freedoms, and are now engaged in ‘redefining the latter half of life and expanding the possibilities in many realms, including romance’.⁴⁵

In fact, a lot of Allan’s issues at a hundred years of age have tangible causes that are not age-related at all:

Allan missed his cat. And [...] [i]t was as if he had lost control of his own spirit, and Director Alice had had a lot to do with that.⁴⁶

We learn that Allan is only residing at the Old Folk’s Home perforce of having exploded his house in the course of wreaking revenge against the fox that killed his cat. Blowing things up is what he has done for a living for most of his life. Upon reflection, it becomes apparent that Jonasson’s novel is replete with positive ageing narrative. Here, for example, we see again the value of a lifetime’s skill-set. Just as with the real-life Raffaele Panicucci, what Allan is seeking when he makes the decision to climb out his window is more of life, and not in fact the death he has

⁴² Jonasson, p. 3.

⁴³ Barusch, p. 4

⁴⁴ Barusch, p. vii.

⁴⁵ Barusch, p. 3.

⁴⁶ Jonasson, p. 377.

half-resigned himself to (even the Vodka with which he has considered committing suicide has always been one of his favourite things in life), and he is suitably rewarded.

It is merry and triumphant then - and not for scoffing at - that Allan gifts his wife a laptop and an internet connection '[o]n her eighty-fifth birthday' because 'he had heard that this Internet thing was something that young people enjoyed'.⁴⁷ In the account of how his wife perseveres to master using his gift to her, there are distinct echoes of Evelyn Greenslade in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, and her own use of a laptop and blog to perpetuate her life narrative.

It took Amanda some time to learn how to log in, but she didn't give up and within a few weeks she had created her own blog. She wrote all day long, about things high and low, old and new.⁴⁸

And again, just as in Evelyn's case, we see that being open to trying new things in general – be it, as in Allan's case a long-established habit of whimsical world travel or as in Evelyn's the willingness to simply explore the potential of new technology and a new environment – can lead to one finding oneself exploring the possibilities of new love too.

MAJOR PETTIGREW

This is definitely the case in Helen Simonson's novel *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*, where the very English Major Pettigrew finds himself slowly attracted to Mrs Ali, the widowed Indian shopkeeper of his village grocery store. As he discovers that they have important interests in common, rather than disengaging from life and 'eschewing intimate relationships' as Haim Hazan observes that some older people tend to do, the Major chooses to pursue the friendship to a romantic end, no matter what anybody else in his social circle has to say on the matter.⁴⁹

Until Mrs Ali turns up on the Major's doorstep one morning to collect the newspaper money because the boy who normally delivers the papers is ill, the pair

⁴⁷ Jonasson, p. 384.

⁴⁸ Jonasson, p. 383-4.

⁴⁹ Hazan, p. 82.

have only ever had conversations about ‘the texture and the perfume of’ the teas he buys from her, and so a hint of the exotic as well as his appreciation for the finer things in life are already present at the beginning of the novel.⁵⁰ On the morning she arrives to collect the money, recent bereavement creates a common emotional ground between them, as Mrs Ali has to help the Major adjust to the news he has just received via telephone of his brother’s death. She prepares him a cup of the tea that she normally only sells to him, and the conversation which ensues changes the potential for their interactions. Having answered the door in his late wife’s floral housecoat, which he wears periodically for its comfort value, Major Pettigrew discovers a kindred spirit in Mrs Ali, who admits to sometimes wearing an old tweed jacket of her husband’s, as well as occasionally chewing on his pipe ‘to taste the bitterness of his tobacco’.⁵¹

When, a little later on, the Major suffers a panic attack on the morning of his brother’s funeral, it is Mrs Ali who finds him in his vehicle on the side of the road and offers him a ride to the event. Their discussion of Mrs Ali’s enjoyment of driving leads to a more general discussion of dreams and goals, with Mrs Ali declaring that she would like to go ‘so many places [...]but there is the shop’ and confessing that the projected reality of her life once she has finished training her nephew in the intricacies of running the family business is that she ‘will be given houserom and [...] the honour of taking care of several small children of other family members’.⁵² Throughout the course of the novel, more cups of tea and other conversations ensue until, because of his connection to Mrs Ali, the Major is eventually asked to enlist her help with a cringe-inducing Raj-themed dinner at the local golf club. She obliges, and he accompanies her to a sampling of the dishes that some caterer friends of hers have proposed to supply for the event.

