



Universitat de Lleida

Discourses of female ageing in the works of Erica Jong

Ieva Stončikaitė

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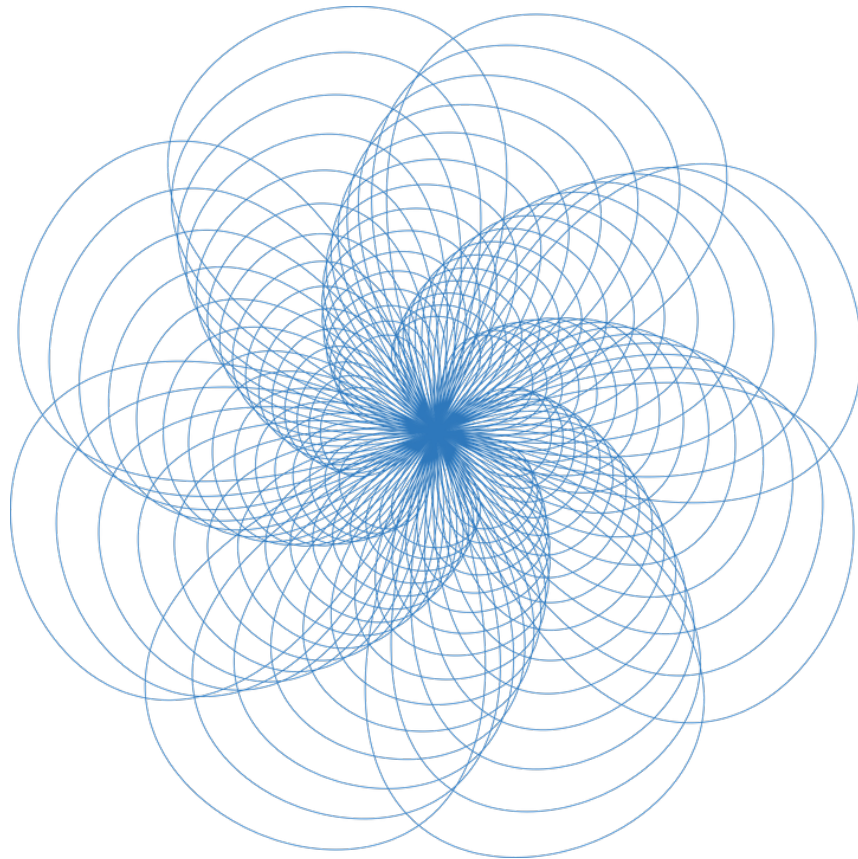
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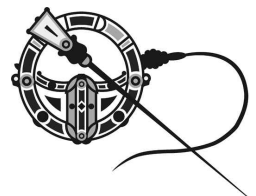
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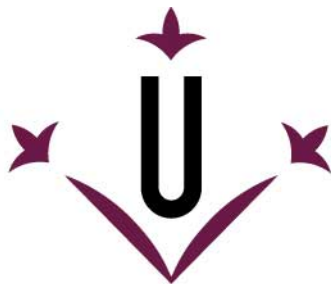
DISCOURSES OF FEMALE AGEING IN THE WORKS OF ERICA JONG

Ieva Stončikaitė



Universitat de Lleida
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TESI DOCTORAL

**DISCOURSES OF FEMALE AGEING
IN THE WORKS OF ERICA JONG**

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Dr. Núria Casado-Gual

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To My Grandmother Aldona,

My Beautiful Sunshine

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““No, My Husband Isn’t Dead, [But] One Has to Re-Invent Sexuality’: Reading Erica Jong for the Future of Aging.” *Societies*. 7:11, 2017. Web: <www.mdpi.com/2075-4698/7/2/11>

“Success in Old Age; Only for Select Ageless Centenarians? Critical Insights into the Measures of Successful Ageing.” *International Network for Critical Gerontology*. 3 Feb, 2017. Web: <criticalgerontology.com/ageless-centenarians/>

ABSTRACT

In the last few decades, there have been important changes in the understanding of ageing and old age due to demographic shifts related to an increase in human longevity. The notion of old age as a period in life marked by loss, frailty, or decay has shifted towards an image of old age as an enriching stage that entails active and healthy lifestyles. Yet, at the heart of Western cultural understandings of ageing, the experience of growing older is still perceived through negative associations. Despite the medical and social achievements that have rendered longevity possible in contemporary Western societies, collective phobias about ageing continue to be manifested in the proliferation of ageism and the persistence of the narrative of decline, both of which affect older women in particular.

With the objective to better understand the complex dynamics of ageing, and of female ageing in particular, this thesis examines the *oeuvre* of Erica Jong from an age-studies perspective. By employing literary gerontology as the specific framework of this study, and by integrating a feminist perspective in it, this study offers a longitudinal analysis of her writings and examines the ways in which the writer's perceptions of ageing have changed over time. Contradicting the dominant tendency in the reception of Jong's work, which considers many of her fictional writings superficial, this dissertation argues that Jong's middle and later works in particular address important professional and personal concerns that affect women of her generation. At the same time, it shows that many of her characters' fears and anxieties are conditioned by sociocultural contexts and dominant discourses that can be contested and transcended in later life. Jong's later writings serve as a corpus that demonstrates how women deal with social, political, and cultural transformations, including shifting feminist and age-related ideas in an anti-ageing-driven society. Her position as a spokeswoman of the American post-war generation is especially relevant, given that the female representatives of the baby-boom generation are now approaching their latest stages in life and, therefore, are exposed to new challenges within the context of controversial anti-ageing imperatives. Ultimately, this dissertation also attempts to show that a study of old age through the lens of literature can help to rethink current constructions of ageing, and provide insights into what it means to grow older today. In sum, this thesis attempts to demonstrate that an age-studies approach to Erica Jong's *oeuvre* not only contributes to a better understanding of the author's work and its sociocultural significance, but also

reveals aspects of female identity that have not been sufficiently addressed, and, which can help to better envisage the complex experience of growing older in contemporary Western societies.

RESUM

En les últimes dècades, s'han produït transformacions importants en la comprensió de l'envelliment i la vellesa a causa de canvis demogràfics relacionats amb l'augment de la longevitat humana. La noció de vellesa com a fase de la vida marcada per la pèrdua, la fragilitat o la decadència ha evolucionat cap a una imatge de la vellesa com a etapa enriquidora que comporta estils de vida actius i saludables. Tanmateix, l'experiència del procés de l'envelliment encara es percep a través d'associacions negatives. Malgrat els èxits mèdics i socials que han fet possible la longevitat en les societats occidentals contemporànies, les fòbies col·lectives sobre l'envelliment continuen manifestant-se en la proliferació de l'edatisme i en la persistència de la narració del declivi. Ambdós factors afecten, majoritàriament, a les dones madures i d'edat avançada.

Amb l'objectiu d'entendre millor el complex fenomen de l'envelliment i la seva interpretació, i, en particular, d'analitzar la vivència de la vellesa femenina, aquesta tesi examina l'obra de l'Erica Jong des de la perspectiva dels estudis de l'envelliment. Mitjançant l'ús de la gerontologia literària com a marc específic d'aquest estudi, que integra també les teories feministes, la tesi ofereix una anàlisi longitudinal de les obres de l'autora, i examina l'evolució de la seva percepció de l'envelliment en les mateixes. Tot contradint la tendència dominant en la recepció de l'obra de Jong, que considera superficials molts dels seus llibres, aquesta tesi argumenta que els seus textos, i en particular, els escrits en la seva maduresa, donen veu a inquietuds professionals i personals que afecten a les dones de la seva generació. Al mateix temps, aquesta tesi mostra que moltes de les por i les ansietats dels personatges de l'escriptora estan condicionades per contextos socioculturals i discursos dominants sobre la vellesa que poden ser superats amb el pas del temps. Les obres tardanes de Jong reflecteixen una sèrie de transformacions socials, polítiques i culturals, incloses les derivades del moviment feminista de segona ona, que representen especialment la generació nord-americana de postguerra. Aquest factor és especialment rellevant avui en dia, atès que les dones representants de la generació del *baby-boom* estan ara mateix exposades als discursos contradictoris que la nostra societat genera sobre l'envelliment. L'aproximació a l'obra d'Erica Jong a través dels estudis de l'edat no només contribueix a comprendre millor els textos de l'autora nord-americana i a reconèixer la seva importància sociocultural, sinó que també revela aspectes de la identitat femenina que

no s'han tractat suficientment i, que poden ajudar a entendre millor la complexa experiència de l'envelliment en les societats occidentals contemporànies.

RESUMEN

En las últimas décadas, se han producido transformaciones importantes en la percepción del envejecimiento y la vejez a causa de cambios demográficos relacionados con el aumento de la longevidad humana. La idea de la vejez como una fase de la vida marcada por la pérdida, la fragilidad o la decadencia ha evolucionado hacia una imagen de la vejez como una etapa enriquecedora que comporta estilos de vida activos y saludables. Sin embargo, la experiencia del proceso del envejeciendo todavía se percibe a través de asociaciones negativas. A pesar de los logros médicos y sociales que han hecho posible un aumento en la longevidad en las sociedades occidentales contemporáneas, las fobias colectivas sobre el envejecimiento continúan manifestándose en la proliferación del edadismo y en la persistencia de la narrativa del declive. Ambos factores afectan, mayoritariamente, a las mujeres maduras y de edad avanzada.

Con el objetivo de comprender mejor el complejo fenómeno del envejecimiento y su interpretación, y, en particular, de analizar la vivencia del envejecimiento femenino, esta tesis examina la obra de Erica Jong desde la perspectiva de los estudios del envejecimiento. A partir del uso de la gerontología literaria como marco específico de este estudio, que integra también las teorías feministas, la tesis ofrece un análisis longitudinal de las obras de la autora, y examina la evolución de su percepción del envejecimiento en las mismas. Contradiendo la tendencia dominante en la recepción de la obra de Jong, que considera superficiales muchos de sus libros, esta tesis argumenta que sus textos, y en particular, los escritos en su madurez, dan voz a inquietudes profesionales y personales que afectan a las mujeres de su generación. Al mismo tiempo, esta tesis muestra que muchos de los miedos y las ansiedades de los personajes de la escritora están condicionados por contextos socioculturales y discursos dominantes sobre el envejecimiento que pueden ser superados con el paso del tiempo. Las obras tardías de Jong reflejan una serie de transformaciones sociales, políticas y culturales, incluidas las que se derivan del movimiento feminista de segunda ola, que representan especialmente a la generación norteamericana de postguerra. Este factor es especialmente relevante hoy en día, dado que las mujeres representantes de la generación del *baby-boom* están ahora mismo expuestas a discursos contradictorios que nuestra sociedad genera sobre el envejecimiento. La aproximación a la obra de Erica Jong a través de los estudios de la edad no sólo contribuye a comprender mejor los

textos de la autora norteamericana y a reconocer su importancia sociocultural, sino que también revela aspectos de la identidad femenina que no se han tratado suficientemente, y que pueden ayudar a entender la compleja experiencia del envejecimiento en las sociedades occidentales contemporáneas.

INTRODUCTION

As we grow older, we grow less eager to depart this World. As our Skin grows less firm and the Roses in our Cheeks fade, we cling e'er more tenaciously to Life. [...] It is not a Paradox that the closer we are to the Grave, the more we cling to Life, whilst the closer we are to our nativities, the more reckless we are with the Gift of Life? (Erica Jong, *Fanny*, 1980: 53)

Erica Jong has been an important spokesperson for women of her generation ever since she gained worldwide popularity with the publication of her bestselling book, *Fear of Flying* (1973). This novel certainly influenced the literary scene of the seventies in the US. Yet, Jong's tendency to incorporate intimate personal experiences and to use sexual references mixed with humour in her fiction also generated a lot of controversy. Following the publication of this work, Jong was cast as a sex icon whose private life was closely examined in various media, which turned her into the target of both sexist and radical feminist attacks. Whatever Jong tried to do in her later works, including academic essays, well-researched historical novels, honest autobiographies, or book reviews of well-known writers, she could never escape the popular sex-writer label that marked her literary debut (Templin, 1995). As Charlotte Templin succinctly puts it,

Jong's story, the narrative of the triumphs and vicissitudes of one writer's reputation, is unique but highly instructive. It illustrates not only the contingencies that govern individual literary judgements and the importance of the intersection of the literary work with the cultural moment but also the remarkable role that media can play in contemporary literary reputation. (1995: 186)

Despite these factors, through a passionate, witty, overtly sexual, and often autobiographical voice, this contemporary American author has continued to explore women's emotional, professional, and sexual needs in her numerous novels, poems, memoirs, essays, as well as in various interviews, public events, and popular TV shows. Jong's literary career now spans over forty years. However, the reception of her later works has been irregular and most of her recent books and memoirs have been understudied.

Although the popularity of Jong's work has gradually declined and her *oeuvre* has been often denigrated, her writings are not *passé*. As will be demonstrated in this dissertation, Jong remains a firm advocate of sexual liberation and a feminist author who voices the concerns of the women of her generation, which she courageously explores in her works. At the same time, the writer increasingly incorporates the voices

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of ageing women and tries to undermine negative associations of old age and late-life sexuality in her writings. In fact, in her later books, the author addresses the fears and hopes of those women who were active and visible during the seventies and eighties, but who have gradually become unvoiced and underrepresented as they have grown older.

Literature scholar Jeannette King observes that even though Second-Wave feminists challenged gender constructions and social inequalities between men and women, they did not take into account the construction of age and its impact on female identity and social status; thus, the needs of older women were not really addressed (2013: xvi). The Women's Liberation Movement was primarily interested in the issues that concerned young women, namely, pregnancy, childrearing, equal pay, contraceptives, abortion, childcare, and equal opportunities in education and work (King, 2013: 62-3; Woodward, 1999: xi). As King observes, "to be young at this time was 'very heaven,' to be old, for women, in particular, was to be invisible, since the visual codes of the fashionable in all areas of cultural life were predicated on the young, immature body" (2013: 58). In fact, the discourse of sisterhood in the sixties was mainly driven by the desire of young women to distance themselves from the lifestyles of women of the previous generation, which were marked by domesticity, marriage bonds, and motherhood, all of which were considered signs of victimhood (King, 2013: 64). The youth-oriented interests of the Second-Wave movement help to explain why Jong, as a young writer in those years, did not deal with issues that preoccupied older women, but looked at the social condition and worries of women her age, with a special focus on female sexuality and sexual freedom. However, as the writer grew older, she started to incorporate the voices of ageing women in her fictional narratives and, in so doing, filled the silences left by Second-Wave feminists. In her latest works in particular, Jong sheds light on the process of ageing from an older woman's perspective and advocates the sexual, emotional, professional, and personal needs of ageing women. Therefore, her late-life writings serve as a corpus that shows how women deal with social, political, and cultural transformations, including shifting feminist and age-related ideas in the anti-ageing-driven society of today. As this thesis intends to demonstrate, Erica Jong's writings can reveal new and different aspects of female identity in present-day societies that have not been addressed yet, and which can be especially relevant to understand the contemporary realities of ageing. In fact, there are no longitudinal studies on her *oeuvre* from a life-course and age-related perspectives nor is there any

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research done which considers the totality of her work, including her non-fiction.

This thesis is aimed at filling in these double gaps. It intends to demonstrate that Jong's literary works are as necessary now as they were at the beginning of Second-Wave feminism and at the peak of the sexual revolution because they chronicle important shifts in the perception of female sexuality, gender relations and women's social roles. They also reveal tensions and anxieties which are especially relevant to the women of the post-war generation and to the ageing population at large. Jong, aged seventy-three, stated that: "I certainly don't want to become ill or lose my mind. I would like to go on writing about older women and older men, because it's so fascinating. I have many books in my head and I hope I have the power to write them" (Finch, 13 Nov, 2015). In a similar vein, she optimistically said: "I remember a clever editor once said to me, 'There's never been a bestseller about a woman over 40,' and I said, 'Well then, we've got to write it'" (Lacher, 18 Sept, 2015). This thesis, therefore, develops a close examination of Jong's works with the hope to show how the author's writings reveal significant facets of the process of growing old, especially for women in our youth- and sex-oriented culture.

Socialist feminist Lynne Segal asks "[w]hat happens when angry young rebels become wary older women, ageing in a leaner, meaner time: a time which exalts only the 'new', in a ruling orthodoxy daily disparaging all it portrays as the 'old'?" (2007: 1) Erica Jong explores these questions by addressing the concerns about female ageing from manifold visions. Having in mind the general aims and the need to fill the double gaps, the present dissertation is intended to analyse if and in what ways Jong's perceptions of old age and ageing have changed over time and how these shifts are manifested through her middle- and later-life works. To answer these questions, this thesis is organised into six specific objectives:

1. To examine how the reception of Jong's early books has influenced the later treatment of her writings.

2. To comprehend how Jong deals with physical decline and what it means to live in a body that starts to age. It also questions how physical changes influence the development of Jong and her heroines' social and individual perceptions of self, and how they respond to the pressures of the anti-ageing ideals of femininity.

3. To investigate how the understandings of sex and sexuality change as Jong and her heroines grow older and how the author responds to a cultural construction of female old age as asexual. It analyses whether Jong succumbs to the successful ageing

discourse, which highlights the importance of heterosexual activity in later life, or offers alternative approaches towards sexual expressions that go beyond the normative notions of sex in older age.

4. To better understand how life-changing occurrences, such as the experience of motherhood, grandmotherhood, parental care, and death are understood and dealt with in Jong's later works, and how these important shifts in life influence the fictional characters' relationship with others, their creativity, and the very process of ageing.

5. To examine whether there are significant changes in Jong's literary creativity as she grows older and what it means to age 'well' in a society which has been greatly affected by substantial demographic shifts. Also, to interrogate the role and social position of the author's older characters, whose autonomy and agency are doubly limited by their age and gender.

6. To demonstrate that a life span approach to Jong's writings and, in particular, the examination of her middle- and later-life works through an age-studies perspective, can help to better understand the complex experiences of growing older in contemporary Western societies and particularly those of women.

The specific theoretical frameworks of this thesis is cultural gerontology and, in particular, literary gerontology, with a special focus on the intersections that these fields of ageing studies create with gender and feminist scholarship. The analysis of Jong's work from an age-studies and feminist perspective is especially important nowadays as our society is facing the so-called 'longevity revolution' and, therefore, it is witnessing important changes in the understandings of ageing and old age (Butler, 2008). Even if the traditional notion of old age, which associates this stage with loss, frailty, and decay, has been gradually contrasted with a modern perception of ageing, which enhances healthy and active lifestyles, the process of growing older is still viewed through the prism of the narrative of decline. This, according to Margaret Morganroth Gullette (2004), is still the dominant discourse of ageing in contemporary Western society. In an attempt to better understand the complex dynamics of ageing during the last two decades, humanistic-oriented gerontological research has emerged and has materialised in several significant collections of critical essays and journal articles.¹ In this respect,

¹Some seminal collections of critical essays are: Thomas R. Cole, Ruth E. Ray, and Robert Kastenbaum (eds). *A Guide to Humanistic Studies in Aging: What Does it Mean to Grow Old?* 2010; Julia Twigg, and Wendy Martin (eds). *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology*. 2015; and some important journals are: *Age and Aging*; *Aging and Society*; *Journal of Aging, Humanities and the Arts*; *Journal of Aging Studies*, and *The Gerontologist*, among many others.

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literary gerontology has become an important field of study within this discipline. As shown by pioneering scholars such as Janice Sokoloff (1987), Barbara Frey Waxman (1990), Kathleen E. Woodward (1991) and Anne M. Wyatt-Brown and Janice Rossen (1993), a literary approach towards old age can help to rethink the current constructions of old age, and provide thought-provoking insights about late-life creativity and about what it means to grow older beyond medical understandings of the process of ageing. Literary gerontologist Amir Cohen-Shalev (1989) observes that chronological age and the model of cognitive and biological deterioration, usually associated with age-related mental fatigue or lack of motivation and productivity, are very often assumed to be determining factors in one's life course and, especially, in one's creative faculties. Medically-oriented gerontological research ignores the fact that the period between the mid-fifties and the mid-seventies, the so-called "Liberation Phase," is characterised by a renewed sense of self that is followed by "comfort, confidence, and courage [that] translates into creative expression" (Cohen, 2010: 191). By observing and analysing the complexities of the experience of ageing that are reflected in literary texts, we can start to see the transitions in human lives from a perspective that is not based on the idealised model of successful ageing and anti-ageing imperatives. Jong's position as a spokeswoman of the post-war generation is especially relevant, given that the representatives of the baby-boom generation are now approaching their latest stages in life and are exposed to new challenges within the context of controversial mainstream discourses of ageing.

This dissertation is organised into six chapters, which correspond to the specific objectives of this study. The first chapter casts light on Erica Jong's trajectory as a female author and shows how the unexpected success after the publication of the novel *Fear of Flying* and its reception have conditioned her literary career, her celebrity status in American letters, and her reputation as a writer and as a woman. Although the writer's attempts to emancipate women from patriarchal domains and to address important aspects that concern women have not helped Jong to escape the label of a non-serious sex writer up to the present day, this chapter shows that the author continued to vocalise the needs, anxieties and preoccupations of women of her generation without ever abandoning the topic of sexuality in her numerous works. It also argues for the relevance of the author's mid- and late-life work in the understanding of the lives of older women today at a time when this important part of her *oeuvre* remains understudied. The second chapter establishes the theoretical framework of

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ageing studies in the light of historical, feminist, and cultural perspectives of old age. It gives a special focus to two master narratives of old age – the narrative of decline and the successful ageing discourse – and provides critical standpoints that resist these sociocultural models. It also considers the importance of literary gerontology and establishes that this discipline can provide multiple insights into gerontological and feminist research. Given the importance of body politics in Jong's *oeuvre*, the third chapter uncovers the complexities of the relationship between physical decay and ageing. It explores how socioculturally embedded perceptions influence Jong's and her heroines' notions of beauty and femininity, and looks into the power of the anti-ageing discourse, which conditions their social and individual identities. The chapter also draws particular attention to their perceptions of self in relation to the male gaze, sexual desirability, and various body-rejuvenation practices, including plastic surgery. Since body politics are closely related to sexual scripts, the fourth chapter considers the treatment of female sexuality in Jong's *oeuvre* and analyses how political, sociocultural, and age-related constructions of sexuality influence the writer's and her characters' identities. It also examines the extent to which Jong's middle- and later-works challenge the successful ageing discourse and biomedicalised notions of sex by providing alternative expressions of sexual and emotional intimacy in old age. The fifth chapter explores the polemical and contradictory topic of motherhood from a life-course perspective. It also looks into the relationship between mothers and daughters in Jong's works, which changes as both the author and her characters grow older and undergo significant identity transformations. Finally, it explores the experience of grandmothing and its impact on the perception of selfhood in later life. The sixth and the last chapter explores Jong's fictionalisation of life-changing experiences, such as parental care, death, and bereavement, and considers their impact on Jong and her characters' development and their perception of self in their later years. With an aim to better understand the ways Jong approaches old age and the turning points in life through her *oeuvre*, this concluding chapter analyses how the writer deals with the internal conflicts, emotional struggles, and existential dilemmas that become more pronounced in later maturity, and which are reflected in the process of writing itself.

Taken collectively, these chapters reveal some recurrent tropes that persist throughout her whole work and provide a broader picture of how Jong and her characters negotiate the complex experience of ageing and important turning points in life as they grow older. By addressing the concerns of women throughout her works,

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and especially in her late-life writings, the author shows that many of her characters' fears and anxieties are conditioned by sociocultural contexts and dominant discourses that can be contested and transcended in later life. As sociologist Andrew Blaikie states, "[b]oth individually and collectively, ageing is a cultural state of mind," the variations of which change according to different historical periods and societies (1999: 31). As will be shown in this thesis, Erica Jong is a consolidated, assertive, and staunch defender of the importance of sexual and intimate expressions in advanced stages of life. Through her work, the writer speaks loudly for her generation of women, who continue to be doubly marginalised in our youth-driven society, but who also show that ageing is not a sign of decline, but rather a way towards a myriad of new experiences and discoveries.

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Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to offer an overview of Erica Jong's works before and after the publication of *Fear of Flying*, and to show how this novel influenced the development of her career as a writer. In spite of the controversy around *Fear of Flying*, Jong has never abandoned the polemic topic of female sexuality and continues to voice the concerns of the women of the baby-boom generation in her later works. A close analysis of her writings can help to better understand the complexities of the lives of older women and their ageing realities, affected by significant historical, demographic, and sociocultural transformations.

In her ground-breaking novel *Fear of Flying*, Jong narrated a story of a young woman in search of emotional, artistic, and sexual satisfaction. Through her story, she depicted the sociocultural and political milieu of the US of the seventies, characterised by sexual liberation, social upheavals, and consciousness-raising groups promoted by feminist activism. *Fear of Flying*, translated into forty languages, became a *succès de scandale* in the America of that time and sold over twenty-six million copies worldwide, which made Jong an international media celebrity. The novel also became known for the term 'zipless fuck,' which refers to an idealised sexual meeting between a man and a woman, in which there is no power relation or sexual objectification of body parts – the strangers are only driven by the purest desire towards each other.² Since the publication of *Fear of Flying*, the term made the novelist an iconic reference figure of the sexual revolution who openly addressed female sexuality and managed to reveal unconventional aspects of female experiences. These include a woman's right to scrutinising the male body to its sheer joy, the fight against misogynist attitudes, the attempt to break free from conventional models that had long silenced female voices, among many similar topics.

²The scenario of the 'zipless fuck' in *Fear of Flying*:

Zipless, you see, *not* because European men have button-flies rather than zipper-flies, and not because the participants are so devastatingly attractive, but because the incident has all the swift compression of a dream and is seemingly free of all remorse and guilt; because there is no talk of her late husband or of his fiancée; because there is no rationalizing; because there is no talk at all. The zipless fuck is absolutely pure. It is free of ulterior motives. There is no power game. The man is not 'taking' and the woman is not 'giving.' No one is attempting to cuckold a husband or humiliate a wife. No one is trying to prove anything or get anything out of anyone. The zipless fuck is the purest thing there is. And it is rarer than the unicorn. And I have never had one. (Emphasis in original, 21-2)

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Her ideas have fuelled raging debates and fierce discussions among literary critics, the media, and academic circles. Jong's novel received both criticism and acclaim from critics and reviewers, which made her an interesting figure in both the literary panorama and the public sphere in the US and worldwide. Due to her transgressive and, at the same time, honest and even confessional writing style in *Fear of Flying*, the writer became an object of misogynist, feminist, and even gender-based attacks launched by the press and academia alike. Because of the autobiographical nature of her work, mixed with sexual references and humour, the author was regarded as a commercial and provocative voice whose sole aim was to get readers to buy her books.³ Also, her frequent appearances in the press, public events, and TV shows turned her into a media celebrity. Jong's debut after the publication of *Fear of Flying*, her celebrity status, and her bold writing gave way to arguments to disqualify her work in American literary circles.

After the instant success of the novel, Jong's popularity has gradually declined and has never been recovered to the same degree. Taking into account the changing social realities and more flexible views towards sex in today's society, the writer's explicit writing about sex no longer shocks her readership; thus, Jong's literary works, in which sexuality continues to be an important aspect, no longer draw as much attention as in the seventies. Yet, even though references to sex do not surprise readers any longer, the sexuality of older women in particular does not leave contemporary audiences indifferent. By exploring the issues related to older women's sexual desire in her later works, the author has again become an important voice in the American literary background, the media, and contemporary society.

An Overview of Erica Jong's Career

Jong always dreamed of writing. The writer confessed that she wanted "to be a writer from the time [she] was ten or eleven" because writing was "the only profession which had enough surprises in store to hold [her] for the rest of [her] life" (Jong, 1980: 118;

³The fact that Jong wrote about sex at the peak of the sexual revolution gave her more visibility and popularity. According to some critics, Jong, by offering her readers sensational novels, could catch the attention of the public and maintain her popularity better than by writing verses. In one of the interviews, the writer said that if she could get people's attention with sex, "then maybe [she]'d be able to tell them about everything" (Olshan and Pitzer, 1994: 77). This statement suggests that Jong writes about sex not only because she believes it is an essential part of human nature, a topic that will be discussed in chapter four, but also because by employing sex she can get the readers' attention to delve into issues she is concerned about (Olshan and Pitzer, 1994: 77).

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Templin, 2002: 24). Apparently, the author's dreams came true in her late twenties, followed by the unexpected and instant success of *Fear of Flying*. Erica Jong (née Mann, March 26, 1942), a born New Yorker, spent her childhood and adolescence surrounded by an artistic and bohemian environment.⁴ Jong's love for the humanities and the liberal arts was reflected in her early interest in creative writing. In Barnard College, from which she received her Bachelor of Arts in 1963, Jong wrote stories and poems, and was in charge of editing the literary magazine and producing poetry programmes. Two years later, Jong earned a Master of Arts in English from Columbia University on representations of women in Alexander Pope's works, and wanted to do a PhD in eighteenth-century English literature, which she was very passionate about (Templin, 2002). Yet, the future writer decided that her willingness to experiment with creative writing was greater than pursuing a doctoral degree.

In 1966, at twenty-one, Jong married a college friend, Michael Werthman, whom she divorced after three years. At twenty-four, the author married a Chinese-American psychiatrist, Allan Jong, whom she followed to a military camp in Germany, Heidelberg, for three years. During this period, she taught at the Overseas Division of the University of Maryland, discovered her Jewish roots and continued with her creative writing. Her second marriage also ended up in divorce and in 1977 Jong got married for the third time to a writer, Jonathan Fast,⁵ with whom she has a daughter, Molly Miranda Jong-Fast. After their separation in 1983, the writer had several short-lived affairs until she met a divorce lawyer, Ken Burrows, whom she wed in 1989 (Templin, 2002). At present, the writer claims she is a happily married woman who spends her time between her Manhattan apartment and a country home in Connecticut, which in many of her works appears as a calm place to unwind and indulge into creative projects (*What Do Women Want*).

Jong's literary writings range from poems, novels, memoirs, non-fiction, essays and articles. The writer has also been active in many professional organisations related to the literary world, such as the Authors League of America, the National Writers Union, and the Dramatists Guild of America, among many others, and has received many prizes. To name just a few, she has been awarded the Premio Internazionale Sigmund Freud in Italy, the United Nations Award of Excellence for literature, and the

⁴Jong's father was a musician who later turned into an antique doll importer, and her mother was an amateur painter who worked as a clothes' designer. Her grandfather was a painter, too. It was in his painting studio where Jong became acquainted with the world of art.

⁵There are no references to why Jong decided to keep the surname Jong after her divorce with Allan Jong.

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Deauville Award for Literary Excellence in France. Up to the present day, Jong continues to be a prolific writer and is a frequent guest in various TV shows, public events, and social networks.

Erica Jong's Literary Debut: Her Early Poems

Even though Erica Jong is best known for her seminal novel, *Fear of Flying*, the author did not start her career as a novelist, but as a poetess. Her first volume of poems, *Fruits & Vegetables* (1971), was followed by a publication party in a fruit and vegetable market, where “the lemons and oranges gleamed in the sunlight,” suggesting the future fame of a young writer (*Fear of Fifty*, 147). The unusual setting marked the very beginning of her distinguished career as a writer and celebrity.⁶ In her verses, Jong stretched the boundaries of feminism by addressing the issues that concerned the women of her baby-boom generation. The poetess aimed at challenging the restrictive American Puritan environment and breaking with the traditional conventions that had limited women's voices in the Western literary scene. As will be explained in the following sections, by offering a frank vision of women's bodies, their sexual desires, and other intimate female experiences, Jong shattered many taboos that are still part of the American literary circles.

In her following volumes of poems, *Half-Lives* (1973) and *Loveroot* (1975),⁷ which clearly reproduce the tenets of Second-Wave feminism, the writer revealed herself as an active defender of women's rights and questioned gender politics, especially in intimate relationships, as well as women's roles as daughters, wives, mothers, and female writers in contemporary America. It is interesting to note that Jong titles her second collection of poems *Half-Lives*. This choice offers many interpretations: it may be stated that she opens up itself only partially in order not to be judged for her sincerity and, in so doing, to avoid public criticism and a negative reception of her work. Another reading of this choice may suggest that she is already concerned about the ageing process and a midlife perspective. Furthermore, the title *Half-Lives* can also be regarded as an allusion to the duality of Jong's persona, the

⁶During the celebration of *Fruits & Vegetables*, Jong was videotaped and photographed surrounded by oranges and grapefruits. As the writer recalls, her “tights were showcased” along with her “high-heeled fuck-me sandals;” yet, she did not foresee that the sexual objectification of her persona would have negative repercussions in her later career as a writer (*Fear of Fifty*, 147-8).

⁷Although *Loveroot* was published after *Fear of Flying*, the themes that Jong deals with in this collection are more similar to the topics she explored in her early volumes of poems.

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struggle to find a balance between mundane life and transcendence, or her aspirations as a poetess and duties as a woman, daughter, and wife. For instance, in the poems of these collections, Jong expressed her unwillingness to become a mother herself, even her fear of motherhood, and explored a complex relationship between mothers and daughters, as will be elaborated in chapter five. Her early poetry contains metapoetic epigraphs with references to classic and well-known contemporary authors, such as Colette, Theodore Roethke and Roland Barthes, and especially identifies with and pays tribute to distinguished American women poets like Sylvia Plath or Anne Sexton. On the one hand, the abundance of literary references to other authors may suggest that Jong sought the approval of academic circles and wanted to position herself as an intellectual writer. On the other hand, it can be argued that Jong did not attempt to obtain academic recognition, but felt more comfortable by referring to other writers because she was simply expressing herself through their voices. The intertextual nature of Jong's works also reveals that creative achievements are always in relation to other texts and are embedded in sociocultural contexts.

Jong's debut as a young and courageous poetess was warmly welcomed and received significant critical acclaim. According to some critics, "throughout the late 60's and early 70's, Jong had an uncommonly successful career as a poetess, and then established the themes that would later dominate her fiction" (Templin, 2002: 122). Jong's early poetry has been praised by many writers, such as Anne Sexton, who called the writer "all woman, but more important, all human;" whereas Margaret Atwood asserted that reading Jong's verses felt like "watch[ing] a trapeze act, with held breath, marvelling at the agility, the lightness of touch," the poems being "the brilliant demonstration of the difficult made to look easy" (back cover of *Loves Comes First*, 2009). Even though, with her poetry, Jong successfully introduced herself in the literary world, it was not until the publication of her novel *Fear of Flying* that she became more visible in both social and literary spheres. As a matter of fact, Jong's most famous book granted her a celebrity status in America and outside her homeland. At the same time, it also overshadowed her recognition as a poetess.

Fear of Flying: The Book that Ignited the Flame

After the social stability and prosperity of the fifties, the America of the sixties and seventies was characterised by important changes in attitudes towards gender equality,

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pregnancy, sexuality, and social values that were promoted by minority groups, the civil rights movement, and Second-Wave feminism (Zygadło, 2004: 53). Second-Wave feminists recognised that the political rights gained during the First-Wave of feminism during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were meaningless unless the social and private concerns of women's oppression were addressed. The NOW (National Organization for Women), founded in the US in 1966, aimed at taking action to achieve equality and freedom of choice, to outlaw sex discrimination, and to make women more visible in political, economic and social environments. The Second-Wave movement aimed at advocating the same rights for men and women, effacing female subordination, uprooting sexism and gender inequality, and proposing actions that would ameliorate women's conditions and rights. Feminist activists organised and promoted consciousness-raising groups to collect and to examine women's life experiences to get a broader picture of women's struggles and the issues they were worried about. By establishing a "new feminist consciousness," Second-Wave feminists wanted to transform social attitudes and behaviours, to change women's perceptions of themselves and of their domestic lives, as well as to provide women with a space to grow and make their voices heard (Zygadło, 2004: 5). In this new era, feminists were intent on making people aware of the fact that personal issues such as domestic chores or motherhood had to be addressed politically.⁸ They also questioned gender hierarchies in their everyday lives by showing a particular interest in sexual politics and intimate female issues. Women were beginning to speak of themselves as sexual beings with subjectivity, autonomy, and agency, instead of being seen as house-bound sexless subjects.

Fear of Flying is a product of this ethos, as it was published just when these social transformations were taking place. Jong's novel became an instant sociocultural icon and a valuable historical document that depicted the fears, struggles, and hopes of the women of that time. In it, the author dared to challenge the passive role that women had long been cast into and decided that it was high time women started to talk back honestly, adventurously, and assertively by using their own voices. Jong's book contributed to raising women's consciousness by showing that sex was as important to women as it was to men. The sexual fantasies depicted in the novel could be seen as a

⁸The idea of 'the personal is political' emerged during the late sixties and seventies. It does not imply that everything that women do is political nor does it suggest that women's personal lives are closely related to political choices. Rather, the phrase means that many women's personal problems are the result of power relations, patriarchal oppression and, gender-based inequalities. Many Second-Wave feminists and activists employed the phrase in their writings, public speeches, and consciousness-raising activities as a means to address gender equality, female social roles, or childbearing, among other topics.

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breath of fresh air that showed that females, in the same way as men, had rich sexual fantasies and a right to them. As Shelley Fisher-Fishkin states, it was clear that “millions of women needed *Fear of Flying* in the early 1970s” to claim their positions that men had long usurped, such as “the freedom to make mistakes – to be bold and transgressive and *wrong*” (2009: 192, 190, emphasis in original). Fisher-Fishkin’s comment not only illustrates a women’s right to be daring and unruly, but also to make mistakes and experiment with their bodies without shame of revealing female sexual urges and the need for self-gratification.

Jong starts her best-selling novel by announcing the fear of flying experienced by the protagonist, Isadora Wing, a frenetic and ambitious writer in her early thirties, who flies to Vienna with her psychiatrist husband, Bennett, to attend a European Psychoanalysis Conference on Freud. The protagonist’s fear of flying is both literal and symbolic, since Jong uses Isadora’s phobia as a metaphor to explore women’s fears in a male-dominated society. While abroad, the character engages in a series of amorous adventures and misadventures with a British analyst, Adrian Goodlove, who appears to be the embodiment of her erotic dreams and who lures her away from her husband. Isadora risks her marriage by leaving her unfulfilling husband to travel across Europe with her new lover. Yet, disillusionment begins to set in when she discovers that Adrian is often impotent. Also, he leaves her alone in Paris and goes back to his family. Abandoned by her British lover, Isadora leaves France to track down her husband. The novel concludes with a scene where the protagonist is enjoying a relaxing bath in a hotel room in London waiting for Bennett to come back.

Some feminists claimed that the final scene promoted patriarchal standards and belied the feminist message that Jong had weaved into the story. Hence, they read Isadora’s return to her husband as a sign of her subordinate position, or as signifying her need for a male companion to make her feel fulfilled both sexually and emotionally. Yet, others interpreted Isadora’s story as an example of a female survivor who breaks free from conventional modes of morality and comes back changed, feeling more self-confident and self-assured. Isadora’s observing and admiring her naked body in the bath may suggest the reconciliation of her divided self and the replacement of her ‘fear of flying’ with a love for herself, as reflected in the following lines: “I floated lightly in the deep tub, feeling that something was different, something was strange, but I couldn’t figure out just what it was. [...] I hugged myself. It was my fear that was missing. The

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cold stone I had worn inside my chest for twenty-nine years was gone” (*Fear of Flying*, 424).

In her essay “Writing a First Novel” written at the age of thirty-two, where Jong explained how she wrote *Fear of Flying*, she refused to call it ‘the first novel.’ According to the writer, the term ‘first novel’ does not exist and the category is meaningless in itself because writers tend to produce many writings until one of them becomes published as *the* first novel (Jong, 1974: 262). All in all, it took the author at least eight years to write *Fear of Flying* and “possibly all [her] life. The draft which was finally published was about two years in the writing, but there was a long history before that” (Jong, 1974: 263). When Jong handed in the manuscript of *Fear of Flying* to her editor Aaron Asher, he advised her to write using a female voice because the text looked unauthentic: “it lacked heart, guts – life, in short. It was clear I was just bursting to write a book about a woman and that was the book we both knew I had to tackle” (Jong, 1974: 265). Asher’s advice became a revelation for Jong. As she confessed, “it was not until [she] allowed the femaleness of [her] personality to surface [her] work that [she] began to write anything halfway honest” (Jong, 1980: 119).⁹ The young writer understood that, although there was a tradition of female authors writing about female concerns, such as proto-feminists like Edith Wharton, Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Willa Cather, Louisa May Alcott or Sarah Orne Jewett, among others, the sixties lacked powerful female voices that dared to speak honestly from a woman’s perspective.

Women writers had become more visible in American literary circles in the nineteenth century. However, their entrance into a literary domain controlled by men very often resulted in unjustified attacks by some male writers.¹⁰ Sex, autonomy, irony, and erotic wit, elements that have traditionally been usurped by men, were considered not ‘proper’ for female writers. Texts with too many sexual overtones were regarded as

⁹The development of Jong’s self-confidence as a female writer and similar aspects will be further examined in the last chapter of the present study.

¹⁰The work of many well-known women writers has been denigrated and banned because it contained sexual explicitness. For example, Anaïs Nin decided to exclude “the sexual parts of her diary” because she feared she would be criticised and censored for the sexual explicitness in her works (Jong, 1974: 266). Another woman writer who faced a similar fate was Kate Chopin. In her novel *The Awakening* (1899) she examined women’s sexuality and looked for the personal freedom of her protagonist, Edna Pontellier, who had the courage to acknowledge her sexual desires in a society where women were supposed to act as ‘sexless angels’. Chopin’s novel was banned in St. Louis and negatively reviewed in the US. She was accused of being vulgar and dirty, similar to Jong herself (Templin, 1995: 6). Sexton’s poem “Menstruation at Forty” was also harshly criticized for being improper and intolerable because of its explicit treatment of female issues (Templin, 1995: 2-6).

