

Joanna McClelland Glass' Mrs. Dexter and Her Daily and the Inter-play among Age,

Gender and Class

Núria Casado Gual

Universitat de Lleida

Introduction: Contemporary Theater and the Discourse of Aging

As a result of the so-called 'revolution of longevity' – a term that was coined by the professor of geriatrics Robert Butler (2008), and which has its roots in the improved health and social conditions that followed the Second World War – multidisciplinary studies of late-aging and ageism have come to be regarded increasingly as a valid and crucial area of inquiry in our contemporary developed societies. In contrast with – and often as a response to – alarming demographic studies on the world's increasingly aged population, which have all too often consolidated essentialist views on aging and old age (Bytheway and Johnson 2010), for more than two decades now the interconnected areas of critical and cultural gerontology have contributed to the creation of alternative perceptions of the experience of growing older that are more truthful to the complexity and diversity of this phenomenon (Cole et al. 2010: 1-23). In the specific field of cultural gerontology, recent collections of essays¹ and monographic studies on the relationship between several arts and the discourse of aging² demonstrate that cultural representations and/or manifestations of aging have also changed throughout the last decades in order to accommodate the increasingly plural realities whereby old age can be experienced.

Out of the various cultural models through which aging and old age may be studied, drama and the theater stand out as especially enlightening artistic media that

¹ See for example Hartung and Maierhofer 2009, Worsfold 2011, or Dolan and Tincknell 2012.

² See Chivers 2011, Gravagne 2013, Jennings and Gardner 2012, Oró-Piqueras 2011, and Taberner 2013.

enhance the constructedness of age and explore or subvert stereotypical visions of older men and women. In fact, in the last fifteen years what we could denominate as the interdisciplinary arena of “theatrical gerontology”³ has proved in different ways that plays and theatrical shows can be powerful sites of inquiry into the richness of aging. Following Ann Davis Basting’s *The Stages of Age* (1998), a study that participated in the inauguration of this particular field, the diverse but interconnected areas of dramatic criticism, performance studies, history of the theater and theater pedagogy have contributed to enriching the study of aging from various theatrical angles, as shown by several recent publications,⁴ research projects⁵ and academic conferences.⁶ Nonetheless,

³ The term ‘theatrical gerontology’ is used here to distinguish it from the closely related field of ‘literary gerontology.’ Even though literature and the theatre are intrinsically connected – and, in this respect, drama as a literary genre epitomizes the intersection between both arts – the multi-medial and multidisciplinary nature of the theatre and its inclusion in the broader field of the performing arts often requires a more explicit distinction between ‘theater’ and ‘literature,’ especially if this is done for research purposes. When literature and the theater are used as expressive vehicles whereby aging and old age can be investigated, some differences can also be found: whereas ‘literary gerontology’ focuses on the study of cultural manifestations of aging in literature and related art forms – and in this respect it includes theatrical representations of aging – theatrical applications of cultural gerontology not only encompass ‘literary’ or ‘dramatic’ representations of old age, but also pedagogical practices, social interventions and other artistic expressions that go beyond the realm of the dramatic or literary text in order to scrutinize the experience of growing old. In this way, ‘theatrical gerontology’ may also refer to the diverse areas of theater pedagogy, theater for education, drama-therapy, social education and social work, or other performative arts, such as dance or music, and their potential connection with issues of aging. In addition, the performative nature of a dramatic text makes it more likely to accommodate performative manifestations of old age: in this respect, the analysis of plays does not only benefit from the ‘narrative turn’ of cultural gerontology that is second-nature to the literary text, but also from the ‘performative turn’ that, in Aagje Swinnen’s words, may be called “the rise of age(ing) studies” (2011). Hence, as Valerie Barnes Lipscomb contends, the theater is an especially “fertile ground for various theoretical angles in age studies” (2012: 117), and it is for this and the reasons stated above that is foregrounded through the term ‘theatrical gerontology’ in this essay. This article is based on the analysis of playtexts and, hence, it is equally related to the fields of literary and theatrical gerontology, but the use of the latter is meant to emphasize the broader web of connections that are established within theatrical manifestations or implementations of cultural gerontology.

⁴ This is the case of Fries-Dieckman in Hartung and Maierhopfer 2009, Lipscomb and Marshall 2010, D’Morte in Dolan and Tincknell 2012, and Mangan 2013.

⁵ See, for instance, Mateu and Esteve 2008, ‘Ages and Stages’ 2009-2012, or the Grup Dedal-lit 2001-2003, 2012-2015. As part of its research projects, the group Grup Dedal-lit from the University of Lleida (Catalonia, Spain), of which the author of this essay is a member, has developed studies of stereotypical, normative and deviant representations of age that are based on dramatic literature and theatrical productions. (Casado-Gual 2002, 2004a, 2004b, 2005 and 2009) Moreover, it has also commissioned theatrical performances for two conferences on cultural gerontology that were organized at the University of Lleida in 2003 and 2008 (“The Art of Aging: An International, Interdisciplinary Conference on Textualising the Phases of Life,” and the “6th International Symposium on Cultural Gerontology,” respectively). Both performances were produced by the Catalan theater company Nurosfera. Grup Dedal-lit plans to commission a new play for the same company for the conference that it is co-organizing as a partner of the European project SIforAge, and that is to be held in Barcelona in October 2016. Information about Grup Dedal-lit can be found at www.pro-age.udl.cat.

it is noteworthy that the work of contemporary playwrights and, significantly, of women dramatists in particular, has seldom been analyzed or referred to by theater scholars, teachers, therapists or practitioners as a source of critical reflection on the experience of getting older.⁷

In the hope of starting to fill this important gap, this essay will look at the latest dramatic piece that the Saskatoon-born writer Joanna McClelland Glass has published to date, the play *Mrs. Dexter and Her Daily* (2012). Joanna McClelland Glass was born in Saskatchewan in 1936 and is a well-known dramatist in both North-American and Canadian theatrical scenes. Since the publication and full production of her first playtext, *Artichoke* (1979), McClelland Glass has written 12 dramatic pieces, the majority of which have been performed in Canada and the United States – the writer's country of origin and the country of her permanent residence since the sixties – as well as in England, Ireland, Germany and Australia. McClelland Glass is also the author of two novels, *Reflections on a Summer Mountain* (1975) and *Woman Wanted* (1984), and of the screenplays of their film versions, but she is mainly considered an outstanding figure in contemporary Canadian literature for the fine quality and commercial success of her dramatic *oeuvre*.⁸ Older characters abound in McClelland Glass' playtexts but, significantly enough, it is in her later works that they acquire the status of protagonists –

⁶ A recent example is the conference "Playing Age," organized this year by the University of Toronto.