By now firm friends, there is a strong sense in the novel that the brightly painted walls of the venue – ‘no doubt the paint cans had been labelled “Mango” or “Persimmon” – and its ‘bright saffron silk curtains’, along with the ‘small bowls of steaming food, blurry with colour and fragrant with spices that were familiar and

⁵⁰ Simonson, p. 3.

⁵¹ Simonson, p. 7.

⁵² Simonson, p. 14.

yet could not be readily named' speak to the fact that the advent of Mrs Ali has caused the Major's life to become a much brighter and more satisfying prospect than it was. The account of the tasting calls to mind both Armande Voisin's appetite for rich and flavourful foods as a symbol of all the various riches of life (including the emotional), as well as the voiceover of Evelyn's first blog post from India in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, in which she relates the names of all the dishes the group have eaten since their arrival at the Hotel: 'Mooli moong dal, bagara baingan, banjara gosht, paneer methi chaman, mutton vindaloo'.⁵³ For Major Pettigrew, Indian food symbolises the delights of the uncharted land of his new romance. Yet, just as Evelyn at first felt overwhelmed by the brightness and bustle of India despite her delight in its novelty, the Major feels overwhelmed by 'the jarring chemical shades'⁵⁴ of the décor at the Indian restaurant, even while they symbolise the bright potential of his new relationship.

Amanda Smith Barusch observes that later life love, rather than necessarily burning with the passion of young lust, involves dealing with 'love's more stable realities, celebrating commitment and recognising the important role of family, friends, and culture in determining the shape of romance'.⁵⁵ In the case of Major Pettigrew and Mrs Ali, it involves dealing with the reality that 'family, friends, and culture' if treated with too much deference, have the power to drive them apart. And so, the Major having rescued Mrs Ali from her predicted role as a glorified sort of live-in servant to her extended in-laws, the pair decide to determine the shape of their own futures in defiance of possible censure. 'I thought it wrong to leave even one small tradition unbroken' declares Mrs Ali as she surprises the Major with a visit prior to their wedding ceremony. True to their deliberate choice to eschew the less important trappings of the matrimonial rites, at the close of the novel they marry among a small group of people that Mrs Ali describes as being 'a motley and ragged bunch [...] what is left when all the shallow pretence is burned away'.⁵⁶ They drain the wine, but leave behind the lees.

⁵³ *TBEMH*, 30:19-29.

⁵⁴ Simonson, p. 116.

⁵⁵ Barusch, p. vii.

⁵⁶ Simonson, p. 355.

ARTHUR AND MARION

Being able to recognise what is really worth celebrating is a whole life-skill on its own, and, as noted already in Chapter Three, the contemplation of death is often the spur to recognizing the things we should be prioritising. In the film *Song for Marion*, directed by Paul Andrew Williams (2013), the title character, upon being told that her cancer has returned and that there is little hope of treating it, is told by her oncologist to go home and eat ‘chips and ice-cream [...] when there is nothing that can be done, you should eat as much chips and ice-cream as you like’.⁵⁷ Marion responds by whispering to her husband Arthur that she ‘likes ice-cream’.⁵⁸ While clearly, upon being given a fatal diagnosis there are more pressing things to consider than merely indulging in foods that are normally on the naughty list, the advice being given is actually to go home and enjoy life while you still have it. Do anything, do everything. Do whatever you like for once, because this is your one chance, and it is drawing to a close. Food is, after all, core to life in a metabolic sense. It is unsurprising then that it should feature so strongly in our figurative and imaginative conceptualisation of the meaning and enjoyment of life as it has been shown in this chapter that it commonly does. In the doctor’s advice are echoes of Armande’s philosophy of unrestrained indulgence in the face of advancing disease.