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obscene and vulgar because they were thought to threaten social stability and signal the perversity of the nation. The existence of books, in which female sexual desire and personal satisfaction were not only allowed, but even encouraged, were seen as a menace to the patriarchal *status quo* and the ideals of traditional motherhood that implied female submissiveness, child-rearing, housewifery, and the exclusion of women from the public, male-dominated sphere. Templin observes that “ever since women have been involved in the creation of art [...] [they have been] a target for abuse of the most virulent kind” and have been evaluated according to the criteria of what was supposed to be proper for a woman, based on the idea of traditional womanhood (1995: 1). According to Jong, many male writers, such as John Donne and, later, Gerard Manly Hopkins, James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, and Henry Miller, among others, were permitted to express sexual fantasies and eroticism in their writings. In contrast, female artists were not allowed to step into these territories because they were expected to be chaste, pure, and ‘womanly’ (Templin, 1995: 2-3). Jong remarked that what she wanted to do in *Fear of Flying* was to write “a female picaresque” having in mind “novels like *Tom Jones*, *Henderson the Rain King*, *Augie March*, and Henry Miller’s *Tropics*,” therefore, the author “saw no reason why the same liberties with language should not belong to women since women take them in life” (1974: 267). In her memoirs, the writer lamented that those female protagonists who dared to seek sexual fulfilment and openly talked about female sexuality had always been punished with death or madness, as shown in European classics such as Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* or Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*: “Anna Karenina and Madame Bovary died for their sins” (*Seducing the Demon*, 72). Looking at contemporary expressions of female sexuality in popular media, such as *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), she observed the same trends: “the most promiscuous woman character in *Sex and the City* is rebuked with breast cancer” (*Seducing the Demon*, 72). Jong’s reference to Samantha’s breast cancer in the popular TV series again reveals that those women who seek sexual pleasures are still punished and that the limitations of the past centuries are still with us. Jong complained that contemporary society was “still not entirely comfortable with sexuality in women going unpunished,” and that is why she wanted to create women characters who do express their sexuality and are *not* punished for it (*Seducing the Demon*, 72). The writer wanted to overthrow the established male-perspective in literary circles by creating empowered women who experienced their sexuality in equal terms with men. Hence, in her novel *Fear of Flying*, Jong gives a face and a body to female sexuality, and presents it as

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normal and natural as is the case with men's sexual urges. As Fisher-Fishkin argues, Jong's book "broke ranks with a disturbing pattern of self-destruction and suicide that has woven through fiction by American women writers for close to two centuries" (2009: 189).

The 'flying' metaphor and the title of the book suggest a reference to the classical myth of Icarus, as observed by Jane Chance-Nitzsche in the article "'Isadora Icarus': The Mythic Unity of Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*" (1978). Both Isadora and Icarus display remarkable courage by venturing into territories forbidden to them. Icarus uses wax wings, whereas Isadora, who is a writer, employs a pen and her creativity to rise above the literary labyrinth that is ruled by male writers. Through Isadora's character, Jong enacts her will to 'fly,' subverts the 'pen-is-envy'¹¹ metaphor, and dismantles old prejudices about women's passivity, their lack of rational thinking, and their inability to write well. Although the heroine does 'get burned' emotionally, she is not killed, unlike the son of the master craftsman Daedalus, or the other heroines presented in the literary works mentioned above. On the contrary, her decision to 'fly' serves as an example to encourage women to face up to patriarchal domains and to speak out. As shown in Jong's novel, even though Isadora breaks the rules and addresses many taboo issues, she keeps on living to tell her life story. In this respect, Jong's work contradicts the suicidal American women writers which she took as first models, such as Plath and Sexton.

Fear of Flying became one of the top ten best-selling books of the seventies in the US, and turned Jong into a media star. However, it would not have received so much acclaim if it had not been published at the right time, in the right place, and promoted by the right people. In fact, the early reviews of the novel were not very enthusiastic but, when fellow American writers such as John Updike and Henry Miller started to praise Jong's work, the reception of her book underwent an enormous transformation. In his review for *The New Yorker*, Updike pointed out that Jong's work had "class and sass, brightness and bite" (1973: 149). He congratulated the young novelist for her wit and sharp sense of humour, and compared the book to the classics by claiming that:

Fear of Flying not only stands as a notably luxuriant and glowing bloom in the sometimes thistly garden of 'raised' feminine consciousness but belongs to, and hilariously extends, the tradition of *Catcher in the Rye* and *Portnoy's Complaint*

¹¹According to Freud, 'pen-is-envy' implies female frustration upon realization of their lack of a masculine organ. See: Sigmund Freud. "On the Sexual Theories of Children." 1908. See also: Derek Hook. "Psychoanalysis, Sexual Difference and the Castration Problematic." 2006.

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– that of the New York voice on the couch, the smart kid’s lament. (Updike, 1973: 149)

There is no doubt that Updike’s review played an important role in the reception of the book, and highly contributed to its success and popularity. Later on, Miller congratulated Jong on having freely expressed female intimate experiences. Miller also offered his help to promote the novel and sent it to his publishers abroad, a gesture that contributed to Jong’s fame worldwide.¹² Walters Clemons, the American book critic and writer, was quite ambivalent about it and, in fact, he did not consider Jong as a good writer. Yet, he admitted that her book was vivid and exuberant:

Erica Jong isn’t, so far, a good novelist. After a nervy, arresting take-off, she pads out *Fear of Flying* with lengthy, quasi-autobiographical detours ... and limps home to a pat landing. Yet her book has plenty of energy, some good (and some terrible) wisecracks and a generous showing of distinct, determined talent. (Clemons, 1973: 114)

According to the American writer Naomi Wolf, the author of the introduction of Jong’s memoir *What Do Women Want*, Erica Jong was:

[...] the first literate female avatar of the sexual revolution: the image of her in the 1970’s as the full-lipped, confrontational young novelist who first made the worlds’ pulses race with *Fear of Flying* [was] as much part of ten collective pop memory as is Peter Max’s psychedelic image, or Kent State, or John and Yoko in bed. (xiii)

Although vivid descriptions of sex and references from a young and attractive woman’s perspective helped Jong to get more visibility and public attention, in the long run she had to pay a high price for offering honest visions of female sexual concerns. Several months after the appearance of the paperback version in American bookshops, Jong was cast in the role of representing all the changes that occurred in the uneasy climate of socio-political transformations and upheavals in America in seventies (Templin, 2002: xii-xv). The portrayal of Isadora as a figure who uses sex for her own pleasure and gets away without being punished was not accepted by everyone. Some radical and conservative critics, reluctant to challenge the *status quo* of gender relations and societal structures, saw Jong’s work as outrageous, dirty and appalling. Templin noted that, even though the success of the novel gave Jong high visibility, “Jong’s fame was deeply marked by the notoriety associated with sex” (2002: x). American travel

¹²It is significant to note that some feminist critics saw the promotion of Jong’s work by male writers as an indicator of her inability to stand for herself and to liberate a woman’s voice without the permission and help from men.

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writer and novelist Paul Theroux is often quoted for having given Jong very harsh criticism. He called Isadora Wing “a mammoth pudenda” and insulted the author for having depicted all the worst things that existed in America in that historical period:

She says she ‘wanted to write *War and Peace* or nothing,’ and hav[e] chosen the latter [...]. This crappy novel, misusing vulgarity to the point where it becomes purely foolish, picturing woman as a hapless organ animated by the simplest ridicule, and devaluing imagination in every line [...] represents everything that is to be loathed in American fiction today. It does not have the excuse of humour, nor is its pretence to topicality anything but tedious. That it was written with a grant [...] from the National Endowment for the Arts should surprise no one already familiar with the ways American money is used, though is ample justification for any of us to refuse paying his taxes this year. (Theroux, 1974: 554)

The American writer and literary critic, Alfred Kazin, saw Jong “as commonplace a mind as ever appeared on the best-seller lists” (Virshup, 1994: 40). Like Theroux, Kazin considered the novel unliterary and vulgar. One of the toughest reviews came from another American writer and reviewer, D. Keith Mano. In the *National Review* (23 Dec, 1977), he referred to Jong’s gender and her inability to treat ‘serious’ themes in her works: “Erica writes, Lord, just like a *woman*. And that’s my very best pejorative. Literature is a risk. Erica didn’t accept the risk: unsurprisingly, she has no balls” (Templin, 1995: 4, emphasis in original). *The New York Times* editor Amy Virshup, in the article “For Mature Audiences Only,” also stated that Jong wanted to make her book a best-seller and, at the same time, to enjoy a high reputation for literature: “[she wanted] to write about sex but be remembered for (almost) getting her Ph.D.,” to be known as a poetess and feminist and not as a woman writer who has invented the ‘zipless fuck’ (1994: 41). Eventually, the writer was turned into a media product and often considered a sexy erotic and low-fiction writer, or even a pornographer, which excluded her from the American literary canon (Zygadło, 2004: 56). Moreover, her readers were also attacked as “impure” people of “the bottom of the social hierarchy” who only looked for easy literature and erotic fantasies rather than moral and aesthetic values (Templin, 1995: 85).

Since the novel does not offer a particularly good image of men’s sexual performance, as it humorously exposes intimate male issues in graphic detail and depicts men as impotent or even rapists, some male writers might have felt offended by Jong’s writing. They may have interpreted her candid and sexual style as merely superficial, offensive, and shallow, with none of the aesthetic or artistic values that

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‘high’ works of art should possess. Also, sexually overt material was seen as belonging to men’s territory, to which women had no access. Thus, it may be argued that male critics employed negative comments in an attempt to deny or suppress female agency and the right to speak out in order to establish an autonomous female self and sexuality. The fierce criticism that Jong received can be seen as a sign of Western society’s obsession with sex-related issues and the constant surveillance to keep sex ‘in its place’ in order to maintain social discipline intact. Some critics, defending her style, have noted that those who blamed the writer for being too ‘outspoken’ about female intimacy, were actually “accusing Jong of not adhering to the patriarchal expectation that women should be shy, modest, passive, and quiet about female sexuality” (Anonymous, 2014). As Jong herself has observed, most of the criticism that came from male writers erupted from their anger for having stolen their favourite subjects – women and their bodies (1974: 267). Yet, those reviewers who attacked Jong for being too promiscuous forgot to mention that many of Isadora’s sexual fantasies remain unfulfilled. That is, the character’s erotic dreams in the novel are more unrestrained than her real sexual life – her marriage is failing and her new lover, Adrian, cannot always satisfy her sexually.

Jong was assessed not only as a writer, but also as an immoral and promiscuous woman. Being an attractive woman, she received sharp criticism that precluded a better consideration of her works. For instance, the American feminist writer and critic, Katha Pollitt, did not forget to mention Jong’s physical appearance when making a comment on her popularity and success. According to Pollitt, Jong’s first novel became famous and widely-read because it was published when “the sexual revolution met feminism,” and because the author was “a sexy young feminist” (Virshup, 1994: 40). Updike fell into the same trap. When praising Jong’s novel *Fear of Flying*, he made a comment on her looks: “[o]n the back jacket flap, Mrs. Jong, with perfect teeth and cascading blond hair, is magnificently laughing, in contrast to the sombre portrait that adorns her own collections of poetry” (1973: 150). In response to bitter comments, Jong remarked that, when a woman writes about sex, her persona is always taken into consideration, too: “I’ve never seen a review of a woman writer in which her sex was not mentioned in some way” (Templin, 2002: 9). The writer also highlighted that reviewers, apart from examining a woman writer’s work, always ended up commenting on her appearance and “if a woman is ugly, they harp on that too” (Templin, 2002: 9).

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Some female critics responded to the negative reaction among men by arguing that Isadora's erotic dreams and detailed portrayals of men's sexual inadequacy could be regarded as an alternative way to belie the notion that only men are allowed to write about female sexuality. The use of obscene language could also be seen as a means to reverse the existing stereotypes and traditional roles prescribed to women and to parody the language of male writers. Women's studies scholar Maryl Altman argued that Jong's text appropriated "a radical terrain of subjectivity" by rejecting the medical vocabulary of the fifties, which was mainly based on terms such as "frigidity" or "promiscuity," and offered a new sexual language for women (2003: 8). By humorously employing sexual language, Jong gave free rein to a female voice that emerged from silence and openly imitated the male gaze. The writer's sheer and honest exploration of the issues that preoccupy women, and her ability to deal with these topics in a candid and satirically courageous way, helped her to deeply connect with readers around the world. For example, Jong's humorously coined 'zipless fuck,' with which she became associated in the media and the press,¹³ was not always seen as a cheap label intended to get the attention of the public. Many female readers of her generation interpreted the term as a symbol of self-search and personal liberation instead of sheer sexual gratification. A lot of women, according to Jong, thanked her for providing a fantasy that helped them to escape traditional sexual roles. In the afterword of a 2003 edition of *Fear of Flying*, Jong noted that, for one of her readers, this novel was more than a simple book – it was "a part of [women's] lives" (438). Jong also confessed that people often stopped her "on the street, on airplanes, in trains and [told her] where they were when they first read 'that book' and how it impacted their lives" (*Fear of Flying*, 438). As the author once pointed out, "*Fear of Flying* is clearly a novel about the quest for self" (Templin, 2002: 105).

Jong's work was also criticised abroad. Jonathan Raban, a British travel writer and novelist, did not consider *Fear of Flying* "a novel at all, but a series of furious escapades, loosely tacked together as parts of Isadora Wing's unfinished quest for something called 'the zipless fuck'" (1974: 76). He also pointed out that Jong invented an "appalling heroine" and the reading of the book felt like "being locked in a lift with a woman who tells you her life story twice over, rapes you, and stops you reaching for the

¹³The popularity of the term was such that Jong even joked that people "would put *zipless fuck* on [her] tombstone" (*Fear of Flying*, 438, emphasis in original).

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Emergency button” (Raban, 1974: 76). Isadora was also seen as a monster that was “close to the insatiably willing dream-girl of male fantasies and male fiction” (Raban, 1974: 76). However, the reception of the book abroad was not unanimously unfavourable, and Jong’s work also received positive criticism for having liberated a female sexual voice. In fact, the writer herself noted, the reviews about *Fear of Flying* were much more favourable in comparison to her home country:

All over the world I’m a distinguished American writer, and people come to me and say ‘How is your writing different from Phillip Roth? How is your writing different from Bill Styron?’ But in my country, I’m sort of getting lost in this women’s-sex-writer category. (Virshup, 1994: 45)

Although the writer was criticised in countries such as the US, Germany and the UK, where, as Jong herself stated, “Bible-thumping puritans [...] want[ed] to silence women who write about passion,” her work was received “as literature” in more liberal countries such as France, Holland, and Sweden (Templin, 2002: 857). In any case, the novel about Isadora did not leave the public indifferent:

For those who liked it, it was useful as a way of understanding and ordering reality and, for some feminists, the impetus for an exuberant flight of self-affirmation. For those who disliked it, it was useful for clarifying some aspects of modern culture and as a vehicle for exploring, or expressing, their own views. (Templin, 1995: 26)

Despite the criticism she received, Jong continued to explore topics that concern women and advocated gender inequality, women’s rights, and the need to change the political climate to improve the lives of women.

Erica Jong’s Career After *Fear of Flying*

Following the publication of her most famous novel, Jong produced a significant body of work, including poetry, prose, memoirs, non-fiction, collections of essays and articles. After *Fear of Flying*, the author wrote two sequels: *How to Save Your Own Life* (1977) and *Parachutes & Kisses* (1984). In *How to Save Your Own Life*, Isadora is still married to Bennett and does not dare to leave him until he confesses he has cheated on her. Outraged, the character flies to Hollywood hoping that the book she is writing will be turned into a movie. Although the motion picture deal flatlines, she finds a new lover, seven years her junior, who knows how to make her erotic dreams come true. In the third book, *Parachutes & Kisses*, Isadora is approaching her forties and is a single mother who struggles to ‘have it all’: to be a famous writer, a good mother, a

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breadwinner, a passionate woman, and an artist in America, where the liberating dreams of the rebellious sixties are being interrogated by the 'Backlash' of the eighties. The book received less attention than its previous sequel and there was less public engagement with this novel. It is significant to note that even though Jong was fiercely criticised for frankly depicting female sexuality in *Fear of Flying*, public disapproval was even harsher after the publication of the novel's sequels, in which Isadora no longer appeared as a young writer looking for sexual gratification and fantasising about 'zipless fucks,' but as a more mature woman. The negative criticism that Jong received for these novels can be associated with still existing societal disapproval of women who, past their youth, engage in sexual relationships (Templin, 1995: 130-1). These negative views bespeak a deeply embedded idea that sexuality goes hand in hand with youth and good looks, as will be discussed in the following chapters (Bordo, 2003; Hurd-Clarke and Bennett 2015; Wolf, 2002). Ageing women, especially, are expected to lead a more conventional life, which often entails taking care of their ageing husbands, home and children or grandchildren (Levy, 1994; Woodward, 1991).

In the novel *Any Woman's Blues* (1990), written when Jong was forty-eight, the writer continues to examine the concerns of women who were greatly affected by shifting ideas in feminist ideology, the understanding of female roles, and the changing socio-cultural climate of the nineties. In this book, Jong presents a middle-aged art celebrity, Leila, who tries to be a good mother as she struggles with her addiction to alcohol, drugs, and sex. To get her lost rationality back and find meaning in life, Leila embarks on a journey of self-discovery from which she emerges renewed and more self-confident. Some critics saw the book as too obsessive, whereas others praised the novel for depicting the problems that many women faced at that time. For instance, Jamaican writer Margaret Cezair Thompson complimented Jong for having written a "very timely and important book" because of Jong's capacity to show the problems many women went through at that time in America (Templin, 1995: 161). Other reviews were quite ambivalent and considered the book a shallow popular novel crammed with too much sex. Moreover, some of the reviewers did not see the novel as relevant, because many women in the nineties did not struggle with addictions as reflected in *Any Woman's Blues*, but were more concerned about pay gaps, childrearing, gender politics, occupational segregation, and equality of opportunity in education, workplaces, and decision-making processes, among a wide range of other significant factors that negatively affect women's lives.

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In her latest fictional novel to date, *Fear of Dying* (2015), Jong portrays an ageing married actress, Vanessa Wonderman. The character faces her parents' deaths, the birth of her grandchildren, her husband's illness and the complexities of female desire and fantasies of no-strings sex. To find passion and sexual satisfaction in life, Vanessa starts looking for erotic adventures on a website called Zipless.com with the help of her best friend, Isadora Wing. By creating an unsatisfied heroine, Jong reveals the existence of the toxic double standards that apply to ageing women. The author examines what it means to grow older in a postfeminist society where, in theory, women enjoy complete freedom and independence, but find themselves limited by some of the same patriarchal constraints that women had to face in the past. Jong shows that if older women want to be visible in a society obsessed with beauty and youth, they have to be sexually active, beautiful, and vital. Although female sexuality and ageing are important topics in the novel, the book also explores human intimacy, mutual understanding between the spouses, and the searing anxieties of death. Vanessa becomes aware of her own mortality when faced with the death of her parents, her dear dog, as well as the threatening illness of her husband. The character seeks to find answers about how to deal with the fear of dying and how to live with that knowledge. Jong frankly confronts the topic of death, a theme which increasingly worries the representatives of the post-war generation, who are starting to face deaths of their beloved ones. In the book, Jong also explores how to accept past mistakes, make amends with one's life, and remain lively and positive when dealing with the process of growing old. Jong's novel has received positive reviews in various media in both the US and abroad, such as *The Guardian*, *The Irish Times*, *New York Times*, *The Independent*, *The Atlantic*, or the *BBC*. The American writer and television producer Jennifer Weiner wrote that:

Erica Jong has done it again! *Fear of Dying* is a big, bawdy, beautifully-written romp through online hookups, female friendships, children grappling with adulthood and parents negotiating with death. *Fear of Dying* is big, warm-hearted, generous book that will satisfy Jong's longtime fans and delight her new readers. (ericajong.com)

The well-known American actor and filmmaker Woody Allen praised Jong's ability to talk about such a painful topic as death and still keep the book light, fun, and a page-turner. As he stated, Jong is "able to deal with all these sensitive issues and still make the book funny, [which] is amazing. I loved reading it" (ericajong.com). Journalist Stacey May Fowles noticed that the novel "may not offer consolation in the face of our

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cultural disdain for getting old” and that the ending of the book is “perhaps a pat ending [...], but it really is the only one possible. A reader comes out of *Fear of Dying* much less troubled by the inevitable onslaught of time, and that’s an achievement in itself” (4 September, 2015). Jong herself has made a lot of public appearances in TV shows and other media to talk about her new novel, and used social networks such as Twitter and Facebook to promote it. Concerned with female issues, sexuality, and women’s lives, the author has also explored these topics in her historical fiction.

Erica Jong’s Historical Fiction

In her historical fiction, Jong blends the concerns of the past centuries with contemporary issues that preoccupy the women of today. In her first historical novel, *Fanny: Being the True History of the Adventures of Fanny Hackabout-Jones* (1980), the writer portrays a courageous and adventurous young woman who leads the reader through a series of stories that take place in brothels, witches’ covens, and pirate ships in the open seas and dark forests. In the book, Jong applies contemporary ideas to the social and historical reality of eighteenth-century England and creates a heroine who is not afraid to defend her position as a woman. Although she is raped by her stepfather, her baby-girl is kidnapped and she is forced to watch the massacre of her female friends, Fanny is still a courageous survivor whose ideas are beyond the limiting conventions of her epoch. It seems that Jong sought to show that the issues of that time are not that different from those that affect women in the contemporary world. In the novel, Jong reminds her readers that women still have to fight to have equal rights and be heard.

From the moment of its publication, the novel became a huge success.¹⁴ As Templin observed, *Fanny* was favoured by many academics and writers, such as Alan Friedman, Pat Rogers, and Anthony Burgess, because Jong was using literary forms

¹⁴The success of *Fanny: Being the True History of the Adventures of Fanny Hackabout-Jones* is due to a variety of reasons. During the writing of the book, Jong was pregnant and her mothering experience was reflected in the creation of Fanny. Jong introduced the topic of motherhood in the novel as a reflection of her new concerns on becoming pregnant and the prospect of becoming a mother herself. It is interesting to see how Jong’s reputation changed to a less controversial one when she became a mother and wrote about the experience of motherhood in her novel. As Templin observed, “not only was *Fanny* received well, but journalist articles about her at this time portrayed a new Jong: the happy mother and suburban matron” (1995: 4). Jong was positively reviewed because she was behaving like a ‘proper woman’ in a feminine and motherly way. Templin compared Jong’s example with that of the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood’s experience upon becoming a mother. Margaret Atwood stated that “People’s attitudes toward me changed remarkably in many cases once I became a MOTHER. You wouldn’t believe it” (Templin, 1995: 5, capitalised in original). It is also important to pinpoint that when Jong gave birth to her daughter, motherhood and mother-daughter relationships became one of the key topics in her *oeuvre*, a topic that will be explored in more depth in chapter five.

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scholars were familiar with, which allowed them to apply already-known conventional methods of analysis (1995: 104-7). Jong was praised for her scholarly background and thorough knowledge of eighteenth-century English literature, reflected in accurate descriptions of London and the British society of that historical period. To make the novel more authentic, Jong employed the language of that epoch in a playful, comic, and witty way, and played with canonical conventions and traits of well-known eighteenth-century picaresque works such as Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1749), Samuel Richardson's epistolary novels *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740) and *Clarissa, or, the History of a Young Lady* (1748), and John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (popularly known as *Fanny Hill*) (1748) among others. Jong's playful depictions of sexual scenes that parodied the writers of the British literary canon also allowed her to observe that the sexual attitudes of that epoch were more permissive, flexible and less strict than those of the Victorians.¹⁵

However, not all the reviews were positive. Many critics accused Jong of simply imitating great classics and, once more, they condemned the sexual explicitness in the book. Many of these negative comments came from British scholars and critics who had a "more personal sense of ownership of British history and literary tradition and thus a greater sense of outrage at the liberties Jong takes with the giants of British literature, Fielding, Swift, and Pope" (Templin, 1995: 116). Some critics also argued that by making references to well-known eighteenth-century authors and choosing to write a historical novel, Jong was seeking to escape the label of a woman who only writes about contemporary women's frustrations in relation to sex. However, this argument is not very convincing, because explicit sexual scenes are still present in the book.

In her second historical novel, *Shylock's Daughter* (formerly *Serenissima: A Novel of Venice*), published in 1987, Jong tries to find answers to what it means to be a woman and a celebrity in the modern film industry. As in *Fanny*, the use of the past historical context of the sixteenth century also serves as a tool to show that the struggles that contemporary women face are present in a still male-dominated society; hence, the writer advocates the need to rethink social structures, gender politics, and women's roles in our times. The protagonist, Jessica, goes to Venice to play a part in a theatrical

¹⁵It may be argued that Jong has chosen to present more liberal sexual attitudes of the eighteenth-century rather than Victorian times because she was passionate about the literary works and sociocultural climate of England of that time. Her interest in that time period is seen in her Master thesis on representations of women in Alexander Pope's works, and her later willingness to pursue a PhD on eighteenth-century English literature.

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production of *The Merchant of Venice*. The adventures start when she is transported to sixteenth-century Venice and meets William Shakespeare and his patron, the Earl of Southampton. *Shylock's Daughter*, in the same way as *Fanny*, was praised for its combination of contemporary issues with the past, abundant references to Shakespeare's work, and Jong's playful writing. As literature scholar Valentine Cunningham wrote, "[t]his is a novel full of masks, actors, costumes, performances. Persons and persona converge, intersect, get confused, at every turn, on and off stage, in public and private, in brothels, at balls, in the here and now, back then" (Templin: 1995: 157). Yet, the book did not become as popular as *Fanny* and did not receive much acclaim.

Jong's search for her Jewish identity and a sense of female bonding is explored in her third historical novel, *Inventing Memory: A Novel of Mothers and Daughters* (1997). This Jewish-American family saga covers the stories of women that belong to four different generations spanning from 1880 until 2006. In the novel, the author focuses on Jewish history and highlights the importance of memory and artistic creation, as well as the strength that daughters inherit from their mothers. Following her interest in historical fiction, Jong wrote *Sappho's Leap* (2003), in which she revived the legendary Sappho, a Greek lyric poetess from the island of Lesbos who is known for her sensual and homoerotic poetry.¹⁶ In the novel, Jong offers a thoroughly researched work of historical fiction and creates an ageing woman who is trying to find a balance in life by combining her role as a mother, a lover and a poetess. Both novels received favourable reviews in *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Women's Wear Daily*, *The New York Magazine* or *Kirkus Review*, and *The Boston Globe*, among others. For instance, Dominican-American writer Julia Álvarez praised Jong's *Inventing Memory* not only for offering a historical picture of four generations of women, but also for merging different cultural backgrounds that smoothly come together in the story: "[h]ere is the Jewish story that joins the other stories, the Latino story, the Italian story, the Irish story, the Asian story, the Afro-American story to form the chorus of the many

¹⁶Sappho is one of the earliest female writers whom Plato called the "tenth muse." Over the centuries, the poems of this classical author, who lived two-thousand six-hundred years ago, have occupied an authoritative position in the Western literary world, and have even been compared to Homer's epics (Greene, 1996). Sappho's poems of burning desire are primarily associated with lesbian love and other alternatives forms of human sexuality. Seen as a proto-queer "literary foremother," the Greek poetess encouraged women to write about female sexuality and carve out a space for themselves in a literary history exclusively occupied by male writers (Greene, 1996: 4). As professor of classics, Ellen Greene, argues, Sappho not only served as an example for women to express their views on female sexuality, but she also provided space for male writers to step out of the male literary territory by appropriating a woman's voice: "[to] many male writers, from Catullus and Ovid in antiquity to Swinburne, Tennyson, and Baudelaire in the modern era, Sappho represents access to a woman's voice" (1996: 4).

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voices that are singing and enriching America” (ericajong.com). Scholar Robert J. Ball’s opinion about *Sappho’s Leap* is reflected in his review in *Columbia University Magazine* that established that “[i]n this beautifully written and thoroughly researched work of historical fiction, Jong attempts to rescue Sappho from the classical tradition that characterises her as a sexual or social deviant as well as a victim of unrequited heterosexual love” (ericajong.com).

Erica Jong’s Later Works

Although Jong has become best known for her fictional novels, she has never abandoned her passion for poetry. The writer has continued publishing collections of poems regularly along with her other fictional and non-fictional works. It is worth mentioning that Jong’s poems are often in tune with her personal life and almost always predate the themes to be treated in her future novels as if they were “a crystal ball” (*Ordinary Miracles*, xvi). For Jong, “the poem is a sort of time capsule in which one traps intense moments of life – epiphanies,” affirming the intensity, immortality and power of her verses (*Ordinary Miracles*, xv). Jong’s poetic voice is more open and refined in her poems in comparison with her fiction: “[i]n lyric poems, one cannot really show the fabric of society, nor can one write the sort of social satire that is one of the great delights of novel-writing” (*Ordinary Miracles*, xv). In Jong’s eyes, “[n]ovel-writing is, in short, like mining salt. Poem-writing is like flying,” which suggests that in her verses the writer is more open and feels less constrained to express her thoughts freely in comparison with the fiction writing (*Ordinary Miracles*, xvi). According to the writer, the novel is “more elastic than the poem. It allows for social satire, cooking, toothbrushes, the way we live now. Poetry, on the contrary, boils things down to essences. I feel privileged to do both” (*What Do Women Want*, 178). Bearing in mind that Jong’s writings develop hand in hand with her personal life, her semi-autobiographical poems, as well as her fiction, allow to observe and understand better the topics she is concerned with in different periods of her life.

In *Ordinary Miracles* (1983), for example, the poetess explores childbirth, pregnancy and motherhood, topics that became relevant to her upon becoming a mother herself. In her other collections of poems, *At the Edge of the Body* (1979) and *Becoming Light: Poems New and Selected* (1991), she focuses on death, meditation, spirituality and a search for her inner voice. These collections of poems have been well received

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and have cemented Jong's reputation as a poetess in the US and abroad. In her poetry book *Love Comes First* (2009), Jong looks into love and the human condition and seems to recreate a personal 'spiritual pantheon' that is grounded on the allusions to the authors that she has been paying tribute to in her previous verses, such as Plath, Sexton, and the Ancient Greek poetess, Sappho. The author's references to the work of well-known poets may be seen as a search for self-validation. Jong may have wanted to defend herself against the negative reception of her previous novels and the accusations of producing easily-readable books. Also, she might have felt in debt to these poetesses who have bravely voiced female issues in a male-dominated society and provided a female perspective to social issues and gender roles. For *Love Comes First*, Jong was awarded the Bess Hokin Prize from Poetry magazine and received acclaimed criticism from her fellow writers. The famous historical fiction writer Ken Follett said that *Love Comes First* was "[f]resh, surprising, funny, sexy" and the poetic voice was "enchanting as ever" (ericajong.com). The American literary critic and writer Daphne Merkin applauded Jong for her more mature vision concerning death and life:

The collection as a whole shows a ripened, generous, and wise spirit, less consumed with eros and more cognizant of death's shadow. These are poems that speak directly to the reader, with artifice [contrivance] but with an unshowy artfulness that leads one in, unresistingly. More pensive than celebratory, Jong speaks about serious things – loss and death and aloneness – with a kind of casual lyricism that belies what is at stake. (ericajong.com)

Jong's persistent search for self-identity and her affirmation of female subjectivity continue to be present in her memoirs and autobiographical fiction. The outcome of her extensive research on Henry Miller is *The Devil at Large: Erica Jong on Henry Miller* (1993), in which she merges his biography and her personal rapport with the writer. In the book, Jong defends Miller, who has been accused of misogyny and explicit sexuality in his works. A more mature Jong offers her readers a confessional and insightful midlife memoir, *Fear of Fifty* (1994), in which she flashes back and forth in time to tell the story of her life as a writer, mother, lover, and passionate ageing woman looking for her identity. In *What Do Women Want: Bread, Roses, Sex, Power* (1998), Jong combines her autobiography with essays which reveal the problems that the women of her baby-boom generation face. In it, she reflects on issues such as women's lives, motherhood, writing, and politics, among other topics. In her other memoir, *Seducing the Demon: Writing for My Life* (2006), Jong continues to examine her career as a writer, gives tips to young writers on how to write and have more self-

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confidence, and further explores the topics of female sexuality, creativity and self-development.

The writer's concerns with female power and liberation are also reflected in her study *Witches* (1981), in which she delves into the world of witchcraft and symbolism. In this book, Jong explores the shifts in the image of the witch from a loathsome figure to a healing and caring mother-goddess. Through her study, Jong shows her engagement with the women's spiritual movement that emerged in the seventies and connected feminist politics with mystery, pagan religion and history. As Hannah E. Sanders asserts, Second-Wave feminists appropriated the image of the witch and neopagan practices "as a motivating political image" to articulate the "politics of feminist sisterhood" and to "bond women politically and spiritually" (2007: 80). In *Witches*, Jong expresses her belief in the power of sisterhood to fight patriarchy and combat women's oppression in a male-dominated society.

The author's concerns with social and family issues are reflected in the illustrated book *Megan's Two Houses* or *Megan's Book of Divorce* (1984), in which the author focuses on the negative effects divorce has on children. Written in incoherent kid jargon from a little girl's perspective, the book presents the voice of a confused child who has to divide her life between two houses. At the end of the book, and quite unrealistically, Megan succeeds in getting her parents back together, reunited along with their respective lovers. In 2011, Jong edited a collection of essays on sex, *Sugar in My Bowl: Real Women Write about Real Sex*, in which she gathered various female contributors, such as Susan Cheever and Gail Collins, who offer essays about their sexual experiences. These women writers show that sex is a crucial element in their lives since it gives them vitality, empowerment and creative energy. Also reflecting her societal preoccupations, the author wrote *A Letter to the President* (2012), in which she addresses the key issues that American women face today and the existence of gender inequality that, according to Jong, gives way to sexism, ageism, women abuse, and gender inequality. The themes Jong is concerned with are also explored in many articles that have been published in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes* and other magazines and newspapers, in which the author expresses her position in relation to feminist politics, motherhood, sexuality, womanhood, social issues, and the art of writing.

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Erica Jong: The Contradictory Media Star

Jong's sudden entrance in the literary panorama not only made her a well-known writer in America, but also rendered her a media celebrity whose personality was put under scrutiny (Templin, 1995: ix). Since the publication of *Fear of Flying*, Jong experienced high media exposure for her liberal and unorthodox lifestyle, appearing in numerous TV shows and newspapers, such as *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Wall Street Journal*. The novel was turned into a "media event" and Jong herself into a "media personality," because she "talked to everyone from *Playboy* to *Redbook*" (Virshup, 1994: 40).¹⁷ The main theme she was enquired about was sex and Jong did not seem to hide her personal life and intimate details, which contributed to making her persona even more captivating.¹⁸ Having had little experience in literary circles and the public domain, Jong did not know that her public and sometimes controversial appearances in the media would tarnish her career as a woman writer. She had to learn to deal with the effects of her celebrity and get used to protecting her private life from too much media and public exposure.

When responding to the criticism she received in those years, Jong said that her sudden fame generated ambivalent feelings and never made her happy; at that moment of her life her celebrity status made her feel "terrified and perplexed" (*Fear of Fifty*, 161). To Jong, the completion of one's work "means possibly succeeding at something. And success, for women, is always partly a failure" (1980: 116). Jong's reference to failure implies the fact that prosperous professional women, who show that they are not in need of male protection and are able to seek sexual pleasures for their own gratification are very often categorised as women who lack what is traditionally understood as 'true' womanhood, namely, care for others, sacrifice, submissiveness, gentleness, and mothering. According to Jong, women have always had more problems becoming artists and establishing their self-identity than men: "men are afraid, too, of

¹⁷An example of Jong's popularity in pop culture can be found in Bob Dylan's song "Highlands," where he makes reference to the writer: "[w]hich ones have you read then? I say, 'I've read Erica Jong'."

¹⁸The identification of Jong with sex was such that, according to Virshup, the media, looking for sensational quotations on female sexuality, "knew whose number to dial" (1994: 40). Eventually, Jong had to "take [her] name out of the phone book and hide a little bit," because "every crazy lunatic" would get her number to make some propositions to the writer. Further on, in an interview for *Time* in 2009, Jong stated that her fans even wanted to move in with her, to have her as a lover, or provide them with advice on salvation since they believed that "a writer can deliver it." See: Andrea Sachs. "Love, Erica Jong Style." 2009.

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course, but in women that fear of self-exposure is even more cultivated” (2002: 6). Therefore, “no wonder women are ambivalent about success” (Jong, 1980: 116).¹⁹

Although Jong’s celebrity status caused contradictory emotions, Jong did not want to give her fame up because “[f]ame is a great test of character” (*Fear of Fifty*, 161). Jong admitted that the criticism she received because of her success was quite harsh on her and, in some cases, “extremely violent,” but “living through that was an interesting experience” which taught her how to deal with the ups and downs of fame, find her own voice, and “be reborn in a riding habit” (Sachs, 2009; *Fear of Fifty*, 161). Her celebrity status not only helped her to strengthen her character but it also allowed her to publish and publicise her poetry better, which ended up being beneficial for her literary career. Jong confessed that “had it not been for her novel [*Fear of Flying*], her poetry wouldn’t be on any book-club lists” (Templin, 2002: 37). For Jong, poetry in her country was not as popular as prose because it “was not the language of the land;” therefore, she needed to find a way to promote it (1974: 263). She even joked about poetry’s unpopularity among contemporary American readers by stating that “the truth is: Nobody *bothers* to kill a poet in America. It’s enough to bury them in universities. Undead” (*Fear of Fifty*, 129, emphasis in original).

Jong has also been attacked for frequently mingling autobiography with fiction in her works, which resonate with her four marriages, her experience of motherhood, her search for identity, and explicit references to sexuality. The author’s tendency to blur the line between fiction and personal experience has generated a lot of controversy. Jong has been accused by many critics of producing unliterary, unoriginal, and easily-readable books that lack seriousness and creativity. Some of the critics have even pointed out that one could write a review on Jong’s ‘Isadora books’ without reading her novel, just by looking at Jong’s personal life (Templin, 1995: 139). The book critic Merle Rubin remarked that Jong’s work was “literary junk food that trie[d] to pass itself

¹⁹Jong’s comments about her fame and success echo Matina S. Horner’s theory on success (1969, 1972), examined in Agata Szymanowicz and Adrian Furnham’s article “Do Intelligent Women Stay Single? Cultural Stereotypes Concerning the Intellectual Abilities of Men and Women” (2011: 44). Horner’s theory states that women have internalized a tendency to avoid and even not to admit their success, especially when they have to compete with men. Successful women who do not fit into traditional gender roles are afraid of the negative consequences of success, since it is associated with “loss of femininity and social rejection” (Szymanowicz and Furnham, 2001: 44); thus, famous and successful women become anxious, which results in their being ambivalent about their personal achievements. Yet, these conflicting feelings do not apply when women score high in areas considered feminine and which do not involve rationality, agency, and cognitive abilities, which are traditionally associated with male performance (Szymanowicz and Furnham, 2001).

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off as artistic *haute cuisine*” (Templin, 1995: 143). In contrast, the novelist and cultural critic John Leonard defended Jong’s autobiographical writing by stating that:

If Jong wants to write a book on how bad it feels to be an unhappily married celebrity, and to put everybody she knows into it, and to tell us how she cured herself of fragmentation by finding a lover who was also a friend, she’s entitled. Fame and its discontents, a dying marriage and healthy heterosexuality are not unworthy themes. And what writer hasn’t in some way exploited parents, neighbors, lovers, friends? (20 March, 1977)

When responding to criticism on creating characters that were similar to her own life, Jong has said that she did not believe in the term ‘confessional writing’: “[w]ho the hell was it who invented that dumb term?” (Templin, 2002: 21) Borrowing Jerzy Kosinski’s ideas about autobiography and memory, she has stated that confessional writing did not even exist because:

Even if you try to write down literally what you remember, memory itself fictionalizes and orders structures. Even if you make a film or a tape, you have to edit it, and so doing, you put a controlling intelligence around it. It ceased to be the same as biography. (Templin, 2002: 7)

The novelist has also added that the term in itself was a “sexist label for women’s poetry” that reinforced even more the ‘double standard’ according to which female writers are undervalued in the male-dominated literary world (Anonymous, 2014). Jong has lamented that many contemporary American male writers are allowed to use their personal experiences and are not questioned about the connections their lives have with their literary works, but when women use their lives and dreams as sources of inspiration, they are accused of lacking creativity. All in all, the writer’s tendency to blend her personal life with her fiction and her celebrity status has influenced the reception of her work (Templin, 1995: 165). Jong’s experience shows that the line between fame and the literary persona can be very subtle and thin, and that the explicit treatment of female sexuality is an uncomfortable topic for the wide public in the US, especially taking into account its Puritan context.

If, during the women’s liberation movement, Jong’s *Fear of Flying* was regarded as a revolutionary, freeing, and promising book that provided women with new roles in a male-dominated society, in the eighties and nineties her works were denigrated by feminist critics who claimed that sex trapped women into domestic roles and subjectivity. Simultaneously, as Susan Faludi argues, the period was characterised by a fierce anti-feminist backlash which deeply affected the perception that women could

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succeed in both the private and the public spheres. In her seminal book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991), Faludi shows that the media tried to convince women that feminism had not made them happy and free, but rather made them feel overworked, bitter, and unsatisfied. Women were advised to return to their 'rightful' and 'more fulfilling' sphere of action, which was the home. Backlash was a response to the false impression that women do really 'have it all.' Postfeminist critics, such as Naomi Wolf, Katie Roiphe, or Rene Denfeld further contributed to downplaying, even denigrating, the gains of feminism by claiming that it has become *passé* at a time when women have achieved complete freedom and equality. However, traditional gender roles and sexist images of women still proliferate, together with the idea that home is the rightful place for women.

Jong was trapped in the gridlock of those feminist critics who condemned her for her reliance on sex as a sign of liberation for women, and of anti-feminist critics who regarded her as too outspoken and controversial to fit in an ethos that demonised, and continues to demonise women who want to 'have it all,' as the term 'postfeminist mystique'²⁰ suggests. Many critics, obsessed with the sexual content of her books failed to see that Jong pays special attention to contemporary women who are caught between their professional and personal ambitions, the past and the future, femaleness and womanhood, and sexual passion and love.²¹ Her heroines are not superwomen who 'have it all,' but women who struggle to find a satisfying role in their lives that can be combined with family duties, meaningful work, artistic expression, romantic love, intimacy, and personal aspirations, topics that continue to preoccupy both young and older women. For instance, the American writer Penelope Mesic, in a review of Jong's novel *How to Save Your Own Life*, states that Jong's "books are read because they fill a need, because they are simple to understand, because they have a vitality so many 'serious' books about entropy and impotence and balding academic lack" (Templin, 1995: 85). Though Jong tried to emancipate women and challenge male dominance and patriarchal assumptions about female roles, women are still regarded negatively if they

²⁰In *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Postfeminist Mystique* (2013), Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters revisit Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem and provide an in-depth analysis of contemporary media constructions of femininity. According to these authors, the feminine mystique continues to be represented in popular culture and reinforces out-dated models of traditional white middle-class femininity.

²¹According to Fisher-Fishkin, one of the reasons for the controversial reception of Jong's works may be the fact that the public was not yet ready to encounter so much honesty and sincerity in relation to female sexuality, the visibility of the construction of gender roles, and a quest of self-discovery in fiction, which reaches a much higher number of readers than poetry (2009: 186).

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out-step the boundaries of traditional femininity and are outspoken about sex. In turn, this showcases the prejudices against women, especially older women, in our youth-obsessed culture, as will be further elaborated throughout this thesis.