⁷ A recent exception is presented in the opening issue of the journal of *Age, Culture, Humanities* through Bridie Moore's analysis of the age-scripts reproduced by five productions of the 2011-12 British theater season (2014). However, as Moore herself notices, only three of the playwrights she covers in her study – which is originally based on a survey of 25 productions – were born before 1960.

⁸ For more information on the playwright, see an interview with her in Rudakoff and Much (1990); the bio-critical essay by Diane Bessai in Tener and Steele 1986; the entries in Toye (1983), Toye and Benson (2006) and Croft (2001); and the section devoted to the writer in the webpage of Grup Dedal-lit's research project "Ageing and Gender in Literary Creation in English," available at <http://www.ageing-gender-creativity.udl.cat>, and created by the author of this article.

this also includes *Two Homely Daughters*, the novel on which she is currently working⁹ (McClelland Glass, 28 March 2014).

This is the case of McClelland Glass' latest published work for the stage, *Mrs. Dexter and Her Daily*, which is a Naturalistic two-hander that premiered in 2010 at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa. The play presents two female characters in their mid-sixties whose respective experiences of aging are dramatized as both homogeneous and diverse. Using theater semiotics as an analytical tool, and cultural gerontology as the predominant critical framework, this article will explore the play's re-presentation of aging as well as the intersections between markers of age, gender and class that underlie the dramatist's theatricalization of later life through her two older female protagonists. The recognition of the interconnection between age(ing) and other identity markers, such as gender, class, ethnicity or disability, is part of the critical project of cultural gerontology in its constant demonstration that the phenomenon of growing older is not solely dependent on biological and chronological factors, but equally or even more conditioned by socio-cultural circumstances that affect the individual and the society in which he/she ages.¹⁰ In light of these studies, the analysis of McClelland Glass's most recently published play will show how the Canadian-American author offers dramatic portrayals of aging that incorporate the complexities and ambivalences of becoming older, especially when old age is represented and explored through inter-connected socio-cultural perspectives. Ultimately, this article hopes to demonstrate that drama and

⁹ The author of this essay is currently conducting research on the relationship between Joanna McClelland Glass' work, her representations of aging in her drama, and her own process of aging, as part of Grup Dedal-lit's project "Aging and Gender in Contemporary Literary Creation in English." A study of the representation of old age in McClelland Glass' dramatic *oeuvre* as a whole will be published this year in *Theatre Research in Canada* (36.1) under the title "Ambivalent Pathways of Progress and Decline: The Representation of Aging and Old Age in Joanna McClelland Glass' Drama," and a chapter that approaches the dramatist's lifelong creativity through a lifespan perspective, provisionally entitled "Mapping One's Journey between One's Origins and One's Achievements": Joanna McClelland Glass' Dramaturgical Creativity," is to be published in a volume of essays that is currently being edited by Emma Domínguez, Brian Worsfold and the author of this article.

¹⁰ See, for example, Biggs 2004, Cole at al. 1992, Cole et al. 2010, Cruikshank 2003, Gilleard and Higgs 2000, Randall and Kenyon 2004, Settersten et al. 2009, Twigg 2004, Woodward 1999, or Zeilig 2011.

the theater continue to offer invaluable sources of inquiry into significant yet marginalized aspects of human life such as the experience of aging. Against the still predominant narrative of decline that plagues our youth-obsessed Western societies (Gullette 1997, 2004, 2011) and the biased misrepresentation – or even invisibility – of older people in social discourses and popular forms of mass communication and cultural consumption, (Bludau 2010, Gerbner et al. 2006, Holmes 2014) the theater can foreground the multiple levels of the aging narrative through the various realities that are implicit in its performative nature, thereby enabling, as Valerie Barnes Lipcomb sustains, a better understanding of the human phenomenon of growing old (2012: 121).

Stepping on Common Ground: Dramatizing Homogeneous Aspects of Aging

The latest theories of cultural gerontology underline the need to recognize the singularity of every person's aging process by focusing, in the words of Brian Worsfold, "on the microcosm, that is, [...] on the individual and the human and social context of the individual" (2011: xix). Nevertheless, other recent studies draw attention to the dominant role that old age can play in the interaction between age and other identity markers derived from the individual's socio-cultural context (Gunnarson 101). Following these apparently opposed theoretical stances, the present analysis will begin by identifying the two main dramaturgical mechanisms whereby *Mrs. Dexter and Her Daily* represents aging as a potentially homogenizing experience, as well as the poetic and socio-cultural connotations of these strategies. It is significant to note that the generational concurrence of the two protagonists of McClelland Glass' piece is one of the first characterization details that are given in the playtext¹¹ (2012: 4), which

¹¹ From this point onwards, only page numbers will be used to indicate quotes quotations from the article's primary source.

facilitates this preliminary consideration of the general features of aging and their possible meanings.