Marion herself already has a strong sense of what is of the most value in life. For her it is her family and her friends; her husband, son, grand-daughter, and the members of her local older folks singing group. Married to a curmudgeon who she loves, but has always known to be one - even in his younger days - Marion simply continues with her life and interests as much as she is able to, embracing the offer she is made of singing a solo at the local concert that serves as the first round of auditions for a national singing competition that the choir’s leader has entered the group into. It is Arthur who has a problem with priorities. Although he turns up to watch Marion sing, and makes sure that his son takes her granddaughter to watch as well, he leaves the event early. Later, following Marion’s death, he attempts to sever

⁵⁷ *Song for Marion*, dir. by Paul Andrew Williams [on DVD], 11:17-29. All further references to this film will be indicated by the abbreviation ‘*SFM*’.

⁵⁸ *SFM*, 11:46-48.

all ties with his son and grand-daughter in order to spare himself the pain of the memories associated with the times they have all spent together as a family.

However, Arthur cannot sustain this self-imposed solitude for very long, and eventually we see him listening outside the window of the community hall where Marion's singing group practices. He has come to find that life is not best lived in a spirit of abstinence. An archetypal grumpy old man, the absence of Marion eventually forces him to reach out into his community in order to supplement the emotional meaning in his life that, hitherto, she has principally provided for him. With the help of the choir's leader, and as a tribute to Marion, he secretly rehearses a song for the competition. His performance at the showcase creates a catalyst both for his acceptance as part of the group, as well as a starting point for repairing his fractured relationship with his son. Arthur not only proves that life is best enjoyed by taking advantage of the opportunities one is given, but also shows that it is still possible to transcend one's prior self even as one ages. The theoretical approach to ageing that is known as Continuity Theory holds that '[b]y adulthood, people have adopted coping mechanisms, established stress and frustration tolerance levels, and defined ego defences.' However, Hillier and Barrow note that, just as Arthur demonstrates (and as also does Muriel in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*), '[p]ersonality characteristics [...] can be modified. Tempers can be controlled, fears lessened, and skills learned'. They go on to suggest that the tenets of Continuity Theory aid in perpetuating negative stereotypes of older people that need to be 'shatter[ed]'.⁵⁹

It can be clearly seen from the instances of the real-life Raffaele Panicucci, and Evelyn Bovett (quoted at the beginning of this chapter) that the process of ageing does not rule out the possibilities of still being able to crave many things in life, or the desire to seek and enjoy new experiences. These two newspaper stories are therefore proof that subversive fictional narratives, such as those of Armande and Allan examined in this chapter, resonate with how real older people can feel about life. Ageing should not and need not entail boredom or stagnation, and it is important to acknowledge this within the accepted canon of narratives that we

⁵⁹ Hillier and Barrow, p. 80.

permit about ageing if we, in turn expect to be permitted to age vibrantly and drain our own vats of life to the lees. As Haim Hazan notes:

ageing is peculiar; alongside matters of life and death it embraces notions about dependency and autonomy, body and soul, and paradoxes emanating from irreconcilable tensions between images of the old, their own will and desires, and the facilities offered to them.⁶⁰

