Uncanny Female Aging in Dahl's Horror

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Introduction

Getting older is one of the biggest contemporary fears or 'gerontophobia' and it is often associated with unease and anxieties (Woodward 1999; DeFalco 2010). Although there is increasing visibility of older adults on a global scale, old age continues to be stereotyped and gendered in contemporary western culture. During the last decades, there has been noticeable growth and attention given to the dynamics of aging from interdisciplinary approaches that go beyond the traditional field of gerontology. Age scholars have argued that gerontology needed cultural and humanities-related perspectives in order to enrich and expand gerontological knowledge and scientific approaches to later life, which cannot be measured or understood by empirical research alone (Hepworth 2000; Gullette 2004; Casado Gual et al. 2016; Oró-Piqueras/Falcus 2018; Barry/Vibe Skagen 2020).

Literature, culture, and the arts not only mirror the established notions of old age, but can also reshape preconditioned beliefs about aging and even create different narratives about later life (Oró-Piqueras 2016). Hepworth highlights that "gerontologists occasionally draw on fiction to illustrate the findings of empirical research or to interweave gerontology and fiction in order to enhance our understanding of aging" (2000: 3). Relatedly, literature and character identification permit the readers to sympathize with specific characters and even experience some degree

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of 'narrative empathy' that may act as a stimulus to emotional responsiveness and as a consciousness-raising mechanism (Keen 2007). And yet, there is not one specific research method or heuristic technique in literary studies of aging, as there is not one single experience of aging (Zeilig 2011). A literary approach does not give us clear answers to questions about old age, but rather helps reveal what aging implies socioculturally, politically, and individually from a life course perspective (Zeilig 2011; Kriebernegg 2015; Falcus 2016; Oró-Piqueras 2016).

This chapter contributes to interdisciplinary approaches to aging and shows how humanities-based perspectives can illuminate research into aging, ageism, and the socioculturally constructed images of later life. By merging literary age studies and the horror genre, it focuses on well-known British writer Roald Dahl's short story 'The Landlady,' first published in *The New Yorker* and later reprinted in the anthology *Kiss Kiss* (1960). By giving a special attention to the female protagonist, the chapter explores how different symbolic and gothic textual elements contribute to the narrative of decline and the negative notion of aging. In the story, later life is portrayed as a source of horror and evokes a fear of aging. Although Dahl's tale provides some hints that aging can be empowering and liberating for older women, the eerie and witchlike portrayal of the landlady proves that older age is enshrined in negative and even grotesque perceptions of later years. Dahl's narrative also reminds us that gender plays a crucial role in creating dominant master narratives of aging and cultural images of later life in popular cultural expressions (DeFalco 2010; de Medeiros 2016). The use of horror helps further expose the individual and societal fears of growing older and the challenges of female aging. Shedding light on Dahl's dark narrative from the perspective of age studies offers new vantage points from which to review the author's literary legacy and rethink the representations of female aging in popular literature.

Roald Dahl, the Master of Horror

Roald Dahl is, without a doubt, one of the most internationally successful and acclaimed masters of short stories for children and adults. His adult short story collections *Someone Like You* (1953), *Kiss, Kiss* (1960), and *Switch Bitch* (1974) were best-sellers in a market that was dominated by novels and autobiographies. Dahl's work was translated into many languages worldwide, making him a celebrity figure (Warren 1988; Mehmi 2014). The writer's famous short story 'The Landlady' also resembles Ernest Bloch's novel *Psycho* (1959), which was adapted into Alfred Hitchcock's pivotal 1960 film of the same name (Mehmi 2014). Even though Dahl is never included in the list of Gothic writers, except for his children stories, which are commonly defined as gothic, his adult tales cannot be easily categorized, and are often described as macabre, supernatural, uncanny, bizarre, mad, and threatening the social order (West 1990, 1992; Sohier 2011; Mehmi 2014; Van Haegenborgh 2015). His adult short stories contain explicit savage and fantasy elements, perverse and unpredictable deaths, intense insanity of his characters, and ironic unexpected endings. Dahl's most popular short stories fuse different stylistic, thematic, and formal elements that reflect "a vivid eye for detail, an elegance of writing and a real virtuosity in plotting" that are derived from the American short story tradition initiated by Edgar Allan Poe, O. Henry, and Ernest Hemingway (Mehmi 2014: 2–3; Van Haegenborgh 2015).