The first dramaturgical mechanism whereby age acts as a homogenizing category in the play is detected in the emphasis that McClelland Glass places on the incipient frailty of her sexagenarian protagonists. The explicit and recurrent reference to the two women's deteriorated bodies creates at first sight a conventional account of aging, which, as noted by Gilleard and Higgs, locates this experience "within the body, where it is expressed as a universal, intrinsic, non-reversible process of corporeal decline" (2014: 1). Hence, throughout the play both Mrs. Dexter and Peggy, her housekeeper, refer to their various physical ailments (6, 7, 17, 27) and psychological or mental weaknesses (6, 7, 8, 11, 25, 36, 37, 38, 47, 48, 52), or to those of their stage partner. The play's abundant verbal, kinetic and aesthetic allusions to their aging bodies indicate the extent to which the characters' "chronological age" is generally represented through the figures' "biological age," to use Kathleen Woodward's categorical dissection of the age category¹² (Lipscomb and Marshall 2010: 5). However, the play's recurrent dramatization of the biological aspect of age does not result in an essentially negative (or superficial) portrayal of aging that, again in Gilleard and Higgs' words, "denies [old age] its diversity]" through a "corporeal mask of [...] defeat" (2014: xii, 21); nor does it lead to the one-dimensional theme of decline through which, as shown by Margaret Morganroth Gullette (1997, 2004, 2011), old age has often been represented or interpreted. Rather, Mrs. Dexter's and Peggy's aging corporealities enable the two figures' personalities and reflections to come into sight from a particular subject position. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's, Michel Foucault's, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theories on the body, Evy Gunnarson highlights the correlation

¹² Whereas "chronological age" refers to the actual age of the individual, "biological age" is conditioned by "the state of health of the body" (Lipscomb and Marshall 5).

between the experience of the aged body and the vision and interpretation of the world that emanates from this enhanced or 'lived' corporeality (91-93). Likewise, Nick Crossley's theory of the social body, which has a direct influence on contemporary debates about the aging body, draws attention to the kind of "embodied knowledge" that can "only be realized in and through bodily performance" (Gilleard and Higgs 2014: 7). In light of these approaches, Mrs. Dexter's and Peggy's enhanced bodily representations can be regarded as repositories and potential vehicles for perspectives that may only be gained through the situational specificity of their aged embodiments, and can only be expressed through the materiality of their theatrical corporealities.

The particularity of the characters' views and of their respective dramatic embodiments is brought to centre stage through the use of the monologue as the predominant model of the dramaturgical structure. Thus, even though Mrs. Dexter and Peggy interact at several points in the piece, only one of them is the visible protagonist of one of the two acts of the play. The anti-Naturalistic predominance of monologue over dialogue constitutes the second mechanism whereby another common aspect of aging is conveyed, namely, the sense of segregation that conditions the characters' "social age" – again in Woodward's terms (Lipscomb and Marshall 5). At one level, the theatrical isolation that is inherent in the delivery of a monologue is coherent with the characters' new forms of loneliness that they experiment in this phase of their lives. Yet, the characters' 'solo performances' also allow for the figures' past selves and projections of the future to emerge, and for their familiar and affective relationships to be re-examined. Hence, in the two acts of the play McClelland Glass interweaves two monological narratives of self whereby the play's protagonists show how they live through and within time, by themselves and in (dis)connection with others.

As a reflection of the new subjectivities that are produced by the prolongation of life (Kaufman 225-6), Mrs. Dexter and Peggy's embodied monologues are imbued with the challenges that accompany the extension of their late adulthood. Through the characters' predicaments, they underline the persistence of change at a phase of life that has traditionally been regarded as, at best, a source of stability or permanence and, more generally and in a negative vein, as existing outside time, and as generating fixed and rigid identities. Although the figures' frail corporealities and theatrical isolation do signify common aspects of the aging experience, they also provide an entry into the expression of the characters' individual circumstances and to the signs of diversity that are related to their respective socio-cultural backgrounds. In this respect, it is important to acknowledge the centrality of the body in aging, while at the same time recognizing, as Julia Twigg maintains, "that [the] body is socially and culturally constituted" (59).

Theatricalizing the Diversity of the Aging Experience

In addition to their representation – and, in a way, subversion – of general aspects of aging, Mrs. Dexter's and Peggy's enacted life-stories and perceptions intersect with other dramaturgical elements that fragment and pluralize the universal experience of becoming older, while at the same time highlighting the complexity of the figures' processes of aging. Whereas the dramatization of the characters' 'biological' and 'social age' in *Mrs. Dexter and Her Daily* provides the value of aging corporealities and their connected narratives with visibility, a closer, 'microcosmic' look at the figures' actions and stories reveals aspects of the characters' 'personal age,' that is, the ways in which their age is 'felt' (Lipscomb and Marshall 5). This individualization of the age category renders Edith's and Peggy's narratives of aging through "the humanizing lens of personal experience", to borrow Simon Biggs' words (45), and transforms their stories

into layered narratives of selfhood. At the same time, the markers of heterogeneity that are part of the two characters' individual experience of aging cannot be separated from the discursive components of which they are partly constructed. These are closely connected to the socio-cultural context from which their aging experiences emerge as well as to the situations of inequality that are related to them. As Molly Andrews contends, structural inequalities affect all stages of the life course, but they "play a particularly prominent role in later life" (391), thereby showing the so-often-neglected socio-cultural basis of aging – or, what is the same, its diverse nature.

The most obvious marker of difference that intersects with the characters' aging process and which is part and parcel of their "personal age" is that of gender. The dynamic interplay between gender and aging in Edith and Peggy's characterizations reveals some of the ways in which older women are often doubly disadvantaged – or, borrowing Susan Sontag's famous phrase, are submitted to "a double standard of aging" (1978) – by the "narrowing horizons of old age," as Nancy Datan puts it, and the traditional discriminations they have faced (Cruikshank 199). As argued by Simon Biggs, the gendered and aging self "needs to be protected from relatively fixed social-cultural stereotyping that may deny or restrict possibilities for personal growth; and, sometimes, it is the subject of this gendered form of aging herself that behaves according to "a series of established roles and identities" that progressively restrict her "gendered and maturational potential" (47). In a way, as will be shown, Mrs Dexter and Peggy reproduce this pattern of fixity that emerges when gender and age intersect in the process of growing older. At the same time, McClelland Glass' dramatization of this intersection through these two characters also discloses possible strategies of resistance that the aging and gendered 'Others' can use in order to reclaim their agency. The composite look of feminist gerontology in both its critique of structural inequalities and

search for alternatives can hence be applied to the analysis of McClelland Glass' play, thereby revealing the extent to which Mrs. Dexter's and Peggy's gender narratives give a more specific meaning to their late-life monologues and the construction of the figures' 'felt' age.