We see, in the cases of Armande and Allan (as well as Raffaele Panicucci and Evelyn Bovett), a definitive rejection of the literal ‘facilities’ offered to ageing persons in favour of the ‘autonomy’ that can be enjoyed by exercising their ‘own wills and desires’ regarding the needs of ‘body and soul’. While in the case of Major Pettigrew, the ‘enclave’ to which Hazan states that we as a society relegate older people is represented as more ‘symbolic’ than ‘physical’, the remedy to the problems inherent to both kinds of marginalisation is clearly the same. Hazan contends that our ‘sense of continuity of self is betrayed by the fear of ‘being there’ [older], and the perception of the indivisibility of the self is challenged by the awareness of finitude’.⁶¹ The answer to this problem, as can be seen from the narratives in this chapter, is to take responsibility for our own ageing narratives, just as all of the characters here do. The canon of ageing narratives which say that to be a good old person one must dwell within the walls of a rest home, eat only healthy foods, keep breathing even when not living, not engage in personal growth, and not attend to the needs of the soul for things like personal satisfaction and love is now obsolete, and we are free to write our own endings.

⁶⁰ Hazan, pp. 1-2.

⁶¹ Hazan, p. 3.

CONCLUSION

My work as a private caregiver caused me to question whether growing older need, in these days, necessarily be a negative experience. My real life interactions with my clients often left me feeling bleak, owing to their isolation, debility, frequent low mood, and unhelpful attitudes. Yet, I was aware that in films that I had seen, and books that I had read, I had seen very different sorts of possibilities for ageing demonstrated. My instincts led me to believe that if I hoped to avoid the sort of older age that I was helping to facilitate on a daily basis, then now was the time that I must begin to research other possibilities for growing older. I reasoned that the state of being old is arrived at via other, earlier life stages. I also found that, during the course of my work, I had been cultivating some suspicions about how ageing comes to be done badly: namely, that ageing begins long before a person becomes old, that it is not helped by falling behind the times, and that we can, to a large extent, be the architects of our own success or failure in the endeavour. I had found borrowed fictional narratives to be of use to me in my past, and so they seemed the logical place to look to again to find pointers for my future.

Pausing here to acknowledge the inherent dangers of confirmation bias (or finding the kind of answer one is seeking simply because one is seeking that kind of answer), and having thus far theorized without data, I was then obligated to find some reliable information on the subject of real life ageing against which to analyse the positive aspects of the fictional narratives I had chosen to examine.¹ However, as I began to read the novels and the scholarship that I had sourced, I began to find my suspicions nonetheless confirmed. Margaret Morganroth Gullette's observation that 'decline is an authoritative narrative' of older age, and Peter Lloyd Sherlock's characterisation of prevailing attitudes to older people within social policy and services as a 'negative paradigm' confirmed that the malaise and dysfunction that I was witnessing among the older people that I was helping to look after was real,

¹ 'No data yet' [...] 'It is a capital mistake to theorize before you have all the evidence. It biases judgement.' Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*, (London: John Murray and Jonathan Cape, 1974), p. 36.

and, furthermore, that I was far from alone in believing that it was not ideal. Gullette's assertion that 'it *matters* whether a given society permits dense, interesting, encouraging narratives about aging ... [because] our narratives become our virtual realities', validated my kernel of an idea of looking for positive examples of ageing in recent literature and films, since these are two important arenas of popularly available narrative. More importantly, they are creative arenas. This means that they can be intentionally exploited in order to challenge negative perceptions of ageing among much wider potential audiences than might a human interest story in local news media about a single instance of positive ageing, which often present as exceptional.

As to the reasons behind prevailing attitudes and outcomes, in my reading of the relevant social sciences scholarship within the field of Social Gerontology, I discovered two diametrically opposed and well-established theoretical approaches to ageing - Activity Theory and Disengagement Theory. Disengagement Theory facilitates the side-lining of older people from the mainstream of life on the grounds that this is the least stressful outcome for society and older persons with regard, for example, to the demands made by new technologies, and the effects of increasing physical frailty. Activity Theory proposes that the more activities that an older person is able to engage in within the arenas of physical, mental, and emotional/social life, the more satisfying that person's whole life will be and the higher functioning they will remain as they continue to age.