Ghastly, violent, grotesque, and mysterious features in Dahl's suspense fiction are used to project the deepest fears and taboos that society tends to mask or ignore. At the same time, gothic elements and settings make the readers question reality in ways that realistic or mimetic fiction could not do (Fabrizi 2016, 2018). While fantasy tends to provide escape from the mundane existence, horror offers a more profound analysis of the unfamiliar and can even lead to catharsis (Fabrizi 2018). The creation of an anxiety-and-suspense filled atmosphere, fused with exaggeration and mystery, guides the readers towards a climatic effect that is aimed to evoke a feeling of unease, and to question conventional reality and the dark side of humanity (Van Haegenborgh 2015: 65). Relat-

edly, horror texts and subversive meanings allow for "a safe exploration of the feelings of fear and danger" and offer a possibility "to wallow in the forbidden – to take joy in destruction and the normally unacceptable or unthinkable" (Brock-Servais 2018: 18). Such narratives also represent not only individual but also societal concerns of repressed, marginalized, or disadvantaged individuals, and show the limits of humanity (Clemens 1999). Contrary to common belief, horror is not aimed at scaring the readers, but rather at moving them out of their comfort zones and exposing real-world issues and individual struggles (Brock-Servais 2018; Ostenton 2018). As Brock-Servais argues, supernatural and scary figures in horror literature often represent "mindless conformity, a fear of contagion or pandemic, anxiety concerning the underclass (the masses), the loss of identity, or a critique of consumerism" (2018: 23). Horror literature functions as a mirror that reflects our inner desires and fears by providing spaces to critically rethink our understanding of the world and human nature.

Although Dahl's fiction, especially his children's literature, has been under a great deal of scrutiny and received more acclaim than criticism (Warren 1988; West 1992; Mehmi 2014), his adult stories did not receive much attention. Moreover, his adult fiction has not been approached through the lens of age studies, which, as will be shown, leads to novel readings and interpretations of his writings and fills a certain research gap. In 'The Landlady', horror serves as a means to empower the older character and challenge the conventional notions of old age as a stage of frailty, asexuality, and dependence (Gullette 2004). Yet, the landlady's emancipation is enshrined in irrationality and grotesqueness, reinforcing the stereotypical image of older women as witches, crones, female monsters, or women gone wild (Greer 1991). Dahl's representation of female aging is controversial and further underpins the negative notions of later life that emphasize contemporary fears of old age and getting older.

The Witchlike Landlady

Roald Dahl begins his sinister short story by depicting a young man, Billy Weaver, who travels alone in search of work, and is extremely excited about the new opportunities that await him. As he walks through the unfamiliar city of Bath in miserable and "deadly cold" weather, he decides to lodge in a charming B&B hotel (Dahl 2004: e10). The boarding house seems like a cozy and inviting place, decorated with yellow chrysanthemums, – flowers often used in funerals in many parts of Europe. As the boy lingers outside, the door is suddenly opened by a "terribly nice" woman who offers him a cheap price for lodgings (Dahl 2004: e12). Although she is between 45 and 50 years old, which is not considered old in contemporary society, we only see her through the focalization of a young man to whom anyone over 40 might seem quite old. Billy Weaver is informed that there have only been two previous guests – Mr. Christopher Mulholland and Mr. Gregory W. Temple –, who, apparently, have never left the hotel. The boy realizes that he has seen their names in a newspaper mentioning their odd disappearance. Yet, he is not suspicious and is even amused by the lady's strange behavior. In fact, the boy decides that she is not harmful but rather "a kind and generous soul" (Dahl 2004: e14). The landlady serves her new guest a cup of tea and, by scrutinizing his body, compliments him on his youthful looks and his unblemished body. She also reveals that she is a skilled taxidermist and has stuffed her dead pets, a dachshund and a parrot, which Billy Weaver thought to be alive. At this very moment, the boy realizes that his tea tastes of bitter almonds and inquires of the landlady if there have been any other guests except for the two visitors, to which she smilingly replies: "No, my dear" […]. Only you" (Dahl 2004: e18). Although Dahl leaves an open ending, the readers are given enough hints to understand that Billy Weaver's fate will be that of the stuffed pets and the previous guests.