One of the key factors that totally conditions the two characters' experience of aging from a gendered point of view is their conflictive relationships with men. On the one hand, Mrs. Dexter late-life divorce provides an alternative explanation for the character's mental and emotional fragility, while at the same time highlighting the double 'Otherness' to which the divorced, older woman can be submitted. As Peggy points out, "when they leave you at sixty-five, it's different than when you're thirty-five" (7), a difference that provides a new justification for Mrs. Dexter's shrinking 'social age' as she eloquently elaborates it in the second act:

I don't go out because the butcher, the baker, the dry cleaner, the man in the wicket at the bank – they all look at me as if a death had occurred. *If* a death had occurred, they'd say, "Oh, Mrs. Dexter, I'm sorry." They'd send me a sympathy card [...] But this – this abandonment, this *abandonment* in the last lap of my life, they don't know what to say. (41; italics in the original)

Throughout the play, the distressing impact and isolating effect of this late-life betrayal is shown through Mrs. Dexter's addiction to alcohol, which she justifies as an escape from finding herself "flying *solo*, in her sixties," without "quite fathom[ing] the past events that led to the present void" (38; italics in the original). On the other hand, abandonment and exploitation are presented as having been constant features in Peggy's sentimental history. Her late-life decision to go back to Herbie, her unfaithful and abusive ex-partner (31, 39), becomes Peggy's desperate outlet on the verge of a penurious retirement. Even if this situation is closely connected with the character's low socio-economic status, it is also deeply related to her commitment as a mother of a diabetic daughter and a mentally-ill son, both of whom rely on her support (7, 16, 21).

Motherhood is, in fact, the other aspect through which Mrs. Dexter's and Peggy's 'gendered age' is constructed, especially in contrast to their ex-partners' more detached parenting style or their complete absence as fathers. For both women, the pressures of mothering have prolonged into their late life. Peggy's long-standing motherly sacrifice is marked by the disability of two of her three adult children, whereas Mrs. Dexter's motherhood also entails an important renunciation insofar as, following her divorce, she decides to sell her own house instead of the family cottage for the sake of her children and grandchildren (13). However, the generosity of neither of the two women is acknowledged: whereas Peggy confesses that her only healthy son, Trevor, has never helped her in her efforts "and [she] doubt[s] he ever will" (14), Mrs. Dexter's middle-aged children only call their mother to demand her economic support or her help in practical matters (45, 46, 47, 57).

Through the two characters' difficult affective relations, which are marked by gendered situations of inequality, McClelland Glass deconstructs two important stereotypes of female aging that are discriminatory despite their apparently well-meaning intentions: the image of the wise old woman, which frequently reduces fictional representations of older women to archetypal figures (Brennan 134) and reproduces a "narrative of intelligence" that can be limiting when the aging subject feels this expectation has not been fulfilled (Andrews 390, 392); and the modern model of successful aging that results from consumer, youth-oriented culture – which, as Twigg explains, directly associates signs of age in women with "failure" and "shame" (61). Indeed, neither Mrs. Dexter nor Peggy Randall feels 'wise' in the traditional sense. Mrs. Dexter in particular complains that "there's little in this world that [she] understand[s]" and, after a meaningful pause, she adds, through a Hamletian allusion:

But, you see, here's the rub. I thought I would. Understand. I had the *expectation*. I thought I'd have achieved clarity and wisdom with passing years. I

thought I'd be the Oracle on Biscarth in the autumn of my life. And I'm not. (37; italics in the original)

The two female figures do not embody, either, the model of successful aging that Mrs. Dexter's neighbour and old school friend, Winni Whitaker, seems to epitomize (22-23, 43). In opposition to apparently positive representations of female aging which disguise the complexity and diversity of gender identity, Mrs. Dexter and Peggy are devised as concrete dramatizations of gendered and aging subjectivities, whose several manifestations of their inner strength compensate for the signs of their fragility. For instance, Mrs. Dexter's resistance towards superficial discourses of self-improvement or domestic docility emerges in an allegorical speech in which she visualizes herself as "a large, round room with many doors," all of which she may go through except for the one that leads to "Forgive and Forget" (50). Mrs. Dexter's ardent personality is also shown through her fiery reactions towards her ex-husband (10), or her own children's abuse of her (346) and, more positively, through her passionate references to literary texts that she knows by heart (37, 38, 40, 42, 43, 54). As for Peggy, the character's physical ailments and preoccupations do not prevent her from carrying out a high number of actions on the stage with vibrant energy and even self-parodic enactments. In fact, the two characters' constant resort to humour is another important strategy through which both show their resistance to the limitations of their biological and social age (9, 10, 11, 16, 20, 21, 25, 27, 29, 38, 49, 50, 51, 55, 56, 62, 63).

All these small but meaningful details endow the monologues of the two female characters with an underlying structure of resilience that gives additional meaning to the figures' 'felt age' and counteracts their presupposed 'feminine fragility' as older women. Despite their ailments and difficulties, and even if both look for problematic escapes from their situations by resorting to an abusive ex-partner for one woman and alcohol for the other, they can also be said to look old age in the face through either

their introspective analysis or practical actions. Contrarily, when Mr. Dexter's views are revealed through Mrs. Dexter's monologue, they also disclose the man's denial of his own age: hence, Mrs. Dexter ascribes her ex-husband's decision to start a new life with another woman to the man's feeling of disempowerment after his retirement, his fear of old age (60) and, as he confessed to her, his ultimate confrontation with his own mortality and "the [unbearable] sameness of [their] days" (61). In Peggy's monologue, Mr. Dexter's retirement is also presented as a negative turning point in his life (9-10). Therefore, the indirect dramatization of Mr. Dexter's disempowered masculinity as an aging man underlines, by contrast, the different characterization of Mrs. Dexter's and Peggy's 'gendered age.'