The stark differences between the two theories gave me reasonable grounds to conclude that my initial suspicions about how my clients had become so isolated and miserable had been correct. My older clients had seemed cut off from the world – unable to engage much, if at all, with the outside world, either electronically, or in actuality, with any sort of ease. Outings requiring transport had to be planned, and proxies were required to book tickets to events, and to answer and send emails. Money was largely managed by others, and social visits to their homes by family members and friends seemed to occur out of a sense of duty, at regular intervals. I had seemed to be spending my days managing what the character Q in *Skyfall* refers to as 'the inevitability of time' even while everything inside me kicked, and still

does, at the notion that to be older should necessarily mean being put into the lonely background of life.² Yet this is the very thing that Disengagement Theory had long suggested was both natural and necessary to the ageing process.

I now disagree with this sort of assumption even more vehemently than I disliked the idea when I first began my reading. Not only are scholars in the field noting the problems and prejudices that have followed from this historical approach to ageing and those doing it, but also, since I began my own research, the most inspiring narratives of ageing that I have found have all either involved older people getting out into the world (*The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, *The 100-year-old Man who Climbed out the Window and Disappeared*), and/or actively bringing elements of it to them (*Chocolat*), cultivating new and meaningful relationships as they do so (*Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*).

It has also become clear that learning new skills and continuing to use old ones is vital to ageing well, as can be seen from the real-life Virginia's experience with her new iPad.³ The characters Evelyn Greenslade and Muriel Donnelly in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* leap to mind as being the best fictional exemplars, among the novels that I have examined in the course of this project, of actively expanding one's comfort zone, and either learning new skills, or effectively exploiting one's existing skill-set. Evelyn, by virtue of her keenness to learn how to use the Internet and her willingness to move to another country not knowing what will happen, definitely comes across as being the most vibrantly positive of the two women, however Muriel shows that even slow progress towards opening the mind and allowing new ideas to percolate can produce a level of personal growth that is both positive and life-changing.

Major Pettigrew, in Helen Simonson's novel *Major Pettigrew's Last Stand*, is another good example of an older character who is not willing to accept that he has had his lot in life and should quietly grow old in isolation. In pursuing first a friendship and then a romance with the shopkeeper Mrs Ali, he proves that the greater benefits in older age are brought by being willing to reach outside one's self

² *Skyfall*, 37:28.

³ 'Virginia's new iPad', and 'iPad helps 99-year-old Woman Rediscover Writing'.

and cultivate new attachments and new interests, rather than being defined by what has been in the past. Allan Karlsson in Jonas Jonasson's novel *The 100-year-old Man Who Climbed out the Window and Disappeared* is yet another role model for taking action to ensure that one's life does not become a desolate boneyard of restricted horizons. Thus we see that taking the first metaphorical step outside of your prison or your comfort zone, getting out, meeting new people, going new places, acquiring new skills, making the first phone call to ask about trying out something new - all options that require the individual to do something rather than nothing to add chapters to their own life narrative - are types of actions that offer potentially vast returns on the relatively small investments in one's own on-going engagement with life.

Most of all, I have confirmed that Ulysses definitely exhibits the right kind of attitudes to ageing, which was by far my strongest suspicion starting out. The type of approach to life that is described above, where one is regularly engaging in acquiring and maintaining skills, and undertaking adventures (big and small) is precisely how to build a lifetime's index of useful knowledge. An approach to life that keeps us looking forward to the next possibility, no matter what our age, will have us still believing, like Ulysses, that 'every hour is ... something more, | A bringer of new things' (ll. 26-8) as we age. Cultivating these kinds of attitudes during one's younger years will go a long way to ensuring that when one is older it is definitely 'not too late to seek a newer world' (l. 57). One of the key observations being made by those involved in the field of Social Gerontology is that ways of ageing are very often the product of how people have lived their lives up to the point where ageing becomes an issue.