By killing a young man, the landlady seems to rebel against the gendered narrative of decline (Gullette 2004) and double marginalization, which further exclude and ignore older women's voices and their participation in society. Through the merciless and monstrous act of murder

she might have been looking not only for revenge, but also for more visibility, which had been denied to her as a nameless aging woman. Driven by a feeling of anger, loneliness, and impotence, the heroine uses violence as a means to make herself more powerful and visible, and threatens the status quo. The eerie ending to Dahl's work can be read as women's revenge on sexism, ageism, dominant master discourses, and societal expectations.

The use of horror elements in the story also allows for the archetypical witch figure to re-emerge freely and demonstrate her power and skills. In fact, it is common in horror literature to portray the figure of a witch, which, in popular culture and folklore, represents malevolent forces, the murder of children and young adults, and the use of poison and potions to kill or curse people (Hutton 2017). Crystallized during the Early Modern period in Europe, the image of the witch continues to embody the eeriness of the unknown, fearful, or unreasonable. Witches have a distinguished history in western memory, which grants them a special position in society that evokes respect mingled with fear (Greer 1991). Moreover, the witch very often functions as a scapegoat in society at a time when a sound explanation to strange phenomena or occurrences cannot be given, which makes her the 'other' or the outsider. The fact that witches do not adhere to any of the institutionalized religions also positions them in a category of rebels who reject prevailing moral codes and conventional standards, and go against established rules and regulations. However, the witch also continues to denote an ambiguous and conflicting character that not only subverts the status quo and challenges misogynist symbols, but also proves problematic for feminism and age studies. As Germaine Buckley argues, "[w]itches as monstrous older women harbouring an unnatural desire for power is one facet of a Western ideology that situates women as outsiders to power" that has been represented as illegitimate and excluding since classical antiquity (2019: 29). Thus, it is not clear whether the witch figure empowers (older) women or hints at patriarchal fears about female power and sexuality (Berenstein 1990; Germaine Buckley 2019).

Macabre Female Sexuality

The identification of the lady with the witch figure also points to sexual transgressions, primal desires, and a relationship with evil forces or the Devil, as documented in many treatises on witchcraft and witch-hunts, such as the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486). Even if the sexual desire of the landlady is not explicit, the readers can find subtle hints that suggest that she indulges in necrophiliac practices once she has successfully performed the art of taxidermy (and witchcraft) upon her young innocent victims. The heroine states that she is always prepared to meet young charming men and greet them with pleasure:

> But I'm always ready. Everything is always ready day and night in this house just on the off-chance that an acceptable young gentleman will come along. And it is such a pleasure, my dear, such a very great pleasure when now and again I open the door and I see someone standing there who is just exactly right (Dahl 2004: e13).

Although it may be argued that the identification of the landlady with the witch may point to female freedom and emancipation from the desired reproductive function aimed at demographic growth and social development, the heroine does not deny her sexual urges. Although she is freed from the male gaze imbued with sexual desire (Greer 1991), she manifests her sexuality through the macabre and grotesque treatment of Billy Weaver's dead body, which may be read as suppressed desires of the 'other' who is alienated from the outside world. Her red fingernails also symbolize sexuality and, thus, challenge the idea of asexual older women, which is in line with the discourse of active or successful aging that stresses the importance of sex and sexuality in later life (Walz 2002; Berdychevsky/Nimrod 2017). The landlady's desire to disrupt the social order and defy male dominance might also stem from a misogynistic portrayal of post-menopausal women as no longer attractive and sexually appealing, which leads one to think they are frustrated. Although, in recent decades, new shifts in understanding female sexuality and sex have contributed to perceiving the menopause in a more positive

light (Sandberg 2015), the eerie depiction of the landlady points to disrespectful identifications of post-menopausal women with old witches. In Dahl's narrative, the image of a sexual older woman does not contribute to counteracting gerontophobia, but further highlights ageism and stigma inherent in the grotesque embodiment of the 'crazy old lady' or a hag. In fact, the origin of the word 'hag' (Old English) signifies a witch, sorceress, enchantress or a repulsive older woman, which reinforces the idea of fear of the power of older women.