Conclusions

This chapter has provided an overview of the evolution of and the recapture of Erica Jong's literary career with an emphasis to the works that have received greater attention. It has discussed the writer's early career as a poetess in American literary circles, which was soon overshadowed by the instant success of *Fear of Flying*. This chapter has also argued that this Jong's book can be regarded as the outcome of significant social transformations, marked by the sexual revolution, the Women's Liberation Movement, the civil right movement, and other important changes that were especially relevant to women in the seventies. This novel gave the young writer worldwide visibility and granted her celebrity status. The present chapter has shown that even if Jong received a lot of attention in American literary circles and abroad, the uneven reception of her early work has made an important impact on her career and on her reputation as a woman and as a female writer. By openly addressing female sexuality and breaking conventional aspects of female experiences, Jong has been accused as a sexy, commercial and not serious writer, and has received gender-based attacks from critics, reviewers, the press and academia. Many male critics employed misogynist comments in an attempt to maintain the *status quo* and to suppress the women's right to address sex-related issues that, traditionally, belonged to the male-dominant territory. Additionally, Jong has also been attacked for mingling autobiography with fiction, which is especially visible in her middle life memoirs.

In fact, it can be said that the author has always oscillated between success and failure: between 'flying' into literary triumphs and the fear of rejection as a woman writer. Although this imbalance and ambiguity in her literary career have, to some extent, kept her visible from the seventies up to present day, her later works have been largely overlooked. This stigma has led to the disqualification of her numerous fictional and non-fictional writings, which, as this chapter has shown, are complex and sophisticated and reveal important topics that concern women of her generation. In order to fill this gap and to analyse Jong's *oeuvre* from a perspective that enhances the contribution of this writer to literary and social spheres, it is imperative to introduce the

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theoretical framework of ageing studies and of literary gerontology. This is the aim of the following chapter.

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Introduction

Ageing studies is an interdisciplinary field that examines ageing and old age from a variety of perspectives. In the words of Chris Gilleard, this field “pursues a different agenda, critically interrogating [...] its older and more established academic partner, gerontology” (2014).²² Traditional gerontology is rooted in the biology and medicine of the late nineteenth century, the time when scientists began to regard old age not only as a potential problem or burden, but also as a ‘disease’ that could be treated and, finally, cured (Achenbaum, 1995; de Medeiros, 2016: 64; Kribernegg *et al.*, 2014: 9). The development of this field of study has been extended to other disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, and psychology (de Medeiros, 2016: 64). Yet, dominated by a “bio-psycho-social framework,” it overlooks humanistic and cultural approaches towards old age which, as will be shown, can offer alternative ways of thinking about the process of ageing (Gilleard, 2014). Due to important demographic shifts and, consequently, to profound transformations in social interpretations of old age, the last two decades have generated a visible growth and interest in age studies from many fields of research. As a matter of fact, critical approaches to the process of growing older which go beyond the traditional field of gerontology are imperative in order to cast light on the current models of old age and the modes of life of older adults.

The aim of this chapter is to establish the theoretical framework of ageing studies to better understand the ageing experiences of Jong and her heroines, who are greatly influenced by changing social, political and cultural dynamics. This chapter starts by looking at important demographic shifts in human life expectancy, which are especially visible among the female population. It also argues that the notions of age and ageing are not determined by one’s chronological age, but are based on variable cultural and social constructions in different historical times (Blaikie, 1999). It provides an overview on how ageing has been envisioned historically in Western cultures and demonstrates that many popular understandings of old age which already existed in ancient times continue to be present in today’s society. Many of these visions are reflected in two mainstream discourses on ageing: ageing as a narrative of decline (Gullette, 2004) and ageing as a successful process of growing older. Since the latter is

²²See: Chris Gilleard. “Aging and Aging Studies: Celebrating the Cultural Turn.” 2014.

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closely linked to the contemporary anti-ageing agenda and medical sciences, the chapter pays particular attention to how biomedical and pharmaceutical industries operate within the successful ageing discourse. Taking into account the double standards that affect women differently from men, it also dwells into feminist approaches to women's ageing experiences. This chapter argues that age, like gender, race, class or ethnicity, is of crucial consideration to better understand older women's lives and their experiences of ageing. New inquires and shifts in age-related issues have given way to the emergence of cultural gerontology (de Medeiros, 2016: 64). Over the past years, there has also been a growing interest in narrative methods from scholars working in gerontology and the social and medical sciences, among other fields of study (de Medeiros, 2016: 64).²³ However, according to Kate de Medeiros, methodologies and the way a narrative is used and interpreted differs by each discipline (2016: 64).²⁴

To illustrate how narrative is approached in literary studies, this chapter gives a special place to literary gerontology, which is the specific framework of this dissertation. In a section that is devoted to this cultural approach to old age, it is argued that literary texts can open doors for the analysis of more internal and personalised experiences of ageing that cannot be measured by data analysis alone (Waxman, 1990). The examination of the literary representations of the process of ageing can be seen as an efficient vehicle to shatter negative connotations associated with old age. This discipline also gives a special focus on late-life creativity as a significant "source of self-discovery and self-creation" (Wyatt-Brown, 1993: 3). Moreover, the exploration of the experience of growing older and individual writing careers provides new visions to our current understandings of literature, especially, late-life fiction (Wyatt-Brown, 1993: 1). As Anne M. Wyatt-Brown states, "[a]geing is an important one of those 'voices' in which writers and characters speak, and critics and readers must learn to hear its messages. To ignore that aspect of a writer's or character's life experience is to ignore a fundamental part of human nature" (1993: 1).

²³The foundations of narrative gerontology are distilled into the numerous works such as: James E. Birren, Gary M. Kenyon, Jan-Erik Ruth, Johannes J. F. Schroots, and Torbjorn Svensson (eds). *Ageing and Biography: Explorations in Adult Development*. 1996; Gary M. Kenyon, Phillip Clark, and Brian de Vries (eds). *Narrative Gerontology: Theory, Research, and Practice*. 2001; James E. Birren, and Kathryn N. Cochran. *The Stories of Life Through Guided Autobiography Groups*. 2001; and William L. Randall, and Elizabeth A. McKim. *Reading Our Lives. The Poetics of Growing Old*. 2008. In fact, it was Ruth who coined the term 'narrative gerontology' in 1994 (de Medeiros, 2016: 65).

²⁴As de Medeiros notes, a psychologist might employ "narratives to link stories within a person's life to some sort of behavioral outcome," while an anthropologist "may be interested not just in the story but the cultural backdrops and meanings that frame where and how the story unfolds" (2016: 65).

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Finally, the chapter shows that, as will be demonstrated throughout this dissertation, Jong's work opens up new ventures to ageing and feminist studies, and helps to undermine ageist and sexist visions of older women. This thesis will intend to show that Jong's later-life writings reveal new insights about the contemporary ageing realities and the complexities of the process of growing older. The writer's feminist position also empowers and gives voice to older women who have been silenced in the literary world and in academia. This study, thus, will reveal how Jong's work alerts to the need to rethink narrow views of ageing, as expressed in the narrative of decline and the successful ageing discourse.

Changing Social Demographics and Understandings of Old Age

Age I do abhor thee, youth I do adore thee; / O my love, my love is young. / Age, I do defy thee. / O, sweet shepherd, hie thee, / For methinks thou stays too long (William Shakespeare, "The Passionate Pilgrim," stanza XII, 1599)

According to UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund (2012), there are more than eight-hundred-fifty million people in the world over the age of sixty, which is almost 12.3 % of the global population. It is estimated that the number will increase to one billion in the next ten years, which will be 22% of the world population. In the article "What Happens When We All Live to 100?" Gregg Easterbrook states that:

When the 20th century began, life expectancy at birth in America was 47 years; now newborns are expected to live 79 years. If about three months continue to be added with each passing year, by the middle of this century, American life expectancy at birth will be 88 years. By the end of the century, it will be 100 years. (17 Sept, 2014)

Segal explains that human longevity has increased by around thirty years, which constitutes almost a whole generation (2014).²⁵ The increase in human longevity is due to many factors, such as preventive medical assistance, improvements in hygiene, food supply, and technology, higher standards of living, financial stability and funding for pensions and housing, and public health initiatives (de Medeiros, 2016: 64; Vidal-Grau and Casado-Gual, 2004: ix). Although ageing is a global phenomenon, data analysis shows that women, in comparison to men, tend to live longer, and, therefore, they

²⁵See: Lynne Segal. "The Coming of Age Studies." 2014.

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belong to the fastest growing group of the older population.²⁶ Statistics reveal that, by 2050, there will be eighty-five men per one hundred women who will be older than sixty, and sixty-one men per one hundred women over the age of eighty (Anderson, 13 April, 2015).

These important demographic changes pose new challenges for a society that is not prepared to meet the increasing needs of old people. The complexities of the experiences of growing older not only require to find better ways to deal with this emerging phenomenon at different social, cultural, and political levels, but also call for a reconsideration of what ‘ageing’ implies in contemporary times. According to many gerontologists, ageing is not a simple and fixed chronological process, but a multifaceted and open-ended experience, conditioned by socio-cultural and historical elements (Cole, 1993; Deats and Lenker, 1999; Gullette, 2004; Hepworth, 2000; Johnson, 2004). As Mike Hepworth states, ageing “is not a straightforward linear trajectory towards inevitable physical, personal and social decline, but a dynamic process of highly variable change: ageing is simultaneously a collective human condition and an individualized subjective experience” (2000: 1). Along the same lines, the literary gerontologist Kathleen M. Woodward notes that age is a “fundamental and endlessly interesting category” that continues to permeate everyday experiences from the moment of birth to the end of our lives, and gives meaning to our existence (1991: 4-5).

Old age may also be thought of as a series of various transitions that individuals pass through between their births and deaths (Vincent *et al.*, 2006: 9). The importance of one’s age is constantly reflected in our everyday lives, and, especially so, through privileges and restrictions that are very often defined according to one’s age. Clear examples of this categorisation can be seen in driving licences, passports, laws related to voting and retiring, or practices of smoking and drinking (Deats and Lenker, 1999: 9). Yet, age-related assumptions are never stable, but change according to diverse belief systems, customs, traditions, and ways of life, which shows that age, like gender or sexuality, is a construction that varies in different historical periods. That is, the perceptions of ageing and the ways we see older individuals are not determined by their chronological age, but are articulated through disciplinarily, medical, economic, and

²⁶Older men, more often than women, tend to develop lung and prostate cancers, heart diseases, and strokes (Nhongo, 2005: viii).

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political discourses that stimulate multifaceted ways of thinking about the process of growing older (Blaikie, 1999; Cruikshank, 2003; Foucault, 1981).

With an increase in human longevity, age-related notions have become more blurred and flexible. These changes have given way not only to different interpretations and understandings of age, but also to the transcendence of age-related categories and behaviours (Blaikie, 1999; Gilleard and Higgs, 2014; Marshall and Katz, 2012). Stephen Katz and Jessica Gish state that age, as a social category, is no longer valid in a culture in which social expectations and roles have become less defined: “we are as young, or as old, as we *feel* since age is no longer the only way to measure living in time” (2015: 40, emphasis in original). Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs also note that “[a]geing is not what it once was” (2014: vii). While the generation previous to baby-boomers saw ageing as a normative life-course trajectory, the post-war generation has aged in very different ways from those of their parents or grandparents. The sixties was a time when Victorian moral prescriptions were challenged, which gave more flexibility to self-expression and new meanings of age and ageing (Woodspring, 2016: 185; Gilleard and Higgs, 2014). The ‘cultural break’ of the sixties and the transition from popular to mass culture greatly affected the Western world “setting one generation against another” (Gilleard and Higgs, 2014: 26). The rebirth of ‘youth culture’ in those years resulted in a “generational schism that set apart the ‘old’ and the ‘new’” (Gilleard and Higgs, 2014: 26). Yet, this generational gap was narrowed by a “combination of marketing, the new media and the post-war entertainment, leisure and self-care industries” (Gilleard and Higgs, 2014: x). Increased consumption and exposure to new market goods, fashion, beauty ideals, and self-care products and services led to the adoption of more diverse roles available to older people. These changes were visible in new ways of self-expression, personal choices, and lifestyles, which were marked by more freedom and the invention of middle age lifestyles. Since then, the traditional view of old age, which had been closely linked to the social and biological understanding of ageing, has been challenged through the emergence of the idea of rejuvenation and prolongevity in the new generation of older adults (Gilleard and Higgs, 2014: 29-30). Blaikie also notes that social trends based on chronological age, which used to bind people to ‘correct’ behaviour patterns, such as marriage at twenty-five, having children in the early thirties, or retiring at sixty-five, are no longer applicable (1999: 73). These changes can be seen in the creation of ‘uni-age’ styles and the emergence of new behaviours: children are becoming more adult, while adults seem to adopt more

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youthful attitudes to life (Blaikie, 1999: 102). In fact, an older woman is often told by the media that no matter her age, she can still “be one of the girls” (Blaikie, 1999: 102).²⁷ Similar to Blaikie, Germaine Greer also contests this newly-adopted youth culture, as she claims that there are some aspects that older women cannot change, such as other people’s attitudes and the expected roles that older women must play: “[s]ooner or later the middle-aged woman becomes aware of a change in the attitudes of other people towards her. She can no longer trade on her appearance, something which she has done unconsciously all her life” (1991: 7). However, the sociologist Sara Arber seems to justify these new life choices, as she states that baby-boomer women, who have grown up in greater gender and labour equality and have received better education than women of the previous generations, refuse to accept stereotypical images of old age marked by passivity and dependency. Therefore, they opt for a more active involvement in society and more flexible and dynamic ways of self-expression (2006: 54). Similar thoughts are shared by the gerontologists John A. Vincent, Chris Phillipson, and Murna Downs, who establish that previous social patterns, traditionally determined by chronological age, have become less structured in comparison to preceding generations, as exemplified in these lines:

The cohort born in the postwar baby-boom in the late 1940s and early 1950s, who experienced the changes in social conventions of the 1960s and 1970s, may not accept the conventional view of old age as conservative and dependant but might seek expression in later late of the sexual liberation, lifestyle experimentation and cultural innovation of their teenage years. (2006: 10)

All in all, because of rapidly changing demographic trends, the meanings of old age are less defined and more negotiable in sociocultural representations of ageing. Older people are no longer portrayed as passive and dependant on their children, but as active and energetic individuals who go beyond age-related categorisation and modes of life.

Yet, even though the meanings of age and experiences of growing older are becoming less constrained and are no longer measured by the chronological age of an individual, negative definitions of ageing and old age still prevail. Instead of being seen as a life-long course or continuum of the human lifespan, the Western-based notion of ageing is often divided into narrowly-defined binary categories as either ‘old’ or

²⁷Blaikie also observes that the now ageing grandmothers are more sexually active and dress like their daughters, while grandfathers go jogging with their children and drive motorbikes or expensive cars, a phenomenon, which he considers a caricature of youth cultures (1999: 73, 103).

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‘young’ (Sandberg, 2013, 2015; Woodward, 1991). As Kathleen Woodward observes, youth has always been regarded as something good and natural, whereas the notion of old age has been represented as bad and even unlawful (1991: 6). Similarly, Naomi Woodspring argues that old age and the physical decline of the body have always been defined through disease and the fear of death (2016: 168). Cultural historical insights into old age reveal that these ideas have long been inscribed into cultural compositions of ageing and the meanings of life and death (Cole, 1993; Thane, 2010).

The examination of cultural and historical representations of old age, however, reveals that a bifurcated vision of ageing is not new in Western thought (Thane, 2010: 33-4). Pejorative associations with ageing individuals were already present in classical Greek myths, folklore, theatre, and poetry. In the article “Old Age in Ancient Greece: Narratives of Desire, Narratives of Disgust” (2007), Gilleard explores the perceptions about old age and ageing in ancient Greece and argues that the Greeks divided the world into two exclusive categories – youth and old age. Youth was seen as “sweet, beautiful and heroic,” whereas old age was perceived as tragic, dreadful, and ugly (Gilleard, 2007: 81).²⁸ On the one hand, there was a desire to extend life, whereas on the other, there was an openly expressed repugnance of old age and bodily decay.²⁹ Medieval society adopted Greco-Roman ideas and the classical view of the ‘ages of life,’ in which old age was understood as either the end of one’s life’s journey towards wisdom and redemption, or as the eventual decrease of all worldly success (Cole, 1993; Gilleard, 2002).³⁰ The human lifespan was divided into two categories: a time of fitness and vitality, and a time of decrepitude and frailty (Thane, 2010: 40). In the study of the history of old age, *The Journey of Life: A Cultural History of Aging in America* (1993), the cultural historian Thomas R. Cole argues that in antiquity and in the medieval period, classical and biblical views dominated the meanings attached to old age: the first stressed the physical causes of ageing, whereas the second regarded life as personal

²⁸The negative Greek notion of old age does not apply to Sparta, in which aged subjects were respected and unchallenged (Gilleard, 2007: 90). This respect for older people was inscribed in Sparta’s political and socio-economic structures, and indoctrinated to Spartan citizens from an early age. Any negative connotations about old age in Spartan society meant abandonment or even death. Paradoxically enough, Sparta is known as the most conservative and illiterate city state, whereas Athenian culture is characterized by freedom, creativity and individuality (Gilleard, 2007: 90-1).

²⁹As Gilleard observes, even if old age was seen negatively in the classical world, there were no attempts to disguise ageing by using medical knowledge, nor were there challenges to prolong life, different from today’s societal obsession with rejuvenation, a topic that will be explored further on in this dissertation (2007: 91).

³⁰In medieval and early modern society people looked and felt older at much earlier stages than people in the recent past because they experienced higher levels of poverty and life hardships, and because there was a dearth of the means to disguise the process of ageing itself (Thane, 2010: 40).

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growth and as a spiritual journey from birth to death. In Puritan America, for instance, ageing was seen as “a sacred pilgrimage” to the kingdom of omnipotent God (Cole, 1993: xxxi). In this respect, old age was regarded as a gift from God rather than a personal achievement. However, by the mid-nineteenth century, this Calvinist view was changed by Victorian Evangelicalism and liberal individualism. As a consequence, physical decline was seen as shameful and as a punishment for sins and lack of self-control. This new theological perspective was in line with modern positivist scientific ideals of productivity, independence, and the idea that ageing can be controlled, which will be explained in the next sections of this chapter. Victorians dichotomised society and separated power from frailty and hope from death with the aim to master, rather than to accept, the natural process of ageing (Cole, 1993: xxvi). This vision has conditioned the eventual rise of the discourse of successful ageing, which will be considered later in this chapter.

The history of old age shows that a dual vision of ageing has survived up to the present day and is inscribed into “less imaginatively labelled ‘young and ‘old’ old age” (Thane, 2010: 40). Catherine B. Silver notes that the ongoing binary division of the world “creates the social and cultural conditions for adults to project their fears of ageing and death unto older groups that become the target of their fears” (2003: 391). As she writes, Sigmund Freud already noticed this split in his book *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), where he said that the bifurcation of the world “was used to project social anxiety onto more vulnerable groups, such as Jews and minorities, who are experienced as different and threatening” (Silver, 2003: 391). In contemporary society, it is the ageing population that becomes the scapegoat or the ‘Other,’ and that can be seen as “the ultimate target in an endless chain of projections along age groups” (Silver, 2003: 391). This dual division of society does not allow for a consideration of the multiplicity of the experiences of ageing, and creates a narrow vision of the process of growing old, as seen in contemporary Western understandings of age. In the modern Western world, the process of growing old is either regarded through a narrative of decline or, conversely, through the lens of successful or positive ageing. Although both discourses focus on the concerns and lived-experiences of older people, they operate in contradictory ways: the decline narrative perceives the process of growing old as a period of losses, frailty, and dependency, while the successful ageing discourse challenges the negative stereotypes associated with older people, and proposes to

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engage into active and healthy lifestyles. The following sections present and discuss these two contemporary visions of ageing with a special focus on older women.

Ageing As a Narrative of Decline

Given our ability to avoid reminders of unpleasant truths, it is not surprising that old age became a cultural taboo (Anne M. Wyatt-Brown, 1993:1)

In Western cultural understandings, the ageing process is often framed by the narrative of decline (Gullette, 2004). At the heart of Western culture, the representations of ageing are predominantly constructed through the prism of anxiety, illness, despair, dependency, and a continuous and inevitable cognitive and physical decay (Silver, 2003; Woodward, 1991). Overriding fears and even “blatant gerontophobia” about the ‘greying’ population are displayed in a growing number of gerontological articles, media messages, and popular science books (Mykytyn, 2006; Segal, 2007: 2). Despite the increased visibility of the ageing population and debates around demographic changes, prejudices that affect old people and constrict their agency continue to persist in contemporary society. That is to say, even though the worldwide population is ageing, one can observe a lack of sensitivity about the process of growing older, which continues to be seen negatively (Oró-Piqueras, 2014: 1). Cultural stereotypes subject those who grow older to a subordinate position and even to discrimination because of their chronological age and deteriorating physical image (Calasanti, 2006; de Beauvoir, 1996; Isopahkala-Bouret, 2015; Greer, 1992). These negative age-related notions, which are present in social, economic, and political spheres, influence the way aged persons are treated and defined in society, as well as how they perceive themselves. Ageism appears in many forms and behaviour patterns directed towards the older population, and it can be compared to sexism or racism (Blaikie, 1999; Calasanti, 2008; Calasanti *et al.*, 2006).³¹ According to age critic Margaret Morganroth Gullette, in the US, “ageism has been growing worse, becoming in some contexts [...] lethal,” and the consequences can be seen in the most vulnerable ageing populations (2015: 22). Examples of ageism in society abound, which are manifested in various forms of discrimination and profound prejudices that are based on a person’s age. As a matter of fact, ageism can

³¹It is important to take into account that ageism is not only characteristic of old age, but can happen at any stage of life.

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have a negative impact on older people's financial situation, their quality of life, and their self-esteem. As John A. Vincent observes, if ageing in itself is seen as bad and damaging, "so is the status of 'old age' devalued" (2008: 334).

The sociologist Alan Walker provides economic and public policy-based explanations to account for the emergence of the narrative of decline in the post-war era. He explains that after the Second World War there were significant changes reflected in the creation of the pension systems, the increase in social expenditure, and the emergence of the welfare state (1999: 368). Since the main objectives of the public policies of that period were to ensure income security for ageing workers and a well-organised transition to retirement, the ageing population came to be seen as a social problem. Nowadays, older people in need of more health care and social policy services are still perceived as dependent in society. Also, due to fixed-age retirement, those leaving the labour market are often associated with old age and economic dependency (Walker, 1999: 369-70). As Walker states, the development of health and social infrastructures was two-sided: on the one hand, "it enhanced the welfare of older people," but on the other hand, "it was delivered in ways that reinforced their dependency and powerlessness" (1999: 370). Ageing individuals, often regarded as social problems for future generations, are still considered as burdens in our contemporary society. Stereotypical characterisations of the older population, especially in regards to their economic concerns and social security savings, may lead to a social battle between generations and personal conflicts in the near future (Kaplan, 1999: 189). Easterbrook, for instance, presents quite a grim vision about the future in an increasingly aged society:

Politics may come to be dominated by the old, who might vote themselves ever more generous benefits for which the young must pay. Social Security and private pensions could be burdened well beyond what current actuarial tables suggest. If longer life expectancy simply leads to more years in which pensioners are disabled and demand expensive services, health-care costs may balloon as never before, while other social needs go unmet. (17 Sept, 2014)

In the same vein, Maria Vidal-Grau and Núria Casado-Gual state that the main social concern for the ageing population is of an economic nature, since the elderly are seen to pose problems to "health care and social services, transport and communication systems, infrastructures, logistics and national pension schemes" (2004: ix). Governmental decisions and the management of economic and socio-political issues will largely affect the older population and their quality of life in the near future, which

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suggests that the image of the old as frail, problematic, and in need of help and assistance will persist.

In order to avoid the perpetuation of the narrative of decline, there is a need to highlight the role of older people in decision-making processes. Older adults are “the best suited to provide suggestions about what is good for them and what options younger generations might like to have open to them when they themselves reach old age. Old people are clear on what they do *not* want” (Vidal-Grau and Casado-Gual, 2004: xiii, emphasis in original). Along the same lines, Woodward states that in order to assure a future for all ages, it is crucial to listen to older people and to ensure their active participation “in all levels of the organisation of social life” (1999: xvi).³² However, the decisions that are being made for older individuals rarely take into account their own concerns because future solutions are based on other sectors and age groups:

National governments, planners and key stakeholders in society bask in the misleading notion that older people have done their time and must be put somewhere in little corners, vegetating and ready to die. [...] The contributions that older people have made to the development and sustenance of their nations are hardly noticed. (Nhongo, 2005: ix)

The visibility of the narrative of decline and the ignorance of the needs of older people are much more pronounced in older women than in older men. As Silver notes, the extension of adult life has led to a more visible “segregation and depersonalization” of ageing women (2003: 430). Very often, older women are ignored, pitied, and even feared in society because, as they age, they are thought to represent death and uselessness. Hence, unless they embody socially acceptable roles as caregivers, grandmothers or wise women, they cannot be visible in the public domain (Thone, 1992: ix). According to Silver, Freudian psychoanalysis has reinforced negative associations with older women in Western thought (2003: 383). When lecturing on *Femininity* (1933),³³ at the age of seventy, Freud looked at changes in the psychological development of men and women, and concluded that women become more rigid, static,

³²Current policies for support and social-welfare programmes for older people are not sustainable. The growing number of very old people, who are in need of social care and support, will continue to increase (Bengtson and Putney, 2006). Thus, there is a greater need than ever to come up with innovative ways to liberate the potential of both older and younger citizens in order to compensate for negative demographic shifts, to promote greater job participation, and to allow them to move back and forth between family and work responsibilities, as well as between their leisure time and retirement (Bengtson and Putney, 2006: 29).

³³See: Sigmund Freud. *Femininity*. SE, vol. 22, pp. 112-35 (134-5). 1933.

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and asexual with age “because their psychic energy [has] been used-up in childbirth and mothering:”

A man of thirty strikes us as youthful, somewhat unformed individual, whom we expect to make powerful use of the possibilities of development opened up to him by analysis. A woman of the same age however, often frightens us by her psychological rigidity and unchangeability. Her libido has taken up final positions and seems incapable of exchanging them for others. There is no path open to further development. It is as though the whole process remains thenceforward insusceptible to influences, as though, indeed, the difficult development to femininity has exhausted the possibilities of the person concerned. (Silver, 2003: 382)

Rather than seeing age as a process of continuity with multifaceted meanings, the Freudian tradition, supported by medical and scientific discourses, has strengthened the male development model of self as the standard, and reinforced the binary nature of late-life and gender inequality (Silver, 2003: 383).

Following the same lines, Margaret Cruikshank highlights that negative attitudes towards female ageing correlate with the image of colonised subjects (2003: 4). That is, older women are not only deprived of their political rights as is the case of the colonised people, but they are treated unjustly and even dehumanised. Seen as weaker, inferior, and less intelligent than men, they are often perceived as “figures of fun” or social scapegoats, who must be kept under close surveillance from the public eye (Cruikshank, 2003: 4). Since the narrative of decline often encourages older women to see the process of growing older in terms of decay, loss, isolation, and diminished material resources, it may negatively affect their self-perceptions and their interactions with others (Trethewey, 2001). Consequently, older women may develop negative age-related perceptions of themselves and other older individuals. Not being able to “envision themselves as powerful midlife women” they may develop feelings of inadequacy, depression, low self-esteem, and loss of authority and social status (Trethewey, 2001: 218). Physical signs of ageing, often read as personal failure, also tend to have harsh consequences for older women, as will be discussed in the next sections (Nolan and Scott, 2009). Gullette states that the notions of ageing “are conveyed in large part through the moral and psychological implications of the narrative ideas we have been inserting into our heads, starting when we were very young indeed” (2004: 11). Psychologists, gerontologists, and medical practitioners examine a variety of aspects that may help to understand the complexities of ageing, such as psychological functioning, cognitive performance, the factors that shape people’s well-being and their

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individual development, and the levels of happiness in old age, among others (Gerstorff *et al.*, 2015; Morgan *et al.*, 2015). For instance, in *The Psychology of Ageing: An Introduction* (2012), Ian Stuart-Hamilton looks into the psychological processes of ageing taking into account a variety of domains and topics, such as intellectual and cognitive changes, memory traits, models of personality, language, psychosocial factors on mental health, dementia, anxiety, depression, and death, among others. However, many older women resist the perception of decline and offer alternative narratives of the process of growing older, in which they assert their identities, and display self-assurance and individual responsibility as they enter the second-half of their lives (Trethewey, 2001). Although women experience increasing concerns about their outer looks and desirability, they also gain in confidence and maturity as they progress across their life course (Nolan and Scott, 2009: 153).

The following section looks at how the narrative of decline is contested by the discourse of successful ageing. This contrasted view of old age, which seems to liberate older people from ageist attitudes, also imposes new regulations and norms onto the older population, which are especially salient in the case of older women. The next section critically examines the ideals of this discourse in a neo-liberal and consumer-oriented culture, and uses examples from Michel Foucault's seminal works to illustrate how some forms of social control are now implemented in contemporary Western societies.

The Successful Ageing Discourse and Its Critical Perspectives

Successful ageing is one of gerontology's most successful ideas (Stephen Katz and Toni M. Calasanti, 2015: 26)

Those who have had an interest in the study of old age have probably been exposed to the successful ageing discourse, which is well-integrated into Western thought and is widely visible in advertising, politics, the media, and social circles (Timonen, 2016: 13). Even if historical notions of active and healthy ageing can already be found in late Renaissance texts (Gilleard, 2013; Skenazi, 2013),³⁴ the modern concept of 'successful

³⁴In the article "Renaissance Treatises on 'Successful Aging'" (2013), Gilleard argues that because of the rise of civic humanism and health concerns in public hygiene, especially in the Italian city states, the ideas about how to age successfully, reflected in numerous treatises, have become more widespread during the late Renaissance period. The same arguments are offered by Cynthia Skenazi, who claims that, in Renaissance, the ideas of successful ageing have become important issues of personal and public

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ageing,' as an antithesis to the narrative of decline emerged in the US in the second half of the twentieth century (Calasanti, 2016; Katz and Calasanti, 2015). Applied as a positive model to measure life satisfaction, it aimed at replacing negative constructions of age and emphasising positive aspects of the process of growing old (Katz and Calasanti, 2015: 26). In the successful ageing discourse, old age is presented not as a stage marked by losses and decay, but as an enriching period in life that opens up an umbrella of possibilities which encompass active sexual lives, youthful looks, physical exercise, healthy and secure living or care provision to family members (Calasanti, 2016; Katz and Calasanti, 2015; Laliberte-Rudman, 2015; Lamb, 2014; Sandberg, 2013, 2015; Timonen, 2016; Twigg and Martin, 2015). This anti-ageing ideal “was later crystallized” in the works of the social scientists John Rowe and Robert Kahn (1987, 1997, 1998) (Katz and Calasanti, 2015: 26). Rowe and Kahn’s defined model of successful ageing focused on three main standards: the avoidance of disease and disability, high levels of cognitive and physical functioning, and active social engagement. In their work *Successful Aging* (1998), the scholars claimed that people can adhere to the ideals of successful ageing through proper life choices and individual responsibility and effort: “[o]ur main message is that we can have a dramatic impact on our own success or failure in ageing. Far more than is usually assumed, successful ageing is in our own hands” (Rowe and Kahn, 1998: 18). Disseminated through various social media and print, Rowe and Kahn’s defined model of ‘success’ in old age continues to exercise an “important influence on research, intervention, and public policy around ageing,” and has highly contributed to “society’s and older people’s ideas about ageing” (Stephens, 8 Dec, 2016). This discourse portrays older people as “living longer in good vigor, [...] working longer, [and] keeping pension and health-care subsidies under control” (Easterbrook, 17 Sept, 2014).³⁵ The images of the older population as passive and ill have also been eclipsed by positive representations of the retirement stage, compared to “an extension of the short vacation” (Baars, 2012: 4). By

debate:

From the late fourteenth to the end of the sixteenth centuries, the elderly subject became a focus of new social, medical, political, and literary attention on both sides of the Alps. A movement of secularization – inspired by the revival of classical literature – tended to dissociate old age from the Christian preparation for death, and downplayed the role of the afterlife, reorienting the concept of ageing around pragmatic matters such health care, intergenerational relationships, and insights one might acquire in later life and pass along. (2013: 1)

³⁵In the contemporary US, a belief that many old individuals “hold vast economic resources” is widely spread (Calasanti *et al.*, 2006: 19). Yet, statistics show that the elderly experience “the greatest inequalities in terms of income and wealth” (Calasanti *et al.*, 2006: 19).

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the same token, Blaikie adds that “the hedonistic joys of leisured freedom” and new adventures “on the road in recreational vehicles” are promoted as all-desired active and pleasurable pastimes (1999: 15). Increased consumerism in older stages of life helps to affirm personal identities and indicates a successful adaptation to the successful ageing ideal (Blaikie, 1999: 175).³⁶

Rowe and Kahn’s model of ‘success’ has gained in popularity because it presented a rethinking of the narrative of decline and emphasised growth and new possibilities (Timonen, 2016: 33). However, it has also received a lot of criticism as being too narrowly-defined, missing subjective perspectives of ageing, focusing too much on personal accountability and moral responsibility in order to age ‘well,’ and lacking a more holistic approach (Wada *et al.*, 2017: 480-1). All in all, the main idea behind the successful ageing discourse is that as long as older people are able to enjoy life, maintain healthy lifestyles, be sexually active, enthusiastically participate in social circles and leisure, and be vibrant, energetic, and ageless, they are ageing ‘well’ (Blaikie, 1999; Calasanti, 2016; Katz and Calasanti, 2015). As anthropologist Sarah Lamb notes, an ideal ageing person in the successful ageing discourse is the one who is “not really ageing at all in late life, but rather maintaining the self of one’s earlier years” (2014: 41). In other words, “[s]uccessful ageing means not ageing and not being old because our constructions of old age contain no positive content” (Calasanti and King, 2005: 7).

Although this discourse challenges the narrative of decline and offers new possibilities to older people, not all ageing subjects are able to keep up with its high requirements and pressures. In this regard, this discourse has generated substantial critical responses by a group of gerontologists who question the ideals of this model, its utility, and its impact on the older population from a variety of perspectives. Gerontology scholars such as Barbara Marshall, Chris Gilleard, Chris Phillipson, Linn Sandberg, Neal King, Paul Higgs, Stephen Katz, and Toni M. Calasanti, among many others, argue that even though the successful ageing concept has been embraced with positivism, the imposition of the privileged model of success in old age ignores the diversity of the experiences of ageing. Instead of liberating individuals who enter the

³⁶This observation springs from the realities of the fifties, when teenagers were ‘discovered’ as potential buyers of goods – “records, clothes, motorcycles” – as an expression of responsibility-free lifestyles and the innocence of youthfulness (Blaikie, 1999: 186). Yet, this “ideal ‘carefree old age’” stage has only become possible since the fifties and sixties, because those ageing in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries “died before they could reap their pensions” (Baars, 2012: 22).

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second half of their lives, the successful ageing discourse, closely intersected with neo-liberal rationality and capitalist ideology, imposes new ways and regulations on ageing subjects (Calasanti, 2016; Katz and Calasanti, 2015; Laliberte-Rudman, 2015; Lamb, 2014; Phillipson, 2016; Timonen, 2016). Phillipson³⁷ has pointed out that the collective responsibilities of the state have been shifted onto individuals, who struggle to keep up with anti-ageing ideals in a neo-liberal global context. According to this scholar, the successful ageing discourse was valid and useful in the nineties, but taking into account the current globalised climate, harshly affected by economic crises, insecurity in workplaces, the rollback of public pensions, and the dismantling of the welfare state and social protection, the idea of successful ageing loses ground. Instead of granting empowerment and new opportunities, it leads to the exploitation of older people, which is manifested by precarious living conditions and inequality. These aspects are much more visible in those who are housebound, have cognitive and physical frailties, and lack access to new technologies and medical advances. Such structural inequalities can constitute life-long disadvantages and may even contribute to the victimisation or further exclusion of those older individuals who do not or cannot adjust to the mainstream standards of growing old. Katz also observes that the focus on active citizenship creates new mandates for older people to be “retirement-ready and-fit” (2000: 148). In fact, according to Katz, the idea of remaining forever functional and youthful in later life can be seen as a business strategy or as “a panacea for the political woes of the declining welfare state and its management of so-called risky populations” (2000: 147). The same thoughts are expressed by Gilleard, who argues that the “desire for a long (and disability free) life is legitimised as part of good governance,” which exposes the alliance between the state and increasingly growing anti-ageing business (2007: 82). However, the ideals of successful ageing have been widely embraced in popular culture and have successfully drifted into anti-ageing focused enterprises (Timonen, 2016: 35).

The anti-ageing industry spreads a common message that an ageing body must be reshaped, remade, rejuvenated, and adjusted to social expectations, which emphasises beauty and youth as the ultimate aims to which every ageing individual should aspire (Daniluk, 2003; Wolf, 2002; Woodward, 1991). Although the successful

³⁷Chris Phillipson gave an opening keynote lecture entitled “‘Active’ or ‘Precarious’ Ageing? New Approaches to Understanding Agency and Empowerment in Later Life” in the *5th International REIACTIS Conference: Ageing and Empowerment – Between Resources and Vulnerabilities*, held on 10-12th February 2016 at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland.

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ageing discourse puts new pressures onto ageing individuals, especially in terms of bodily image, it also shows that the fear of ageing should not be paralysing because the signs of ageing can be efficiently effaced from one's body. Personal responsibility of self-care, moral codes, and living up to social expectations are often justified by scientific and medical advances which promote the idea that having youthful looks guarantees healthier and happier lives (Bayer, 2005: 18; Gilleard and Higgs, 2014; Katz, 2000; Smirnova, 2012; Timonen, 2016; Vincent, 2008). The pharmaceutical industry and medicine operate in reliable ways within a wider social system and, by using credible advertisements and "repetition, frequency and self-referential logic," spread persuasive messages that carefully instruct on how to turn back the clock and stay young (Smirnova, 2012: 1237).³⁸

Ageing people are offered a variety of practices that are said to help to improve their looks, and are told that if they can control their bodies, they can also overcome their fear of ageing. In fact, anti-ageing products are not presented as tools that ameliorate external looks, but are promoted as necessary items for health reasons, which legitimises the role of aspirational medicine and the anti-ageing discourse (Bayer, 2005; Gilleard and Higgs, 2014; Katz, 2000; Rose, 2001; Smirnova, 2012).³⁹ Ageing individuals are taught that they have a fundamental right to their health and well-being, and are eligible to "age better' by 'not being old'" (Gilleard and Higgs, 2014: 145-6). Unconstrained direct-to-consumer⁴⁰ availability of cosmeceutical products shows how the responsibility of people's health is shifted from state onto individual consumers.⁴¹ In

³⁸The sociologist Michelle Hannah Smirnova observes that the references to doctors help to legitimize advertisements which suggest that the technologies used to make the product have been "innovative, unique and akin to other patent protected scientific technologies such as pharmaceutical medical treatments" (Smirnova, 2012: 1241). However, a panoply of these advertisements "do not specify the role the doctor played in the development or use of the product. This might serve to imply a more direct connection between doctors and the cosmeceutical than that which actually exists" (Smirnova, 2012: 1241).

³⁹Anti-ageing cosmetics and other means of rejuvenation are now presented as tools to improve one's health, similar to dieting, which is now endorsed by the notion of healthy nutrition and avoidance of serious diseases, rather than aesthetic reasons. In fact, the very term 'cosmeceutical' is a combination of the words 'cosmetic' and 'pharmaceutical,' which implies that ageing is a disease that must be treated and fixed by using a great array of now available curative anti-ageing methods which can be employed by whoever is willing to take care of his/her general well-being (Bayer, 2005: 14).

⁴⁰Direct-to-consumer advertising of medical products in the United States was legalized in 1998 (Smirnova, 2012: 1238).

⁴¹As Courtney Everts Mykytyn observes, anti-ageing medicine can be seen as a social movement or revolution whose aim is to show that ageing can be treated by the aid of innovations in biotechnology. It is regarded as a tool that will soon "offer the ability to both add years to life and life to years" (Mykytyn, 2006: 643). Mykytyn states that "[c]onstructing anti-ageing as not-an-insurance product is a way of separating it from mainstream biomedical practice, which may not only be financially advantageous to practitioners but also reinforces the revolutionary nature of anti-ageing medicine" (2006: 649). The

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the successful ageing discourse, consumption of anti-ageing products is seen as an indicator of one's morality and health – the more an aged person acquires, the healthier and happier he/she becomes. As Timonen observes, to age successfully and gracefully “is clearly an all-consuming, expensive project!” (2016: ix) In fact, highly innovative technologies of preventive medicine, in tandem with the pharmaceutical industry and anti-ageing proponents, go as far as to create an illusion that people age and die not because it is a natural part of human nature, but because medical advances have not yet found the means to cure the diseases people age and die from (in Baars, 2010: 116).⁴² Instead of promoting the acceptance of the natural process of ageing, aesthetic practitioners reinforce ageist ideas about the undesirability of older bodies and the need to reshape and to rejuvenate them (Hurd-Clarke, 2011: 7; Gilleard and Higgs, 2014).

However, the equation of one's looks with well-being and the desire to stop the very process of growing old are so internalised by individuals that “solutions to both internal and external symptoms of ageing, the concepts of health, youth and beauty are collapsed onto each other” (Smirnova, 2012: 1239). Thus, those who do not comply with the successful ageing ideals, do not use innovative self-care devices, and do not take advantage of scientific advances, are often regarded as neglectful, decadent, and irresponsible citizens (Calasanti and King, 2015; Joyce *et al.*, 2015; Katz, 2000; Rose, 2011; Smirnova, 2012). As Calasanti and King note, the visible physical signs of ageing are seen as markers of “personal goodness” and “[f]ailure to appear healthy permits others to stigmatize a person as unfit” (2015: 195). Along the same lines, Katz states that those who do not try to adjust to anti-ageing ideals are often regarded as failures or “problem persons” that need to be re-educated for their *own* benefit (2000: 148).⁴³ That successful ageing does not challenge ageism is also illustrated in Gilleard's observation

promoters of this ‘revolution’ in biomedical treatment are exempt from total responsibility for health and well-being of their (potential) patients, as well as health insurance (Mykykyn, 2006: 649). Expensive anti-ageing products and treatments must be purchased by patients / costumers themselves, since they are not covered by insurance companies. This observation again points to the existence of neo-liberalist practices that the focus on individual responsibility in the successful ageing discourse.

⁴²See: Leonard Hayflick, and Harry R. Moody. *Has Anyone Ever Died of Old Age?* 2002.