Class is the other social marker that plays a prominent role in *Mrs. Dexter and Her Daily* in its depiction of the intricacies of later life. Contrary to gender, class difference does not signify a common source of diversity in the creation of the two characters, but rather sets the two protagonists apart. The title of the piece, which refers to Peggy indirectly through her occupation, already signifies the importance of the socioeconomic distance between the two protagonists. The spatial attributes of the play also exude materialist connotations that reinforce the social imbalance between the two women. In the first place, the Naturalistic description of the fictional space indicates that Mrs. Dexter's house "is in the 'old money,' Rosedale, section of Toronto on Binscarth Road" (2), a well-off area in the Canadian city. In coherence with the aesthetics of the "traditional kitchen" that is said to be part of "a twelve-room brick house" (2), the play's fictional and presentational spaces directly place Mrs. Dexter as a member of the upper-social class of Toronto to the eyes of readers and spectators. Peggy's apartment, in contrast, is only a spatial reference in the universe of discourse of the play, and is situated in a deprived area of the city.

Costume, props, gesture, movement and word are the other stage systems whereby the characters' socio-economic distance is effectively conveyed: whereas the detail of Peggy's second pair of shoes in her handbag and housedress quickly present her as the housekeeper before she starts speaking in the first scene, all the cleaning products and tools she carries with her, together with the actions that she enacts, dramatize her as Mrs. Dexter's domestic employee, her use of an informal register and regional dialect reflect the character's elementary education, and her comically referring to Mrs. Dexter as "Herself" (5), or "my lady" (6) at the beginning of the play enhance her subordinated role. In opposition, Mrs. Dexter's passive attitude while sitting in a lawn chair in the garden, and her bossy manners when first addressing Peggy (6, 27) effectively introduce her as the owner of the house; but it is mainly her refined language and frequent literary allusions (37, 38, 40, 42, 43, 54) that especially mirror the "privileged, intellectual life" that she is said to have lived (4, 58).

Despite the semiotic effectiveness whereby class-difference is communicated in the play as a distinctive discourse, its representation and codifications do not exist in isolation from age- and gender-based dramatizations. Rather, the class category intersects with that of gender and age throughout the piece, thereby complicating to a greater extent the author's portrayal of aging. As the only presentational space of the play, the kitchen illustrates the piece's complex blend of social markers and discourses. On the one hand, it establishes the distinction between service and power through the different – and separate – uses that Peggy and Mrs. Dexter make of it as employee and owner, respectively. On the other hand, the kitchen can be perceived as a 'gendered' dramatic space, as demonstrated by the historical use of this space in modern drama. The common use of the kitchen as private domain for Mrs. Dexter's and Peggy's monological confessions foregrounds the space's traditional association with feminine

domesticity, even if neither woman conforms to the role of the traditional housewife. Finally, the kitchen is also described as “old,” like the house, (8) with only “new appliances” which were bought ten years ago (2). The coincidence between this detail of the set and Peggy’s serving period in the house reinforces the close connection between the play’s dramatic space and the two women’s characterizations. In effect, Mrs. Dexter’s kitchen may be understood as a powerful spatial metaphor for the intricate combination of age, gender and class in Mrs. Dexter’s and Peggy’s dramatized life narratives, and of the new meanings that such a combination introduces into McClelland Glass’ portrayal of aging.

Some details that are revealed about the kitchen and the house in general – like the negligent aspect of the garden without a gardener, with raspberries rotting on the bush (41-42), or the broken fan that needs fixing so as to cut down the expensive air-conditioning bills (6, 19) – foreground the importance of monetary income in the dramatic world of the play. As a result of Mrs. Dexter’s late-life divorce and of Peggy’s imminent retirement, loss of income conditions the two women’s immediate present and future prospects, as well as their ‘social age.’ Hence, in both cases the reduction of the women’s earnings entails the danger of descending the social ladder. Yet, the consequences of this risk are very different for each character. In Mrs. Dexter’s case, her leaving her upper-middle-class life behind by moving to a condominium and learning “to live on a budget” (19) entails a loss of the character’s public profile – as reflected when she ceases to contribute to the alumni association of her old school (42) – and, more importantly, a redefinition of her family roles, as implicit in her decision to let her husband or her own children take care of her grandchildren’s expensive education(47). As for Peggy, her new pension only enables her to live in a small apartment that is part of Toronto Community Housing, in which the sense of insecurity,

as the character explains, is extreme (14, 20, 34). In her case, her daily struggle to “make ends meet” and guarantee a safer home simply becomes a matter of survival, which ends up conditioning her affective and family relationships through her decision to go back to her former partner. The portrayal of late-life hardship that McClelland Glass creates through the two female characters is a realistic representation of the living conditions of many older women which, as shown by several studies, present an inferior status with respect to that of older men (Cruikshank 2003, Settersten and Trautren 2009). Through this depiction, the author highlights the negative connotations that the class marker acquires through its interconnection with those of gender and age, in the same way that she complements the social signification of age itself through the incorporation of class difference in the distinctive characterizations of her protagonists.

Each character’s body is also a potent theatrical symbol whereby the intersection between the characters’ gender, age and social-class membership is poetically communicated, especially when this interconnection re-defines the figures’ ‘biological age.’ If, as Julianne Malveaux puts it, “[t]he economic status of older women is a ‘map or mirror of their past lives’” (Cruikshank 117), the bodies of McClelland Glass’ female characters are themselves maps or mirrors of their class burdens or advantages. In this light, a materialist reading of the different types of frailty that are presented by each character enables a re-definition of the figures’ ‘biological age.’ Significantly, the only limitation of a physical nature that apparently affects Mrs. Dexter is the impairment of her vision, which cannot only be ascribed to her chronological age, but also to her intense intellectual life as an educated, upper-middle-class woman. As Margaret Cruikshank affirms, “a good education, white-collar jobs that do not cause bodily harm, health insurance, sufficient money for a healthy diet, and control over many life circumstances do not guarantee good health in old age, but they make it likely rather

than exceptional (117). By contrast, Peggy's long history as an industrial worker is inscribed into her body and, hence, onto her 'biological age' through various physical tensions and impairments, such as a permanently bad shoulder and hearing loss in one ear (28-9). Even her teeth can be read as a bodily metaphor that betrays her humble origins: as she explains, the dentist at her hometown pulled all her teeth because she could not afford an alternative treatment (27). Yet it is the social determinism implicit in the dentist's "judgment" that the character really resents, a professional's decision which, for Peggy, became "a life sentence" (28). Poignantly, she goes on to wonder: "how come he was so sure I'd always be poor? How come he thought that, when I was full-grown, I couldn't afford to get my teeth fixed?" (28).