It is also worth mentioning that Dahl's fiction and his use of unprecedented sexual violence has frequently been described as misogynist, especially prominent in his short story collection *Switch Bitch* that features unadulterated pornographic fantasies and cruelty against women (Mehni 2004). Actually, the very title of this collection reveals sexist overtones, and four of the stories in *Switch Bitch* were originally published in *Playboy* between 1965 and 1974. However, even though sexist violence and macabre elements are common in many of Dahl's works, in 'The Landlady' these aspects are twisted. It is the aging woman who uses cruelty against innocent young men for her own pleasure and perverse sexual fantasies. Sohier (2011) points out that the inclusion of horror elements in the tale hinge on the Freudian idea of a death instinct in human behavior, and states that the death-drive and life-drive complement each other. In fact, the scholar argues that "the death instinct constitutes the drive *par excellence*" as it underlines "all the other drives that are subsumed under the word 'Eros'" (Sohier 2011: 2, emphasis in original). According to Freud, human sexuality is closely linked to the destructive power and eroticism that is expressed in sexual fantasies and dreams that may signal emotional disorders, neuroses, and inner conflicts. Dahl's tale shows that some secreted sexual desires might be frightening and manifest themselves in the strangest ways, such as taxidermy and the subtly implied necrophilic acts. The use of the macabre and horror in the story, hence, allows further exploration of different scenarios surrounding the complexities of human sexuality that, contrary to the popular belief, do not decline with age, but can acquire new forms of expression (Stončikaitė 2017). The eerie and

slightly humorous culmination of the story is also a story of a desire for immortality, longevity, and rejuvenescence.

The Desire for Eternal Youth

In Dahl's work, an older woman is characterized as an evil and selfish witch that is obsessed with stopping the ravages of time. The resemblance of the landlady with the archetypical image of the witch not only points to her desire for eternal youth, but also signals the bodily decay, deformation, sagging, and vulnerability that comes with age.

As women grow older, they become more invisible and desexualized; however, aging becomes more visible on their bodies and, especially, their faces (Woodward 1991; Bordo 2003; Öberg 2003; Hurd-Clarke 2011; Furman 2013; Hurd-Clarke/Bennett 2015; Stončikaitė 2020). The fact that the female protagonist remains nameless in the story further reinforces the invisibility of older women and the idea of the eerie otherness of later life (Woodward 1991; DeFalco 2010).

In the story, the landlady scrutinizes youthful Billy Weaver's body and is excited about its perfection: "her blue eyes travelled slowly all the way down the length of Billy's body, to his feet, and then up again" (Dahl 2004: e13). She is constantly keeping an eye on the boy to ensure that she captures his flawless beauty in order to perform the sadistic act of taxidermy and, in so doing, to keep the young man's impeccability forever: "Billy knew that she was looking at him. Her body was half-turned towards him, and he could feel her eyes resting on his face, watching him over the rim of her teacup" (Dahl 2004: e16-17). Billy Weaver becomes the sexualized object of desire whose body is scrutinized and subject to transgressive violence leading to macabre death, after which his stuffed corpse will be used for visual delectation of the lady (Mehni 2004). In fact, all three victims are young men in the prime of their lives: "they were extraordinarily handsome, both of them, I can promise you that. They were tall and young and handsome, my dear, just exactly like you" (Dahl 2004: e15). The landlady thinks that seventeen is the most marvelous age for

it is positioned on the threshold of becoming eighteen, which officially marks the stepping into adulthood and the loss of innocence:

> 'Seventeen!' she cried. 'Oh, it's the perfect age! Mr Mulholland was also seventeen. But I think he was a trifle shorter than you are, in fact I'm sure he was, and his teeth weren't quite so white. You have the most beautiful teeth, Mr Weaver, did you know that? (Dahl 2004: e17).