⁴³Katz (2017) also observes that not only the body, but also memory and the brain have become technologically quantified in a neo-liberal consumer culture. According to Katz, the successful ageing discourse has been expanded into the governance of human minds, often measured by the use of digital technologies, such as brain scans. The ageing population is advised to use various innovative means, such as online brain-game performance or ‘bio-games,’ in order to optimize their brain health and “cognitive fitness,” which are seen as an indicator of successful ageing and adaptation to societal expectations. Yet, time and again, ageing subjects are made responsible for their own cognitive performance, which is measured by brain sciences and “align[ed] to capitalist standards of productivity, efficiency and speed.” Moreover, an increasing fear of dementia contributes to the rise of the promotion of digital anti-ageing-oriented innovations, which equate cognitive abilities with successful ageing and risk-management.

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that “[s]uccessful old age is old age without old age” (2007: 82). Following the same idea, Linn Sandberg states that “successful ageing should perhaps more rightfully be termed successful non-ageing or agelessness” (2013: 13). Yet, as Katz underlines, the ideals of the successful ageing discourse are so integrated in the contemporary Western ‘measurement’ of the well-being of old people, that the questioning of its benefits “would be considered unprofessional, if not heretical” (2000: 135).

In the article “Let the Countdown Begin – Aging Experiences of Young Adults in Countdown Blogs” (2012), Anita Wohlmann observes that the promotion of social interaction, active lifestyles, well-being, and an emphasis on personal responsibility were already contested by Foucault in his lectures on governmentality and biopolitics (1979). Foucault defined an individual as an ‘entrepreneur of himself’ (Wohlmann, 2012: 91). He stated that economy permeated every aspect of peoples’ lives and influenced the way individuals constructed their identities, personal relationships, and life courses. According to Foucault, within the American neo-liberal economic system, people have passed from passive objects to busy economic subjects and active producers of their own personal goals and fulfilment. By keeping their lives busy and functional, they have turned themselves into social entrepreneurs and consumers similar to “a business enterprise, which is equipped with human capital” (Wohlmann, 2012: 91).⁴⁴ Moreover, the promotion of active agendas and the focus on self-improvement not only have shifted the moral responsibility onto individuals, but have also made them more manageable and, as suggested by Foucault in his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), more controllable within larger economic and institutional systems.

In his seminal work, Foucault argued that at the beginning of the nineteenth century, public punishment as a spectacle of pain was replaced by a private “secret between the law and those it condemns,” which reactivated the public discursive power within the political apparatus of the penal system (1991: 15). The disciplinary power

⁴⁴It is worth mentioning that the rhythm and the understanding of time in modern corporate cultures have also been altered so as to fit the demands of profit-driven capitalist societies and, hence, to turn citizens into economic units. The promotion of ceaseless busyness and productivity reveals the transformation of the Western world into an age-graded and time-and-money concerned culture. The paramount importance given to activity also points to an overemphasis on chronological time that, in contemporary Western society, is carefully measured by clocks and timetables so as to increase human efficiency and consumerism (Baars, 2012; Wohlmann, 2012). The same idea is addressed by the literary gerontologist James E. Birren, who laments that we live in a “marvellously efficient” society, dominated by new technologies (2001: ix). However, Birren notes that technological inventions do not make our lives easier because we are time-bound and expected to be more productive: “[w]e are saving almost immeasurable amounts of time, yet the more we save, the more we feel the need for more time. We are breathless” (2001: ix).

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operated through biopolitics⁴⁵ based on public control, which reached down to all individuals to control their behaviours. It functioned through its very invisibility while subjecting the individuals to “a principle of compulsory visibility,” which helped to maintain constant surveillance over people’s lifestyles (Foucault, 1991: 187). Prolific, youthful and functional have been separated from aged, ill, mad, and delinquent bodies, which, in some cases, were punished because they “[had] not earned the right to remain in a productive society”⁴⁶ (Woodspring, 2016: 82). The control mechanisms defined by Foucault have not ceased to exist. Today, they continue to be exercised through the panopticism that requires individuals to internalise the prescribed behaviour patterns and disciplinary anti-ageing regimes, which convert them into ‘docile bodies’ within the successful ageing discourse and the social expectations it generates.

Blaikie, too, notes parallels between the contemporary discourse on age and another seminal work by Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1961). Blaikie observes that, according to Foucault, the ways of thinking, created in and influenced by specific historical realities, have had real effects on people – those labelled as insane have been incarcerated (1999: 12). Moreover, he highlights that the very existence of terms such as ‘old age’ or ‘the elderly’ already indicate analytical problems, as they point to the classification of people based on their chronological age, and in so doing, to the existence of permanent regulation (Blaikie, 1999: 12). Another example of Foucault’s observed relationship between power and knowledge can be found in Katz’s book *Old Age: The Formation of Gerontological Knowledge* (1996), in which he argues that gerontological knowledge can be employed to control and regulate older people. Therefore, taking into account the contemporary successful ageing ideals and disciplinary regimes, Blaikie states that “unless you work at being ‘liberated’ from chronological destiny, you are less than normal,” which suggests the complexity of the relationship between an ageing individual and the

⁴⁵Foucault’s coined term ‘biopower’ (‘biopouvoir’) refers to the regulation of human life in two forms: the control of the human body through discipline, and regulation of the population *en masse*, understood as biopolitics. While discipline is aimed to optimize people’s capabilities and render them more docile, biopolitics concern rigorous management of the whole population through the control of practices of public health and biological processes, such as birth, death, or life expectancy. According to Foucault, both forms of control require a great amount of scientific knowledge. These modern power mechanisms become encoded into social practices and human behaviour as people gradually adjust to the expectations of a generalized disciplinary society (Foucault, 1981; 1991).

⁴⁶Woodspring argues that although Foucault’s work is crucial to body politics, “fleshy living bodies and the experience of embodiment” have not been addressed in his work (2016: 83). For Foucault, human bodies are not agentive and lack social action and lived experiences. Therefore, Woodspring sees his work as uni-directional because it does not involve a consideration of “a world of relationships with others and our environment” (2016: 83).

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political economy of the West (1999: 209). The philosopher Jan Baars offers the same standpoint as he argues that unless ageing individuals raise their voices against being pressured into adopting the successful ageing expected lifestyles, they will not be truly liberated (2012: 1).

The questioning and negotiation of the successful and positive approach to ageing is especially important when looking at older women's lives. Through the lens of the successful ageing discourse, retirement and the completion of child-rearing and family responsibilities may signal a better social integration and new roles for ageing women (Moen *et al.*, 1992: 1615). Within the context of changing social attitudes towards ageing, older women seem to gain more visibility in the public sphere by adopting active and more dynamic social roles beyond those of wife and mother, such as volunteering or joining social clubs or organisations (Moen *et al.*, 1992: 1634). By maximising active engagement in social communities, older women may also encourage other women to follow the new emerging trends. In this respect, the successful ageing discourse seems to create new pressures to adapt to the ideals of the so-called 'successful' ageing. That is, since the standards of femininity and sexual appeal in Western cultures are measured in terms of youthful physical appearance, a woman's 'success' in the successful ageing discourse, and even her health, are very much defined by her ability to embody the model of youth as closely as possible (Clark, 2015; Gilleard and Higgs, 2014; Levy, 1994; Sontag, 1972; Thone, 1992; Wolf, 2002; Woodward, 1991). Following the examination of older women's ageing realities, the next section deals with the feminist vision of female experiences of growing older and provides critical insights into the relationship of older women and the successful ageing discourse. It also shows how a feminist interest in ageing studies can provide richer insights into late-life stages and, in so doing, stimulate the development of the field of gerontology as a whole.

Feminist Approaches to Ageing Studies

Feminism gives us the tools to examine ageism and age relations more deeply (Toni M. Calasanti, 2004: 7)

From the eighties onwards, there has been a growing interest in older women and their ageing experiences. The age scholar Diane Gibson argues that Second-Wave feminist

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preoccupations with the reproductive life cycle have led to an increased interest in the postmenopausal phase and the ways ageing women approach their midlives (1996: 433). The concerns about older women's experiences have also become more emphasised because the generation of feminists who were active during the sixties and seventies have gone through their midlife crises, and, thus, have become more interested in defending their rights and privileges, determining their roles, and changing the stigmatisation of older women (King, 2013). The growing visibility of the feminist input in ageing studies is evident in the expansion in topics, methods, and the emergence of new areas of study that "push feminist gerontologists to reflect on the philosophical and practical implications of their project for the old as well as for themselves as they age" (Calasanti, 2004: 4).

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Coming of Age* (1971) is one of the first texts to voice the concerns of ageing women and to show their marginalised position as discriminated 'Others.' According to de Beauvoir, women have always been victims of sexual and gender inequality. In this book, the writer argued that even though midlife and older age could be seen as liberating stages that exempt women from social obligations, family burdens, and the patriarchal order, they are not fulfilling because those freedoms could no longer be used to women's own benefit once they became older, and, hence, less visible and even neglected. Although *The Coming of Age* addressed the concerns of ageing women, it did not receive much attention and interest from Second-Wave activists, which suggests that ageism, as observed by Woodward, is enshrined within feminist discourse itself (1999: xi). Although in the article "The Double Standard of Aging" (1972), Susan Sontag addressed the negative connotations ascribed to ageing women, it was not until the nineties and beyond that age-related issues became more visible in the feminist agenda.

Margaret Morganroth Gullette is among the first critics to have coined the term 'age studies' and challenged negative connotations about ageing women, ageism in Western cultures, and biological essentialism. In her numerous works, such as *Safe at Last in the Middle Years: The Invention of the Midlife Progress Novel* (1988), *Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Midlife* (1997), *Aged by Culture* (2004), and *Agewise: Fighting the New Ageism in America* (2011), she has noted that age-related stereotypes are often coded into a narrative of decline. Gullette has been followed by feminist writer Germaine Greer who, in her *The Change: Women, Ageing and the Menopause* (1991), saw the need to empower ageing women as a way to fight

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patriarchy and challenge ageism. In her book, Greer observed that, with age, women became more satisfied with themselves and their lives in general, contrary to the narrative of decline in which older women are perceived as frail and dependant. Another important feminist scholar of the Second-Wave, Betty Friedan, also pointed to the importance of giving voice to ageing women. In her work *The Fountain of Age* (1993), Friedan examined practical issues that concern older Americans, and called for the reconsideration of negative stereotyped meanings attributed to age and older women. Feminist gerontologists such as Toni M. Calasanti and Kathleen F. Slevin suggested including a consideration of age, along with race, class, and gender as a social category that is inextricably linked to social inequalities, power relations, and ageism. In their view, traditional feminist theory has not considered age-based relations and social structures that create long lasting effects on and limit the opportunities for older women. In their book *Gender, Social Inequalities, and Aging* (2001), Calasanti and Slevin explore gender differences by looking at the labour market, retirement, health, and family relationships, among other topics, and call for a need to rethink the ideals of successful ageing in a still male-dominated society.

However, even if ageing women have gained more visibility and autonomy in the public domain, they are in greater jeopardy than men to experience age-related marginalization and discrimination (Calasanti and Slevin, 2001; Calasanti *et al.*, 2006; Trethewey, 2001). Although women of all ages experience work inequality, wage disparities, and lack of family and health care needs, as they grow older, their social status and economic situation become grimmer (Trethewey, 2001: 184). As Angela Trethewey observes, the narrative of decline is especially troublesome for older women “because it prepares professional women to expect and demand little as they age, diminishes women’s individual and collective experiences, and treats rejuvenation through consumption as the only means of staving off eventual decline” (2001: 186). As women age, they also start to experience a greater a degree of isolation in their working lives because there are no midlife role models they can identify with in their personal and professional lives (Trethewey, 2001: 205). Older women are also more exposed to social marginalisation and violence, which can be manifested in the form of abandonment, neglect, or physical, financial, emotional, or sexual forms of abuse (Calasanti and Slevin, 2001; Calasanti *et al.*, 2006; NIA). In addition to this, ageing women are more likely than men to be impoverished and suffer from precarious living conditions since their pensions are generally much smaller than those of their male

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counterparts (Calasanti and Slevin, 2001; Segal, 2015; Trethewey, 2001). Moreover, because older women outlive men, they are twice as likely to end up living alone without anyone to take care of them (Arber, 2006; Bengtson and Putney, 2006; Calasanti *et al.*, 2006; Phillipson, 2016; Segal, 2015). Because of the emphasis on productivity and active lifestyles as expressed in the ideals of the successful ageing discourse, many women may assume that being ‘productive’ equates being ‘useful’ and ‘valued’ (Calasanti *et al.*, 2006: 23). As a result, they may “feel compelled to stay active in order to be of worth”, which, consequently, “can result in a sort of tyranny to prove one’s productive value” (Calasanti *et al.*, 2006: 23). For instance, care-related and grandparenting duties have significantly increased in recent years (Bengtson and Putney, 2006: 24; Nhongo, 2005: ix). Older women are becoming important figures in multigenerational family relationships by performing the role of caretakers when parents cannot afford or do not want to resort to childcare services. Although grandmothering may be pleasurable, it also confines them to new roles, reinforces their “status as domestic laborers,” and limits the freedom that they “might otherwise enjoy” (Calasanti *et al.*, 2006: 24). Moreover, very often, older women serve as caretakers not only of their grandchildren, but also of their own parents and their family members; “round-the-clock care” is becoming more intense in older women (Arber, 2006: 58).

Other important aspects that also greatly condition older women’s freedom and their experiences of ageing are related to their bodily image and sexuality. The feminist agenda has taken a critical standpoint towards the increasing emphasis on rejuvenation and active sexual lives in later stages of life. The successful ageing discourse, by rendering the female body more visible in public, has created the need to adjust it to Western anti-ageing ideals, which celebrate youth and beauty as social virtues (Gilleard and Higgs, 2014; Woodspring, 2016). Therefore, in order conform to societal expectations, women are often instructed to adhere to youth-oriented ideals of femininity and desirability by keeping their bodies under surveillance through diet regimes, body workout, beauty work, and even plastic surgery interventions (Bordo, 2003; Gilleard and Higgs, 2014; Henderson-King and Henderson-King, 2005; Hurd-Clarke and Bennett 2015; Hurd-Clarke, 2011; Katz and Gish, 2015; Wolf, 2002). The importance given to active sexual lives has also imposed new pressures for older women: if ageing women are uninterested in romantic or sexual relations in later life, they are often labelled as asexual and even ‘unsuccessful’ ageing subjects (Gilleard and Higgs, 2014; Katz, 2000). Youthful culture, which is characterised by autonomy,

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agency, desirable bodies, beauty, and sexual appeal, is especially harsh on older women. These aspects will be discussed in more depth in the corresponding chapters of the present dissertation.

All in all, women's studies scholars and activists reveal that a feminist perspective is of crucial consideration to gerontological studies as it expands the perceptions of age and ageing beyond monolithic perceptions of old age. In feminist thought, the life-course perspective appears to be a central issue for the consideration of age relations within the traditional feminist framework in order to erase ageism and other social inequalities. The emerging field of feminist gerontology and its growth "in sophistication" helps to combat negative notions of older women and shows that feminist analysis not only applies to issues that concern women, but is also relevant to power and gender relations, among many other areas of study (Calasanti, 2004: 2; 1999; 2008). However, feminist theories alert to the need to develop better empirical and theoretical approaches along with other disciplines, and place old age at the centre of analysis in order to understand how women approach their old age (Calasanti and Slevin, 2001; Calasanti *et al.*, 2006). As Calasanti *et al.* state,

As feminists and people growing old, we need to be smarter about this. We need to recognize that just as gender, race, class, and sexual orientation serve as organizing principles of power, so too does age. We should no longer assume, rather than theorize, these age relations. We cannot continue to write of gender, or generalize about 'women,' for instance, as if they were all middle aged or younger any more than we can assume they are all white, middle class, or heterosexual. (2006: 25)

Acknowledging "that old age is a political [and sociocultural] location" can provide older women with better opportunities and more freedom to choose different ways of growing older in a society driven by the anti-ageing industry (Calasanti *et al.*, 2006: 25; Calasanti and Slevin, 2001). Additionally, cultural representations of old age also contribute to a better understanding of gender relationships within feminist politics. The following section discusses cultural approaches to ageing, which, like feminist gerontology, reveal how contemporary older subjects deal with their ageing realities. It also shows how alternative and interdisciplinary visions of age can push the boundaries of the study of ageing beyond Western-specific norms, and may open up new spaces to enhance old people's freedom of self-expression.

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Cultural Perspectives in Gerontological Studies

Each person has a unique interpretation of the meaning in old age, according to his or her unique location at the matrix of social locations, cultural contexts, and historical time and space (Jiayin Liang and Baozhen Luo, 2012: 331)

The field of cultural gerontology seeks to comprehend how social, cultural, and anthropological backgrounds shape the perceptions of ageing by representing age through the lens of intersectionality and multifaceted meanings (Calasanti and King, 2015; Gilleard and Higgs, 2015; Gullette, 2015: 21; Maierhofer, 2011). This area of academic analysis bridges the gap between the sciences and humanities, and leads to the discovery of “the multiple, the elusive, the awe inspiring, the disturbing, and even the ineffable aspects of growing older” (Kivnick and Pruchno, 2011: 143). Since cultural attitudes about a person’s age, social status, gender, sexuality, and rights are rooted in cultural perceptions and collective approaches to old age, a closer examination of culture is imperative when dealing with ageing realities (Vidal-Grau and Casado-Gual, 2004: ix). Leading expert of ageing studies Roberta Maierhofer also notes that cultural interpretations can provide important “implications for medical ethics and practice, physiotherapy and the education of older people, research on the biology of ageing and the prolongation of human existence public policy, and religious and spiritual life” (2011: xiii). Yet, according to Maierhofer, this discipline “can only be established with a better understanding of all fields concerned, both the more traditional disciplines dealing with age and ageing, such as medicine and the social sciences, as well as the humanities and sciences in more general terms” (2011: xv).⁴⁷ The focus on medical aspects of ageing, as well as the attention given to social welfare and public policy frameworks, have obscured cultural aspects of ageing and downplayed the importance of alternative understandings about old age.⁴⁸ The social gerontologists Julia Twigg and Wendy Martin argue that cultural gerontology, “[n]o longer confined to frailty, or the

⁴⁷Maierhofer states that cultural representations of old age are becoming more visible in teaching agendas and research activities in educational fields, health care, and social work. However, there is still a lot of work to be done for cultural gerontology to be recognised among other fields of study, because its contributions are very often overlooked and lack validation in other disciplines (Maierhofer, 2011: xvi).

⁴⁸Even though the works of Clifford Geertz, Michel Foucault, or Pierre Bourdieu, among others, have emphasised the importance of cultural and humanistic inputs into sociological analysis, “the cultural turn,” which occurred in the twentieth century along with an increasing interest in post-structuralism and post-modernism, has granted new ways of looking at social sciences “through the critical prisms of power and performativity” (Gilleard and Higgs, 2015: 29).

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dominance of medical and social welfare perspectives, [...] addresses the nature and experience of later years in the widest sense” (2014: 1).

A broader cultural approach to ageing studies is also closely related to the elaboration of alternative and less Western-centred perspectives of the experience of growing older. Liberated from the binary distinction of young and old, and from narrow visions of ageing as either success or decline, many scholars have merged various disciplines to offer complementary understandings of old age. Instead of seeing ageing as a narrative of success that imposes norms of ‘correct’ and desired ageing, Linn Sandberg proposes an alternative conceptualization, which she defines as ‘affirmative old age’ (2013). Through this model, the scholar aims to visualise late-life as a stage to affirm differences, empower ageing subjects, and give them new options within a wide range of possibilities that go “from active to sedentary, [and] from sexually vibrant to sexually indifferent” (Sandberg, 2013: 35). Affirmative old age, according to Sandberg, not only helps to rethink the concept of ageing and late-life, but can also serve “as social critique in a culture that eradicates difference” (2013: 15). To Sandberg, the diversity of lived experiences shows that ageing cannot be framed within narrow binary understandings, but opens up new meanings associated with the last stage in human life.

Like Sandberg, the social scientist and gerontologist Christine Stephens critically reconsiders the effects of the successful ageing discourse on older people’s social identities, and proposes a ‘capability’ approach to ageing.⁴⁹ In her 2016 article, “A Capabilities Approach to Healthy Ageing: Towards More Inclusive Identities for Older People,” she claims that a ‘capabilities’ perspective allows to change the ways we look at older people today. Stephens claims that, instead of promoting youthful functionality, active engagement, and fitness, there should be more emphasis on the “recognition of the needs of older people in their actual circumstances” (8, Dec, 2016). According to Stephens,

From a capabilities perspective, health research, policy, and intervention would focus on the ways in which the environment supports the capability of all older people to achieve valued functioning, rather than individual responsibility for ageing ‘successfully’. Because the dominant discourses that underpin research and social policy have powerful effects, the adoption of a capabilities approach

⁴⁹The capability approach was first proposed in 1980 by an Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen. Sen defined capability as an effective way to measure “environmentally, socially and ethically oriented framework for research, policy, and intervention in ageing and health by taking into account the influence of the social and material environment and the diverse values of older people” (Stephens, 8 Dec, 2016). Sen’s capability approach attempts to give a broader theoretical framework for ageing studies by providing more focus on social rather than individual change.

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can influence the way in which ageing is constructed by all, including older people themselves. (8, Dec, 2016)

Unlike the successful ageing discourse, the ‘capability’ approach focuses on the moral significance of older persons’ capacities to achieve the life they want; it takes into account their social standing, their cultural values, and the material circumstances that impact their ways of ageing.

Social gerontologists Jiayin Liang and Baozhen Luo place special emphasis on cultural and ethnic diversity when examining ageing realities. In the article “Toward a Discourse Shift in Social Gerontology: From Successful Aging to Harmonious Aging” (2012), they criticise the dominant conceptual framework of successful ageing, and claim that the successful ageing discourse is ageist in its nature because it overlooks the harmony between body and mind and imposes capitalist and consumerist pressures on older population. Liang and Luo believe that by promoting an image of a sexually active, functional, and busy citizen, this discourse denies diversity and complexity to the uniqueness of old age and, instead, creates a new image of a good old age, enshrined with anti-ageing methods. The scholars also note that the ideals of ageing are bound to Western value systems and ways of life, which overshadow other experiences of ageing in the global context and the existence of other theories in today’s gerontological research. According to Liang and Luo, the multiple Western-centred theories on ageing are too fragmented and there are too many of them:

Today, we are witnesses of the “productivity” of various theoretical perspectives in social gerontology, summarized by Tornstan (2005) as the pathological perspective, the activity perspective, the disengagement perspective, the continuity perspective, the developmental perspective, the mask of ageing perspective, the masquerade perspective, and the selection, optimization and compensation perspective. Seemingly, we no longer lack theories. (2012: 327)

Thus, the scholars challenge the cultural blindness of contemporary Western society and, instead of elaborating on new theories, they propose to define ageing as ‘harmonious ageing,’ inspired by the Yin-Yang philosophy.⁵⁰ According to Eastern values, harmony implies the balance between body and mind, an equilibrium in everyday experiences, and a sense of continuity and change in the life course. The Yin-Yang philosophy also highlights the autonomy and freedom of choice of an individual,

⁵⁰In traditional Chinese philosophy, the concept of Yin-Yang refers to a dynamic balance of all things in the cosmic and human realms. The interaction of these two opposites, Yin and Yang, ensures a constant harmonisation and unity of the world and human life in general.

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and the maintenance of one's health and spirituality through the unity of physical exercise and mental health, since it is believed that inner peace helps to keep the physical body healthy. Because of its holistic approach towards human nature, the harmonious model of ageing can be applied to both Western and non-Western societies and cultures. As Liang and Luo state,

Harmony is created by an ageing individual by constantly achieving a balance between the structural and the individual, advantages and disadvantages, change and continuity, inadequacy and abundance, etc. Furthermore, because of its emphasis on balance that is achieved based on differences, harmony is expressed through a less standardized language than is the Western notion of success. (2012: 331)

These scholars argue that the emphasis on harmony “contribute[s] to cross-cultural gerontological research, education and communication,” as it involves both the complexity and flexibility of ageing experiences that extend beyond the ethnocentric Western values and binary definitions of old age (2012: 327).⁵¹

The need to redefine Western-centred ideals of successful ageing is also expressed in the article “Women Making Sense of Midlife: Ethnic and Cultural Diversity” (2007), in which the sociologist Sharon Wray argues that the dominant notions of ageing have neglected the multiple experiences of growing old. Wray shows that the experiences and priorities of ageing individuals differ significantly depending on their backgrounds. According to her, social, economic, cultural, ethical, racial, gender, and religious differences create richer understandings of the experience of growing older and reveal that there is a great range of possibilities beyond Western ethnocentric ideologies and lifestyles, which are not always accessible, needed, or even wanted by older individuals. However, because of a lack of greater empirical research and examination of more subjective viewpoints, the diverse perceptions of the ageing process still remains “under theorised,” and creates “a distinctly Western understanding of midlife” (Wray, 2007: 32). Hence, for Wray, it is crucial to be more sensitive to the complex nuances of old age and move away from hegemonic Western-specific norms in order to have a broader and more diverse vision of ageing.

Cultural age studies along with feminist theories can also learn a lot from literary critics who help to “escape the confining binary oppositions of young and old”

⁵¹In some societies, such as China or Iceland, age is not perceived in binary terms. Instead, it is seen as an ongoing process similar to a life journey, in which individuals are portrayed as ageing in multiple ways (Woodspring, 2016: 168).

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(Maierhofer, 1999: 256). More subjective experiences of ageing and their interpretations are examined in the field of literary gerontology, which offers an unconfined life-course perspective across different cultural contexts. Literary texts, as Maierhofer suggests, are “necessary to analyse the cultural narratives that inform these texts and go beyond the simple grouping by the common denominator ‘age’” (1999: 258). The next section discusses the significance of this discipline and gives a particular focus to a new literary genre, the *Reifungsroman*, which challenges the narrative of decline from a narrative and often feminist perspective.

Literary Gerontology

The world of older individuals needs to be studied from the inside (Catherine B. Silver, 2003: 393)

Because of its focus on late-life style and creativity, literary gerontology is a multi-dimensional field of research which offers the possibility to explore internal views of the meanings of ageing and old age (Birren, 2001; Cohen-Shalev, 1989, 1992, 2008; Hepworth, 2000; Ruth and Kenyon, 1996; Waxman, 1990; Worsfold, 2000, 2007). In their introduction to a collection of essays on literary representations of ageing, Vidal-Grau and Casado-Gual state that “[l]iterature, unlike scientific, political and economic journals, offers a framework” that allows to regard ageing experiences in “multiple forms and nuances” and contributes to better and deeper understandings of late life (2004: x). Similarly, literary gerontologist Barbara Frey Waxman points out that novelists can talk about ageing “in a way that gerontologists and psychologists cannot,” since they are unconstrained by the disciplines of empirical research (1990: 18). In the same line, Brian Worsfold compares the fictionalisations of old age to a rough-cut diamond, whose crystal axes, like “beams of light,” offer a rainbow of visions about ageing and later life (2011: xix).

The attention given to personalized experiences of the process of growing older through literature has become more prominent in the past two decades (Birren, 2001: vii). In the late eighties, the first scholars to point to the importance of the literary input in gerontological studies were Kathleen E. Woodward (1991) and Janice Sokoloff (1987). These innovators, as Wyatt-Brown calls them, had to struggle to bridge the gap between theories of ageing and those of the literary field. According to Wyatt-Brown, they had to “master an unfamiliar social science vocabulary, and attract an

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interdisciplinary audience capable of responding intelligently and critically to their insights” (1990: 299-300). In the next decades, the works that emphasised the significance of the intersection of ageing and literary criticism started to proliferate. Seminal books in narrative gerontology, such as Barbara Frey Waxman’s *From the Hearth to the Open Road: A Feminist Study of Ageing in Contemporary Literature* (1990), Kathleen Woodward’s *Ageing and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions* (1991), Anne M. Wyatt-Brown and Janice Rossen’s *Ageing and Gender in Literature: Studies in Creativity* (1993), and Mike Hepworth’s *Stories of Ageing* (2000), offered different representations of late-middle and old age which helped to expand the field of literary gerontology. In the nineties and beyond, literary approaches to age were influenced by cultural studies and the increasing growth of narrative studies as well as by the focus on guided autobiographies and life story programs for older people (Cole and Sierpina, 2007).⁵²

The prevalent ‘double standard’ of ageing and the narrative of decline have been counteracted by the increasing interest in studies of creativity and old age (Casado-Gual *et al.*, 2016: 10). Cohen-Shalev (1989; 1992; 2008) and Wyatt-Brown (1989; 1993; 2010) have extensively written about the intersection of ageing, creativity, and maturity in later stages of life. These and other scholars working in similar fields show that artistic creations of older authors can be important sources of self-discovery, self-recognition, inner transformations, and maturation. For instance, Gullette in *Safe at Last in the Middle Years* (1988) and Woodward in *Ageing and its Discontents* (1991) argue that ageing may affect literary creativity in a positive way, as can be observed in changes that occur in late style and the modes of thinking of older writers (Wyatt-Brown, 1993: 2). Moreover, as Wyatt-Brown observes, the exploration of ageing realities also “adds insights to our understandings of literature and life” (1993: 1). In fact, Gullette claims that “[o]ur age narratives become our virtual realities,” which shows that literary texts allow to create a brighter picture of ageing and its varieties in our time (2004: 11; Wyatt-Brown, 2010: 57). A closer examination of the shifts that occur in creative performances and writing patterns as writers enter the second half of their lives will be discussed in the next chapters.

⁵²Some examples of the pioneer books in the field of life stories are: James E. Birren, and Kathryn N. Cochran. *The Stories of Life Through Guided Autobiography Groups*. 2001; Ruth E. Ray. *Beyond Nostalgia: Aging and Life Story Writing*. 2000; Ronald J. Manheimer. *A Map to the End of Time: Wayfarings with Friends and Philosophers*. 1999; among others.

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Since personalised visions about old age contain social themes and values, they become important sources of information that provide insights into the diversity and complexity of collective ageing experiences, and can make a huge difference in the world by evoking empathy, tolerance, compassion and a more open-minded vision of ageing (Deats and Lenker, 1999: 8; Johnson, 2004: 2; Ruth and Kenyon, 1996: 4; Waxman, 2010: 83; Worsfold, 2011). That fictional representations of ageing are valuable data is also stated by Hepworth, who argues 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 ageing” (2000: 3). Moreover, the ways people perceive their lives not only undermine restrictive conceptions of the process of growing older, but can also create new ways of understanding old age, as exemplified by Sara Munson Deats and Lagretta Tallent Lenker: “literature, the arts, and the media not only mirror society’s conventions, but also create them” (1999: 1). Moreover, as Maierhofer observes, literary gerontology is also “political in its interrogation of marginalized and minority discourses, the status and formation of the canon, and the forms and effects of oppression” (1999: 266). This discipline continues to gain visibility within humanist, feminist, and cultural studies approaches to later life, and serves as a guideline for social and health care policies, psychoanalysis, linguistics, and post-structural and literary theories (Ruth and Kenyon, 1996: 2). An increasing interest in the intersections between age studies and literature shows that “there is no sign of a slowing of pace” (Falcus, 2015: 53, 58). Along the same lines, Vidal-Grau and Casado-Gual state that the voices of older people in fictional texts are “sounding louder and older characters are being presented in a different, more positive light” (2004: x).⁵³

Taking into account the ‘double standard’ of ageing that affects older women, an interpretative vision of late-life experiences is particularly important when analysing older women’s fictional narratives. In her book, *From the Hearth to the Open Road: A Feminist Study of Ageing in Contemporary Literature* (1990), Barbara Frey Waxman introduces a new fictional genre that challenges the narrative of decline, and that

⁵³Although there are clear signs of the expansion of literary gerontology, similar to feminist and cultural age studies, it still lacks visibility in mainstream gerontological research, social domains, higher education systems, and literary doctoral studies (Calasanti, 2008: 157; Falcus, 2015: 58). Following the same argument, Maierhofer observes that gerontologists have been quite hesitant to validate literary gerontology and its significance to the study of ageing because they give more importance to medical and sociological research (2011: xv). Literary gerontologists call for a greater need to emphasise the value and the significance of the literary input in ageing studies.

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provides positive perceptions of growing older through a female perspective. She terms this new genre the *Reifungsroman*, a novel of ‘ripening,’ which follows the so-called *Bildungsroman*, namely, a novel of growth that traces the development of a character who arrives to self-knowledge. This literary genre provides significant insights into ageing, which is presented as an ongoing process of growth, positive change, and becoming, rather than a stage marked by losses and decline. As Waxman states, a novel of ‘ripening’ not only gives more visibility to older women’s ageing experiences and encourages to rethink the meanings attached to late-life, but it also presents age as a utopia where “age is no longer an element of identity” (1990: 2). That is, the *Reifungsroman* shows that the artificial patriarchal divisions that exist between the old and young, and the assignation of identity and social values as based on one’s chronological age, are no longer valid (Waxman, 1990: 8). According to Waxman, older women, in comparison to men, have been greater victims of sexism and the ‘double standard’ of ageing. Hence, they take up this genre as an opportunity to tell their own life stories, which are different from men’s life experiences, and, thus, must be examined separately (1990: 12). Since the *Reifungsroman* reflects ageing women’s ‘ripening’ process into older age, it is more confessional in tone and structure, and is usually told from a first-person perspective or a third-person limited omniscient narrator; it is also accompanied by stream-of-consciousness and flashbacks in time: “these protagonists usually make an internal journey to their past through dreams and frequent flashbacks, essential features of the *Reifungsroman* narrative structure” (Waxman, 1990: 17). The genre positively portrays older women who take up an internal life journey during which they grow and come to terms with their younger selves, their sexual and intimate past experiences, and their cultural roots. The older women that are portrayed in this genre appear revitalised and self-confident to move forward into the world of senescence (Waxman, 1990: 17).

Conclusions

As shown in this chapter, the field of ageing studies examines later life from different perspectives in order to look at how people approach their old age. It has been argued that substantial shifts in the current demographic panorama have given rise to a growing interest in age studies from a historical perspective, which is helpful to understand how different life phases have been interpreted and conceptualised over time. This viewpoint

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also reveals how historical notions of old age can serve as the means to examine the current ageing realities as well as the futures of ageing. The growing social, economic, and political concerns about old age have also accelerated the emergence of various theories on ageing, in which the narrative of decline and its counter narrative – the successful ageing discourse – are among the most prominent ones in the contemporary Western mindset. Yet, they are rooted in a traditional binary view that divides the life course into two: the young and the old stage. Although the successful ageing discourse tries to shatter negative notions associated with older people by encouraging them to remain sexually active, healthy, functional, and autonomous, it also promotes neo-liberal rationality and puts a great emphasis on individual morality. By shifting governmental responsibilities onto older adults, this ideology creates new limitations to and even the exclusion of those ageing subjects who cannot follow and adjust to new ‘successful’ lifestyles. In this chapter, a special focus has been given to the role of the pharmaceutical industry and the medicalisation of ageing bodies, all of which transform the natural processes of ageing into the creation of new diseases and illnesses. As Gilleard and Higgs state, the physical signs of ageing are very often legitimised as pathological and seen as a threat to healthy and successful lives (2014: 147).

Criticism directed towards the successful ageing discourse and anti-ageing ideals has led to an elaboration of various theories of ageing from feminist, cultural, and anthropological fields of study, which offer more interdisciplinary, realistic, and less Western-centred aspects of the process of growing older. The feminist agenda challenges binary oppositions of young and old and critically interrogates the contemporary understandings of old age. At the same time, it aims at providing older women with better social and economic opportunities beyond the ideals of success and the new roles that often restrict their ways of self-expression in later years. Cultural gerontology, linked to feminist studies through gender politics, also investigates how age-related constructs operate in social, cultural, and ethnic fields, and how they permeate every aspect of our everyday lives. Scholars working in this discipline seek to offer alternative understandings of old age across various cultural contexts that are not confined to hegemonic Western-specific models of growing older.

This chapter has also highlighted the importance of literary gerontology in age-related disciplines. It has been shown that this field of study, not constrained by empirical analyses of old age, allows for a more open and personal view towards late-life experiences and the ways people interpret their own ageing process. Literary texts

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can be seen as vast and valuable sources of data which help to understand better the complexities of ageing outside scientific longitudinal studies of ageing. This section has argued that literary representations not only entertain and reflect on important cultural changes, but also have the power to change attitudes, make us more conscious of our lives and belief systems, and even influence decision-making processes in political and social fields (Waxman, 2010: 83). Such subjective visions are especially relevant when examining women's experiences of growing older. These are often fictionalised in a literary genre known as the *Reifungsroman*, which aims at challenging the narrative of decline and the 'double standard' of ageing of older women through its structure and ageing protagonists. In summary, more attention given to feminist and literary criticism, as well as to historical and cultural studies, can give way to a better understanding of the multifaceted meanings attached to age and ageing.

The following chapters of this dissertation will integrate the critical approaches examined in the present chapter, and will attempt to prove that opening doors to inner views of the experiences of growing older contributes to shattering many of the negative stereotypes associated with ageing and, especially, with older women. As will be shown, Erica Jong's works, very often autobiographical in nature, serve as a valuable source of information to examine how the narrative of decline, successful ageing discourse, and anti-ageing ideals operate in a society that regards ageing as predominantly negative. Jong's own experiences, fears, and ambiguities about ageing and those of her fictional characters help to create a broader picture of social, psychological, and biological realities of the now ageing baby-boom generation women. In one of her interviews, at the age of sixty-one, the writer stated that: "[i]n fact you could say that all my novels have been about that, how to integrate the different parts of a woman" (Moyers, 27 June, 2003). The subsequent chapters of this thesis will reveal how Jong's works shed light on the contemporary experiences of growing older by depicting ageing female protagonists, whose personal and intimate life records offer significant contributions to gerontological, sociocultural, and feminist research. Given the importance of the anti-ageing discourse and the pressures it exerts on older people to maintain youthful looks and 'ageless' bodies, the following chapter starts with the analysis of ageing body politics as represented in Erica Jong's *oeuvre*.

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Introduction

Ageing is about the body. Since we all are “embodied persons with a finite life-span,” anxieties and worries about bodily decline become more pronounced as we approach the final stages of our lives (Featherstone and Wernick, 1995: 1). Physical changes are never just manifestations of cellular and organic loss, but can also be a source of troubled identities and fragmented personalities caused by the mismatch between our external appearance and the inner perception of the self (Featherstone and Wernick, 1995: 2-3; Featherstone and Hepworth, 1991). Today’s increased life expectancy has exposed the human body to a longer period of bodily ageing and, consequently, to more complex perceptions of the body (Hearn, 1995: 100). The ways we read our bodily transformations are deeply embedded in our understandings of the ageing body, which are inscribed in cultural meanings and symbols that vary across different historical times and societies.

Resistance to physical decay and old age is not new in human history. The concerns of the ageing body and its rejuvenation have a long history, sometimes surrounded by magic and even dreadful occurrences. While Cleopatra is known to have bathed in goat milk to achieve more youthful looks, the seventeenth-century Hungarian Countess, Elizabeth Báthory, popularly known as the Blood Countess, bathed in the blood of virgins because she believed that this macabre ritual could stop her body from ageing.⁵⁴ These are just two examples of the desire to stop the ravages of time; yet, they show that preoccupations about the ageing body are not new. In fact, they are still very relevant in our society, where the idealisation of longevity and the youthful body are “lucrative component[s] of consumer culture” (Katz, 1995: 61). Worries about physical changes have become even more problematic taking into account that in the popular media bodily ageing is portrayed as a personal issue, especially visible on women’s faces (Coupland, 2009: 957). As women grow older, they are expected to embody socially and culturally acceptable images through various regimes of bodily control. As

⁵⁴Elizabeth Báthory was convinced that her complexion improved after consuming young girls’ blood because, according to her, it contained the spirit of life and youthful energy. It is said that there were more than six hundred young girls captured by night, dragged to the castle, and “hung upside-down by chains round their ankles, naked and still alive. Their throats were slit and blood drained for Elizabeth’s bath”. If a girl was pretty, the Countess would “drink her blood from a golden flask but, as her taste for this depravity increased, she’d drink directly from the stream of blood as the writhing body hung from the rafters.” The killing for young girls for the sake of beauty and youth became her ritual (elizabethbathory.net).

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Katz and Marshall state, our culture mandates to grow older without getting and looking older, which especially affects women “because of the cultural idealization of their bodies as age-defying technologies” (2012: 224). The successful ageing discourse spreads the message that the signs of physical ageing, often pathologised and biologicalised, need to be “urgently dealt with, on the gerontophobic assumption that the look of ageing renders” women less sexually attractive and less socially acceptable (Coupland, 2009: 953). These cultural notions are especially relevant “in a society like the United States, which is obsessed with youth images, narcissistic gratifications, and the prolongation of life at all costs” (Silver, 2003: 386).

The analysis of female processes of ageing through Jong’s main characters is of paramount importance to gender and ageing studies because it uncovers significant aspects of the pressures older women are subjected to in order to look more appealing in youth-oriented cultures. The examination of Jong’s writings demonstrates that the human body is often regarded as a conflicting site of perpetual ambiguities and troubled feelings caused by physical decay. The first section of this chapter addresses contemporary Western understandings of femininity and the experience of bodily ageing as reflected in Jong’s earlier works. Following the same line, it reveals how her female characters deal with mainstream beauty ideals and the male voyeuristic gaze, often seen as an indicator of sexual attractiveness and self-confidence. This section points to their growing preoccupations about the importance of external looks for self-definition and reveals their increasing worries about the difficulties to stop bodily decline, which become more difficult to hide with age. Jong’s writings show that women, especially older women, struggle to perceive themselves and their ageing bodies in terms of sexual desirability. The third section examines Jong and her fictional characters’ experiences of and their thoughts about surgical anti-ageing interventions, which are becoming more common among the older sectors of the Western population. It highlights that modern body-rejuvenation practices create discrepancies in female identities and generate conflicting feelings. By drawing on Jong’s later works and her personal accounts, the last section of this chapter looks into how her ageing heroines negotiate their selfhood, their sense of agency, and their troubled identities in a consumer-driven culture. In sum, Jong’s works illustrate the complexity of the meanings attributed to body image and the difficulty to ignore the socially constructed requirements to reshape, to remake, and to adjust our outer looks to contemporary beauty ideals of femininity.