Besides these complementary readings of the characters' 'social' and 'biological' ages, the characters' 'felt' age is also modified by the socio-economic circumstances in which the two figures grow older. Once again, class introduces an important element of diversity in the two women's personal experience of aging. On the one hand, Mrs. Dexter's financial disempowerment adds a materialist quality to the various feelings of loss that explain her isolated, semi-depressive state, as reflected in her describing her life as a period of "subtractions," "debits," and "bankruptcy" (42). Although Mrs. Dexter's lifelong upper-middle-class privilege (46-7) has liberated her from the "cumulative disadvantage" that older individuals with working-class origins experience (Cruikshank 117), her loss of financial and social power as she approaches her old age renders her more sensitive to socio-economic inequalities. On the other hand, Peggy's urgent need to gain security in her elderly years activates her capacity for resilience through her search for alternatives. Despite her anxiety to improve her circumstances, Peggy is also capable of expressing gratitude for what she already has, such as the government pension that enables her to pay for the medical treatment and

institutional care of her disabled children (7, 16). The details of Peggy's hard life that are reconstructed through the two monologues, which include the woman's humble family origins (21, 22) and low level of education (51), her early struggles to survive as a young mother in Toronto (2, 12, 18), and her long history as an industrial worker in physical demanding jobs (11), generally depict her as a working-class woman whose social circumstances and personal history have instilled in her a constant capacity for self-improvement – and, as McClelland Glass herself reflects, a greater capacity to be satisfied which she can obtain in her old age, despite everyday disappointments, and as a result of her lower expectations (2015). All in all, the different attitudes and reactions that Mrs. Dexter and Peggy present towards their gendered, aged and financial disempowerment in their later life make Peggy appear stronger – even younger – despite her higher social vulnerability.

Ultimately, the interplay between the figures' class differentiation, their gendered subjectivities and their individual process of aging results in a diverse perception of time and distinctive constructions of selfhood that are derived from it, which also include the characters' spiritual dimension. As a working woman, Peggy continues to “punch the clock” and is forced to “squeeze in” all sorts of tasks that Mrs. Dexter asks her to perform (15, 35). Her constant busyness lets her value her scarce moments of peace, which are often reduced to the brief admiration of precious details of everyday life such as the sunshine in the “long, sunny August day [-]” that conforms the temporal framework of the play (5). Peggy's Catholic upbringing also provides her with the Judeo-Christian image of the journey of life, which colors her own self-narrative with teleological cohesion, and the adversities of her life with a sense of transcendence. Reflecting upon the difference between her faith and Mrs. Dexter's apparent lack of it, she claims that “[i]f Mrs. D could pray, it would lighten her road” (20). As for Mrs.

Dexter, the combination of her socio-cultural and personal circumstances facilitates her privileged state of introspection, which enables her to have a more contemplative approach towards time but also creates a suffocating sense of stagnation. For Mrs. Dexter, August evenings become “endless summer days” (41) in which “[i]t takes forever for the sun to set” (56). Within the space of one of these daily eternities, in which she describes a recent trip she made to her old school, Mrs. Dexter unveils the random pattern whereby she has come to perceive her life and her own sense of self as being composed of split, estranged age-identities:

I drove over to Branksome last week. I parked and looked at the old, ivied buildings standing there, anticipating the arrival of all the nubile young women next month. And I wondered, who the hell *was* I when I was seventeen? And what is this random plan that will deposit me, this fall, in a small apartment on Whitehall? (47; italics in the original)

In her need to continue looking for answers to the existential challenge posed by her later years, and believing that religion is a form of “assisted living” (62), she seeks spiritual refuge in a more intellectual approach towards theology or even Jewish sacred texts, where she hopes to find “some kind of philosophical safe haven” once she settles down in her new apartment (54).

Conclusion: Joanna McClelland Glass' Latest Representation of Aging

As has been shown throughout this analysis, *Mrs. Dexter and Her Daily* represents the intricacies, contradictions and challenges of two fictionalized processes of aging which deconstruct positive and negative stereotypes of old age through some homogeneous features that, as has been done through the theoretical discourse of “the new aging” (Gilleard and Higgs 2014: 17-19), reclaim the importance of the body in narratives of old age, while at the same time presenting markers of diversity that facilitate a more

focalized – and, therefore, realistic – gaze towards the heterogeneous phenomenon of growing older. As the gerontologist George Maddox has put it, “[o]lder people do not become more alike by becoming old. In many areas, they become more varied” (Woodward 156). In her latest published play, McClelland Glass attains this complex representation of aging at various semiotic levels. Through the solid social, psychological and discursive bases of Mrs. Dexter’s and Peggy’s characterizations, she portrays the self as “a locus of sociocultural influence,” as Herzog and Markus put it (229), in which composite markers of gender and class interplay with the fluid category of age, and continuously modify individual reconstructions of identity and experience across the life span. Precisely the use of a house on sale as the piece’s fictional space can be read as a symbol of the significant form of transition that older adulthood can imply for the individual. At the same time, the author’s choice of the end of the summer as the play’s fictional time (5) avoids the archetypal association between winter and old age, and suggests instead an extension of the last phase of the life course which still leaves room for new late-life changes and their associated self-perceptions.