Hillier and Barrow draw attention to the propositions that 'a person's adaptations to young adulthood and middle age predict that person's general pattern of adaptation to old age' and that 'neither activity nor disengagement theory [completely] explains adjustment to aging'.⁴ This is true with regard to health, things like financial planning, and, even more importantly, the attitudes that affect our emotional lives and our connections to, and interactions with, others as we age.

⁴ Hillier and Barrow, p.79.

Since, as Peter Lloyd-Sherlock points out, ‘[t]he well-being and [quality of life] of elderly populations are strongly conditioned by their capacity to manage opportunities and risks associated with rapid and complex change’⁵ we should all do our best to ensure that when we are old we are as well able to adapt to change as we have been throughout the rest of our lives. Prospective empowerment in our later years can be gained from the knowledge that, as Brita Larenz observes, ‘Growing old is a period of life which one can actively and positively influence if one starts early enough [...] [it] has as much to do with personal responsibility, in the sense of positive anti-ageing, with nutrition, adequate exercise, mental flexibility and making the best of the problems of ageing’.⁶ These are the factors that will determine whether our ageing will be principally a matter of numbers or a form of affliction. As Ulysses notes, ‘all experience is an arch wherethro’ | Gleams that untravell’d world’ that constitutes the future (ll. 19-29).

In turn, it is up to society at large to recognise and foster the notion that ‘Some work of noble note, may yet be done’ (l. 52) by older people. Part of what Amelia De Falco refers to as ‘redefining the meaning of old age’ is encouraging the involvement of older people in the lives of younger generations.⁷ Narratives that treat decline as the only, inevitable product of ageing foster a level of dependence by older people on younger generations that can easily become burdensome and onerous.⁸ However, when there is a reciprocal gain to be had from relationships, older people are viewed as being a vital and important part of society. In addition, older people who feel and know that they occupy this state, who can know (as it is evidently important for Santiago to know in *The Old Man and The Sea*) that they are appreciated by their community and would be missed if they were gone, will in turn experience a vastly improved quality of mental and emotional life.⁹

The symbiosis that exists between the boy Manolin and the old man Santiago, in both Aleksandr Petrov’s adaption and Hemingway’s original novella *The Old Man and the Sea*, is a perfect demonstration of this type of outcome. Manolin, as well as

⁵ Lloyd-Sherlock, p. 1.

⁶ Larenz, p.14.

⁷ De Falco, p.128.

⁸ Bjorklund and Bee, p. 153.

⁹ Bjorklund and Bee, p. 361.

being a kind boy who is taking care of someone who he recognises is no longer as well able to provide for himself as he once was, is also very interested in learning whatever he can about fishing from Santiago, who has been around longer than any of the other fishermen in the local fleet.

Just as Manolin chooses to actively learn from the tales Santiago has to tell, and the wisdoms he can pass on, in terms of his future career, so positive role models for ageing can help us enormously in preparing for, and living, a healthy and happy older age. Amelia De Falco proposes that, in particular:

fiction and film addressing the process of aging into old age offer more than narratives of regrettable and unavoidable loss. Without refuting the difficulties of aging, narrative texts often incorporate positive and constructive perspectives on becoming older, depicting characters who nurture the pleasures that persist, and even flourish, over time.¹⁰

As I have observed, these types of positive ageing narrative are becoming more common.

Amanda Smith Barusch notes that '[m]uch of our interest in other people's lives stems from the hope of learning something that will expand our own possibilities'.¹¹ It is a safe assumption then that, as today's younger generations approach mid-life, there will continue to be a demand for creating new images within the collective popular mind of what it means to be old. It is vastly important that ageing cease to be viewed as a negative, and instead come to be seen as something that inherently holds positive possibilities because '[h]ow a society thinks about ageing will affect how it mobilises current resources for the future'.¹² Currently in New Zealand it is reckoned that about half of our elderly population (or approximately 70,000 individuals), live in poverty.¹³ This is self-evidently both unacceptable and undesirable, and would not be allowed to happen if both government and society

¹⁰ De Falco, p. 129.