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The Body in the Anti-Ageing Era

Appearances account for larger shares of women's social capital than they do for men (Toni M. Calasanti, 2007: 350)

The 'cultural break' of the sixties rendered the human body more visible in the public domain (Gilleard and Higgs, 2014; Woodspring, 2016). During the sixties, everything revolved around bodies – “music and dance, drugs, sex, and the Pill, gay rights and queer bodies, liberating women's bodies from the drudgery of housework, dressing bodies, watching bodies dance on television; and, importantly, much governmental legislation centered on loosening state control over body” (Woodward, 2016: 79). An increased buying power and higher standards of living were accompanied by a great expansion of self-care and cosmetic products, hedonistic leisure activities, and entertainment that emphasised one's physicality (Gilleard and Higgs, 2014: 30; Twigg and Majima 2014: 23). In this context, the body became the target of “self-care industries that were all oriented toward fashion, beauty, skin colour, hairstyle, sexuality, dance and music, in short, to the concerns of a newly affluent youth” (Gilleard and Higgs, 2014: 26-7). Paradoxically enough, while important cultural changes were promising freedom of self-expression in the Western world, the post-war period was creating new oppressive patterns on bodily image (Woodspring, 2016: 171-2).⁵⁵ Since then, the body has been refashioned and kept under surveillance by means of emerging keep-fit regimes, self-care routines, and “new practices such as aerobics, jogging, and whole body workouts” (Gilleard and Higgs, 2014: x-xi). For example, from the seventies onwards, jogging and gym culture became popular and gave rise to the public

⁵⁵In the article “Samson and Delilah Revisited: The Politics of Women's Fashion in 1920s France” (1993), historian Mary Loise Roberts analysed women's fashion and body politics in France around the twenties. She argued that new gender roles, which allowed women more freedoms in the public sphere, also created new bodily pressures. The sporty and casual female dressing style, embodied in Coco Chanel's model *à la garçonne*, emphasised male behaviour patterns and hedonistic bohemian lifestyles in the Paris of that historical period. The dressing style dictated that sexual appeal resided in short flapper-style dresses, bobbed-hair, pale complexions, and slender bodies with narrow hips and flat breasts. Thus, in order to adjust to these fashion trends, many women were obliged to keep strict dieting and even had to bind their breasts. According to Roberts, the promises that emphasised the image of independent and self-sufficient *femmes modernes* were illusionary because they did not grant women a higher degree of emancipation. Instead, women were chained to fashion dictates, consumerist lifestyles, and patriarchal ideology. Roberts' analysis shows that although beauty ideals change over time, female bodies are always chained to societal and historical standards of beauty and sexual appeal. The oscillation in fashion trends subject the female body to different modes of body surveillance and create illusionary ideas about women's agency and autonomy. Sometimes there is more emphasis on thin and slender bodies, whereas at times, more voluptuous models are considered as the ideals of femininity and desirability, as was the case with Marilyn Monroe, whose body became a beauty and sexuality icon after the Second World War.

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display of the fit and muscular body (Gilleard and Higgs, 2014: 44). In sum, widespread health campaigns and advertisements spread the idea that health, beauty, and youthfulness are synonymous (Calasanti, 2007; Gilleard and Higgs, 2014: 131).

It is also worth noting that, from the sixties onwards, when women entered the labour market, they became more visible in the public sphere (Gilleard and Higgs, 2014: 40). The media disseminated the image of a newly liberated and economically independent female who no longer depends on a man to purchase the desired goods, but can buy them with her own savings. Therefore, women, freed from patriarchal constraints, were rapidly hooked into compulsive consumption and inculcated new models of femininity. That is to say, their social currency was defined by their purchasing power and investment in their personal image, also seen as a sign of their well-being (Wolf, 2002). In fact, statistics show that women have become the leading consumers and, thus, the ‘saviours of the world economy’ (Voigt, 26 Oct, 2009).⁵⁶ The social media and advertisements spread the idea that if a woman purchases a particular product, gets the right gear, and exercises self-discipline, she, too, can look as fabulous and young as those attractive women who “stare out from the pages [with] blemish-free faces” (Daniluk, 2003: 296).⁵⁷ On a daily basis, women continue to be overwhelmed by messages that show how to look younger and how to stop physical changes caused by ageing (Öberg, 2003; Smirnova, 2012; Wolf, 2002). Although both men and women worry about appearing old, the fear of bodily deterioration and the consumption of self-care and beauty products is more prominent in women than in men⁵⁸ (Bordo, 2003; Hurd-Clarke and Bennett 2015; Öberg, 2003; Wolf, 2002). If, in contemporary Western understandings of beauty and attractiveness, grey hair and wrinkles translate into maturity and wisdom in men, in women they are seen as an antithesis to the hallmarks of femininity and as a sign of grandmothering and nurturing (Calasanti and King, 2015; Sontag, 1972). Consequently, since women’s physical appearance is “central to their sense of identity and personal worth,” women are encouraged to keep a constant

⁵⁶Guest blogger Kevin Voigt in his CNN article entitled “Women: Saviors of the World Economy” stated that the “largest growing economic force in the world isn’t China or India – it’s women” (26 Oct, 2009). The use of anti-ageing products, such as face creams or lotions, is highest among women over sixty-five. Studies show that the promotion of anti-ageing drugs “has been strongly led by the giant toiletry corporations which have used glossy advertising aimed at women in middle and later years to develop the market” (Twigg and Majima, 2014: 29).

⁵⁷There are very few female models in the popular media who do look their age, and those who exist, are presented as exceptions that are praised not for their looks, but for personal achievements or represent traditional nurturing roles, such as mothers or grandmothers (Daniluk, 2003).

⁵⁸Although women are more pressured to maintain youthful and sexually appealing bodies, men, too, are expected to look strong, masculine, and lean.

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surveillance on their bodies and engage into diet regimes (Hurd-Clarke and Griffin, 2007: 197). In fact, the images of average women's bodies are very scarce in the media, which promotes very slim, surgically altered, young, or photoshopped models (Wolf, 2002).⁵⁹

The inability to meet idealised standards of beauty affects women's self-perception and their sense of femininity and self-worth, which may lead to frustration, embarrassment, inadequacy, anxiety, and discomfort (Fernandez and Pritchard, 2012; Yamamiya *et al.*, 2005). The Western drive for thinness very often results in eating disorders which spring from dissatisfaction with one's body (Bordo, 2003; Hurd-Clarke and Bennett, 2015; Hurd-Clarke, 2011; Wolf, 2002). Apart from thinness and beauty, women are also expected to maintain their youthful looks. Therefore, according to Thone, "[i]s it any wonder that depression, feelings of uselessness, and low self-esteem, are so well-known to the ageing women!" (1992: 22) The representation of older women as deformed, desexualised, frail, sagging, unattractive, and even ridicule leaves them even more vulnerable (Silver, 2003; Sontag, 1972). As a result, ageing women are more likely than men to experience the injurious effects of the 'double standard' of ageing and discrimination because of their physical appearances (Bordo, 2003; Calasanti and Slevin, 2011; Calasanti, 2007; Hurd-Clarke and Bennett, 2015; Sontag, 1972). Very often mature ageing female bodies remain hidden from the public eye in our post-industrial, youth-oriented society (Woodward, 1991). However, with the expansion of a 'youth culture' and various self-care products aimed at bodily 'repair,' older women have been provided with more options to hide and efface their physical decay. When the post-war generation started to show the first signs of ageing, new markets were quick to 'solve' the ageing problem by catering for "mid-lifers and the 'young' aged" (Gilleard and Higgs, 2014: 121). However, the beauty industry puts women, especially ageing women, in a paradoxical situation: if women opt for reshaping their bodies according to social demands, they end up conforming to patriarchal standards of beauty, but if they try to resist anti-ageing ideals, they are in jeopardy of "losing social currency and being rendered invisible" (Hurd-Clarke, 2011: 36).

Concerns about beauty, youthfulness, and attractiveness, and attempts to postpone physical decay are visible in Erica Jong's literary universe. The author shows

⁵⁹Research shows that "94% of female characters in television programs are thinner than the average American woman" (Yamamiya *et al.*, 2005: 74).

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her heroines' worries about their exterior images, which are expressed in their constant surveillance of their own bodies in order to adjust to Western beauty ideals of femininity and desirability. The heroines seem to both comply to and resist these notions. This contradictory position and unease about bodily ageing, already visible in Jong's early writings, shows the extent to which her work reproduces the ambivalence generated by the ageing process. As will be shown, these worries become more intensified as the writer grows older. In the poem "Ageing" from the collection *Fruits & Vegetables*, published when the writer was twenty-nine, she expresses her preoccupation about the first marks of age around her eyes, mouth, and nose, which go deeper and wider with time: "I've been studying how women age / how / it starts around the eyes so you can tell / a woman of 22 from one of 28 merely by / a faint scribbling near the lids a subtle crinkle / a fine line / extending from the fields of vision" (45). In the poem, getting older equals deterioration: "it's only the beginning as ruin proceed downward / lingering for a while around the mouth hardening the smile / into prearranged patterns (irreversible!) writing furrows / from the wings of the nose [...]" (45). As shown in the following lines, the ageing face is compared to a tragic mask that slowly takes over the whole surface of the body and reminds of the presence of death:

& plotting lower to the corners of the mouth drooping them / a little like the tragic mask though not at all grotesque / as yet & then as you sidestep into the 4th decade / beginning to crease the neck (just slightly) / though the breasts below / especially / when they're small (like mine) may stay high far / into the thirties / still the neck will give you away & after that the chin [...]. (46).

Although the poetic voice uses an anti-ageing cream to stop ageing, she sees it as mere "perfumed grease" that cannot stop the bodily transformations: "[h]ooked for two years now on wrinkle creams creams for / crowsfeet ugly lines (if only there were one!) / any perfumed grease which promised youth beauty / not truth but all I need on earth" (45). The use of cosmetic products shows that the young speaker succumbs to the anti-ageing discourse that promises to help to erase or at least to postpone ageing. Yet, paradoxically enough, although she employs anti-ageing creams, she is not convinced that they can efface the first signs of old age. Jong even seems to lament the obsession with beauty and the negation of the natural ageing process, as seen in these lines of the same poem: "desperate to censor changes which you simply might have let play / over you lying back listening opening yourself / letting the years make love the only way (poor blunderers) / they know" (46).

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In the collection *Loveroot*, published when the poetess was thirty-three, she makes references to her ageing body again. In “Wrinkles,” the speaker writes about her friends and attributes their wrinkles to the tiredness of life: “the ones who are married are tired / of being married,” whereas “the ones who are single are tired / of being single” (51). To her, it is impossible to “persuade them that being married / or being single / has nothing to do with wrinkles” (51). To escape the marks of ageing and their everyday burdens, the figures alluded to in the poem seek cosmetic surgery, which promises to efface the signs of ageing and fatigue: “[t]hey trade the names of plastic surgeons / like recipes” (52). In fact, the poetic voice confesses that she would like to accept the natural process of ageing because it liberates the soul and allows to experience inner freedom. However, she feels an obligation to adjust to contemporary ideals of female beauty: “[s]ometimes I think / (but do not dare to tell them [her friends]) / that when the face is left alone to dig its grave, / the soul is grateful / & rolls in” (52). This early poem advances the complexities of the narrative of bodily ageing and the discrepancy between one’s inner self and the perception of one’s outer image, which will persist in Jong’s later work.

The poem “Doubts Before Dreaming,” written in her fictional book *How to Save Your Own Life* at the age of thirty-five, again illustrates the idea of the inability to postpone the process of ageing: “[t]his is the problem: that we live; / & as we live each body cell must change. / We dream, & as we dream our dreams must change. / We eat, & in devouring life, we change” (305). It shows physical decline and constant transformation of the body as inevitable. The notion of temporality of human bodies is again exemplified in “People who Live,” a poem which appears in the collection *At the Edge of the Body*, written when Jong was thirty-seven. In it, the body is compared to a fragile sandcastle built on the sea shore, which is never permanent and steady, but deteriorates with every single wave of salty water: “[p]eople who live by the sea / understand eternity. / [...] / They know that the house of flesh / is only a sandcastle / built on the shore, / that skin breaks / under the waves / like sand under the soles / of the first walker on the beach / when the tide recedes” (94). The inability to reverse time and stop the body from growing older is again present in “Anti-Matter,” a poem from *Ordinary Miracles*, written when Jong was forty-one. In it, the speaker expresses her disgust for the ravages of age that are visible in rotten and smelly bodily changes. The speaker in the poem is aware of the fact that her own body is facing the first signs of her unavoidable death and that there are no remedies to stop the erosion caused by time:

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I am not interested / in my body – / the part that stinks / & rots & brings forth / life, / the part that the ground / swallows, / death giving birth / to death – / all of life, / considered / from the body's / point of view, / is a downhill slide / & all our small / preservatives / & griefs / cannot reverse the trend. (14-5)

In “Poem for Molly’s Fortieth Birthday,” which appears in the same collection, the speaker’s daughter, Molly, asks her mother why she has wrinkles on her forehead, and wonders if they signal her old age: “[w]hy do you / have stripes / in your forehead, / Mama? / Are you / old?” (23) The persona in the poem is transported back to her childhood memories, when she used to walk the streets with her grandfather. Like Molly, she, too, thought that her grandfather was old: “I can see / myself / sinking back / into that childhood / street / I walked along / with my grandfather, / thinking *he* was old / at sixty-three / since I was four, / as you are four / to my / forty” (23-4, emphasis in original). It is important to mention that, in contrast to the earlier poems, this piece reveals a different position towards physical decay. There is a marked acceptance of ageing, which is interpreted as respectful signs earned throughout one’s life: “[t]hese stripes / are decorations / for my valor – / forty years / of marching / to a war / I could not / declare, / nor locate, / yet have somehow / won” (25). Instead of lamenting her ageing body, as seen in earlier poems, the poetic voice appears as a victorious heroine and a mother who has successfully fought the battles of life and whose memories lie engraved on her skin. These contrasted attitudes are significant as they convey uneasy feelings that are generated by ambivalence towards bodily ageing. It seems that the poetic persona is trapped between two positions: she would like to accept the signs of ageing; yet, she is also constricted by the desire to adjust to ideals of femininity that render her more visible and appealing. As will be shown in the next sections of this chapter, the presentation of bodily changes in Jong’s later writings become even more ambiguous. As revealed by her later fiction and poetry, more importance is given to the male gaze and one’s own sexual attractiveness, which is seen as a sign of identity and of female subjectivity.

The Female Body and the Male Gaze

Thin was virginal and fat was sluttish, and I oscillated between these poles, unsure what I looked like or who I was (Erica Jong, *Fear of Fifty*, 62)

One’s physical appearance helps to define one’s social and individual identity, and is a significant aspect in social interactions with others (Gilleard and Higgs, 2014; Hurd-

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Clarke and Bennett, 2015; Öberg, 2003). Cultural pressures to embody the beauty ideals of femininity as closely as possible are especially high for women, who very often tend to perceive themselves from the perspective of others and, especially, from the external voyeuristic male gaze (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997; Hurd-Clarke, 2011; Wolf, 2002). According to social gerontologist Laura Hurd-Clarke, men's attention is often seen as a marker of femininity and desirability. That is to say, if women can no longer attract their male counterparts, they may develop feelings of self-loath and antipathy towards themselves and the very process of growing older (Hurd-Clarke, 2011: 42-3). As Hurd-Clarke states, "women reiterate the importance of male attention and sexual interest as an indicator of feminine attractiveness" (2011: 42). Blaikie, too, notes that women "remain under pressure to satisfy the male gaze or risk social invisibility by dint of losing their physical attractiveness" (1999: 191). The media messages and advertisements contribute to disseminating the idea that if a woman wants to be considered sexually appealing, she must adhere to social expectations and keep her physical looks under constant surveillance through active engagement in specific beauty work⁶⁰ practices from the very early stages of their lives:

to diet, to dye their hair, to have surgery on tights, stomachs, breasts, and faces, to make up faces in order to be beautiful and desirable, to be ashamed of natural body odor, to wear high heels to make legs 'look attractive,' i.e., thin, and to have the buttocks wiggle, and to dress in a manner that reflects outside approval, not inner comfort (Thone, 1992: 4).

It is worth mentioning that social pressures to conform to beauty ideals of femininity and to keep one's body under a constant control are not only characteristic of middle or older age, but are already imposed onto young women and even teenagers. Hurd-Clarke states that, from an early age, girls learn that their "social currency largely derives from their ability to achieve and maintain proximity to a privileged feminine appearance, which is a youthful, toned, healthy, voluptuous yet slim body" (2011: 21). Yet, as Hurd-Clarke observes, the pleasures that both young and aged women derive after having accomplished 'better' self-images come from the achievement of culturally imposed beauty standards (2011: 137). In this respect, using beauty work, adhering to contemporary feminine and youth-driven ideals, and defining one's value in relation to

⁶⁰Beauty work encompasses various practices that range from putting on makeup to undertaking cosmetic surgery (Kwan and Trautner, 2009: 54).

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one's appearance, imply the acceptance of ageism and patriarchal values in a sex- and anti-ageing-obsessed culture (Hurd-Clarke, 2011: 137).⁶¹

Jong's characters seem to be caught between adhering to youthful ideals of femininity and, at the same time, criticising them. Her heroines express their fear of gaining weight and looking old because they do not want to lose men's attention and their sexual appeal. Jong's most famous heroine, Isadora Wing, is aware of the importance of her bodily image for her self-definition and desirability in her late twenties. Isadora points out that American girls are brainwashed into thinking that, if they take good care of their looks – “[their] smells, [their] hair, [their] boobs, [their] eyelashes, [their] armpits, [their] crotch, [their] stars, [their] scars, and [their] choice of Scotch in bars” –, they will be able to “meet a beautiful, powerful, potent, and rich man who would satisfy every longing, fill every hole, make your heart skip a beat (or stand still), make you misty, and fly you to the moon (preferably on gossamer wings), where you would live totally satisfied forever” (*Fear of Flying*, 15). However, this character seems critical about the social pressure to maintain one's graceful looks in order to attract the male gaze. The following quotation illustrates that from the early stages in life women are convinced to adhere to Western standards of beauty:

Growing up female in America. What a liability! You grew up with your ears full of cosmetic ads, love songs, advice columns, whoreoscopes, Hollywood gossip, and moral dilemmas on the level of TV soap operas. What litanies the advertisers of the good life chanted at you! What curious catechisms! (*Fear of Flying*, 14)

Yet, time and again, although the heroine is aware of the fact that such ideas are deterministic and rooted in discursive mechanisms, which turn the female body into an object to be looked at, she cannot resist the desire to sculpt her body according to contemporary beauty ideals. In her second Isadora's novel, *How to Save Your Own Life*, written at the age of thirty-five, Jong again depicts Isadora's fear of ageing by stating: “I was thirty-two and panicked about getting older” (16). Jong's early work reveals that the maintenance of beauty and youth are very important aspects for her heroines.

⁶¹Catherine Hakim does not see the importance given to the female body as a burden, but rather as a means by which women can “enhance their erotic or cultural currency deriving from their physical, sexual and social attractiveness” (Hurd-Clarke and Bennett, 2015: 134). In her book, *Honey Money: The Power of Erotic Capital* (2011), Hakim argues that women, by boosting their attractiveness and the power of their ‘erotic capital,’ can succeed more in their personal and professional projects. She claims that a combination of sexual appeal, social skills, liveliness, and charisma can be read as signs of female power and independence. According to Hakim, ‘erotic capital’ will become more important in the future because of the modern labour market and, in contrast to previous decades, an increased interaction with other people in the public space and in the social media.

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Although they know that the contemporary ideals of femininity are social constructs and an expression of patriarchal oppression, they still try to adjust their exterior looks to social expectations by policing their bodies to fit into acceptable standards of beauty.

The importance that Jong grants to the male gaze and the maintenance of youthful looks never loses ground, but, on the contrary, it becomes even more pronounced in her later works. In these, the author shows that, with age, it becomes more difficult to maintain the desired bodily image because the ageing body becomes more unforgiving.⁶² In her midlife memoir, *Fear of Fifty*, Jong reveals her concern about her ageing body and the loss of men's attention: "[n]ever again, I thought, would I walk into a room and meet some delicious man who would change my life" (3). The writer worries about her inability to catch a man's eye and compete with younger and prettier women:

Every year another crop of beauties assaults me on the streets of New York. With thinner waists and blonder hair and straighter teeth, with more energy to compete (and less cynicism about the world), the class of 1994, 1984, 1974, is inexorably replacing my class – Barnard '63 – yikes! (*Fear of Fifty*, 2)

In *Fear of Fifty*, the writer clearly shows that she is not ready to approach her midlife – she does not like getting older. In fact, the very title of this midlife memoir, *Fear of Fifty*, already indicates her fear of facing the second half of life. Jong states that she does not want to be the representative of her post-war generation: "I am the older generation now, and I am not always sure I like it. The losses sometimes seem more clear-cut than the gains" (*Fear of Fifty*, 2). According to the author, as a woman grows older, almost every birthday becomes a turning point in life, which reduces her sexual attractiveness and renders her less visible in society (*Fear of Fifty*, xvii). To Jong, reaching her midlife is more a personal tragedy for a woman than for a man, because it "is a more radical kind of passage to the other side of life" (*Fear of Fifty*, xvii). The idea that turning fifty is a symbolic date in women's lives is also stated by Woodward, who establishes that midlife coincides with the biological marker of menopause, often seen as decline rather than growth and maturity (1999: xiii). Jong's unwillingness to celebrate her fiftieth birthday in public, but rather in a private encounter with her daughter in a spa, also suggests her fear of growing and looking older. As explained in her memoir, at that stage of her life she "needed something private, female, and

⁶²As women grow older, the maintenance of a thin silhouette becomes more problematic: the metabolism slows down and the distribution of fat in the body starts to change (Daniluk, 2003; Hurd-Clarke and Bennett, 2015).

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contemplative to sort out these conflicting feelings. A spa was perfect. And [her] daughter was the perfect companion” (*Fear of Fifty*, xvi, xvii). In her later memoir, *What Do Women Want*, the writer, aged fifty-six, expresses her concerns with weight and her never-ending efforts to adjust her body to contemporary beauty standards, which generate inner frustrations and anxiety:

I had always felt a discontinuity between being an intellectual and wanting to look pretty. I felt I could not be allowed both. As a pretty teenager I tried to hide my prettiness under fat, then under rampant anorexia, which made my skin break out into a plague of boils and my eyes look hollow and purple-rimmed. I hated my body – hated it fat, hated it thin. In fact, I could not distinguish between the two. I felt oozing flesh there was only bone; my brain muddled the perception of my body. I could not have told you what I looked like. (62)

A preoccupation with bodily ageing is also present in Jong’s historical novel, *Sappho’s Leap*, written when the author was sixty-one. In the opening of the book, Jong’s Greek poetess expresses her disgust for her ageing body and the loss of her good looks and sexual appeal. Although Sappho is in her fifties, she already feels like an old “crone” and thinks she has no right to love and to catch the male gaze:

I am unimaginably old – fifty. Only witches live to be fifty! Good women die in childbirth at seventeen as I nearly did. By fifty I should be dead or a crone – with my dark looks and my somewhat crooked spine – which I have always disguised with capes of multicolored silk. My youth is gone, but my vanity is not. How can I still dream of love at fifty? I must be mad! (*Sappho’s Leap*, 1)

In this depiction of Sappho, Jong confronts her readership to two existing clichés about ageing women: the older woman gone mad and the witch. The use of such ageist conceptions suggests that Jong herself succumbs to Western stereotypes of old age and the narrative of decline. This becomes more visible as the novel progresses and Sappho reveals her dislike of her bodily transformations and confesses that she does not want to face her self-reflection because it is no longer appealing to her. In Jong’s novel, the Greek poetess uses various remedies to disguise her ageing body but none of them are efficient to turn back the clock. Sappho not only despises the very process of ageing, which renders her body frail, unpleasant, and smelly, but she even thinks that her aged image offends the eye and turns people away from her: “I will grow old and people will turn away from me in disgust. Nobody likes the smell of an old woman – not even other old women” (*Sappho’s Leap*, 4). Sappho explains that women, in contrast to men, are not allowed to age because their social and erotic currency is measured by their ability to adjust to ideals of femininity:

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We accept imperfections in our men. We even dote upon their imperfections. But in women we want something else. We want perfection beyond humanity. And how can such perfection be real? Moreover, how can it inspire our love? Odysseus can be quirky, tempted by sirens, and too proud to be wise – and still we adore him. The human he is, the more we love him. Not so with women heroes [...]. (*Sappho's Leap*, 156)

Although Sappho continues to detest her ageing body, as seen in the following lines, the reference to the sun suggests that she still looks for the joy of life and does not fade into darkness and invisibility:

Age seizes my skin / And turns my hair / From black to white: / My legs no longer carry me / Lightly, nimbly / Dancing like young fawns. / What can I do? / I am not eternal / Though my songs may be. / Can pink-armed Dawn, / Who could not save her love / Erase these harbingers of age? / My youth is gone. / Still I adore / The sun. (*Sappho's Leap*, 3)

The next excerpt also reveals that, even if her beauty and attractiveness fade, Sappho finds solace in her fame as a female poetess. However, she is not as happy as she was in her earlier days, when she could take her beauty for granted and attract men. Although Sappho's celebrity status does not fade, her youthful beauty declines with age: physical changes become more visible, which negatively affects her self-perception. Sappho realises that there is no effective beauty work that can remediate or postpone bodily decline. In sum, Jong's heroine cannot accept the process of growing older:

My black hair, which used to glisten like wet violets on an ebony altar, is now a steely gray. [...] I do not like to look at my reflection these days. Even the thickest paint cannot disguise the wrinkles. Yet I have my wiles, my perfumes, my potions, my magic salves as much as Aphrodite has hers. I can still make someone love me – if only for a little while. In the past it was the charm of youth I conjured with. Now it is the charm of fame. (*Sappho's Leap*, 1-2)

A closer look at the ancient Greek categorisation of the world, their negative attitudes towards old age, and their desire to look for ageless perfection can help to better understand Sappho's disgust for her own ageing body. Jan Baars explains that ancient Greeks had gods for almost everything and everyone, except for old age (2012: 88). There were no Olympic gods who were old, except for the white-bearded men who, in fact, were full of youthful energy and proficient in the art of seduction (Baars, 2012: 88). Similarly, Gilleard observes that in ancient Greek society there was no middle age – people were either young or old (2007: 81). Its demographics show that there were very few chances to live up to fifty, and even less to reach the age of sixty or seventy. The situation for older women, in comparison to aged men, was even worse – ageing

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women were considered older at earlier stages in life and, as reflected by old female figures in ancient Greek mythology, they were associated with death, curses, horror, and revenge (Baars, 2012: 89).⁶³ This may explain why Sappho, aged fifty, feels old and ugly in a society in which life expectancy was much shorter. Moreover, Gilleard's examination of classical Greek tragedies and comedies⁶⁴ reveals that both old men and old women were portrayed as stock figures in classical comedies: old men appeared as father figures, usually in competition with their adult sons, while old women were represented as either sympathetic characters or figures of fun, especially when they exposed their sexual drive (2007: 84). The fact that old women were ridiculed in Greek cultural representations, which exalted immortality and forever-youthful looks, may explain why Sappho feels trapped in a society in which there were no role models for ageing women.

The poetess' ageing body, perceived as unattractive in Greek, and, in fact, in today's cultural understandings of desirability, subjects her to the association with the old crone who is no longer entitled to men's love. Jong's heroine laments that her favourite goddess of youth, beauty, and love, Aphrodite, only favours and glorifies youthfulness, and excludes the old. Jong's Sappho used to worship Aphrodite, but as she starts to grow older, she can no longer identify with her goddess: "I used to love Aphrodite as she loved me. Now I find her love as hard as these rocks beneath my feet. She has turned her beautiful face away from me" (*Sappho's Leap*, 3). Yet, Sappho does not blame Aphrodite for having abandoned her. The poetess is aware of the fact that the goddess cannot understand the process of growing older because she never ages: "[f]orever fresh-faced, forever nubile, how can Aphrodite know what it means to lose beauty and youth, inspiration and passion? The gods are cold. They never experience the loss of beauty, so they laugh at our sorrows" (*Sappho's Leap*, 3). It can be argued that Jong, by highlighting Sappho's inability to accept her physical decline, uses ancient Greek perceptions of old age in order to explore her own concerns about bodily ageing. By placing her fictional character in ancient Greece the novelist seems to dramatise her incapacity to accept the process of growing older. Moreover, Jong's choice may also suggest her willingness to remind her readers that preoccupations about physical decay

⁶³Baars' observations show that in classic Greek culture there were no role models for older people and no gods to take care of their final years, which were usually feared or encountered with little compassion (2012: 89).

⁶⁴Gilleard analysed the body of archaic Greek literature dating back to fourth-seventh centuries BCE. Interestingly enough, the distaste for old age and admiration for youth in Greek plays was expressed by poets and playwrights who were advanced in years themselves (Gilleard, 2007: 91).

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and the desire to rejuvenate one's ageing body are not new in human history. Melancholic and grim images of bodily ageing and an obsession with the loss of the male gaze established in *Sappho's Leap* continue to be present in Jong's later works.

In her latest fictional novel, *Fear of Dying*,⁶⁵ written when Jong was seventy-three, the main character, Vanessa, also laments her loss of sexual appeal and her youthfulness:

I used to love the power I had over men. Walking down the street, my mandolin-shaped ass swaying and swinging to their backward eyes. How strange that I only completely knew this power when it was gone – or transferred to my daughter, all male eyes on her nubile twentyish body, promising babies. I missed this power. It seemed that the things that has come to replace it – marriage, maternity, the wisdom of the mature woman (ugh, I hate that phrase) – weren't worth the candle. (5)

Vanessa envies the young and confesses that she did not know how to appreciate her good looks when she was younger. As the character ages, she becomes even more aware of the value and benefits that youthfulness has in contemporary society. Hence, the heroine looks back in anger, regret, and nostalgia, and blames herself for not having used her young beauty to her advantage when she still had it: “[b]ecause when we *were* young, we didn't appreciate our youth. That's what makes me *nuts!*” (*Fear of Dying*, 155, emphasis in original) Vanessa wishes for the impossible – she wants to get her previous looks back. At the same time, though, she wants to maintain her wisdom: “[a]ll I want is to be thirty years younger, knowing what I know now” (*Fear of Dying*, 155). In fact, the heroine is so displeased with her ageing body and the loss of her charms, that she would even sell her soul to the devil if he could promise her the recovery of her beauty and the power of seduction:

Now I believed I was old, and I didn't like it. I didn't like the hairs on my chin. I didn't like dyeing my eyebrows. I wanted my youth back – even with all its miseries. I envy the young and they don't know they are enviable. I certainly didn't know it when I was young. I hate, hate, *hate* getting older. I would sell my soul to the devil to stay young. And then an idea begins to dawn – for a play. (*Fear of Dying*, 151, emphasis in original)

⁶⁵As in *Sappho's Leap*, in this novel Jong also turns to ancient Greek culture to evoke a story about a Trojan prince, Tithonus. In it, the novelist explains that the goddess of dawn, Eos, fell in love with Tithonus, and asked Zeus for her lover's immortality. Yet, she forgot to ask for his eternal youth. Thus, Tithonus “wandered the earth begging endlessly for mercy as his eyes, his limbs, his inner organs rotted and fell out and he grew more and more decrepit” (*Fear of Dying*, 233). In the end, he was transformed into a cicada, still waiting for the blessing of death to save him. Eos' love for Tithonus turned into repugnance because his old body was no longer appealing. The story shows that eternal youth is not possible for human beings because the magic elixir of life and beauty is only available to immortal gods.

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This last sentence is important, as it shows that Vanessa's desire to reshape her body according to the expected standards of femininity does not stay in her fantasies. The quotation illustrates that the heroine struggles to accept the ageing body that does not correspond to her more youthful self-perception. Vanessa's inability to synchronise her inner and outer selves and her wish to turn back the clock, but not to lose her actual knowledge, is repeated many times in the novel. This repetition reveals that the protagonist is never at ease with her ageing body, and that the fear of ageing never abandons her thoughts. This makes Vanessa similar to other characters in Jong's works. Yet, although Jong's latest novel shows the heroine's wish to find the elixir of youth, it also reminds her readers that the desire for eternal youthfulness has a high cost: "[i]n most Faustian transformations, the dabbler in magic is punished. We're not supposed to play with time and the devil. Challenging the gods shows a lack of humility that often proves fatal" (*Fear of Dying*, 157). The following section shows how Vanessa and other fictional characters in Jong's middle and later works succumb to the promises of the anti-ageing industry in order to regain sexual appeal, beauty, and self-appraisal. However, Jong continues to remind her readers that the desire to reverse time has its price – her fictional figures' longing for rejuvenation generate conflicting and uneasy feelings that limit their freedom of expression.

The Surgical Face 'Repair'

Fear and desire are at the heart of cosmetic surgery, particularly anti-ageing cosmetic surgery (Meredith Jones, 2004: 531)

By the late sixties, cosmetic surgical interventions became part of legitimate medicine and marked a great change in aesthetic medical science and the pharmaceutical business (Gilleard and Higgs, 2014: 150). Due to improvements in laser technology, reduced prices, and an increased emphasis on youthful physical appearance, cosmetic and non-cosmetic procedures⁶⁶ have become very popular since then (Gilleard and Higgs, 2014: 150; Henderson-King and Henderson-King, 2005: 137; Hurd-Clarke, 2011: 70; Katz and Gish, 2015).⁶⁷ In fact, research reveals that the desire to sculpt one's body is

⁶⁶The intervention of cosmetic procedures include botox, liposuction, injectable fillers, rhinoplasty, chemical peels, laser hair removal, dermabrasion, among many other forms of bodily 'repair.'

⁶⁷Katz and Gish document that in the US alone, there were 15.1 million procedures documented by the American Society of Plastic Surgeons [ASPS] in 2013. The most common nonsurgical procedures were botulinum toxin type A, soft tissue fillers, and chemical peels (Katz and Gish, 2015: 46-7).

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becoming more socially accepted, which suggests that a naturally aged body is seen as a failure in contemporary Western societies (Davis, 2003; Gagne and McGaughey, 2002; Hakim, 2001). As Katz and Gish point out, today there “is a blooming field of clients, professionals, as well as surgical and nonsurgical procedures that aim to repair, reverse, or slow the undesirable signs and conditions of ageing, such as age spots, wrinkles, and skin laxity” (2015: 46). In her short essay “Botox Blues,” Cruikshank states that the popularity of various means of rejuvenation is such, that the FDA⁶⁸ has approved Botox for cosmetic use (2015: 3). As Cruikshank argues, the fact that face-lifts have become accepted and regulated by state authorities and rigid health policies indicates that it is becoming a normalised practice. Similarly, Gilleard and Higgs also observe that for “many plastic surgeons, health is beauty and beauty is health” (2014: 146). These observations show that plastic surgery interventions are gaining popularity and are seen as needed practices for health reasons and self-care; more than that, they are regarded as tools to create harmony between individuals’ self-identity and their outer appearance (Hurd-Clarke, 2011: 82; Garnham, 2013: 44). Moreover, cosmetic bodily ‘repair’ is regarded “as something that’s utterly correct to desire and indeed crucial in the enactment of ageing: it is presented as an indispensable rather than an optional tool for the stretched middle age” (Jones, 2004: 529).⁶⁹

Cosmetic surgery and non-surgical interventions are much more prominent in women than in men (Daniluk, 2003; Woodward, 1991). As has been previously mentioned, external body image is closely related to a woman’s self-perception and the way she is treated by others. Yet, attempts to adjust one’s physical body to one’s individual identity may create inner frustration and discrepancies. This discordance becomes more pronounced with age because one’s bodily image does not correspond to the way people feel about themselves. As social gerontologist Peter Öberg notes, “the outer body can be interpreted as a betrayal of the youthfulness of the inner self,” and, thus, becomes a threat to one’s identity (2003: 106). Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth (1989, 1991) coined the concept the ‘mask of ageing,’ which indicates a younger self living in an older body to which a younger self-identity is bound. In order

⁶⁸FDA stands for the Food and Drug Administration of the US Department of Health and Human Services. Its responsibility is to protect and promote public health through the supervision of food and medications.

⁶⁹Woodward observes that the disguised purpose of cosmetic surgery is not to change the bodily image, but to correct and approach it as closely as possible to a youthful model that is featured “by the aesthetics of smoothness, tact, and good taste” (1991: 162). Therefore, the signs of ageing must be extirpated or “literally effaced – at least on the surface” (Woodward, 1991: 162-3).

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to achieve congruence between the inner sense of self and the outward image, older individuals, especially women, tend to seek solutions in plastic cosmetic interventions and, hence, create this particular 'mask'. As psychologists Donna and E Aaron Henderson-King argue, "the more shame women feel about not having met socially defined standards of beauty the more likely they are to accept cosmetic surgery" (2005: 147). Those who have a weaker body image and lower self-esteem are more inclined to seek bodily corrections and self-improvement by the aid of plastic surgery or other forms of rejuvenation (Farshidfar *et al.*, 2013; Greer, 1991: 155).

However, there is a wealth of feminist literature that reveals that those women who engage into anti-ageing practices and undergo cosmetic procedures in order to hamper the signs of ageing can be seen as victims of the homogenising ideals of patriarchal society (Hurd-Clarke and Griffin, 2007; Smirnova, 2012). A desire to use cosmetic or non-cosmetic tools implies the internalisation of a body that is unvoiced, sexualized, and silenced, all of which confirms women's subordinate position in youth-based Western societies (Smirnova, 2012; Woodward, 1991). Smirnova argues that the popularisation and branding of anti-ageing products and cosmetic surgery show how internalised and normalised the discourse on eternal life has become (2012: 1238). She also notes that new scientific technologies and the promotion of the cosmeceutical industry can be seen as an extension of male power over women: "[t]he technologies themselves are also part of the heroic narrative, masculinized by the rhetoric of neoliberal, rational action backed by scientific and medical authorities" (Smirnova, 2012: 1236).⁷⁰ To the scholar, a woman's worth is still measured not by her mental abilities, but rather by her capacity to postpone the dreadful process of ageing and to maintain the feminine ideals and youthful looks as long as possible:

⁷⁰In the article "A Will to Youth: the Woman's Anti-Aging Elixir" (2012), Michelle Hannah Smirnova employs a fairy-tale metaphor to disseminate images of young heroines that have permeated the popular culture. She mentions the well-known story of Aurora in *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), whose dormant prettiness remains intact while she is asleep. The contraposition of the young and slender princess with an old and evil villainess in the story reinforces the association of youth with goodness, and equates the old with malevolent powers. Similarly, Merry G. Perry also looks at Disney productions to argue that the ugliness and old age of wicked Disney queens point to their grotesqueness and insecurity, as well as their inability to accept their own process of ageing (1999: 204). At the end of each of the Disney stories analysed, love, beauty and youth win, while evil old age is doomed to be effaced. Smirnova observes that the symbolic meanings presented in the Disney fairy-tale find an echo in contemporary cosmeceutical advertising, which constantly promotes youthful images: "a number of the articles [that] pictured a sleeping woman, instructed women to 'wake up' to a younger version of themselves. The reoccurring theme of fantasy-turned-reality serves as a common branding narrative among these ads" (Smirnova, 2012: 1240). In these narratives, a woman, victimized by the process of ageing, can be awakened by the aid of science, which traditionally represents male power and gender inequality. All in all, these popular tales suggest that a woman can be rescued from evil forces of ageing by turning to her Prince Charming, which is no longer a male hero, but the cosmeceutical science (Smirnova, 2012: 1241).

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Her self-appraisal is conditioned by the male gaze which constructs her ageing process as a loss of femininity; a femininity that is exemplified by the ideal image of the young, passive, white, healthy, heterosexual, thin woman. As such, she is under constant pressure to conform to these homogenizing images. (Smirnova, 2012: 1236)

In fact, many gerontology scholars argue that the anti-ageing discourse and the promotion of anti-ageing products are in themselves ageist, since they reveal the denial of the natural process of growing old (Garnham, 2013; Vincent, 2008).

Yet, taking into account the great popularity of surgical and non-surgical interventions among older women, it can be assumed that these bodily ‘repair’ techniques will continue to be in demand and their costs will go down in order to provide more individuals with access to new advances in science. Moreover, as long as social pressures continue to be harsher on older women, their interest in cosmetic or non-cosmetic procedures will increase along with the development of the medical sciences (Hurd-Clarke, 2011: 100-1). Hurd-Clarke and Griffin believe that anti-ageing interventions will become normative, if not expected in the near future: “both the medical and non-medical arenas, non-surgical cosmetic procedures are poised to become the next legitimised and logical intervention that women will feel obligated to employ in their socially sanctioned fight against ageing and the physical realities of nature” (2007: 199). The beauty industry, aesthetic medicine, and anti-ageing discourses will keep reminding the ageing population, and, in particular, older women, that regardless their age, gender, or social class, there are certain aspects that can always be improved when fighting the bodily decline.