Contrary to what might be suggested by the author’s own position in her life span, and coherent with the inquisitive spirit of her characters, *Mrs. Dexter and Her Daily* does not convey conclusive thoughts about the meanings that can be ascribed to one’s lifetime or old age. In fact, in the passage of Mrs. Dexter’s monologue that closes the play the character enhances the “eye of the storm” that contains everything which does not give her peace of mind at the moment, and which might only be dissipated by her death, a prospect that she situates “years from now” (64). Hence, the play as a whole enhances the practical and meditative ways through which two aging characters struggle against their various insecurities, and postpones their possible attainment of self-knowledge or self-fulfillment.

Despite this lack of conclusiveness as to what aging and the life course can mean for the two women dramatized, there is one kind of fulfilling certainty that the author allows for in her double portrayal of old age and which, in fact, constitutes the heart of the play: namely, that the feeling of sympathy and sense of loyalty that unite the two protagonists beyond their distinctive subject positions makes their individual vicissitudes more bearable and meaningful, and provides the two women's unstable circumstances with a sense of continuity despite the impending dissolution of their professional relationship. The personal bond linking Mrs. Dexter and Peggy is never shown through the physical interaction of the two characters on the stage. However, it is expressed through their mutual consideration in their double narrative, insofar as the details of each character's life and worldview are completed by the other figure's narration. In addition, each monologue presents subtle but constant details whereby their mutual admiration and affection are suggested (11, 14, 19, 26, 32, 33, 34, 37, 40, 45, 51, 52, 53, 58). More significantly, their closeness becomes evident at the end of the play when Mrs. Dexter eventually ignores her opinions about Peggy's partner and presents a reference for him and Peggy so that they can rent a new apartment. At one level, Mrs. Dexter's gesture of friendship and self-denial – which finds its reciprocal correspondents in many other acts of loyalty performed by Peggy – reveals the extent to which fellowship in old age becomes, in the words of Evy Gunnarsson, “necessary both for comfort and as a diversion when everyday life feels difficult” (101). But, more generally, it becomes a symbol of the form of interdependence that recognizes the necessities of older individuals and is yet respectful of their freedom of choice. Hence, Mrs. Dexter's and Peggy's responses towards their mutual needs within the limits of their own subject positions completes the playwright's portrayal of old age as, to borrow Molley Andrew's words, “a unique phase of the lifecycle replete with continued

developmental possibilities” (301). Ultimately, McClelland Glass’s piece enriches the contemporary dramatic discourse and associated theatrical scenes with a realistic depiction of the thicker texture of life that may be found when the end of the journey is only apparently nearer. In the theater of our imagination, Mrs. Dexter and Peggy Randall become useful symbolic signposts that broaden our understanding of late life and enable us to envisage the sources of diversity and homogeneity which inevitably shape, unify and pluralize our own experience of aging.

Works Cited

- Ages and Stages*. Keele University. 6 Feb. 2015.
<<http://www.keele.ac.uk/agesandstages>>
- Andrews, Molly. “Unexpected Age.” *Journal of Aging Studies* 26 (2012): 386-393.
- Basting, Anne Davis. *The Stages of Age: Performing Age in Contemporary American Culture*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1998.
- Biggs, Simon. “Age, Gender, Narratives and Masquerades.” *Journal of Aging Studies* 18 (2004): 45-58.
- Bludau, Juergen H. *Aging But Never Old: The Realities, Myths, and Misrepresentations of the Anti-Aging Movement*. Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010.
- Brennan, Zoe. *The Older Woman in Recent Fiction*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2005.
- Butler, Robert. *The Longevity Revolution: The Benefits and Challenges of Living a Long Life*. New York: Public Affairs, 2008.
- Bytheway, Bill, and Julia Johnson. “An Ageing Population and Apocalyptic Demography.” *Radical Statistics* 100 (2010): 4-10.
- Casado-Gual, Núria. “Black Skins, Old Masks. Aging Through Racism in Edgar Nkosi White’s Drama.” *The Polemics of Aging as Reflected in Literatures in English*. Eds. Maria Vidal and Núria Casado. Lleida: Servei d’Edicions i Publicacions de la Universitat de Lleida, 2004a. 17-36.
- . “Claudia Jones a través de Winsome Pinnock. Retrat d’un retrat teatral.” *Asparkia* 13 (2002): 11-24.

- . "Of Lethal Pokers and Stale Biscuits: Tragicomic Aging in Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*." *Humour and Tragedy in Ireland*. Eds. Patricia Trainor de la Cruz and Blanca Krauel Heredia. Málaga: Servicio de Publicaciones e Intercambio Científico de la Universidad de Málaga, 2005. 235-43.
- . "Old Age as Theatrical Matter: Devising and Performing CollAge, a Play on the Masks and Mirrors of the Aging Process." *Gramma. The Text Strikes Back: the Dynamics of Performativity* 17 (2009): 183-98.
- . "Theatrical Responses to Stigmatization: the Representation of Black Youth in Edgar White's *Ritual by Water*." *Estudios de Filología Inglesa. Actas de las IV Jornadas de Filología Inglesa. Córdoba, Octubre 2001*. Eds. M^a Luisa Pascual Garrido et al. Córdoba: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Córdoba, 2004b. 433-40.
- Chivers, Sally. *The Silvering Screen: Old Age and Disability in Cinema*. Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 2011.
- Cole, Thomas R., et al, eds. *A Guide to Humanistic Studies in Aging: What Does It Mean to Grow Old?* Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2010.
- . *Handbook of the Humanities and Aging*. New York: Springer, 1992.
- Croft, Susan. *She Also Wrote Plays: An International Guide to Women Playwrights from the 10th to the 21st Century*. London: Faber and Faber, 2001.
- Cruikshank, Margaret. *Learning to Be Old: Gender, Culture and Aging*. Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003.
- Dolan, Josephine, and Estella Tincknell, eds. *Aging Femininities: Troubling Representations*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Press, 2012.
- Gerbner et al. "Aging with Television: Images on Television Drama and Conceptions of Social Reality." *Journal of Communication* 30.1 (2006): 37-47.
- Gilleard, Chris, and Paul Higgs. *Cultures of Ageing: Self, Citizen and the Body*. Harlow: Pearson Education, 2000.
- . *Ageing, Corporeality and Embodiment*. London and New York: Anthem Press, 2014.
- Gravagne, Pamela. *The Becoming of Age: Cinematic Visions of Mind, Body and Identity in Later Life*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2013.
- Grup Dedal-lit. *Aging: Cultural Gerontology*. 6 Feb. 2015. <www.pro-age.udl.cat>
- Gullette, Margaret Morganroth. *Agewise: Fighting the New Ageism in America*. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