¹¹ Barusch, p. 8.

¹² Thandika Mkandawire, in the Preface to *Living Longer: Ageing, Development and Social Protection*, (United Nations Research Institute for Social Development), ed. by Peter Lloyd-Sherlock (London: Zed Books, 2004), p. xii.

¹³ 'Superannuitants Living in Poverty Underestimated', *New Zealand Herald*, 1 March 2014 <http://m.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11212238> [accessed 6 June 2014].

thought it was important to remember that older people are not ‘other’, but simply ourselves, later, and always have been.¹⁴ Individuals within society and the people who create the social policies within it therefore have complementary duties in this regard.

It is also important to remember that, as much as ageing well is about living well, the complete story of life also includes death, as Ulysses notes. As to the type of choice made by Armande in *Chocolat*, fortunately or unfortunately, the law has never taken away the possibility for individuals to end their own lives. Decidedly unfortunately though, it is commonly accepted, as is illustrated by the initial fate of the character Selma in *Guppies for Tea*, that older people should not get a say in how they live and die. It is therefore encouraging to note the attention being given currently to the concept of Advance Care Planning [ACP] in this country, which allows ‘patients [to] talk with health professionals about how they want to die’. Because of New Zealand law, ACP does not involve the often dreaded euthanasia discussion, but does allow older people, like 91-year-old Jean Whitteker the peace of mind of a ‘confirmation that she will “die with dignity – my way [...] [instead] of being kept alive just to die at some time in the short distance”’.¹⁵ For Whitteker, who ‘watched her mother slowly die from cancer [and whose] late husband suffered a debilitating stroke’ and “lived a lot longer than he wanted to” such reassurance is understandably important.¹⁶ This type of initiative has the potential to help people like my 91-year-old client in ways that I could not, and to alleviate a significant cause for concern for many older people.

I believe that one of the reasons that I have been able to succeed in my quest to find better narratives of ageing than the real-life ones that I was seeing is precisely this. Ageing and death are untraveled countries, life stages that potentially do not reflect any that have preceded them. Just as we exercise our right to make choices during the rest of our lives, we want to be able to determine how we age, and how we end. Gullette puts it that we are “all imaginatively [...] stakeholders in age ideology and

¹⁴ De Falco, p. x.

¹⁵ ‘New Plan for Last Days of Life’, *The Press*, 1 March 2014
<<http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/health/9777926/New-plan-for-last-days-of-life>> [accessed 1 March 2014] (paras. 3 and 6 of 26).

¹⁶ ‘New Plan for Last Days of Life’ (para. 5 of 26).

the politics of ageing, with a powerful interest in ... life-course narratives”.¹⁷ I agree.

We, who now have the potential to grow old for longer than the human race has ever had the prospect of doing at any other point in history to date, are currently in the business of creating - to quote Ulysses - ‘an arch wherethro’ a future, which will be ours, and where decline is no longer the authoritative narrative ‘gleams’ (ll. 19-20). Our whole lives lead up to our ageing, and the gleaming horizon, so long as we allow it, will remain before us as a vastness of potential to explore as we age. Both included within, and stemming from, this repository of potentials are fictional narratives, which Amelia De Falco notes can ‘remind us of our own narrativity, our [...] condition as perpetually ‘in progress’[...] both the fragility and possibility such instability ensures’.¹⁸ Positive fictional narratives of ageing can both inspire us to undertake our lives in a manner that will allow us to age successfully as individuals, and, by virtue of their mass appeal, also have the potential to facilitate the change in popular conceptions of what ageing means that scholars within the field of Social Gerontology have so long been wishing for, and advocating.

¹⁷ Gullette, p. 18.

¹⁸ De Falco, p. 138.

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