As has been shown, the fears about the ageing body are visible throughout all Jong’s work and become more salient over time, which is seen in her consideration of plastic surgery. In her midlife memoir, *Fear of Fifty*, Jong ponders whether to lift her face or to stay loyal to her wrinkles: “I was facing the eternal question: to lift or not to lift – and should I do it before the next book tour?” (3) In her later memoir, *What Do Women Want*, the author again shows her hesitation about this form of bodily ‘repair.’ When contemplating a face-lift, Jong consults various plastic surgeons who promise magical results; however, she refuses to learn more about the actual surgical intervention because it is too scary and unpleasant: “I run from such consultations for the next five years, I don’t want to know what the knife can do” (*What Do Women Want*, 61). Jong remembers that doctors, gently touching her face, explain that they will “just reshape it here and here,” will narrow her nose, and will lift her brow, which

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makes the whole procedure look simple and painless (*What Do Women Want*, 61). Finally convinced, Jong makes “an appointment with the wizard of San Francisco” (*What Do Women Want*, 62). Yet, the recovery process and the feelings that arise after the face-lift are not pleasant and comforting. They remind her that turning back the clock is not priceless. The writer feels strange in her own body and compares herself to a sacrificial lamb which is cut into pieces for the festivity:

It is still hard for me to believe that I flew three thousand miles, lay down in a stranger’s office, took anaesthesia, and allowed myself to be cut up like a Christmas lamb. I did it impulsively – but as I came up from the anaesthesia, I was sure I had made a terrible mistake. My face felt like a mask glued on by an evil genius. There were black-and-blue circles under my eyes. I doubted everything, I was convinced that excised along with my frown lines was my ability to write – even my ability to think. (*What Do Women Want*, 62)

Even when the surgical intervention is over, the memory of this very intervention generates conflicting feelings: “[n]ow that it’s over, I torture myself by imagining the procedure. I did not do this beforehand. A gash was made into top of my head. My scalp was peeled back from the skull. My eyes were tucked up with black thread. I savor all the gory details” (*What Do Women Want*, 63). Jong’s inability to frown after the face-lift and a sense that her face has been cut, stretched, reshaped, and glued again make her feel uncomfortable and lifeless:

All my life, I have defined myself by ceaseless activity – and now I was forced to keep still. I felt like I was dead. I felt like I had entered a bardo between one existence and another. I sat there waiting for my face to heal, waiting to become myself again, to undo the spell I was under. [...] I kept expecting to look in the mirror and find another person. However many times I looked, I did not believe what I saw. It was as if I expected a brand to show up on my forehead reading, ‘V’ for vanity. (*What Do Women Want*, 62-3)

Although Jong is aware of the fact that face-lifts are now becoming a normalised practice, especially salient among older women, she cannot conform to the thought that her face has been ‘tortured.’ Although the doctor congratulates Jong on the quick healing of her new face and the absence of scars on it, the writer is aware that the stitches are still there; however, they are buried deep inside her soul and invisible to the public eye: “[o]f course there are no scars, because they are all inside. My face looks blameless. My soul is all stitched up” (*What Do Women Want*, 63). In fact, Jong feels that she has trespassed some moral boundaries and now must pay for her selfish desire to play God:

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I would like to peel off my cohorts and be twenty-nine again, knowing what I know now. I would like to have this edge over all the other twenty-nine-year-olds. I know where the road leads, and they don't. But knowing where the road leads takes away a certain recklessness. I may have the face of youth, but I have the caution of my age. I look before I leap. I am wondering whether my face will fall off. (*What Do Women Want*, 63-4)

While the surgeon praises his work, which he sees as his masterpiece, the writer feels alien and eerie with her newly-rejuvenated face: “[t]he doctor meanwhile is delighted with his handwork. He praises my rapid healing, the absence of visible scars. This is self-praise” (*What Do Women Want*, 63). Moreover, she is surprised that her troubled feelings do not apply to other older women who feel lifted up after their rejuvenation process: “[o]ther women who had been through the procedure didn't feel this way. They were jubilant, glad to be rid of wrinkles – what was wrong with me? I felt I had transgressed some moral law and was about to be punished horribly” (*What Do Women Want*, 62). In fact, scientific research reveals that after having undergone cosmetic surgery and, consequently, after having adapted to hegemonic ideals of feminine beauty, many women report a higher sense of self-esteem (Gagne and McGaughey, 2002; Goodman, 1994; von Soest *et al.*, 2009). Since the improvement of the outward appearance is related to self-acceptance, some scholars even state that plastic surgery may be regarded as a psychological intervention (Sarwer *et al.*, 1998). However, according to Jong, “[t]he fact that thousands of women and men do this routinely” does not comfort her; therefore, she feels a need to find her own reason for having challenged nature:

I had to find my own justification for tempting the fates, and I could not do it. I felt like Princess Langwidere of Oz taking off one of her thirty heads and putting on another to avoid responsibility for the atrocities the lately worn head had committed, I felt I was escaping my fate somehow and it would catch up with me nonetheless. (*What Do Women Want*, 63)

Jong comes to the conclusion that, after having succumbed to the promises of the anti-ageing discourse, there is no way back; thus, she has to accept her new face, which now looks smoother and younger, as desired. However, even so, it lacks the signs of life experiences and cherished memories:

So, too, I must surrender to my new face. It is not so very different from the old, but it has its own imperatives. The brow is softer and less lined. There is no fat under my chin or ring under the eyes. It is not a young face but a new face. It is a moon into which no craters have been carved. (*What Do Women Want*, 63)

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In her latest novel, *Fear of Dying*, Jong again returns to plastic surgery and expresses her ambiguous thoughts about the natural process of ageing. As in her midlife memoirs, the novel's heroine considers whether to undergo a face-lift or to turn to beauty practitioners, who promise rejuvenation by employing non-surgical interventions: "I am in rage against age. To that end, I have recruited dermatologists, yoga teachers, exercise coaches, nutritionists, herbalists, physical therapists, and doctors – alternative and plain" (*Fear of Dying*, 151). She desperately searches for remedies, specialists, and even magic to postpone time; yet, Vanessa appears hesitant about the efficiency of these practices:

There is a shortage of antiageing specialists in New York – from dermatologists who harvest and reuse your own fat to those who freeze your facial muscles with toxins. There are blasters and scrapers, injections and fat-suckers. There are skin resurfacers, fraxelists if not taxidermists, pore shrinkers and redness faders for rosacea sufferers. There are plastic surgeons and acupuncturists and even hypnotists who regress you into false youth you dream is real. But I wanted more. I wanted magic. (*Fear of Dying*, 151)

Having proved the wastefulness of the listed practitioners and their remedies, she puts her trust and her face in a plastic surgeon's hands who is not described as a doctor, but as an artist, insofar as he is capable to look at "the sagging skin around your eyes and see how to exercise just enough, not too much. He could make tiny, imperceptible cheek-tucks that erased the lines of worry and age. He could raise your forehead back into your twenties" (*Fear of Dying*, 28). Yet, time and again, after the plastic surgery, the protagonist feels constrained, "parched," and dizzy, comparing herself to a "Christmas turkey" (*Fear of Dying*, 28). She even avoids her self-image in the mirror because she fears to encounter an embalmed mummy whose "brain ha[s] been scooped out through [one's] nose, as if the embalmers ha[ve] also carved out [one's] soul" (*Fear of Dying*, 28). The healing procedure is followed by grim days accompanied by "ice packs, immobility, a sense of suspended animation," anaesthesia, and even the inability to read or write or go out (*Fear of Dying*, 29). Moreover, Vanessa's face-lift is not approved of her ageing mother, who thinks that she is too smart to have undergone plastic surgery: "'I can't believe you've had a face-lift,' my mother insists. 'You're too smart to have had a face-lift'" (*Fear of Dying*, 29). Although readers get to see the opinion and reproach of Vanessa's mother, the protagonist's voice is absent. In the novel, Jong does not write about Vanessa's feelings after the face-lift. Vanessa only mentions a nightmare that leaves the reader to decide whether the character is satisfied

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or not with the final results: “I had dreams in which I saw my skin (complete with muscles and blood vessels) being pulled back from my skull” (*Fear of Dying*, 29).

Jong and her fictional characters’ obsession with rejuvenation and their uneasy feelings about getting older are reminiscent of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which shows that today’s anxieties about getting older and the desire to stay forever young and charming had already been contemplated in the Victorian period.⁷¹ The nineteenth century was a time when ageing became of widespread public concern in different fields of knowledge (Miquel-Baldellou, 2014: 126). Linked with the emergence of medical sciences, old age was categorised and attributed judgements of mental and moral incapability as a result of the inability to mediate declining health through constant surveillance over one’s body (Cole, 1983; Miquel-Baldellou, 2014). Actually, there were two contradictory perceptions of old age in Victorian thought: on the one hand, individuals were assumed to be growing older when they exhibited a set of biological signs of gradual deterioration of the body; on the other hand, old age was regarded as the cause of a sudden bodily collapse, reflected in loss of mental and sexual capacities (Mangum, 2005; Miquel-Baldellou, 2014: 126-8). In sum, Victorians displayed ambiguous and complex images of old age expressed in either gradual or sudden bodily transformations.

Wilde’s parable, to some extent, is similar to Jong’s middle life and later works as it mirrors the desire to preserve youth through experimental practices and even magic.⁷² In fact, the author also shows that nothing motivates ageing individuals more

⁷¹Dorian Gray’s story resonates the Faustian myth from a classic German legend. It shows that the desire to prolong life and the fear of physical deterioration were already present in the premodern epoch and were manifested in various cultural representations long before the Victorian era.

⁷²Similarly to Jong’s middle life and later works, Wilde’s novel reveals the denigration of old age and the importance granted to aesthetic values of youth and beauty. Lord Henry Wotton, Dorian Gray’s dandiacal mentor, convinces Dorian Gray that youth is the most precious treasure in life: “[t]here is absolutely nothing in the world but youth!” (Wilde, 2003: 25) The significance that Lord Henry Wotton gives to youth and aesthetic beauty is well exemplified in the following speech, addressed to Dorian Gray:

You have a wonderfully beautiful face, Mr. Gray. Don’t frown. You have. And beauty is a form of genius – is higher, indeed, than genius, as it needs no explanation. [...] Yes, Mr. Gray, the gods have been good to you. But what the gods give they quickly take away. You have only a few years in which to really live, perfectly, and fully. When your youth goes, your beauty will go with it, and then you will suddenly discover that there are no triumphs left for you... Ah! Realize your youth while you have it! Don’t squander the gold of your days! [...] Live the wonderful life that is in you! Let nothing be lost upon you! Be always searching for new sensations [...] With your personality there is nothing you could not do. The world belongs to you for a season. (Wilde, 2003: 24-5)

Dorian Gray’s wish for immortality and eternal youth, which eventually comes true, allows the protagonist to remain intact, while his portrait continues to age in his stead and degrades into a monster. Wilde’s hero’s tragic death recalls the previously evoked idea that ‘playing God’ is dangerous. However, Wilde’s parable also shows that craving for eternal youth is the wish of “an ‘everyman’ who surrenders to

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than finding a way to reverse time. As Blaikie observes, “what we really want is immortality in life, to look into the mirror, and, like Dorian Gray, [...] appear always young even while the images in our portraits decay” (1999: 216). Yet, Blaikie also states that in Wilde’s novel youth is used as a symbol of decadence and superficial identity; therefore, finding eternity and agelessness means the evaporation of life itself, which brings us back to Jong’s uneasy feelings after her face-lift, which left her lifeless and numb (1999: 216).⁷³ Similar to Dorian Gray, Jong and her heroines can also be seen as ‘products’ of their sociocultural context and their times, influenced as they are by the anti-ageing ideals. By spreading the message that beauty and youth are the keys to happiness, good health, sexual appeal, and self-appraisal, the successful ageing discourse, which characterises contemporary attitudes towards old age, generates inner frustrations. These contradictions and ambiguous feelings recall the previously mentioned ‘mask of ageing’ that intends to synchronise the mind and the body of an ageing individual as equally young. For instance, Jessica, the protagonist of the novel *Shylock’s Daughter*, written when Jong was forty-five, is a woman past her forties who feels trapped inside her body because her age does not correspond to her younger inner-self. She confesses that “when [she looks] in the mirror, [she sees] the flaws in [her] beauty, not the beauty, however much it has been praised. [...] [Her] soul feels none too attached to [her] body these days anyway” (*Shylock’s Daughter*, 30). These ideas are also visible in Jong’s memoir, *Fear of Fifty*, in which she points to a discontinuity between her inner feelings and her physical body. As the writer grows older, she feels younger and more liberated; however, her body becomes more unforgiving: “when we are dewy-faced and tender-looking we tend to be horribly tough on ourselves. At fifty, we are more ready to forgive. And this is when the flesh becomes most unforgiving” (*Fear of Fifty*, 61). The following quotation further exemplifies this paradox:

I look in the mirror and see my grandparent’s jaws starting to form where my apple cheeks once were. I hurriedly pass a reflection of myself in a store window and see my grandmother. And what an insult this metamorphosis is, coming just when I feel freer than I have ever felt in my life. Just when I’m feeling younger every year, why do I look older? (*Fear of Fifty*, 61, emphasis in original)

Jong and her fictional characters’ oscillating thoughts about ageing and their

a wonderful dream of immortal beauty” (Bautista-Naranjo, 2011: 197). Moreover, Wilde, in this novel, already implies the existence of the ‘mask of ageing’ as he points to the discordance between one’s inner perception of self and the external image, as reflected in this quotation: the “tragedy of old age is not that one is old, but that one is young” (Bautista-Naranjo, 2011: 189). The Victorian desire for the fountain of youth and eternity continues to be present in contemporary society, as reflected in Jong’s work.

⁷³See also: Hannah Zeiling. “The Critical Use of Narrative and Literature in Gerontology.” 2011.

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inability to find harmony between their inner feelings and outward looks demonstrate that their identities are expressions of their multiple selves, greatly affected by the sociocultural climate of their times. According to the writer, “years of brainwashing are not so easy to forget. The beauty trap is deeper than you thought. It’s not so much the external pressures as the internal ones that bind. You cannot imagine yourself middle-aged – cute little you who always had ‘it’ even when overweight” (*Fear of Fifty*, xviii). To Jong, ageing not only concerns the physicality of the body or sexual appeal, but it is closely related to an internalised fear of ageing, uncertainty, and self-definition that limit the formation of one’s identity:

The problem goes deeper than menopause, face-lifts, or whether to fuck younger men. It has to do with the whole image of self in a culture in love with youth and out of love with women as human beings. We are terrified at fifty because we do not know what on earth we can become when we are no longer young and cute. (*Fear of Fifty*, xix)

Jong’s generation of women appear as victims of constant indoctrination, who only feel empowered by a moral obligation to efface the signs of ageing. However, although aware of this particular and ageist impositions, they still wish to adjust their looks to contemporary standards of beauty and desirability. At the same time, they also lack role models that could help them to express themselves more openly without the need to adhere to the Western ideals of female beauty. The following section shows how Jong and her ageing heroines try to negotiate these socially constructed assumptions and how, sometimes, they succeed to contest contemporary beauty myths. However, even though their perception of their ageing bodies appears more positive at times, they still cannot escape the assumption that women’s social currency and their acceptability is measured by their ability to embody youthful ideals as closely as possible in an anti-ageing-driven culture.

Erica Jong’s Sociocultural Milieu

Growing older in Western societies is contradictory
(Stephen Katz and Jessica Gish, 2015: 40)

An important body of research shows that the baby-boom generation has been heavily affected by the rise of consumerism, better living conditions, the development of the pharmaceutical industry, the ideas of sexual liberation, the body cult, and celebrity-based culture, which may help to justify their engagement with frequent consumption of

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goods, anti-ageing products, and a desire to maintain youthful looks (Bayer, 2005; Smirnova, 2012; Twigg and Majima, 2014). As Julia Twigg and Shinobu Majima state, this generation has “been drawn into changing historical circumstances of the period; and their behaviour reflects that” (2014: 31). Their 2014 study, based on British women over the age of seventy-five, reveals that the female representatives of this generation invest more into their appearances in terms of frequent shopping for clothes and cosmetics in comparison to previous generations of women.⁷⁴ Another study, conducted by Laura Hurd-Clarke and Meridith Griffin in 2007, also reports that women of the baby-boom generation are more opposed to ageing in a natural way in contrast to pre-boom generation women, who were more inclined to accept the natural process of growing older.⁷⁵

Jong’s awareness that the successful ageing discourse and the anti-ageing ideals are deeply integrated into the collective Western consciousness is reflected in her later works and interviews. In one of the poems from the collection *Love Comes First*, published when Jong was sixty-seven, the speaker points to doctors’ promises to prolong life by the use of preventive measures and healthy lifestyles; yet, a slightly ironic tone in the poem suggests that the speaker does not believe in the efficiency of new medical advances: “[m]eanwhile / I am listening to a doctor / who claims we can all live / to be a hundred, / a hundred and twenty, / if only we expand / our arteries with exercise, / our genitals with sex, / our brains with crossword puzzles, / poems, and proverbs” (11). The same thoughts are expressed in *Fear of Dying*, in which Jong shows that women are made to believe that if they do not take care of their looks, they will have no chances to be successful in a beauty- and youth-obsessed Western society. Through Vanessa’s character, the writer addresses gender inequalities and the ‘double standard’ of ageing by stating that if a man chooses to undergo cosmetic surgery, it is because he wants to; but if a woman decides to rejuvenate herself, it is because she feels a need to do so: “I know men do plastic surgery too now – voluntarily – but it’s different for men” (*Fear of Dying*, 26). The heroine thinks that the anti-ageing discourse

⁷⁴Twigg and Majima (2014) warn that although the current target market of consumption of anti-ageing products and services is the baby-boom generation, commonly described as a generation marked by selfishness, greed, and hedonistic individualism, there is little evidence that they consume more in comparison to other generations. That is, a greater consumption of anti-ageing products is mainly based on economic factors characterized by cheap fashion for the masses and a major reduction in price. See: Julia Twigg, and Shinobu Majima. “Consumption and the Constitution of Age: Expenditure Patterns on Clothing, Hair and Cosmetics among Post-War ‘Baby Boomers’.” 2014.

⁷⁵See: Laura Hurd-Clarke, and Meridith Griffin. “The Body Natural and the Body Unnatural: Beauty Work and Aging.” 2007.

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is so integrated in contemporary society, that it is even seen as a female ritual: “[w]omen feel they have no choice. Age still equals abandonment for women. [...] I considered plastic surgery as mandatory as leg waxing” (*Fear of Dying*, 26).

Jong’s disapproval of the anti-ageing ideals and their powerful influence on older segments of society is also expressed in her criticism of feminism. According to the writer, feminist activists have failed to establish proper validation of ageing women and to reshape the meanings associated with age. The author thinks that, instead of trying to root out pejorative notions about old age, the contemporary feminist agenda remains inactive and invisible:

What has happened to our twenty-five years of protest about not wanting to be plastic Barbies? What has happened to the anger of Naomi Wolf analysing beauty myths, or Germaine Greer fiercely celebrating cronehood, or Gloria Steinem showing is how to accept age gracefully and turning inward at last? [...] Are we just a bunch of old broads talking to each other in the steamroom, cheering each other up? We write and talk and empower each other, but the obsession with newness and youth (newth?) does not seem to change. (*Fear of Fifty*, 2)

Yet, it is interesting to note that Jong, herself a feminist, instead of trying to combat ageism and negative characterisations of older women, succumbs to the feminine ideals promoted by the anti-ageing discourse. Unlike Isadora in *Fear of Flying*, who challenged patriarchal assumptions about female sexuality and liberated many women writers’ voices, Jong’s ageing fictional characters appear as hapless victims of powerful male-dominant discursive mechanisms and the anti-ageing-industry. However, Jong acknowledges that in today’s society it is very hard for the women of her generation to find their true selves because they lack role models: women’s social and individual identities are constructed around consumerist lifestyles and the marketplace that “still sees [them] as consumers of everything from hormones to hats, from cosmetics to cosmetic surgery” (*Fear of Fifty*, 4). In an interview with Carole Burns for *The Washington Post*, Jong, aged seventy-three, again pointed out that ageing women are supposed to adjust to contemporary beauty standards and constantly rejuvenate themselves: “[a]s women, we can’t look old. We can’t be fat. We’re supposed to look like the 14-year-old models in *Vogue*, who are younger and younger and skinnier and skinnier, and they are air-brushed and contoured and Photoshopped” (8 September, 2015).

The complexities and ambiguities that surround the female ageing body in Jong’s work may be better understood taking into account Judith Butler’s performativity

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theory. Following postmodernist and poststructuralist practices, Butler argues that gender is constructed through repetitive performative acts which are never stable and coherent, but subjected to discourses, societal expectations, and stylised imitations of dominant conventions (1988, 1990, 1993). In her work, Butler states that gender is not only a cultural construction imposed on our identities, but also a process of creation through which we reshape ourselves in a particular social reality that is constructed through language, gestures, symbolic signs, and social manners. Butler takes her formulations as far as to suggest that gender as such does not exist. According to her, gender is real only to the extent that it is subject to social constructions. We enact our gendered identities through a variety of acts and expected behaviours, which make the idea of gender possible. In so doing, we make gender appear natural and, thus, unquestionable. Gendered performances are acted out on ourselves in as much as others act them out on us in accordance with social expectations. The performance of gendered roles and social conventions creates a sense of subjectivity, which seems to be ordinary and free-flowing, thus giving us a sense of freedom and agency. Butler claims that individuals think that the way they shape their bodies is an individualistic expression of their free will, but, according to performativity theory, their acts are mere expressions influenced by cultural norms.

The promotion of the idea that people are not constrained, but free to exercise subjective power, makes the anti-ageing discourse feasible. The anti-ageing industry confirms gender relations by promoting different youth-based ideals of femininity and masculinity in all ages. By seeking rejuvenation and performing personal daily activities, such as keeping fit, dieting, or using beauty work, individuals unconsciously enact gendered, age-based, and socially constructed roles and, in so doing, reinforce the oppressive *status quo* and hegemonic social conventions. This applies especially to women, who are expected to ‘adorn’ themselves to be sexually appealing to the heterosexual male gaze. In fact, according to Butler, the natural body as a material entity does not exist, because all bodies are discursively regulated and adjusted to a set of repeated social rituals and habits since our birth. The increasing use of surgical and non-surgical cosmetic interventions make the anti-ageing practice appear normative and even natural; thus, it is no longer questionable, like gender itself. Gender differences also have important implications for gender inequality in old age (Calasanti, 2007: 351). As Calasanti states, “[t]he hegemonic adult body is a gendered body as well as one inscribed with a race (white), class (middle class or better), and sexual orientation

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(heterosexuality)” (2007: 350). By acting out their gendered identities in accordance with social expectations, Jong’s heroines comply with the societal roles and reinforce the legitimacy of the anti-ageing industry and power relations. Obsessed with rejuvenation, they enact socially expected gendered roles and allow their bodies to be controlled by the successful ageing and patriarchal anti-ageing discourses. A fake sense of subjectivity, freedom of choice, and a sense of agency make the characters morally accountable for their own ageing and health, as expected in the successful ageing discourse.

However, since anti-ageing ideals, like gender and power relations, are political and social constructions, they can be deconstructed too (Calasanti and Slevin, 2011). In other words, people can resist being moulded into socially created discourses by negotiating new meanings and alternative perspectives about ageing and bodily image in their own social frameworks in order to uproot ageism and to have more freedom of self-expression in old age. In *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (1991), Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann explain that, over time, our cultural creations become our social reality; unquestioned and taken for granted, these notions and modes of life are eventually passed onto other generations:

All human activity is subject to habitualization. Any action that is repeated frequently becomes cast into a pattern, which can then be reproduced with an economy of effort and which, *ipso facto*, is apprehended by its performer as that pattern. Habitualization action further implies that the action in question may be performed again in the future in the same manner and with the same economical effort. (1991: 70-1)

Many older individuals reject socially constructed realities and hegemonic pressures to stay young. That is to say, although cosmetic and non-cosmetic interventions are becoming very popular, many ageing women perceive ageing as a freeing and life-affirming experience (Hurd-Clarke and Griffin, 2007; Cruikshank, 2015; Öberg and Tornstam, 1999; Greer, 1991; Sandberg, 2013).⁷⁶ The refusal to use cosmetic and plastic interventions is also related to a fear of losing one’s natural face expressions.⁷⁷ Cruikshank states that surgical face corrections are not only dangerous, but may also lead to the loss of one’s personality and individuality:

⁷⁶Research shows that working-class women are more likely to accept the signs of ageing, whereas elite women display a greater dissatisfaction with their bodily images (Calasanti and King, 2015: 197). In general, women’s experiences of ageing are always subjected to their social location, ethnic and racial affiliation, and to the meanings they attribute to beauty work and ageing (Hurd-Clarke, 2011: 6).

⁷⁷Botox, which immobilises muscles, is known for erasing natural human emotion (Hurd-Clarke, 2011: 99).

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With a Botox stiffened face, I would not be able to frown. A furrowed brow would become extinct. With Botox, older white American women would all look alike. Marks of individuality would seem old-fashioned and embarrassing, and, within a generation or two, the phrase ‘crow’s feet’ would refer only to the feet of crows. (2015: 3)

In the same line, Greer observes that no matter how hard a woman may try to mask her ageing process, there are some aspects that are impossible to be disguised or cured by promising advances in medical sciences. According to this scholar, once a face has been lifted, there will always be a constant need to lift it again, because the ageing neck, the hands, and “the rheumy old eyes will give it away” anyway (1991: 155). The same thoughts are expressed by Judith C. Daniluk, who states that, at some point in life, a woman hits the “wall” and comes to the conclusion that no anti-ageing creams, plastic surgeries, regular exercises, hair dyes, and other rejuvenation techniques can mask the gradual process of growing old; therefore, she starts to reconcile herself to “what can no longer be” (2003: 307). The existing literature also shows that many aged women see the process of growing older as liberating, since they no longer feel the need to meet unrealistic beauty requirements and attract the male gaze, and, hence, they can regain their true selves and establish their own criteria about their ageing bodies (Daniluk, 2003; Greer, 1991). Ruth Raymond Thone thinks that female “attractiveness is not determined by body size, hair color and makeup, old is beautiful; and ageing is glorious, not ugly, bad nor wrong” (1992: 62). Hurd-Clarke and Griffin’s findings (2007) attest to these statements as they show that, over time, many aged women learn to accept their sags, stretch marks, wrinkles, and grey hair, which they interpret as signs of self-identity and gained life experiences. For instance, a single woman, aged sixty-two, interviewed by Hurd-Clarke and Griffin, reported:

People get needles stuck in their face... but I don’t think there is anything wrong with looking your age. Some people look far older than what they are but I imagine that things happen in their life and that’s why that is. But I can’t see doing these things to yourself. It can’t be good. You’re messing with nature is what you’re doing. (2007: 191-2)

The notion that bodily transformations are part of the natural processes of ageing, whose signs can be interpreted as markers of life experiences and personal identities, is also visible in many excerpts of Jong’s later writings and interviews. In one of the scenes depicted in *Fear of Fifty*, Jong, approaching her midlife, appears comfortable about her nude body in front of her husband, who is positively surprised at her confidence to expose her nakedness:

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‘I love how comfortable you are with your body,’ he said. ‘You just walk around the room dressed, half-dressed, undressed, and you’re happy in your skin. I’ve never been with a woman like that.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Usually they lock the door and put on makeup. Women are so afraid to be seen in their own faces’. (274)⁷⁸

In fact, Jong claims that “[her] age is part of who [she is]. But women, even desirable women, are always afraid of seeming undesirable. Honesty takes a long time” (*Fear of Fifty*, 264). A similar statement is also observed by Cruikshank, who notes that although young naked female bodies are everywhere in the visual media, there is an absence of naked bodies of older women because they are thought to evoke shame and even guilt (2003: 149). Woodward terms this phenomenon ‘unwatchability’ (1999), which is especially visible in the film industry. In it, an older woman’s body remains concealed from the spectator, which illustrates the gendered ‘double standard’ of ageing and the notion of an aged women’s asexuality. In fact, in the West, an older woman’s nudity is even regarded as immoral and shameful; thus, it must be hidden from the public eye.⁷⁹

The acceptance of the process of ageing is also exemplified in other works by Erica Jong. For instance, in *What Do Women Want*, the writer states that she even likes the signs of her ageing face and will accept her older body as it is: “I will adjust to my face, accept it as God meant me to. There is something eerie and strange about recutting my face like an old suit. I even like my furrows, and wrinkles. I earned them. Why give up these badges of life deeply lived?” (61) To Jong, the physicality of the individual cannot express his/her personal identity, because age, beauty, and youthfulness do not belong to the same category: “I don’t believe that women should be defined by their looks, that age equals ugliness, or that youth and beauty are synonymous – so why should I change my face? It goes on ageing as I go on trying to come to terms with it”

⁷⁸Daniluk states that a woman’s relationship with her body and the comments she receives from her significant others are very important in defining her personal identity and her emotional intimacy (2003: 300). A positive validation of a woman’s external image adds to a higher degree of self-appraisal. On the contrary, if a woman’s physical appearance is criticized, it creates emotional and psychological barriers that limit her self-acceptance and may lead to a development of low self-esteem and a need to hide her body (Daniluk, 2003: 300).

⁷⁹Older men are always represented in larger numbers in the film industry – they appear ten times more frequently than older women (Hardwood, 2007: 153). For instance, “Paul Newman, Harrison Ford, Clint Eastwood, and many others retain a ‘sexy’ image into their 50s, 60s, and even later, while thinking of their equivalents among Hollywood actresses is considerably more challenging” (Hardwood, 2007: 155). Yet, each time there are more films that try to reverse the idea that people are invisible when old. An example is Nigel Cole’s comedy *Calendar Girls* (2003). It is based on a true story that shows a group of ageing women who decide to produce a nude calendar with the aim to raise money for leukaemia research. However, both older men and women’s nude bodies remain largely hidden from the screen.

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(*What Do Women Want*, 62). In one of the interviews, conducted in 2015, Jong, aged seventy-three, stated that: “I wouldn’t swap. I believe humans are spiritual beings encased in a fleshly body – and the body is very much a part of our being. I wouldn’t reverse time, I accept time. It’s not easy, but I do” (Finch, 13 Nov, 2015). Jong’s interviews and her less commercial writings also display a different picture about bodily ageing. In one of her essays, written when Jong was seventy-two, she stated that the wish to regain youth with all its flaws and delights may be risky and delusionary because by reviving good looks and innocence people also get back pain, lack of self-esteem, and inner frustrations: “[a]t first we think we’ll regain our dewy looks, our enthusiasm, our joy in the newness of love and lust, but we are dumbstruck to learn that we might also have to live with pain again, our unformed identities, our confusions” (2014: 86). In another interview, conducted in 2015, Jong confessed that ten years before she did fear looking old, but this fear has gradually faded with age (8 September, 2015). Yet, although some excerpts from Jong’s late-life work and her interviews point to her and her heroines’ acceptance of their ageing bodies and the rejection of the narrative of decline, the majority of her writings still display unease with the ravages of time. On the whole, her characters’ ambivalence and conflicting feelings about the biological process of growing older, and, in some cases, even ageist beliefs mirror Jong’s deeply-rooted anxieties about physical decay.

Conclusions

This chapter has provided an overview of body politics in feminist and gerontological studies, and has analysed how the successful ageing and anti-ageing discourses operate in mainstream sociocultural contexts to condition gendered and aged-based roles. Erica Jong’s *oeuvre*, in particular, her middle and later-life writings, show that women’s individual satisfaction is closely related to the desire to reshape and rejuvenate their ageing body. Both Jong’s early and late fictional characters appear trapped in consumerist lifestyles that reinforce ‘liberated’ women’s spending power and encourage them to use various forms of beauty work and preventive measures, and even undergo plastic surgery, in order to adjust their external images to societal expectations and to attract the male gaze, which is seen as a needed element to their self-appraisal.

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The chapter has also demonstrated that Jong and her fictional characters experience a sense of discordance between their youthful inner selves and their exterior images, which limits their self-definitions and their self-approval in their respective social circles. The ageing heroines in Jong's work regard the physical signs of ageing not as subjective life experiences, but as obstacles that do not allow them to synchronise their ageing bodies with their still youthful inner selves. These internal discrepancies generate ambiguous and conflicting feelings and reveal a profound fragmentation of women's identity. Yet, Jong's writings also suggest that even if older women would like to accept the natural process of growing older and regard the signs of ageing as footprints of their life experiences, they are constrained by the powerful anti-ageing discourse, which limits their choices and the ways of self-expression. In Jong's works, the female characters are grounded on prejudiced sociocultural realities and subjected to the patriarchal tyranny to always remain youthful and sexually attractive. Therefore, they feel an obligation to continue to look for the magic elixir of rejuvenation. The protagonists can also be seen as an integral part of the powerful discursive mechanisms of the anti-ageing businesses, especially aimed at the now ageing female representatives of the baby-boom generation. Jong and her fictional characters, highly influenced by the "visual imagery of the sixties" and consumption-oriented modes of life, to borrow from Twigg and Majima's words (2014: 31), seem to respond to the expectations of their times.

As has been shown, understanding gender constructions and power relations enables to better visualise how the rapidly growing anti-ageing enterprises operate along with the neo-liberal state system, in which individuals are given false freedoms of choice and are made responsible for their own process of ageing. Jong's work proves Woodward's statement that the meanings attributed to ageing are not shaped by one's chronological age, but are rather influenced by socially constructed meanings that are ascribed to the ageing body within specific social and historical contexts of each generation (1999: xiii). Moreover, her writings also reveal how gender, embodiment, and ageing are closely interwoven and can be seen as the sites of sexism and social inequalities. The (ageing) body and its sexual politics become an object of both feminist and gerontology research, in which women's bodies require a special consideration because they are subjected to the 'double standard' of ageing and higher pressures to keep their youthful looks as a sign of desirability and social currency. Jong's writings reveal Hurd-Clarke and Griffin's observation that the body is a "site of ongoing

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struggle” (2006: 189). In this respect, Jong’s *oeuvre* demonstrates that women’s frustrations and concerns are caused by the desire to comply with socially constructed expectations in order to be validated and accepted in a youth-driven society.

It is also worth mentioning that Jong’s uneven vision about the ageing body and her oscillating views about beauty work and chirurgical interventions are expressed in her more commercial works rather than in her more personal accounts. This may suggest that the author might have wanted to maintain her polemical celebrity status and popularity in the public domain. By evoking the preoccupation of ageing women about their bodily image and their ceaseless search for remedies to postpone ageing, the writer may have tried to make her books more appealing and relevant to her readers – mainly, the women of the baby-boom generation –, who are influenced by consumption- and rejuvenation-driven imperatives. In this sense, the fear of bodily ageing in Jong’s work could be read as a possible commercial strategy to sell her books and to assure a wider readership. This observation also accounts for the explicit treatment of female sexuality in her work, which is examined in the following chapter of this dissertation.

CHAPTER IV: Ageing, Sex, and Sexuality

Introduction

Sexuality and old age were regarded as contradictory and incompatible. Yet, in recent decades, and especially due to the so-called ‘longevity revolution,’ there has been an increased interest in older people’s sexual activity (Gilleard and Higgs, 2014; Katz and Calasanti, 2015; Laliberte Rudman, 2015; Sandberg, 2013, 2015; Twigg and Martin, 2015). At present, later life sexuality is much more visible in the media and popular culture, and is described in more liberal and affirmative terms, which shapes the meanings attributed to sex and the sexuality of older people. Older people are perceived as sexually incapable at a much later point in their lives in comparison to prior decades. The narrative of decline and deeply embedded stereotypes related to it, which portray ageing individuals as dependent and too weak both physically and psychologically to engage in sexual relationships, are no longer valid (Daniluk, 2003). The previous notion that sex is part of youth culture has been replaced and reinforced by the successful ageing discourse. As Waxman notes, “we seem more able to accept with enthusiasm the idea of sexual activity and pleasure among old people” (2010: 103). Research findings show that although perceptions of sexual scripts take on different meanings, getting older does not imply the loss of interest in romance, intimate touch, or emotional contact, all of which continue to be significant and necessary aspects of human lives (Daniluk, 2003; Clark, 2015; Roberts and Padgett-Yawn, 2011). In fact, sexual activity in later life is now seen as an indicator of the successful, graceful, and healthy process of growing older (Gilleard and Higgs, 2014; Katz and Calasanti, 2015; Katz and Gish, 2015; Katz, 2000, 2005; Sandberg, 2015; Woodspring, 2016).

Even though the successful ageing discourse allows for more freedom of sexual expression and helps to undo the stereotypes of older individuals seen as asexual and uninterested in romantic relations, it may also lead to the social stratification and even exclusion of those who are not interested in cultivating sexual relationships in later life. In this respect, those who show little interest in sexual activities are often seen as ‘unsuccessful ageing subjects’ or ‘problem persons,’ and are advised to see a doctor or a sexologist (Gilleard and Higgs, 2014; Katz, 2000). As Gilleard and Higgs note, we live in a society where

[...] sex and the expression of one’s sexuality became social virtues, indicators of emotional physical and mental well-being. Sexual expression became a right

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to which all are entitled, to the point that those unable to access sexual partners [...] are considered to have 'unmet needs' that health and social care services should at least consider, if not meet. (2014: 109)

The medical sciences, along with influential pharmaceutical and biomedical enterprises, suggest looking for solutions of sex-related problems in medication and drug-oriented markets. They spread the message that the optimisation of sexual functionality in old age is a sign of well-being and sound health in old age (Calasanti and King, 2015; Gilleard and Higgs, 2014; Katz and Gish, 2015; Katz and Marshall, 2003; Sandberg, 2015; Woodspring, 2016). Consequently, the ageing individuals become manageable objects and consumer-oriented target groups within the wider neo-liberal systems and anti-ageing agendas (Blaikie, 1999; Katz, 2000; Mykytyn, 2006; Wohlmann, 2012).

A close reading of Erica Jong's work, especially her later-life writings, helps to explore how political and social constructions of sexuality and anti-ageing ideals have an impact on the lives of older people and, especially, on the female representatives of the post-war generation. Although the author's work has been dismissed for its explicit treatment of sex-related matters, the writer has never abandoned the topic of female sexuality in her *oeuvre*; in her more recent literary productions she continues to write about how ageing, intimacy and sexuality intersect. This chapter demonstrates how Jong's heroines challenge the ideas of asexuality and sexual decline in old age as often presented in dominant cultural narratives, and offer alternative understandings of later-life sexuality and its expressions. The chapter opens up with reflections on female sexuality as a social construction influenced by historical, religious, and sociocultural transformations. It shows the author's attempts to find an appropriate language to express female desire and to challenge 'double standards' in the women's writing tradition. The second section emphasises the female figures' sexual travelling experiences abroad that, as will be shown, permeate Jong's *oeuvre* and provide significant understandings about intimate heterosexual relationships. The following section presents the predominant medical and socio-cultural attitudes towards post/menopause in Western culture and looks into Jong's heroines' relationships with younger men that are reflected in her mid- and later life productions. The final sections of the chapter reveal alternative ways of understanding how women make sense of their ageing identities and emphasise female assertiveness beyond dominant ageist discourses. In her most recent work, Jong opens the discussion for a reconsideration of late-life sexuality and the centrality of the optimisation of sexual functionality. The

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author offers a critical consideration of the successful ageing discourse as she points to how late-life sexuality has become a site for medical innovation, intervention, and regulation in culture, which blurs age-related boundaries and promises new freedoms to sexed bodily expressions. Instead, her later work reveals that sexual expressions and experiences in older age are marked by boundless possibilities and meanings that are always in a process of transformation. The writer's late-life writings, therefore, serve as a counter-narrative that defies narrow representations of sexuality in ageing individuals, and open new paths in feminist, gender, and age-related studies.

Sexual Freedom, Female Sexuality, and Sexual Language

I hate the American way of sex (Erica Jong, *Fear of Fifty*, 123)

The idea of sexual essentialism, according to which sexuality⁸⁰ is seen as a fixed and asocial state of being without historical roots, was deconstructed by Foucault in his monumental three-volume study *The History of Sexuality* (1981).⁸¹ In it, the philosopher argued that sexual desires are not biological, but socially constructed through historical and cultural practices, beliefs, customs, and institutional norms, and are disseminated through powerful discourses that include or exclude certain individuals, sexual behaviours, and age groups. Although there have been historical periods in which sexual expressions, meanings, and perceptions were less stigmatised, as in the Greco-Roman civilisation,⁸² with the rise of advances in medical knowledge in the seventeenth-century and a greater dominance of social institutions, such as schools, hospitals, or prisons, the meanings of sexuality and sexual practises were reorganised and restructured. Since then, certain sexual behaviours and attitudes have been classified as 'good' sexual practices and encouraged, whereas others have been defined as 'bad' and 'immoral,' and, therefore, have been condemned (Bristow, 1997; Foucault, 1981; Lee, 2011; Rubin, 1994). Medical-science and education-based discourses have

⁸⁰The gender and literary scholar Joseph Bristow notes that the word 'sexuality' is in itself quite a new term: it became common in late nineteenth century when Europe and America were experiencing the advances in anthropological, scientific, and social fields (1997: 2).

⁸¹The first volume, *The Will to Knowledge*, was first published in French 1976. The second and the third parts, *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of The Self*, appeared in 1984.

⁸²The Greco-Roman civilisation, considered the foundation of Western culture and society, had a more flexible view towards sexual expressions and accepted same-sex relations. Sexuality was viewed as a natural, healthy, and enjoyable part of life with no guilt, shame, or repressive feelings attached to it (Foucault, 1981).

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been politicised and used by governments in order to monitor sexual behaviours and, incidentally, to guarantee social order by stigmatising and/or criminalising certain sexual expressions within corrective frameworks (Bristow, 1997; Corbin, 1987; Foucault, 1981; Laqueur, 1990; Rubin, 1994).

Even though states have used scientific, educational, and medical discourses to regulate and control human sexual behaviour, they have not been the only agents to interfere with the regulation of sexual expressions. Religious institutions and their moral campaigns have played a significant role in repressing ‘bad’ sexual behaviour and preventing any transgressions of established norms based on religious moral codes (Foucault, 1981). Jong’s writings reflect a poststructuralist view of sexuality; that is to say, an interpretation of sexuality as a social construct that is controlled by powerful discourses, and, especially, by the Church. In her numerous works, the writer expresses her view on sex as the most honest and profound manifestation of humanity; however, she laments that its expressions are not free-flowing, but classified and regulated by religious institutions, a phenomenon that is especially visible in the US. In the light of these religious perceptions of human sexual behaviour, Jong thinks that Americans do not know how to enjoy sexual pleasures because they are too influenced by Puritan dogmas. According to the author, Protestant preaching has led to a confusion of what love and human sexuality are. In *Fear of Fifty*, Jong states that:

One decade we pretend to fuck everyone, the next decade we pretend to be celibate. Never do we balance sex and celibacy. Never do we acknowledge for Pan and the search for solitude – the two poles of a woman’s life. Never do we acknowledge that life itself is a mixture of sweets and bitters. (123)

In fact, Jong disapproves of organised religion and the Church because she believes that sexual urges are a natural part of human nature. This can be observed in her novel *Any Woman’s Blues*. The fictional character, Leila, states that “Christ spoke of love, but the church that bears His name deals in power. Every proselytising religion eventually is corrupted that way” and claims that the “only pure religions are religions of attraction; we come to them when we are ready” (*Any Woman’s Blues*, 245). The following quotation exemplifies Leila’s dislike of the American way of looking at sex, influenced by Puritanism, political corruption, and capitalism:

America is my home, and so I love and hate it equally, as one loves and hates one’s parents. I know it too well. [...] What I love about America is its boundless optimism; what I hate is the way it fetters that optimism in a straitjacket of puritanism. [...] What I hate about America is its belief in dualism — when the truth is that the more you have, the more you grab the *less* you

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have, and the more you give the more you have. (*Any Woman's Blues*, 258-9, emphasis in original)

Jong thinks that Western religious ideas and sexual oppressions not only lead to the confusion of what sex and love are, but also make sex look sinful. In *Seducing the Demon*, Jong points out that “Christianity and Islam have not eradicated lust but have managed to make it dirty – the worst of both worlds. No wonder we specialise in perverts and paedophilia” (69). In the same book, Jong seems to praise ancient societies and their more open-minded vision towards human sexuality and eroticism in comparison to Western religions. The author highlights the transcendental importance of sex by arguing that ancient Greek and Hindu civilisations “had no problem imagining and worshipping lusty gods and goddesses. They knew that Eros was dangerous and tricky, but they also knew Eros was human” (*Seducing the Demon*, 68-9). Jong sees sex as a natural human condition and, therefore, there should be no shame when talking and writing about it. In the introduction of her edited anthology on female sexuality, *Sugar in My Bowl: Real Women Write About Real Sex*, the author writes that “[w]e are just the same old primates who have, for thousands of centuries been hallooing at one another from the trees and doing it behinds the bushes. [...] Nature made us this way” (xiv).