Although one of her three victims, Mr. Temple, was older, he still preserved youthful beauty, softness, and handsomeness:

> 'Mr Temple, of course, was a little older,' she said […]. 'He was actually twenty-eight. And yet I never would have guessed it if he hadn't told me, never in my whole life. There wasn't a blemish on his body.' 'A what?' Billy said. 'His skin was just like a baby's' (Dahl 2004: e17).

Sohier suggests that "a desire for the perfection of the skin, the fascination of the body" is closely linked to "a desire for whiteness, the whiteness of teeth and, in the same breath, with an insistent apprehension of age and aging" (2011: 9). The fact that the landlady "performs taxidermy not only on her pets but also on unwary young men, makes her into an uncanny woman, a figure of death, a representation of the death-drive" (Sohier 2011: 2). Although, by stuffing Billy Weaver's body, the lady champions the eternal beauty and youthful innocence that cannot be found in older age, her sinister acts are not empowering as they manifest irrationality, insanity, and the decline that comes with age. Even if through the performance of taxidermy the aging heroine gains power over youth and preserves her male victims' youthfulness, her resemblance to the witch further reinforces the notion of aging women as evil and threatening the social order and patriarchal domain.

Conclusions

Roald Dahl's work has not been approached from the lens of age studies – one of the aims of this chapter was to fill this research gap. In the short story 'The Landlady,' female aging is presented as a source of horror and grotesqueness. And yet, the very use of horror in the light of literary age studies helps expose the often silenced and tabooed aspects of female aging and the overriding fears of older age. In his depiction of the female character, Dahl shows different clichés about aging women, such as witches, hags, crones, or women gone mad. The landlady is not an absolute outsider or scapegoat; however, her portrayal as an evil and rebellious aging woman does not grant her enough agency beyond rebellion, thus hindering the production of a counter-narrative to the master narrative of decline (Gullette 2014). Although she is given a voice to share her desires and vulnerability, ageism and sexism continue to be inherent in the grotesque embodiment of the crazy murderer in a lonely house. Her macabre acts display the problematic and controversial image of a witch or the 'other,' which is deeply rooted in many cultural representations of older women. The fact that the landlady goes unpunished for her unprecedented and anxiety-ridden cruelty and necrophiliac fantasies further justifies misogynist views toward women, especially older women.

The chapter has also aimed to convey that the horror genre, sometimes considered inferior in comparison to more realistic and mimetic texts (Drout 2006; Fabrizi 2018), can serve as a tool to further explore individual and societal complexities and desires. Gothic and macabre elements help evoke deeper emotions that can lead to more critical readings of popular narratives and reveal how they shape our visions of the world and our identities (Ostenton 2018). As Mehmi argues, "Dahl's short story has gained its success because it functions cathartically as a deadening of pride, revenge, incestuous desire and rebellion and also as a social reconfiguration of being" (2014: 34). The use of horror allows for a safer exploration of our fears and anxieties, brings to light unvoiced, marginalized, and repressed individuals, and helps critically approach conventional truths by revealing societal and individual struggles (Clemens 1999; Brock-Servais 2018; Ostenton 2018). A closer

analysis of how horror elements interact with gender relationships and the representations of aging in popular writings would enrich not only gerontological scholarship, but also feminist, horror, fantasy, age, queer studies, and beyond.

Ultimately, the study has attempted to show that a critical examination of how the images of older adults are created within popular culture is important in order not to reproduce age-related stereotypes, which may further exclude, denigrate, and marginalize older people (Goldman 2017). Henneberg, for instance, proposes writing texts that are "in active opposition to received patterns of ageism" and include more realistic portrayals of older age and older women (2010: 132, 133). Literature, popular cultural expressions, and the arts are powerful tools and extensions of sociocultural developments and individual stories that need to be told, shared, and heard in order to enable different narratives of growing up and growing older alike. More positive representations of older people are important because the stories we tell create the social imagery of older age and influence the ways we understand the life course. Examining popular texts from the age-studies perspective can help dislodge many stereotypical notions of aging and create other stories in which older women are given more roles besides the witch or the crazy and uncanny old lady.

Author Bio

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