- . *Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Midlife*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997.
- . *Safe at Last in the Middle Years: The Invention of the Midlife Progress Novel – Saul Bellow, Margaret Drabble, Anne Tyler, John Updike*. Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1988.
- Gunnarson, Evy. "Older People's Meaning of Everyday Life and the Lived Body." *Acculturating Age: Approaches to Cultural Gerontology*. Ed. Brian Worsfold. Lleida: Edicions i Publicacions de la Universitat de Lleida, 2011. 89-104.
- Hartung, Heike, and Roberta Maierhofer, eds. *Narratives of Life: Mediating Age*. Wien: Lit Verlag, 2009.
- Herzog, A. Regula, and Hazel R. Markus. "The Self-Concept in Life Span and Aging Research." *Handbook of Theories of Aging*. Eds. Vern L. Bengtson and K. Warner Schaie. New York: Springer, 1999. 227-252.
- Holmes, Knigel. "Hiding Bumping Uglies behind Silver Screens: Media Underrepresentation and Misrepresentation of the Elderly." 2014. 5 Feb. 2015. <<http://www.knigel.net/hiding-bumping-uglies-behind-silver-screens-media-underrepresentation-and-misrepresentation-of-the-elderly/>>
- Jennings, Ross, and Abigail Gardner. *Rock On: Women, Ageing and Popular Music*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2012.
- Kaufman, Sharon R. "Time, Clinic Technologies, and the Making of Reflexive Longevity: The Cultural Work of *Time Left* in an Aging Society." *Sociology of Health & Illness*. (2010). Vol 23 (2). 225-237.
- Lipscomb, Valerie Barnes. "The Play's the Thing: Theatre as a Scholarly Meeting Ground in Age Studies." *International Journal of Aging and Later Life* 7.2 (2012): 117-41.
- Lipscomb, Valerie Barnes, and Leni Marshall. *Staging Age: The Performance of Age in Theater, Dance, and Film*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Mangan, Michael. *Staging Ageing: Theatre, Performance and the Narrative of Decline*. Bristol: Intellect, 2013.
- Mateu, Mercè, and M. Esteve. "Creativity and Elderly People: Artistic Motor Practices in Physical Activity Programmes." Research poster presented at the 6th *International Symposium on Cultural Gerontology* "Extending Time, Emerging Realities, Imagining Response," Universitat de Lleida, 16th-18th October 2008.
- McClelland Glass, Joanne. *Artichoke*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1979.
- . *Mrs. Dexter and Her Daily*. Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2012.

- . E-mail interview. 28 March 2014.
- . E-mail to the author. 23 January 2015.
- . *Reflections on a Summer Mountain*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1974.
- . Two Homely Daughters. Manuscript. 2015.
- *Woman Wanted*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982.
- Moore, Bridie. "Depth, Significance, and Absence: Age-Effects in New British Theatre." *Age, Cultures, Humanities* 1 (2014). 5 Feb. 2015.
<<http://ageculturehumanities.org/WP/depth-significance-and-absence-age-effects-in-new-british-theatre/>>
- Oró-Piqueras, Maricel. *Ageing Corporealities in Contemporary English Fiction: Redefining Stereotypes*. Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2011.
- Randall, William Lowell, and Gary M. Kenyon. "Time, Story, Wisdom: Emerging Themes in Narrative Gerontology." *Canadian Journal on Aging* 23.4 (2004): 333-346.
- Rudakoff, Judith, and Rita Much. *Fair Play, 12 Women Speak: Conversations with Canadian Playwrights*. Toronto: Simon&Pierre, 1990.
- Settersten, Richard, Jr., and Molly E. Trauten. "The New Terrain of Old Age: Hallmarks, Freedoms and Risks." *Handbook of Theories of Aging*. 2nd ed. Ed. Vern L. Bengtson. New York: Stringer, 2009. 455-469.
- Sontag, Susan. "The Double Standard of Aging." *The Saturday Review* 23 Sept. 1972: 29-38. 6 Feb. 2015. <<http://www.unz.org/Pub/SaturdayRev-1972sep23-00029?View=PDF>>
- Swinnen, Aagje. "Theorizing Age: Challenging the Disciplines." Call for Papers for the 7th International Symposium on Cultural Gerontology, Maastricht University, 6-9 Oct 2011. 6 Feb. 2015. <<http://call-for-papers.sas.upenn.edu/node/39194>>
- Taberner, Stuart. *Aging and Old-Age Style in Günter Grass, Ruth Klüger, Christa Wolf, and Martin Walser: The Mannerism of a Late Period*. New York: Camden House, 2013.
- Tener, Jeane, and Apollonia Steele, eds. *The Joanna M. Glass Papers*. Calgary: The University of Calgary Press, 1986.
- Toye, William. Ed. *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*. OUP, 1983.
- Toye, William, and Eugene Benson, eds. *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*. 1997. OUP, 2006.

Twigg, Julia. "The Body, Gender and Age: Feminist Insights in Social Gerontology." *Journal of Aging Studies* (18): 2004. 59-73.

Woodward, Kathleen. *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999.

Worsfold, Brian, ed. *Acculturating Age: Approaches to Cultural Gerontology*. Lleida: Edicions i Publicacions de la Universitat de Lleida, 2011.

Zeilig, Hannah. "Critical Use of Narrative and Literature in Gerontology." *International Journal of Ageing and Later Life* 6.2 (2011): 7-37.