Religious teachings have also played an important role in ‘correcting’ female sexual behaviour and determining the way it is constructed. The alliance between the state and the Church, with a helping hand of medical science, seemed determined to demonise female sexuality (Giddens, 1993). Female sexual expressions have been kept in check by disseminating the importance of the family, by restricting sexual practices within marriage bonds, by promoting the confession of intimate lives in religious institutions, and by prohibiting any form of contraception. Women have been reduced to figures of procreation and made to stand for moral standards, respectability, domesticity, and purity within the family and the state. In fact, female sexuality has been made to conform to dual perceptions of femininity, by which women have been seen as either virginal angels or as fatal whores or temptresses (Daniluk, 2003; Giddens, 1993), and pathologised and regarded as hysterical, as a result (Giddens, 1993: 21).⁸³ These narrow perceptions of women’s sexual nature have hidden rather than explored

⁸³In the Victorian period, hysteria was considered a female disorder. According to Victorian physicians, a woman’s failure to adjust to self-discipline was seen as a sign of sexual excesses and mental pathologies. Women diagnosed as hysteric were regarded as going against moral conducts, social responsibilities, and the preservation of the family unit. According to feminist historians, hysteria has been considered as a means to impose male-dominated medical science to control the conduct of women and limit their freedom and voices (Rojek, 1994: 88-9).

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the reality of female sexuality and have led to presenting it as a mystery that needs to be unwrapped (Giddens, 1993: 19-21). Jong also holds that the Church has constrained female sexuality into limiting and paradoxical definitions whereby women have been seen as “common property and [have been] regularly categorized [as] virgins, sluts, witches, [or] crones” (2014: 90). The negative religious and sociocultural connotations about female sexuality have persisted in time and have never lost ground in the popular mindset up to the present day.

The sexual revolution of the seventies promised to change the world of sex and, especially, the lives of women, as it brought about new social and cultural developments that deeply transformed the perceptions of female sexuality. The gay, feminist, and hippie movements, along with various civil rights protests against the Vietnam War, racism, social injustice, inequality, capitalism and consumerism, led to significant shifts in society and to the rethinking of gender roles, perceptions of love/sex, and traditional institutions. Women were given more possibilities to speak out their needs and to interrogate their gender roles, motherhood, marriage, and housewifery as their sole objectives in life. Transformations in economy also granted women an opportunity to work outside the home and sustain themselves economically without the need to get married and have children. As Giddens observes, sexuality was separated from “a chronic round of pregnancy and childbirth” (1993: 26). Also, more reliable forms of birth control, such as hormonal contraception, known as ‘the pill,’ together with abortion rights and the appearance of other reproductive technologies, gave women access to unbridled sexual pleasures in the forms of multiple partners without fear of undesired pregnancy, maternal death, or infant mortality (Giddens, 1993: 27-8). Female concerns were voiced in works such as Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Sue Kaufman’s *The Diary of a Mad Housewife* (1967), Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* (1970), and Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970), among many other authors who called for the reconsideration of traditional values and norms that trapped women within domestic and marriage bonds. All in all, the discourse on sexuality and sexual freedom was expanded more than ever before.⁸⁴ However, despite the obvious

⁸⁴In the book *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (1997), John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman also observe that new sexual freedoms led women to be considered as sexual objects whose right to sex came to be seen as a duty (288). Different forms of sexuality were widely represented in the mass media and put on display for all to see to the extent that “sex became a daily staple of American popular culture” (D’Emilio and Freedman, 1997: 288). In a similar vein, Gilleard and Higgs observe that the appeal to sexuality has also penetrated the intimate sphere of women. If, by the sixties, female

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changes that took place with the advent of the sexual revolution, the perceptions of women who explicitly wrote about female sexuality and intimate issues were still negative, and the social changes of the time did not liberate professional women from certain oppressive stereotypes. This was the case with Jong after she published her novel *Fear of Flying*, as explained in the chapter on the reception of her work. In this book and her other novels, the writer responded to the cultural tendency to demonise women who explicitly wrote about sex by allowing her heroines to freely enjoy their sexuality, by undertaking an attack against religious institutions, and by exposing the hypocrisies and prejudices that still riddled American society and that, consequently, undermined the advance of the sexual revolution.

In her early career, therefore, Jong already attempted to challenge negative notions about female sexuality and desire by using several strategies. These included trying to find a new language to express female sexuality, breaking the association of sex with dirtiness and shame, and making female intimate experiences more comprehensible to the general public. This constant search for more adequate words to describe female sexual yearnings has never ceased to exist in her *oeuvre*. In her memoir, *Seducing the Demon*, written around her midlife, the author stated that:

‘Fucking’ is a violent term that means both intercourse and submission. ‘Cunt’ is both a term of abuse and a label for the female genital. ‘Prick’ is also a term of abuse. Our language of sex tells us how much we hate and fear sex even as we yearn for it. (73)

In order to undo negative notions associated with female sexual expressions, the author sometimes went back to the past to recover old words such as “quim” or “quente” to describe female genitalia, as she did in her historical novel *Fanny (Seducing the Demon, 74)*. According to Jong, women have more difficulties to find new words and expressions to write about sex because they lack a female tradition to describe sexual ecstasy (*Seducing the Demon, 73*). Hence, she considers it crucial to help women to find their own language to voice their erotic experiences and feelings without the fear of being denigrated as producers of pornography.⁸⁵ Many female writers refused to contribute to the collection of essays edited by Jong in *Sugar in My Bowl* because they

underwear was selected by its function to provide comfort and hygiene, with the rise of consumer culture and an emphasis on sexuality, it has been made sexy (Gilleard and Higgs, 2014: 126).

⁸⁵Jong identifies herself with the ‘pro-sex’ movement, which can be seen as the antithesis to the ‘anti-porno’ movement and she is also an avid supporter of LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual) rights and same-sex marriage (Templin, 2002: 186).

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feared their husbands' disapproval: "at least half dozen contributors to this book would not say yes until their partners agreed" (*Sugar in My Bowl*, xii). According to Jong, they did not want to collaborate because of the fear of "not be taken seriously if they wrote for [her] anthology" (*Sugar in My Bowl*, xii).

Writing about older women's sexuality is even more complex because it is seen as an inappropriate topic, if not a taboo in Western society. In an interview conducted in 2015, in which Jong was asked about her novel *Fear of Dying* and late-life sex, the writer admitted that sexual practices among older people are still unvoiced and even silenced: "[i]t's not that they don't have it, it's that it's taboo to write about it. There's this privacy thing in Britain which often results in a kind of hypocrisy. People do it, but they don't talk about it" (Finch, 13 Nov, 2015). In another interview, also carried out in 2015, Jong claimed that to talk about ageing in relation to death and sex is still a big issue in our society:

I think we do have a fear of dying and I think there is a taboo of talking about death. My Italian publisher changed the title to *Happily Married Woman Meets Happily Married Man* and when I asked why, she said, 'Italians, the minute you mention death, they start grabbing their testicles.' They don't want to talk about it. Which is odd to me. (Abraham, 24 Nov, 2015)

Jong pointed out that women writers, contrary to men, are less likely to talk about sex in their later years: "[s]tereotypes can be a trap for women writers as well, but at least we have our own ambivalence to fall back on. We are less likely to stereotype our gender. But old? Being old is still taboo" (2014: 91). Jong's later-life works challenge these negative stereotypes associated with sex and old age, and depict sexual experiences of older women. In them, the writer reveals that sex continues to be an important element in an ageing woman's life as both a sign of maturity and a means to achieve self-growth. This will be especially shown in the following section, which explores the interplay of travelling, intimacy, and female sexuality in Jong's fictional works.

Sexual Travelling as a Means of Female Liberation

Open my cunt and you shall see / Engraved upon it:
Italy (Erica Jong, *Fear of Flying*, 136)

Fear of Flying and its explicit treatment of female sexuality established the tone for the rest of Erica Jong's works, in which she continued to explore female sexual intimacies.

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In *Fear of Flying*, Isadora Wing's self-discovery and sexual experimentation are closely related to her experience of travelling in Europe. In one of the novel's flash-back narratives, the character appears as a young rebellious adventurer who is looking for sexual and personal freedom. Through this narrative strategy, Jong takes her readers back to the time when Isadora was not yet married and sought an escape from her family home and American Puritan moral codes. The heroine recalls how, in her early twenties, she explored Italy with her girlfriend Pia. The following quotation exemplifies the young women's erotic adventures in Florence, where they surrendered to their sexual urges with foreign men:

We slept with guys who sold wallets outside the Uffizi, with two black musicians who lived in a *pensione* across the Piazza, with Alitalia ticket clerks, with mail clerks from American Express. I had a weeklong affair with that married Italian named Alessandro who liked me to whisper 'shit fuck cunt' in his ear while we screwed. [...] Then another weeklong affair with a middle-aged American professor of art history whose name was Michael Karlinsky [...]. And then there was the Italian voice student (tenor) who, in our second date, told me his favorite book was Sade's *Justine*, and did I want to enact scenes from it? Experience for experience's sake, Pia and I believed – but I never saw him again. (*Fear of Flying*, 137)

In Jong's novel, travelling functions as a way of self-discovery and maturation through sexual experimentation. The characters use their 'female gazes' to scrutinise men and, in so doing, they enter the space of sexual objectification that had traditionally been prescribed to men. As Isadora points out, she and her travel companion felt empowered when using their 'female gazes' to fulfil their erotic dreams: "[g]radually, the men were reduced to sex objects" (*Fear of Flying*, 136). *Solo* women travellers without male companions can also be seen as a threat to patriarchal values because travelling abroad grants them more power, sexual knowledge, and self-confidence. By making her sexual travellers women who dare to embark on voyages to foreign lands, Jong also questions the notion that only men can leave home and look for sexual adventures. In so doing, the writer subverts patriarchal ideology by giving visibility to a female traveller figure who is not afraid of experimenting with her body. Rather than sexual acts, the sexual adventures of Jong's heroines can be seen as symbols of female sexual freedom, and as a form of rebellion against rigid Puritan American norms and its limits on women's sexual expressions.

Jong's fictional characters' sexual experiences abroad may also be compared to the young men's adventures during what was known as the Grand Tour in the early

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eighteenth century, a sociocultural phenomenon in Europe that was initiated by the aristocracy.⁸⁶ This travelling practice came to be seen as a rite of passage during which a young man became a properly educated gentleman and acquired a better understanding of the arts, social institutions and the culture of foreign countries. Yet, more intimate writings dating from the eighteenth-century reveal the ambiguous nature of the Grand Tour and show that men often used it to live sexual adventures and quite often contracted sexually transmitted diseases (Littlewood, 2001: 2-15). In these journeys, pleasure-seekers went abroad to indulge their sexual fantasies while protecting their reputation at home. A male traveller who embarked on voyages to foreign countries in search of sexual freedom was commonly regarded as a rebel. Lord Byron, for instance, is often considered the emblem of a sexual rebel who confronted rigid social mores and went against the established norms of his times. As historian and travel writer Ian Littlewood observes, Lord Byron was seen as a “wanderer with romantic glamour [who] expressed a scornful rejection of everything most obviously Victorian [and] eroticised the whole project of European travel” (2001: 119).

The Mediterranean was an extremely popular destination during the Grand Tour, as it offered a form of sexual tolerance that was not always found in the travellers’ home countries, and functioned as “the reverse of everything cold, damp, smog-ridden, buttoned-up and repressive in Victorian England” (Littlewood, 2001: 59). Its sunny and hot climate also served as a catalyst that fuelled the travellers’ sexual dreams. Italy in particular came to be seen as an ideal destination which offered sexual passions and an escape from moral and social restrictions. As Littlewood argues, “no other country has been so long and consistently associated with erotic freedom” than Italy (2001: 24). Many well-known male writers expressed their admiration for Italian charms, its bohemian lifestyle, and sexual liberties.⁸⁷ In fact, the country was very often compared to a sensual lady who lured men into seductive labyrinths of passion and adventure.

⁸⁶The duration of the journey and the places visited during the Grand Tour were not set. However, the travellers were expected to spend at least two years in countries such as France, Italy, and Switzerland (Littlewood, 2001: 13).

⁸⁷For instance, in his *Beppo*, written in Venice in 1817, Lord Byron established Italy’s seductive power by stating that: “[w]ith all its sinful doings, I must say, / That Italy’s a pleasant place to me” (Littlewood, 2001: 27). Henry James, writing to the literary critic Edmund Gosse, revealed that he had nothing to relate to him “save that [he] sit[s] here making love to Italy. At this divine moment she is perfectly irresistible” (Littlewood, 2001: 62). Even the more discrete Goethe confessed that in Italy he “ate some nice pears,” but he was “longing for grapes and figs,” which suggests that his trip to Italy was not only a spiritual pilgrimage, but also implied erotic pleasures (Littlewood, 2001: 57-8).

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Therefore, travellers used to go to Italy to live out their erotic dreams and experiment with their sexuality.

Moreover, in the American literary tradition, Europe was often seen as the Old World, a space for romance, high culture, and more sexual freedom. Henry James, a representative of nineteenth-century literary Realism and trans-Atlantic literature, observed that the New World, namely, America, was different from the Old World, which was seen as a place to escape from strict social restraints and Puritan morality. Those who felt oppressed by American sexual politics used to flee to the Old World, which evoked both “adult independence and adolescent irresponsibility” and was an antithesis to the American way of life characterised by prohibition, child-like treatment of individuals and societal control (Littlewood, 2001: 126). Along the same lines, sociology and travel writing scholars Naomi Rosh White and Peter B. White state that crossing the borders helped to postpone responsibilities for those who were not yet ready to step into an adult life (2004: 201). The images of the Old World as a place of liberties and sexual freedoms has also been widely disseminated through the mass media, advertisements, the fine arts, literature, popular culture, and the industry of tourism. Hollywood movies, for example, have promoted the image of the blonde American female tourist as easy game for charming and seductive Italian *casanovas*. All in all, the imagery of the Mediterranean as a place of sexual adventures and romance that was promoted during the Grand Tour has not been banished from popular culture, but has been adjusted to the contemporary travellers’ needs, in which sexual elements continue to play an important role (Littlewood, 2001; Wang, 2000).

Isadora’s youthful sexual affairs in *Fear of Flying* are not limited to her recalled experiences in Italy, but also extend to extra-marital affairs and sexual adventures in Europe, the Old World. In the novel, Isadora seems unhappily married to a Chinese psychologist, Bennett, and, consequently, she is looking for personal and sexual fulfilment. The heroine realises that “[f]ive years of marriage had made [her] itchy for all those things: itchy for men, and itchy for solitude. Itchy for sex and itchy for the life of a recluse” (*Fear of Flying*, 16-7). The young woman seeks adventure and novelty in the arms of Adrian Goodlove, with whom she tours Europe. Even though their affair is short-lived, as Adrian Goodlove abandons Isadora in Paris and returns to his family in England, this experience helps her to reassess her unsuccessful marriage and her own idea of romanticism. The *sojourn* in Europe with her British lover was also necessary to assert her sexuality and her female subjectivity. After her newfound lover fails to satisfy

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her sexually and emotionally, Isadora becomes stronger and realizes that she needs to fly on her own wings: “I knew I would not run after Adrian to Hampstead. I knew I wouldn’t screw up my life for the sake of a great self-destructive passion” (*Fear of Flying*, 412). She realises that sexual experiences are not always fulfilling, and that sex and men cannot lead to the real discovery of her inner-self. Although there is much emphasis on sex in the book, Jong uses it as a form of exploration, growth, and self-empowerment for the heroine. After her sexual adventures in Italy with Pia in her early twenties and after those in Europe with her newfound British lover in her late twenties, Isadora emerges as a reborn woman. The heroine realises that she has become more empowered to continue with her own life as she learns to stand for herself without the need of a male figure: “[p]eople don’t complete us. We complete ourselves. If we haven’t the power to complete ourselves, the search for love becomes a search for self-annihilation; and then we try to convince ourselves that self-annihilation is love” (*Fear of Flying*, 412).

That Isadora matures and becomes more autonomous is also emphasised by Jong herself in the afterword of the book, written thirty years after its publication. In retrospect, Jong seems to justify Isadora’s sexual adventures by stating that she was very young and inexperienced, and, therefore, by implying that her sexual practices were needed to make her grow up. The writer explains that “[t]he twenties are as frenetic a decade as the teens, [because the youth] have a voice inside [their] heads repeating *I want, I want, I want*, but [they] don’t know *what* [they] want or how to get it” (*Fear of Flying*, 427-8, emphasis in original). For Jong, Isadora was “a maniac” obsessed with sex and “always in love with the wrong man;” wanting to find her identity, she acted “on instinct” (*Fear of Flying*, 427-8). According to the author, what Isadora wanted was to break free from her parents and home, to find herself, and to experiment with sex, but she was too young to know how to “recognize love when the madness of sex [was] blinding her” (*Fear of Flying*, 428). As Jong grew older, she understood that the youthful “instinct mostly pushes you towards adventures you won’t grasp until you look back on them” (*Fear of Flying*, 428). The dangers and unpleasant sexual experiences of Jong and her fictional characters are explored in the following section.

Sex as a Source of Danger and Destruction

The land of fuck / is not for sale – / which does not mean / it has no price (Erica Jong, *Becoming Light*, 25)

The previous section has shown that Jong does not belittle the energising and liberating power of sex, and uses sex and travelling as a form of female empowerment to gain insights into the nature of love and intimacy, and, above all, to show the importance of female sexual independence. In her midlife works, Jong does not abandon the travel leitmotif and, in so doing, shows her belief in the liberating power of sexual travelling. However, contrary to her earlier books, in her later writings the writer puts a greater emphasis on the idea that sexual adventures can be self-destructive and dangerous for a woman. Jong's midlife works demonstrate that the writer's female protagonists come to an understanding that unbridled sexual relationships can have their downsides, and that men do not experience sex in the same way as women. However, Jong's heroines do not disparage sex for this reason, but celebrate it as a vital source of self-development. Hence, Jong's midlife fictional characters appear as survivors that emerge from their destructive sex-based relationships with renewed, self-confident, and stronger inner selves.

In *Serenissima* or *Shylock's Daughter*, written when Jong was forty-five, the novelist shows the destructive power of sex and even seems to find gratification in the absence of men in the lives of her female characters. The protagonist, Jessica, thinks that love and sex are “a trap to make you crazy [and] obsessed” (*Shylock's Daughter*, 66). What is more, the character adds that living without men and sex allows for more freedom and autonomy, and contributes to a woman's self-development:

Life is so much simpler without it [sex]. My head was so much clearer. And I could concentrate on my work. At night I went to bed with volumes of Shakespeare ranged around my pillow and no lover to jealously kick them onto the floor. I cherished my solitude, my books, my maidenly envelope of cool, clean sheets, my guardian white roses. (*Shylock's Daughter*, 61)

Yet, Jessica, like Isadora in *Fear of Flying*, also admits that she needed these intimate experiences in order to mature and get to know herself better:

I had not come to this delight of solitude and chastity easily, as you might imagine. I had lived much of my life for love – with results as predictable as they are common: heartbreak, yearning, drinking too much, and stoical decisions never to love again, no sooner made than broken. (*Shylock's Daughter*, 61-2)

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Similar ideas are also present in other works written in the author's middle years. In *Any Woman's Blues*, the novelist takes the protagonist, Leila, through a spiritual life journey during which she learns that even though sexual passions are important, men and romance cannot guarantee happiness and self-satisfaction. Moreover, Jong also shows that women care more about love and mutual understanding, whereas men are more focused on sexual pleasure and are afraid of commitment. Leila's relationship with her young lover, Dart, clearly illustrates that men and women's approaches to sex are different: "he's thinking of winning and she's thinking of love, and it will never work. Never. The two sexes might as well be separate species" (*Any Woman's Blues*, 214). Moreover, Leila points out that men "like nothing better than to fuck and run – leave the primordial cave and return to the proxy fight. It's the woman who wants the weekend or the week" (*Any Woman's Blues*, 214). Dart's betrayal is manifested by his infidelity and unexpected comings and goings, which make Leila suffer and inhibit her to work: "[w]ell, I was strong, I thought. I would ride out the crises. Sexual infidelity was not the worst thing in the world. [...] This proved to be easier to say than to do" (*Any Woman's Blues*, 61). Desperate, Leila compares herself to Homer's Penelope and states that "years of waiting for a man to come back makes a woman mad" – to fight her loneliness and misery, she turns to drinking: "[u]nable to paint, I drink. And having drunk, I plunge into despair" (*Any Woman's Blues*, 63). Through Leila's character, Jong reveals that sexual obsession and dependence can be self-annihilating and lead to acceptance of a situation that may involve betrayal and infidelity. Yet, as Leila matures, she understands that when women "reach middle age," they come to terms with "how terribly frail [men] are" and how wrong she was believing that men were necessary in a woman's life and creative processes (*Any Woman's Blues*, 190). The heroine also realises that as women become more mature and more self-assured as they grow older, they constitute a danger for their male-dominated society because men are afraid of smart and knowledgeable women: "[a]nd is that the moment when we become witches to be stoned in the market-place? Not because we are ugly but because we *know* too much. We are onto their game, and they don't like it" (*Any Woman's Blues*, 161, emphasis in original).

These ideas are also stressed through Leila's friend Emmie, a happy single older woman, who serves as a template for Leila's process of growth and maturation. Emmie teaches Leila that life without men and sex is also worth living, and claims that being single is a great "opportunity to find your sane mind. [...] To learn to talk to yourself

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kindly and gently, to learn to nurture yourself” (*Any Woman’s Blues*, 190). Through Emmie, Jong reveals that men and sex do not fuel creativity but, on the contrary, they can even take it away: “[y]ou need *you* to power your creativity. Dart takes you away from you. From the twins. From your work” (*Any Woman’s Blues*, 93, emphasis in original). According to Emmie, Leila needs Dart “like a fish needs a bicycle;” hence, she must make herself her ‘first priority’ instead of projecting all her creative energy onto her younger lover: “[m]ake yourself *your* first priority – you don’t have to be at the affect of someone else. *Seize your life*. Dart’s incidental – and *boring*. *You* give him all the power he has” (*Any Woman’s Blues*, 92, 121, emphasis in original). With Emmie’s help, Leila realises that “sex and creativity [are not] one” and that “life without sex [is] not the worst thing in the world” (*Any Woman’s Blues*, 192). In fact, Leila compares the absence of sex to fasting – “[t]he first three days were wretched, but after a while you got high and even came to like it” (*Any Woman’s Blues*, 116).

After her recovery from her sexual obsession with Dart, Jong takes her heroine on a trip to Italy. The character is depicted as having a romantic relationship with her Venetian lover, Renzo, whose capacity to awaken Leila’s erotic fantasies is such that “[w]hatever he asks [she] will do. He has only to crook his finger and say *vieni*, come, and [she] will follow” (*Any Woman’s Blues*, 267). The lovers experience a deep passion in which human language is not necessary because they communicate with their bodies: “words fail us, we communicate with our fingertips, with our tongues, with the brush of our toes on the surface of our skins. Outside, inside, sun, moon have no meaning, and we are rocking in the boat of each other, in the lagoon of dreams” (*Any Woman’s Blues*, 274). For Leila, Venice equals ‘The Land of Fuck,’ described as “the Tunnel of Love leads to the Romper Room, through caves of bloody endometrial ooze and salty sperm,” where nothing is permanent and safe, but where passions are uppermost (*Any Woman’s Blues*, 269). Leila’s clichéd statement that “[h]e is fucking me as if he wants to enter every part of me discovering America” makes Renzo look like Columbus. Leila, who embodies America, does not resist to be conquered by a European because he represents the Old World, a space where sexual passions and freedoms go hand in hand.

Although Leila allows herself to be swept away by sexual passions, she ultimately learns that the intense romance with the Venetian gondolier is ephemeral and impermanent. It also makes her lose control and self-worth: “I try to remind myself of nonattachment, but that doesn’t work. I want to come back to my center, my equanimity, but The Land of Fuck will not give me back. Having totally forgotten that

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the only moment is now, I am in a reverie about some future life with Renzo” (*Any Woman’s Blues*, 277). Leila’s close friend, Cordelia, who lives in Venice, like Emmie, advises Leila never to fall in love with a Mediterranean lover because for him “sex is sex, but money an’ position last *forever*. [...] We Americani are *very* romantic and believe in moving on. The Europeans are far more practical than we are. [...] And La Mamma is La Mamma” (*Any Woman’s Blues*, 279, emphasis in original). Her friend tries to warn Leila that she is not “the *first* lovely foreigner he has seduced” (*Any Woman’s Blues*, 279, emphasis in original). Through Cordelia’s character, Jong again shows her readers that sexual passions can be a source of danger for a woman and her creativity: “[h]e’s as scared of commitment as any of these American swains, but he’s got the family as a buffer. That’s Italian” (*Any Woman’s Blues*, 280-1). Cordelia even jokes that Italian seducers, like Renzo, should “be on *pensioni* from the Italian ministry of tourism,” because they make foreign women come back again and again in search of passionate sex and an Italian dream (*Any Woman’s Blues*, 281). According to Cordelia, foreign female travellers look for “[a] moonlit roll in the *bateau* for every lovely *straniera*,” because they “all just dyin’ to be swept away by the fatal charm of Italy” (*Any Woman’s Blues*, 281). In Jong’s books, Venetian seducers appear as a tourist attraction for female adventurers who come to Venice brainwashed about Italian passions and romances, but do not know that the gondolier is impossible to tame because he is “the taboo man, the demon lover, the dybbuk, the incestuous incubus. He’s beautiful, but wet dreams are always beautiful. And he’s unhealable. He belongs to another, to mamma” (*Any Woman’s Blues*, 299).

In her midlife work, Jong shows that growing older is not so much about looks, but about the accumulation of knowledge and life-experiences, which consolidates her feminist position in the perception of sexuality and gender relations: “the difference between forty-four and twenty-two in a woman’s life is not just a question of looks. I don’t *look* worse than a twenty-two-year-old – to some men I look better – but I *know* too much. I am less easily conned. [...] I don’t smell the bullshit and call it roses” (*Any Woman’s Blues*, 160-1, emphasis in original). Leila realises that sex was blinding her, and that her definition of love was too limited, since she had always equated love with sex and romance: “I have defined love too narrowly. I have defined it as sexual love, as the love between a man and a woman” (*Any Woman’s Blues*, 244). Hence, she learns that love is “far more than that” and that there are many expressions of love, such as love for writing, for her family, or for art: “[w]riting in this notebook is love, feeding

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my twins is love, nourishing my roses is love, painting is love” (*Any Woman’s Blues*, 244-5). It is precisely these ‘other loves’ and accumulated life experience that make “worth the passage through life” (*Any Woman’s Blues*, 244). Leila’s life story shows a woman who emerges from the obsession with sex and men to self-acceptance through a rediscovery of other aspects of love and the realization that creative energy has nothing to do with men or sexual pleasures. The heroine learns that creation comes from the inside of a woman who is strong and mature enough to stand for herself. Yet, Jong reminds her readers that Leila’s intimate relationships, albeit destructive and painful, are also necessary for her to come to terms with her inner-being and self-growth. In the afterword of the book, Isadora Wing, the fictional author of the novel, states that when a woman reaches her middle life, she “either perishe[s] or recreates[s] [herself] like a phoenix” – Leila has opted “for the latter course” (*Any Woman’s Blues*, 306). It is worth mentioning that in her later life memoir, *Seducing the Demon*, written when Jong was sixty-four, she confessed that Leila’s story in *Any Woman’s Blues* was her story too: “Leila was a version of myself through whose struggle against addiction I could comprehend my own inner battles” (132). The quotation shows that Jong’s works are very much in line with her personal life and that many of her heroines are, in fact, her alter-egos.

As in her previous novels, in her later midlife memoirs Jong continues to depict sexual experiences in Italy. In *Fear of Fifty*, the author tells her own Italian *avventura* with a gondolier named Piero who visits her every morning “to say hello” *all’italiana* (106). However, the Venetian romance only lasts for eight days – “on the evening of the eight day he vanished without a word. He was at sea with people I did not know. He was gone, and I had no idea if he would ever return (*Fear of Fifty*, 106-7). Jong learns that “eros is never permanent, or rather the conditions of its permanence are impermanence” (*Fear of Fifty*, 106). A similar story is evoked in Jong’s later memoir, *Seducing the Demon*, in which she recalls her Venetian seducer, Leonello, who helped her to enact her erotic fantasies and led her to an understanding that for a relationship to last, sex and passions are not enough. After these sexual experiences abroad, Jong feels she re-emerges stronger and more self-confident as she learns new lessons about love, sex, and intimate relationships.

In many ways, the romances with Italian *gigolos* that are described in the writer’s literary works become a contemporary female version of Thomas Mann’s novella *Death in Venice*. Like Jong and her fictional characters, Gustav von

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Aschenbach, the protagonist of the book, are all famous writers in their early fifties who cannot resist Venetian charms. In Jong's literary universe, the women fall for Venetian lovers who they can never possess, whereas Gustav von Aschenbach is mesmerised by an extremely beautiful teenager, Tadzio, who reminds him of a Greek sculpture. Although physical contact between the boy and the German writer never takes place, he gradually becomes filled with all-consuming and destructive inner passions and dies caught in a cholera plague. Contrary to the German artist, Jong is more careful because she has had enough life experiences to know that sexual passions are temporal and can be dangerous. This is emphasised when affairs take place in Venice, a city that is presented as ghostly and mysterious:

But the lovemaking does not produce life. It produces only ghosts, seductive ghosts, ghosts with incredible magnetic and sexual force, ghosts who can rattle pots in the greatest orgasm known on terra firma. In truth, it is not terra firma. It is the sea, and the barque of death floats west to the setting sun. (*Fear of Fifty*, 231)

This idea is again emphasised in Jong's memoir, *What Do Women Want*, in which she makes a reference to Mann's novella and the temporality of sexual dangers lurking in the seductive city of Venice:

Venetian love affairs, like Aschenbach's with Tadzio, inhabit some ideal realm, but they rarely prove durable when reality draws. Perhaps that's the whole point. Venice accretes into the form of a yearned-for lover to teach us something about time, about beauty, about mutability. If a thousand-year republic can fall, Venice tells us, then even the greatest lovers are transitory. Venice is our earthy correlative for mutability. (164)

The idea of sex as a source of danger is repeated in Jong's historical novel *Sappho's Leap*. In this book, the writer revives the Greek poetess from the classical tradition and reveals how the life journey from youth to middle age teaches that sexual passions can sometimes be very destructive and dangerous, just like Venetian affairs with seductive gondoliers. As the character of Sappho grows older, she starts teaching young girls about love and sex.⁸⁸ For instance, the Greek poetess reminds her student Dica that "love is not a fatal disease but a powerful lesson;" she knows it because she has "lived through many shipwrecks" (*Sappho's Leap*, 297-8). Although in Ovid's version of *Heroides* Sappho dies of grief and despair by jumping off the White Rock⁸⁹

⁸⁸In her article "Sappho Schoolmistress," Holt Parker states that Sappho taught music and instructed young girls in sex education (1996: 2).

⁸⁹The Leucadian cliff is thought to be located on the west coast of the Greek mainland (Greene, 1996: 6).

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for the love of the boatman Phaon,⁹⁰ Jong takes advantage of the fragmentary nature of Sappho's story and offers her readers an open ending to make their own version of how Sappho finishes her life. Jong's confession that she "strongly felt that the tradition of her suicide was wrong" suggests that she decided to rescue the lyrical poetess from her fatal ending (*Sappho's Leap*, 315). In so doing, the writer shows that female passions do not end with age, and that women who express their sexuality do not have to be punished with death. Jong vindicates the position that love has no boundaries and that an aged woman can fall in love as 'crazily' as a teenager. However, life-experience does not lead Sappho to folly: in Jong's novel, the heroine hesitates over whether to jump or to stay alive. Probably, the heroine decides to live.

The love affair between young Phaon and Sappho as an older woman is also present in one of Jong's poems from the collection *Love Comes First*. In the poem, "Talking to Aphrodite," Jong's Sappho sees herself as too wise and mature to fall in love with a man, and gives preference to creativity rather than sex and men, because she knows too much about life and the dangerous nature of erotic passions: "[b]ut I am wise / if not yet quite old, / wanting the poem / more than the lover, / wanting words / more than the sticky dew / men secrete in their / private places" (*Love Comes First*, 77). In an interview with journalist Bill Moyers in 2003, Jong explained that although sexuality was an important subject in Ancient Greece, the Greeks knew that sexual interaction implied destructiveness and temporality. Consequently, they gave more value to friendship between partners and friends: "[t]hey understood, you know, that we are moved by sexual passion. [...] But that if we want something that lasts, we look for friendship. So, I was... I'm very moved by their philosophy of love" (Moyers, 27 June, 2003). In fact, the writer admitted that "we make fools of ourselves by sexual passion," a statement that applies to her fictional characters in her literary productions and midlife memoirs (Moyers, 27 June, 2003).

The idea that the perceptions of sexual relationships and passions change as people grow older is also visible in Jong's midlife poetry. If in her early poems sex was always presented as provocative, sassy and stimulating, in her later volumes the poetic voice appears less obsessed with sexual dreams and more focused on love, creativity, and the search for one's self-identity. Jong's poem "Lullabye for a Dybbuk," from the

⁹⁰The eighteenth-century Romantics admired Sappho for her courage and commitment, and they adopted her image as an emblem to exemplify desperate and passionate female desire and death for love (Greene, 1996: 5).

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collection *Becoming Light*, written when Jong was forty-nine, shows that sex becomes less significant, whereas family, writing, and personal freedom start to be of a paramount importance in a woman's life as she grows older. In the poem, the poetic voice talks to her old self, which wants to bring her back to the 'Land of Fuck' to indulge into sexual pleasures. However, the new and wiser self does not listen because she knows that sex does not provide fulfilment and personal freedom. The older self "wants to come back / She is digging / her long red nails / into the tender meat of my thighs / She tweaks my clit, / hoping that my sexaholic self / will surface / and take me back, back, back / to the land of fuck, where, crazed with lust / I come over and over again, / going nowhere" (*Becoming Light*, 3). The new self is "the calm woman / nourishing her roses, / her daughter, her dogs, / her poems, her passionate / friendships," whereas the old self wants her to go back to chaos claiming that disorder can fuel creative energy (*Becoming Light*, 3-4). The speaker will not come back to the 'Land of Fuck' because "the new tenant / is wiser to her tricks, / *Disorder is not poetry*, / she says. *Pain / is not love. / Love is flowers; love gives / without taking; / love is serene / and calm*" (*Becoming Light*, 4, emphasis in original). The other poems in the same collection also show that sexual pleasures come with a high price and that nothing is given for free: "[t]he land of fuck / is not for sale – / which does not mean / it has no price. / The tax / is tranquillity, calm, / and the stillness of life. / The land of fuck / has a price" (*Becoming Light*, 25). Another of her later poems, "In Vino Veritas," which appears in Jong's latest collection to date, *Love Comes First*, shows that the poetic voice used to love passion, the promise of love and sex, but, as she grows older, she starts to question her insatiable search for sexual pleasures. The ageing poetic voice realises that all her youthful ideas about the freeing power of sex were vain and false: "[w]hat was I looking for / in those crystal depths? / Transport to / a real / of pure spirit? / Transparency? / Transcendence? / It was never there" (*Love Comes First*, 36).

All in all, Jong and her heroines' sexual adventures reveal an ongoing paradox that is present throughout her literary productions and which receives more emphasis in her midlife works: for Jong, fragile and unbridled sexual passions are a source of danger and self-destruction for a woman. However, these experiences, along with sexual travelling abroad, are necessary to foster self-growth, self-assertiveness, and maturity. Although, as seen in the first chapter, the author has been trivialised because of the explicit treatment of intimate female issues in her work, and has been misinterpreted as an opportunist who used sex to sell her books, a closer analysis of her work articulates a

coherent discourse about sex, female subjectivity, and a process of maturation that emerges from both of them. Jong reveals her ultimate feminist agenda in her celebration of women's independence, her disclosure of the dangers of unrestrained sexual passions and dependence on men, and her refusal to reduce women to bodies whose allure and passions disappear as they grow older. Even if Jong expresses the disillusionment with temporary sexual encounters in her midlife and later works, the writer continues to voice sex-related concerns in her writings and, significantly, as will be demonstrated in the next sections, she gives visibility to post/menopausal characters who are depicted as technologically savvy, sexy, and brave women, ready to experiment with their sexual drives with men, no matter their age.

A Counter-narrative to Post/Menopause

I think pleasing men is hormonal (Erica Jong,
Abraham, 24 Nov, 2015)

In popular Western thought, the cessation of menses signals the loss of sexual appeal and libido.⁹¹ The narrative of decline portrays post/menopausal women as asexual, not interested in sex, and not able to seek out sexual pleasure in their lives and relationships. This negative view of ageing not only reminds older women that they cannot compete with younger and more desirable females, but also restrains them from initiating sexual practices through fear of being rejected or seen as 'promiscuous old ladies.' Although

⁹¹According to the medical science, a lower interest in sexual activity in ageing women is due to physiological and psychological changes that are likely to occur when women reach menopause. A decreased interest is caused by a higher reduction of the libido and fluctuations in androgen levels that tend to appear later in men's bodies (Edwards and Booth, 1994). The common physical sexual difficulties that many menopausal women face are characterized by an increased vaginal dryness, urinary incontinence, lower clitoral and orgasmic sensitivities, among other features that may cause unpleasant and even painful intercourses (Daniluk, 2003; Roberts and Padgett-Yawn, 2011). Medical research also points to the embarrassment caused by the previously mentioned physiological changes that may discourage women to have sex and result in a loss of libido and orgasmic intensity. Although the changes that occur in transitional stages of women's lives are widely discussed in public, social, and scientific domains, which causes a lot of debate about whether post/menopausal women become more or less prone to sexual performance, many women live through their post/menopausal phases as if they have not occurred. Some women report that they feel perfectly well, which, given the abundance of the existence of literature that concerns post/menopause, leads them to question their 'normality' (Bates, 12 Dec, 2015). The discursive mechanisms in the popular media and multinational markets have created new discourses that signal the problems that each post/menopausal woman should have: "[c]ompanies have realized that there is big money to be made from a baby boomer demographic in full menopausal flush" (Bates, 12 Dec, 2015). Ageing women are told what syndromes they should be experiencing, which are regarded as perfectly normal, whereas those women who go smoothly through their post/menopause may be even perceived as pathological because they do not report having any problems. This example clearly illustrates the powerful influence of the discourse on sexuality on ageing women in the Western mindset.

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the menopause is now widely spoken about, especially in clinical and medical settings, the topic is often “shrouded in mystery, myth and misinformation” and even seen as a taboo (Bates, 12 Dec, 2015). These cultural stigmas may explain why women are not always prone to talk about their post/menopausal experiences openly. The American correspondent for the Thomson Reuters Foundation, Lisa Anderson, reports that when women reach middle age, they become almost invisible in society and are barely registered, because the data collection of female sexuality, health, employment, and domestic violence starts at the age of fifteen and ends at forty-nine, which shows that after having reached the end of the reproductive stage, women become excluded from the analysis (13 April, 2015). That is, according to normative timetables of the life course, sexual drives arouse in youth and reach their full potential during mid-adulthood, a period that is also marked by reproduction and physical attractiveness (Roberts and Padgett-Yawn, 2011: 107). Some authors argue that since older women can no longer ensure the growth and well-being of the nation, they are not taken into consideration (Frueh, 1997; Greer, 1991). Greer also highlights that menopause brings a woman closer to mortality, since her ovaries are dying and there is nothing she can do about it (1991: 142). There is a general refusal to voice the needs and sexual desires of ageing women, who are often perceived as invisible because they no longer embody productive and, hence, a ‘useful’ role in society.

Contrary to these views, more recent medical studies reveal that some post/menopausal women report heightened sexual activity and support the idea that the quality of sexual performance and the possibility to reach orgasm in women do not diminish with age, but, on the contrary, can even become more intensified (Levy, 1994). According to existing literature, “[a] woman in her forties is more likely to be coitally orgasmic than a woman in her twenties,” because there is “a dramatic increase in the amounts of luteinising and follicle-stimulating hormones circulating in a woman’s blood-stream” (Roberts and Padgett-Yawn, 2011: 101-7). Sex for an ageing woman may be seen as a new awakening that brings greater intensity to sexual experiences.⁹² The studies on female sexuality in midlife also show that there is a higher degree of sexual confidence in older women because they have better knowledge of their sexual

⁹²Sandberg argues that a sense of growing older and approaching the terminal stage may even intensify sexual performance in ageing subjects (2013). The awareness that life is not going to last long can enhance feelings that arouse new sensations and deeper pleasures: “when the intimacy and touch will be disrupted by the coming of death [...] every caress, every encounter skin to skin, is given particular significance and ‘beauty’” (2013: 27). According to Sandberg, “sex and sexuality in later life are meaningful because of death” (2013: 28).

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needs and bodily stimulations based on their previous sexual experiences (Daniluk, 2003; Levy, 1994; Roberts and Padgett-Yawn, 2011). There is an increasing number of ageing men and women who opt for active sexual lives and rediscover sex as a pastime, helped by various workshops that “encourage them to relearn dating skills and brush up on sexual techniques” (Roberts and Padgett-Yawn, 2011: 111). Studies reveal that romantic encounters take place among ageing subjects and loving relationships can become even more intense than in previous life stages. As people grow older, they have more time to spend together, get closer to each other, and develop a greater sense of emotional stability, shared intimacy, and mutual understanding (Butler and Lewis, 2002; Roberts and Padgett-Yawn, 2011). Less concerned about “living up to society’s expectations, [older people] may feel that it is time to act self-indulgently, especially if they have been single for a number of years” (Roberts and Padgett-Yawn, 2001: 113). Also, as people grow older, they are less accountable for their already grown-up children and are exempt from fear of pregnancy, work-overload, career-building, and settling down, among other issues that preoccupy younger people (Roberts and Padgett-Yawn, 2011: 106, 113). Hence, ageing individuals can start activities that had previously been abandoned – a higher sense of freedom and joy can be projected onto the cultivation of new relationships. Couples who start dating and (re)discovering sex in later life also report less stress and show more tolerance to each other because they have gained enough life-experience to know what they want and, at the same time, respect the personal space of their partners (Roberts and Padgett-Yawn, 2011: 106, 113). As a result of this approach to sexuality in old age, the images of older people interested in sex and romantic relationships are now present in magazines, newspapers, films, and other forms of popular media (Roberts and Padgett-Yawn, 2011; Sandberg, 2015).

In summary, new shifts in understanding female sexuality and sex have contributed to perceiving menopause in a more positive light. Disrespectful identifications of post/menopausal women with witches, crones, hags, or women gone wild, which have populated our Western cultural landscape, are now losing ground (Frueh, 1997; Greer, 1991).⁹³ Those women to whom sex was and is still an important

⁹³The archetypal witch is always an old female whose existence is surrounded by mysterious forces that she can employ to protect or to curse others. In popular culture, the witch is thought to connect with the supernatural world and magic by casting spells, using potions or amulets among other practices, which make her a powerful figure, but also one to be afraid of. The witch very often functions as a scapegoat in society at a time when a sound explanation to strange phenomena or occurrences cannot be explained, which makes her ‘Other,’ somebody who does not fit into societal norms and policies. The fact that witches do not adhere to any of the institutionalized religions also positions them in a category of rebels,

element in life may benefit from new shifts in the discourse on ageing that shows that growing old and sex are compatible. According to Sandberg, post/menopausal women do not regard ageing as a stage of losses and debilitation of their functions and capacities, but as a continuous “process of becoming in which the body is set” (2013: 19).

In the work produced after her midlife, as well as in her most recent interviews, Jong demonstrates that getting older does not imply the loss of sexual interest and romance. Interestingly enough, the writer does not even voice the physical transformations that occur during the post/menopausal stages. In one of the interviews conducted in 2015, Jong said that:

I remember when there was a whole rush of books about menopause... My book *Fear of Fifty* didn't even mention menopause, you may have noticed. Because it's not a disease. Childbirth is not a disease and menopause is not a disease! In fact, when women stop trying to please men, they totally come into their own. (Abraham, 24 Nov, 2015)

It may be argued that Jong does not want to illustrate physical post/menopausal changes because they are not pleasant topics to talk about. Yet, taking into account her honest writing and her tendency to reflect on her intimate life, the absence of references to these bodily transformations in her works may reflect the writer's smooth transition towards the menopausal phase, or at least her intention not to present menopause a female problem. More than that, the fact that Jong does not depict post/menopausal physiological transformations in her books might also imply that the writer welcomes the cessation of menstruation as something positive. Instead of seeing the process of ageing as characterised by emotional swings and undesirability, the author offers alternative and positive approaches to late-life sex that are visible in her ageing characters, all of which have satisfactory sexual affairs. As a matter of fact, by making

who reject the prevailing moral codes and go against the established social order (Greer, 1991: 390 - 412). It is interesting to see that some feminists, like Germaine Greer, do not underrate the comparison of a post/menopausal woman with a witch figure. According to her, witches have a distinguished history in Western memory, documented long before the invention of writing, which grants them a special position in society that tends to evoke respect mingled with fear (Greer, 1991: 391). The post/menopausal woman can be compared to a witch in that she no longer follows a desired reproductive function, aimed at demographic growth and social development, but embodies freedom from sexual objectification and the male gaze, imbued with sexual desire. Once the climacteric stress is over, an ageing woman may experience a new phase that Greer calls the autumn of one's life that is “long, golden, milder and warmer than summer, and is the most productive season of the year” (1991: 142). To her, the advent of menopause can be perceived as a relief to those women who were not sexually active in earlier stages in life and show no interest in sex as they grow older. Yet, from the lens of the successful ageing discourse, the sexual inactivity in later stages of life is not a sign of ageing ‘well’ and ‘successfully.’

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her heroines have affairs with younger men, Jong shows that women approaching their midlife are able to seduce men as much as younger women do.

The trope of a sexual relationship between older women and younger men is quite recurrent in Jong's works produced around her midlife. In the poem "When I Am an Old Lady" from *Ordinary Miracles*, Jong shows that even if the ageing process makes her lose her good looks, it does not mean men lose interest in her. That is to say, although her erotic capital becomes lesser with age in comparison to earlier points in her life, the speaker in the poem continues to display her sexual attractiveness:

When I am an old lady / the young men / will come to me / & sit trembling / at my trembling / feet / saying: / you must have been / beautiful / when you were young; / you must have been / a wonderful lover - / & perhaps / they will still feel / that current / which you say / passes from me / to you / & which you give back / doubled / on our wild / afternoons. / The madness / will still be there - / the current of sex, / of poetry, of heroism - / which only / another name / for God / passing through us – [...]. (96)

The poem shows that young men will continue to notice her sexual energy and appeal and will "sit trembling" imagining her in her younger days. Similar examples are also distilled into Jong's midlife fictional works. In *Any Woman's Blues*, Leila's sexual partner Dart is almost twenty years her junior – Leila is in her forties, while Dart is "[o]nly twenty-five" (14). Yet, the age difference does not interfere with their passionate sex. In fact, Leila appears as having more libido than her younger lover: "[h]e was passionate twenty-five and I am even more passionate thirty-nine" (*Any Woman's Blues*, 14). In *Sappho's Leap*, the author also portrays Sappho as a sexually active and passionate heroine in her fifties who has sexual affairs with the much younger ferryman Phaon. Jong's Sappho allows herself to be engulfed in the ardent flames aroused by her younger lover, who brings back fire and thirst into her life: "[t]hat was how we began. He wormed his way into my life. I had thought I had had enough of love, was sick of love, sated by love, but this beautiful young creature gave a freshness and carelessness to my life I thought I had lost forever" (*Sappho's Leap*, 270). The scene suggests that instead of neutralising old women and seeing them as sexless mothers or caregivers, Jong grants them power and shows that attractiveness does not finish when women reach post/menopausal age.

The relationship of older women with younger men persists in Jong's later life works. In her most recent novel, *Fear of Dying*, Jong portrays Vanessa as an energetic 'sexy oldie' who has erotic adventures with a man young enough to be her son: "[m]y

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daughter was thirteen and more grown up than my twenty-six-year-old lover” (81). Although, at first, sex is a source of enjoyment, the fictional character realises that her interest in her younger lover is only based on his looks and his sexual energy: “I had taken up him purely for his James Dean looks and the indefatigability of his cock” (*Fear of Dying*, 81). When her *gigolo* no longer satisfies Vanessa emotionally or intellectually, and starts behaving in a childish way, the heroine simply kicks him out of her bed and of her life. Also, because Vanessa knows too much about life, she is less optimistic about temporal sexual adventures that lack companionship and intimacy: “[i]t takes a certain optimism to begin an affair – an optimism I may have lost. [...] And that gets harder and harder as you get older” (*Fear of Dying*, 40). According to the character, “[e]ven if you still looked good, you *knew* too much. You knew all the things that could go wrong, all the cons you could set yourself up for, all the dangers of playing with strangers. You knew discretion as a dream” (*Fear of Dying*, 8, emphasis in original).

Similar ideas are expressed in an interview carried out after the publication of *Fear of Dying*. In it, Jong says that the stereotypes that associate sexual arousal with slim youthful-looking women are not true: “[i]t’s absolutely not true that men *only* want women who are young and skin and bones [...]. It’s not true. But it makes women feel very bad about themselves” (Abraham, 24 Nov, 2015, emphasis in original). The novelist adds that no matter her age and her body shape, she has always felt desirable: “[w]hat’s the sexiest age? Oh God. I’ve always felt sexy. As a teenager I felt sexy, at 40 I felt sexy, and I still feel sexy” (Abraham, 24 Nov, 2015). These comments show that the narrative of decline and the idea that with age women lose social currency and attractiveness do not apply to Jong’s sexual experiences and her external self-image. Rather than that, her comments suggest that sexual appeal is related to self-perception and the way a woman projects herself in society.

However, although Jong’s works demonstrate that sexual appeal and age are not correlated, she also demonstrates that getting older is not an easy task for women, because it may lead to falling victim of ageism and despair. Since women tend to outlive their male counterparts, widowhood can be very harmful for older women. That is, they run the risk to fall “in love with the studs” or become desperate “looking for a place to put all that unfulfilled sexual energy” (*Fear of Dying*, 146). According to the protagonist, it would be a great idea to open a sex shop for all those “unattached women rattling around” so that they “could come, get their needs swiftly taken care of by young studs, and then move on to their grandparentally duties, professional duties, filial

duties” (*Fear of Dying*, 146). In one of the interviews, Jong humorously suggested that those aged women whose partners are already dead, impotent, or show no interest in sex, should find younger lovers: “[y]es, you can find — you know, your 30-year-old male lover with a constant erection” (Bright, 2 Oct, 2007). Yet, this may be a bit complicated, notes Jong, because the majority of young men “don’t want women who are 60,” although some do, for “whatever Oedipal reasons” (Bright, 2 Oct, 2007). Jong’s witty observations and her use of humour in particular may be seen as strategic tools to help women to feel less disadvantaged in youth-oriented societies, and to undo the myth about older women’s asexuality. In fact, studies show that laughter and wit can be effective coping mechanisms. The use of humour empowers people and helps them to go through difficult and stressful situations in life (Lowis and Nieuwoudt, 1994; Martin and Lefcourt, 1983; McGhee, 1999; Yovetich *et al.*, 1990). The use of humour may also help to deal with ageist and sexist comments directed to older people, especially regarding female asexuality in later years.

Jong’s remarks about sexual relationships between older women and younger men are also addressed by the sociologist Tiina Vares in her study on relationships between older women and younger men (2009). In her article, “Reading the ‘Sexy Oldie’: Gender, Age(ing) and Embodiment,” Vares analyses two contemporary films, *Something’s Gotta Give* (2004, directed by Nancy Meyers) and *The Mother* (2003, directed by Roger Michell), and comes to the conclusion that even though there has been greater acceptance of the image of the ‘sexy oldie,’ society is still more inclined to tolerate and to accept couples formed by older men and younger women. Yet, it is important to note that the male participants that Vares interviewed in her study admit that these perceptions are cultural products that could be changed with more positive representations of ‘sexy oldies’. Vares’ findings show that the popular idea of ‘a dirty/indecent oldie’ is losing ground in mainstream cultural portrayals – that is to say, there is a greater acceptance of the new image of a ‘sexy senior/ oldie’ characterised by self-determination, sexual desirability, vitality, and even the capacity to seduce younger men (Vares, 2009). The following section demonstrates how Jong explores sex-based relationships of older women through online dating websites, which enable to rethink the ‘sexy oldie’ image and intimate relationships with men. Although Jong warns about the lurking dangers of these virtual sexual encounters, her ageing heroines are not depicted as frenetic and sex-blinded women, but as experienced, modern, and self-

confident females who know that growing old does not limit their sexual expressions, but rather grants them new possibilities to experiment with erotic pleasures.

The Pleasures and Perils of Online Dating

Probably the best thing about getting older is that you're not as vulnerable to sexual drives and passions as you were when you were younger (Erica Jong, in Mitchell, 1997: 36)

Romantic relationships may occur in various ways and places, which range from old friendships in social circles, dating agencies, or new encounters in the most unexpected venues, such as online dating sites. These online sources are becoming a common phenomenon among both younger and older generations (Davis and Fingerman, 2016; McWilliams and Barrett, 2013; Roberts and Padgett-Yawn, 2011; Sandberg, 2011, 2013, 2015; Stephure *et al.*, 2009). Older people turn to online romance in part as a response to decreasing satisfaction with traditional ways of seeking opportunities to find romantic partners (Stephure *et al.*, 2009). The flexibility and anonymity of the Internet opens up a space for the creation of multiple personality traits – there is no need to reveal one's true identity or actual chronological age (Sandberg, 2013; Whitty and Carr, 2006). The possibility of greater control, more safety, and a larger pool of future romantic partners lead many older adults to try out playful and dynamic virtual dating experiences (Watson and Stelle, 2011; Whitty and Carr, 2006). Dating websites can be appropriated as exciting areas to explore one's sexuality and to make contacts that may eventually lead to sexual or non-sexual encounters outside a common everyday sphere (Sandberg, 2011, 2013). As Sandberg notes,

[...] for people growing old today and in the future, online dating, sex chatting, web-cam sex, access to pornography, and many other things related to the Internet, are/will become central parts of how sexuality is experienced. Fantasy is here interestingly entwined in people's online behaviours, and sexual experiences need not lead to online sexual encounters. (2011: 288)

Moreover, Sandberg observes that online sex web-users do not need to reveal their real faces or age, and can choose when and how to meet people, which allows for more control, power, and caution than in reality (2013: 30). The virtual setting appears as a safe play-space for older women to engage in sexual rendezvous and become more familiar with their own sexuality and their bodies. As expressed by one of the aged female Internet users in Sandberg's study on ageing sexualities and online settings:

[...] you choose yourself when to go there, how far you want things to go and you choose yourself with whom and what. Nobody can get a hold of you, like in everyday life, in physical contact. And this sort of makes it fun, it adds something, it becomes relaxing. (2013: 30)

Another of her interviewed women said that the online dating sites contributed to a (re)discovery of her sexuality, which became more exciting than when she was younger and married (Sandberg, 2013: 29). Similar arguments are found in sociology and ageing scholars, such as Mineko Wada, Laura Hurd-Clarke, and Julia Rozanova, who study on constructions of sexuality in later stages in life within the context of online dating, as reflected in Canadian magazines and newspapers. Their analysis reveals that older people are not being pushed to the margins of society, but, on the contrary, actively engage in online settings for sexual and romantic encounters, and show positive attitudes towards ageing processes:

[...] individuals living in the Third Age are vital, potent, and physically, socially and sexuality active as well as being technologically savvy in that they are able to participate in a variety of online activities, such as connecting socially or seeking romantic or sexual relationships. (2015: 42)

Virtual dating experiences reveal that ageing people do not lose interest in sex and romance. Instead, they emerge as assertive, creative, technologically engaged, and agentive individuals who produce complex meanings of the process of ageing and, in doing so, challenge the narrative of decline.⁹⁴

As Jong grows older, she, too, offers alternative spaces of seduction, such as the online setting, as reflected in *Fear of Dying*. In the novel, Vanessa wishes to reconnect with her youthful sexuality and to bring in some feverish excitement into her life; hence, the heroine subscribes to an online dating site called Zipless.com, in which she describes herself as “[a] happily married woman with extra erotic energy [who] seeks happily married man to share the same” (*Fear of Dying*, 6). Vanessa invites men to “[c]ome celebrate Eros one afternoon per week” and guarantees discretion offered “by playful, pretty, imaginative, witty woman” (*Fear of Dying*, 6). However, although

⁹⁴However, the use of dating sites may also be counterproductive for many reasons. Online dating can sometimes be risky and may cause potential dangers, such as Internet addiction, cyber-harassment or cyber-stalking, lesser face-to-face interactions, fewer community and family activities, or isolation from the outside world (Whitty & Carr, 2006). In addition, ageing individuals may feel inadequate and excluded from society if they do not use technological inventions, or, on the flip side of the coin, an aged person may suffer from isolation or loneliness because of the lack of face-to-face social interaction, as scholars Emma Domínguez-Ruè and Linda Nierling observe (2016: 12). In fact, Internet dating is a clear example of a socially constructed product promoted by discursive apparatuses and the media, which encourage both young and old people to engage into sexual relationships.

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Jong's fictional character is courageous enough to place the ad on the sex site, she is also afraid that this may attract all sorts of "creeps, losers, retreads, extortionists, and homicidal maniacs" that would make her life unbearable and even put her into danger (*Fear of Dying*, 6). As expected, the messages she receives are not romantic and erotic, but vulgar and unrefined. The very first response that she gets shows "a scanned Polaroid of an erect penis" with an accompanying message that asks for her "nude shot and measurements" (*Fear of Dying*, 7). Furthermore, Vanessa learns that society sees ageing women as sexless individuals whose only preoccupations should be family and care giving: "[women over sixty are] supposed to become grandmothers and retreat onto serene sexlessness" (*Fear of Dying*, 8). Moreover, the heroine notes that men *are* permitted to look their age or older, and are even allowed to have sexual dysfunctions, but women, on the contrary, are doomed to solitude and failure because they no longer comply with contemporary beauty requirements: "[a] man can look like he's a hundred, be impotent and night blind, and *still* find a younger woman who never got over her daddy. But a woman is lucky to be able to go to the movies or bingo with another old bag" (*Fear of Dying*, 26, emphasis in original). Thus, Vanessa hates getting older and compares her process of ageing to a dangerous rocky slope that she could not visualise when she was younger:

The downward slope of life is full of rocks. Your skies are blunt and there are these patches of black ice everywhere, ready to slip you up. They may have been there before but you never noticed them. Now they are lying in wait for you on every slope. (*Fear of Dying*, 41)

In any case, after having received a new message from a married man who offers her the possibility to have a sexual encounter once a month to "celebrate Eros," the heroine considers whether to accept his offer (*Fear of Dying*, 41). If in her twenties the character would have been challenged by such a proposal, as she grows older, she becomes more reluctant to accept the invitation from a stranger she has met online. Vanessa considers the proposal foolish and risky, which makes her feel guilty when she recalls the lived experiences with her husband: "[a]m I going to risk all the great things I have with Ash for a perfect stranger?" (*Fear of Dying*, 44)

Vanessa's doubts about the blind date show that she is no longer an inexperienced and frenetic woman looking for sex without thinking of the consequences; life experiences have taught her that sexual passions can be dangerous and do not guarantee long-lasting fulfilment in life: "I used to be good at putting all the

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risks out of my head, but now I think how much I have to lose” (*Fear of Dying*, 45). Even though Vanessa gathers all her courage to meet the suitor at a bar room in New York and to follow him to his suite, their encounter ends up being a very unpleasant experience for Vanessa. However, her failed sexual affair does not lead her to despair, but, on the contrary, teaches her that online dating is a waste of time and that sex with strangers is not satisfactory: “I now thought I must have been crazy to seek intimacy there” (*Fear of Dying*, 271).

That dating websites do not lead to sexual fulfilment is also reflected in one of Jong’s interviews in which she stated that she “never looked for sex on the internet” (Finch, 13 Nov, 2015). For Jong, the popularity of sex websites is caused by general disappointment in contemporary society. That is, people desperately look for love, but find out that love-seeking online is not realistic:

People are very disappointed with the internet as a way of finding love, sex or romance. So, in a way, I’m satirising the dream in my book. My daughter met her husband on JDate and they have a very good marriage, but that was 12 years ago, and I think people are very disillusioned with social media. It doesn’t tell the truth, it’s all about images and I don’t think there’s reality there. A lot of it is about monetising your life. I don’t trust it. (Finch, 13 Nov, 2015)

In the novel, Jong shows that Vanessa’s online dating experiences with web-users end up being unpleasant and unsatisfactory. Jong’s protagonist comes to the conclusion that confidence, love, and trust are the pillars for enjoyable sexual intercourse, and that sex ads on the Internet are unrealistic and disappointing: “[i]t works in fantasy, not reality. In reality you have to trust someone to have great sex, and how can you trust what you read on the Internet? [...] It stimulates our eyeballs, not our brain. So often, I click on the story only to be disappointed” (*Fear of Dying*, 111). These ideas are further developed in the final section of the present chapter, which shows how Jong offers alternative understandings of later-life sexual practices for both men and women in her later work.

Alternative Sexual Practices in Later Life

No, my husband isn’t dead. But I’m talking about what I see around me. And then with the one that one loves, one has to re-invent sexuality. It can’t be the same (Erica Jong, in Bright, 2 Oct, 2007)

If, in the nineties, ageing men in the media were portrayed as caring grandparents who enjoyed spending time with their grandchildren and pursuing their hobbies, during the

last decades the images of older men have undergone some important shifts (Joyce *et al.*, 2015). One of them has been the new emphasis placed on the functionality of men's sexual organs, to the extent that male impotence has come to be understood as a sign of failure in sexual relationships (Calasanti and King, 2005, 2007; Katz and Gish, 2015; Katz and Marshall, 2003, 2012; Sandberg, 2013; Wentzell, 2013). The decrease or cessation of the erectile sexual function and the inability to perform penetrative sex is now regarded as the inability to embody the ideals of 'real' manhood (Wentzell, 2013). Under the paradigm of successful ageing, older men are required to adjust to new hyper masculine and youthful roles in which 'staying hard' and 'playing hard' become indicators of healthy ageing, age-appropriate gender behaviours, and success (Calasanti and King, 2005; Joyce *et al.*, 2015).

Those who cannot meet sexual expectations and adjust to the ideals of manhood are suggested to look for the intervention of adequate medical treatments (Calasanti and King, 2005; Katz and Gish, 2015; Katz and Marshall, 2003, 2012). That is, the solution to recover a sense of masculinity and regain the functionality of the phallus is to turn to sexologists and the medical science, which promise to bring back youthful virility through the consumption of a great variety of sexuopharmaceuticals, such as Viagra or testosterone supplements (Calasanti and King, 2005; Hearn and Wray, 2015; Katz and Gish, 2015; Katz and Marshall, 2003, 2012; Wentzell, 2013). Older men who reject the consumption of pharmaceutical drugs may develop feelings of guilt and inadequacy because they do not follow the model of healthy and successful ageing (Joyce *et al.*, 2015). In this respect, the liberating promises of the discourse of successful ageing have resulted in promoting "the discursive apparatus of the sexy senior, formulated as the intersections of biomedical, consumerist and successful" ideas of ageing (Sandberg, 2015: 223).⁹⁵ In a similar vein, Calasanti and King state that:

Sexual functioning now serves as a vehicle for reconstructions of manhood as 'ageless,' symbolizing the continued physical vigor and attractiveness derived from the experiences of younger men. To the extent that men can demonstrate their virility, they can still be men and stave off old age and the loss of status that accrues to that label. (2005: 16)

In this light, the growth and popularity of biomedicine and pharmaceutical solutions to sexual dysfunctions reveal that sexual performance and its optimisation in later life is

⁹⁵The medicalization of sexuality in the US is also visible in the legislation that allows 'direct-to-consumer' drug promotion, "online drug sales and the engagement of health professionals and drug marketers" (Joyce *et al.*, 2015: 160).

based on very narrow youth-based understandings in which penile-vaginal intercourse, the erectile phallus, and the lubricated vagina are the ultimate goals for successful sexual lives in ageing subjects (Katz and Gish, 2015; Sandberg, 2015). In fact, in the West, the phallus is supposed to guarantee sexual pleasure for women, because it is commonly assumed that women's sexual desires cannot exist without a penile-vaginal intercourse. As Daniluk observes, “[m]en, and the magical penis, still play a central role” (2003: 217). This notion is “based on the assumption that somewhere deep inside every woman, a fierce erotic desire exists, waiting to be unlocked by the lovemaking talents of an erotically skilled man” (Daniluk, 2003: 213). Similar to the emphasis on the erectile penis, older women are also told that regular sexual activity helps to tone up muscles, stimulate blood circulation, maintain vaginal health, and produce lubrication, necessary for the performance of successful sexual acts, which are necessary for the maintenance of good health in older age (Daniluk, 2003; Roberts and Padgett-Yawn, 2001). Moreover, Daniluk notes that masturbation and orgasm are considered as insufficient for a woman's sexual health – sexual intercourse and active sexual life are still seen as the indicators of well-being and happiness of women at all ages (2003: 317).

Jong's later-life writings are in line with these observations as they reveal that contemporary Western society is very much phallus-oriented and permeated with messages that instruct how to create satisfactory penetrative sexual relationships, because sex is mainly talked about in terms of orgasmic fulfilment. Yet, the evolution of Jong's writings shows that phallocentrism loses ground in her works as she ages. For instance, in her earlier volumes of poems, Jong placed a lot of emphasis on the phallus as an object of female pleasure. In her first collection of poems, *Fruits & Vegetables*, written when the writer was twenty-nine, sex and the male body are recurrent topics that are described in a lively style. In one of her early poems, “With Silk,” the speaker in the poem focuses on the phallus, scrutinises the male body, and provides explicit sexual descriptions: “her Chinese lover / with balls / like fresh linchees / & tongue on her tongue / like a kumquat. / At night / he entered the body / of her dream / [...] / His body was white / in the dream light, / his penis dark / as a tree” (*Fruits & Vegetables*, 15). In another of her early poems, “On the Air,” from the collection *Half-Lives*, published when Jong was thirty-one, the poetic voice compares her sexual drives to radio signals that transmit passion. The speaker's sexual desire is such that it permeates the depths of her body and invites erotic fantasies to take place: “[e]very hair on my head / is

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transmitting signals. / My nipples give off / ultrasonic beeps. / [...] His penis keeps on playing Rock & Roll. / [...] I play the engineer to his disk jockey. / I signal him to take a station break” (*Half-Lives*, 54 - 5).

A phallogentric vision is also clearly expressed in the novel *Any Woman's Blues*. It is interesting to mention that both the protagonist, Leila, and her younger lover, Dart, give a lot of importance to the phallus, which is seen as the central element that guarantees their fulfilling sexual life: “[h]e is inside me again, hard again, the curved shaft of his cock corresponding to the bent desire that drives me, the tip of his glans hitting the spot deep within me that squirts pure liquid, the withes’ potion of the universe” (*Any Woman's Blues*, 13). Yet, as Leila matures, she realises that Dart’s obsession with his sexual organ is much greater than hers, which bears evidence to research that stresses the significance for the phallus to a man’s self-identity and masculinity. Because Dart cannot admit his increasing impotence, he projects his problem onto Leila, whom he blames for his sexual dysfunctions: “Dart impotent was not a pretty sight. He was convinced his life was over. All men perhaps identify themselves with their cocks, but in Dart’s case the identification was total. He lay on the bed as limp as his organ. He cried real tears. He blamed me” (*Any Woman's Blues*, 114). Leila comes to conclusion that the “size and stiffness of a man’s cock determines his life. It determines how he feels about himself. It determines whether he likes himself. A man who likes his cock likes himself. And a man who can’t trust his cock can never trust himself. Or a woman. Or any other man” (*Any Woman's Blues*, 276). In her historical novel *Sappho's Leap*, the author also highlights the never-tiring phallus of Sappho’s younger lover Phaon, who is described as having an enormous sexual potential: “[t]he phallus empties and fills again. The phallus stands up, lies down, and stands up again before you know it” (*Sappho's Leap*, 271).

As Jong grows older, the focus on the phallus becomes less important, which is seen in her later life works and interviews. In her memoir, *Seducing the Demon*, the writer stated that “our sexuality is so focused on the stiff prick that we have no idea what to do when that becomes occasionally problematic as it does with age. You can become a Viagra junkie or you can create other ways of making love” (79). The same idea is presented in an interview conducted in 2007, in which Jong highlighted that men were too focused on their penises and were expected to meet women’s erotic needs as proof of their masculinity, virility, and sexual potential. To Jong, this viewpoint led to overlooking the fact that the human body is an erogenous zone with unlimited

possibilities. According to the writer, men “have to get over their identification with themselves and the hard dick. And once they do, the sex can be truly wonderful” (Bright, 2 Oct, 2007). Moreover, the author added that:

Suppose he doesn't have an erection? You have to be whole-body – tantric sex. You have to change the way you look at sex, and him too, because men have a real problem with that. They're so focussed on their penis, you may have noticed, that making the change from focus-on-the-penis to focus-on-the-whole-body is hard for them. (Bright, 2 Oct, 2007)

These ideas are more accentuated in her latest fictional work, *Fear of Dying*. After Vanessa's husband's illness, he becomes impotent; however, this sexual dysfunction is not seen as a problem, but rather as an opportunity which leads the couple to significant discoveries about the new meanings of sexuality and tantric sex. As Vanessa and Ash grow closer to each other, they learn that getting older can be seen as a positive stage in life that provides alternative ways of lovemaking because sex is no longer bound to youthful sexual urges, erect phalluses, and the search for orgasm. After Ash's recovery, the couple discovers *kundalini*,⁹⁶ commonly defined as a physical energy which runs through the body like an electric serpent and grants new bodily experiences. The finding of whole-body practice is especially significant to Ash, who is intolerant to Viagra because it gives him “those infamous blue spots” and makes him feel as if he has “been run over by a truck” (*Fear of Dying*, 149). The couple realises that Viagra is not the solution to their sexual fulfilment and that the libido changes as people grow older: “[n]o matter what the cheerleading gurus of ageing may say, sex among the seniors is not what it once was when we were young” (*Fear of Dying*, 145).

This statement implies Jong's criticism of the medicalisation of later-life sexuality and the need to optimise men's sexual capacity, as disseminated through the successful ageing discourse and the focus on the erectile phallus. That is, through Vanessa's character, the writer shows that as she grows older, she no longer sees sex as an expression of coital intercourse, but rather as a whole-body experience, which leads

⁹⁶The experiences of *kundalini* have been known since ancient times (Kumar and Larsen, 2003). According to classic Hindu yogic traditions and beliefs, every person has the energy of enlightenment and the capacity to experience *kundalini*, but until it is properly stimulated, it lies hidden in the body. *Kundalini* is very often compared to an unconscious instinctive force or a huge volume of potential primal energy, similar to an electric current running along the spine like a dormant serpent, which can be awakened through mediation, breathing, chanting mantras, sex or even traumatic near-death experiences. As Kumar and Larsen state, the *kundalini* experience activates the seven chakras, the centres of energy, in the human body and passes “from the base of the root of the spine to the crown of the head” (2003: 111). Therefore, those who experience *kundalini*, report feeling a boundless energy passing through their body that starts in the abdomen and moves upwards to reunite body and mind.

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to the discovery of new sexual practices. When Ash makes love to his wife for the first time after his recovery from his illness, he reports feeling “a bolt of lightning go down [his] spine” and confesses that he has never felt it before (*Fear of Dying*, 213). The sensation of involuntary wave-like movements along his spinal column is so strong that it also reaches Vanessa, who feels an immense flow of sexual and spiritual energy (*Fear of Dying*, 213). According to Vanessa, *kundalini* is a mental state that is closely related to spirituality, creative energy, and maturity: “[t]he *kundalini* is life force, energy, fire, sexual power. Some yogis believe that when you harness that body power to the mind, there’s nothing you can’t do. When you have that fire – sexuality, creativity, knowledge – everything comes together” (*Fear of Dying*, 213). Newly found sexual experiences help the couple to get closer to each other and lead them to conclude that their bodily urges are not physical, but rather spiritual, initiated by the waves of bliss and inner fire that ignite their newly found sexual desires:

Meanwhile, Asher and I were growing closer and closer. His near-death experience had opened him up somehow. And I was opened up too. I was reminded of how overwhelming real passion could be, how it could become your *raison d’être*, and how few people wanted to acknowledge that. (*Fear of Dying*, 215-6)

Through the discovery of *kundalini*, the spouses embrace new powerful energies that allow them to obliterate Ash’s illness and his impotence as they learn to channel the heightened energy into a betterment of their sexual life. Hence, Vanessa no longer wants to go back to her youthful days when good looks and penile-vaginal intercourse were understood as the essence for good sexual life: “[f]uck young and beautiful – this is worth everything – and I come with fierce contractions that seem to go on and endlessly” (*Fear of Dying*, 213, emphasis in original). The statement shows that whole-body sex can also lead to endless organismic experiences.

Yet, very importantly, although Vanessa no longer advocates coital sexual performance, she does not belittle the importance of orgasm. However, the following statement also reveals that it becomes less crucial in her life, because the heroine realises that orgasm-oriented experiences become less significant as she ages: “[r]eally, folks, the search for orgasm is pure hunger. You think of it when you haven’t had it in a while. After a long time you forget, become more light-headed. Sexual starvation is like other forms of hunger, but hunger is not love” (*Fear of Dying*, 226). In fact, Vanessa laments that people are too focused on genital stimulation and seek pure sexual pleasure, which is especially relevant to a sex-obsessed American culture which aims at

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“mutual orgasm” through one-night-stands (*Fear of Dying*, 216). Since whole-body sex is not an orgasm-based practice, it is “alien to a lot of Americans” who are blind to see that human bodies function as “the instrument of the sexual symphony” (*Fear of Dying*, 216). In Jong’s novel, instead of penile stimulation, the characters seek mutual understanding, complexity, and “a sense of safety and caring” (*Fear of Dying*, 216). As a matter of fact, these experiences bring the couple closer to each other: “[w]e had beaten terrible odds and we were still holding hands in bed” (*Fear of Dying*, 145).

In an interview following the publication of *Fear of Dying*, when Jong was seventy-three, she revealed that as people grow older, touch becomes “more important, erections are less important,” and that “somebody needs to write about that” (Kelsey, 16 Oct, 2015). As has been demonstrated, this is exactly what Jong does in her later life works, in which she honestly explores the changes that occur in the human mind and body as they age. Jong’s latest books show that, in this respect, sexuality is a wide terrain to be explored, contrary to the narrative of decline, which associates old age with losses and asexuality. Her most recent writings open new paths to alternative approaches to human sexuality, which, as exemplified in the next section, show the importance of touch and the growth of emotional closeness between the partners.

Emotional Intimacies and the Home Space

My experiment with ziplessness had lost its savor. I wanted the growing closeness with my husband more than I wanted strangers. Astonishing (Erica Jong, *Fear of Dying*, 217)

Jong’s later literary productions show that ageing not only provides space to discover alternative sexual practices, but also determines a higher degree of intimacy, emotional fidelity, and mutual understanding between partners, who become more confident when experimenting with sex.⁹⁷ Terri Clark, a professional trainer and facilitator in sexual issues, states that “touch is truly fundamental to human communication, bonding, and health. Even if you (or your partner) are ill or have physical disabilities, you can engage in touch and/or intimate acts and thereby benefit from closeness with another person” (14 April, 2015). According to Clark, even though human sexual needs change over their lifecycle, the need of intimacy, closeness, and touch continue to be important as

⁹⁷Because of a gradual decrease in testosterone levels from the ages of forty-five to seventy, it takes longer for men to ejaculate, which results in sexual acts becoming longer and more sensual (Roberts and Padgett-Yawn, 2011: 109).

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people age: “[i]t is simply not true that when we are lighting dozens of candles on our birthday cake that we lose interest in sex or that our lives as sexual beings are over (14 April, 2015). The following quotation shows that not only the emotional attachment and a sense of intimacy between partners gain more significance with age, but that an increased self-assurance and maturity also add to better sexual experiences:

The independence and self-confidence that come with age can be very attractive to your partner or potential partners. No matter your gender, you may feel better about your body at 72 than you did at 22. [...] Confidence and honesty can be sexy and appealing. (Clark, 14 April, 2015)

Studies show that, with age, men give less focus on the phallus and more emphasis on lovemaking, foreplay, and the whole sexual intercourse (Roberts and Padgett-Yawn, 2011: 111-2; Sandberg, 2013, 2015; Wentzell, 2013). That is to say, their sense of the connection between sex and emotion increases with age. Sandberg’s study on ageing, masculinity, embodiment, and sexuality, based on in-depth interviews and body diaries of twenty-two men, aged sixty-seven and eighty-seven, also lends weight to the fact that many older men give more importance to intimacy, closeness, and touch with their partners than to genital stimulation (2013). As Sandberg states,

[Men’s] experiences of ageing bodies could neither be reduced to experiences of loss or of erectile or other bodily capacities nor be understood as success stories whereby men resisted ageing and regained their bodies of youth, for example, through sexuopharmaceuticals. Instead, the materiality of the men’s ageing bodies directed them towards increasing intimacy and touch, and towards a wider discovery of the body as a whole. (2013: 33)

Similar findings are also reflected in anthropologist Emily A. Wentzell’s study on how older men in Mexico cope with ageing, chronic diseases, intimate relationships, and decreasing erectile capacity (2013). In her book, *Maturing Masculinities: Aging, Chronic Illness, and Viagra in Mexico*, Wentzell reveals that age-related sexual disabilities and the cessation of penetrative sex lead to the development of multifaceted understandings of bodily changes and sexuality in later life. Taking into account the focus on manliness through sexual performance in Mexican culture, it is interesting to see that none of the study participants have provided narrow stereotyped portrayals of their sexuality. Instead, they revealed more complex approaches to the cult of the phallus and penetrative sex, such as acting as financial providers, incorporating fond feelings, and cultivating emotional attachment to their partners and commitment to their families.

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It is significant to note that an increased degree of intimacy and touching, rather than sex, also promotes a greater sense of happiness, while the lack of it may result in feelings of loneliness and anxiety: “[l]oving physical gestures, such as holding hands, linking arms, hugging and kissing, become much more important during old age. A person who has lived a long time often craves for something deeper than a sexually fulfilling relationship” (Roberts and Padgett-Yawn, 2001: 112). As a matter of fact, sexually-active aged individuals report that they practise sex not because it benefits their health, as highlighted in the medicalised discourse on successful ageing, but because of mere pleasure, personal fulfilment, and even a sense of spirituality (Daniluk, 2003; Levy, 2014; Roberts and Padgett-Yawn, 2001; Sandberg, 2013). Moreover, the need of emotional closeness becomes more important when people grow older as they experience that their contributions to society become more limited and a sense of the close presence of death more intensified (Roberts and Padgett-Yawn, 2001: 112).

These ideas are present in Jong’s midlife memoir *Fear of Fifty*, in which the writer reveals that, with age, she finds self-fulfilment in feeling close to her husband Ken:

[My] waking life with my husband has become more and more sexual. We find ourselves making love every night, laughing and kissing in the morning. I find myself telling him my dreams and fantasies, reading him pages which excite him, teasing him like a new lover. We have gone into a domestic idyll. This astonished me. (*Fear of Fifty*, 121)

Jong discovers that sexual pleasures can be lived through a different spectrum of sensual expressions in which cuddling, tenderness, and closeness are very important elements for sexual satisfaction, as seen in these lines, taken from an interview conducted after the publication of her latest novel:

Throughout our lives, from infancy to old age, we need touch. Infants who are not touched grow up unable to make connections with other people, that has been proven many times. When older women are not touched it seems tragic to me... and, actually, most of the older women I know have some kind of love, touch or intimacy in their lives. It’s a lie that women shouldn’t be touched when they’re older. But it’s another powerful aspect of sexist propaganda – that you’re only fuckable if you’re under 25 and pathologically underweight. (Abraham, 24 Nov, 2015)

For Jong, “intercourse produces an orgasm in the pelvic area, but other kinds of sex produce it all over the body – and mind” (*Seducing the Demon*, 80). The writer believes in the power of mind, which is “our most important sexual organ” that helps to engage

into sexual fantasies and creative ways to explore alternative sexual drives (Bright, 2 Oct, 2007). According to Jong, people “could lose everything else, but as long as [they] didn’t have a lobotomy, [they]’d be sexual. It’s the key to everything” (Bright, 2 Oct, 2007). These statements reveal that, to Jong, sexual drives and transcendence are synonymous, since they help to get closer to her inner being and to get a sense of emotional intimacy.

Similar to Jong, Ravindra Kumar and Jytte Larsen also claim that sexual energy is “the most powerful, most natural and perhaps the *shortest path* to Self/God-realization, if it is understood properly” (2003: 195, emphasis in original). According to them, “[s]exual energy is the bearer of life and God will remain beyond the reach of a person who is ignorant of sexuality (Kumar and Larsen, 2003: 199). They argue that the juxtaposition of transcendence and sex in ancient Hindu erotic sculptures did not cause “any sense of vulgarity, rather, [they generated] the feelings of sacredness and peace” (2003: 195). Likewise, Jong believes that Western religions categorise sexual practices into moral and immoral forms, and, in so doing, they limit the expressions of human sexual nature. This is clearly exemplified in the following quotation:

Is the yearning spiritual or sexual? Who’s to say that the two are not the same? Rumi and Kabir and most of the Persian poets see them as aspects of the same force – but then, of course, the Persians invented love. [...] Our Protestant puritanism has built a wall between physical yearning and the yearning for God. (*Fear of Fifty*, 123)

It is also worth mentioning that newly found sexual experiences lead Jong to questioning heterosexuality. At sixty-four, in her memoir *Seducing the Demon*, Jong revealed that as people grow older, heterosexuality loses its significance and individuals become freer than ever before to consider other forms of sex (79). The same idea is repeated in one of the interviews carried out in 2007, in which the writer said that “[a]ffairs with women seem to proliferate after 50” (Bright, 2 Oct, 2007). According to Jong, because men die sooner and tend to experience more health problems than women, women have to contemplate alternative sexual expressions: “heterosexual men grow scarce [...], but there are so many lovable women. Who knows what the future holds? I have learned never to say never” (*Seducing the Demon*, 95). Studies demonstrate that the changes that occur as women grow older can sometimes bring out unusual swings in sexual orientation – post/menopausal women may find out their growing inclination towards lesbianism or bisexuality (Daniluk, 2003; Kitzinger, 1985;

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McCarn and Fassinger, 1996; Weasel, 1996). As Daniluk states, for many women, “it is not until midlife that they begin to be aware of and acknowledge the strength of their erotic desires toward women” (2003: 262). These observations show that the interplay between ageing and sexuality is a complex one, and it becomes even more multifaceted in later life stages.

The evolution of Jong’s works also reveals that it takes a lifetime to detach ourselves from the almost automatic association of sex with genitalia. Jong herself has revealed that even if she “tried to write about the role of sex” in people’s lives, only in her sixties did she realise that in her fifties she knew only “the half of it” (*Seducing the Demon*, 79). According to Jong, “[u]ntil you get wise enough (or old enough) to understand sex as a whole-body experience you know nothing. All my life I had heard about tantric sex and I thought it was utter bullshit” (*Seducing the Demon*, 79). The idea that sexual lives become more fulfilling as people grow older is also exemplified in one of Jong’s later life poems “Continental Divide,” in which the writer says that “[t]he passions of the old / are deeper / that any wells / the young can plumb” and that “[t]he eyes of the young show flame, [whereas] / the eyes of the old, light,” which suggests that sexuality in older age is less focused on orgasmic stimulation but rather on a sense of transcendence and intimacy (*Love Comes First*, 9-11, emphasis in original). Also, the very title of her latest collection of poems, *Love Comes First*, suggests that love for family, intimate relationships, and artistic creation are more important than the love for sex and sexual fulfilment. The same ideas are also highlighted in one of her latest interviews, in which Jong stated that sex “doesn’t necessarily open up people’s souls, and I think that we have to learn that really true intimacy is rare and it depends on other things besides sex” (Young, 1 June, 2011). When asked about ageing sexualities after the publication of *Fear of Dying* in an interview to *LATimes*, Jong again stated that as people grow older, they are “not looking for sex, [they]’re looking for connection.’ And Vanessa realizes that she’s very connected to [her husband] Asher, and that they’re very close and that all these crazy men with fetishes are not going to satisfy the longing for connection” (Lacher, 18 Sept, 2015). With time, Jong and her ageing heroines learn that later life sexual activity should not be understood in narrow terms as solely penile-vaginal intercourse or as a narrative of decline, but should be regarded as a transformative experience that involves other forms of intimacy and bodily expressions. Therefore, instead of looking for sexual adventures abroad or on online dating sites,

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they start to focus more on cherishing intimacy within the marriage bonds and the shared home space.

Research literature shows that as people grow older, they start to give more importance to the home space (Blaikie, 1999; Peace, 2015). Because homes contain idealised images that help to maintain one's identity within changing social realities and conjure a space of intimacy and spirituality, they acquire more importance in later life stages (Blaikie, 1999: 2000). For instance, a sense of belonging and safety is visible in objects that have symbolic values and connections to family, memory, and self-identity (Blaikie, 1999). As gerontologist Sheila Peace in her article, "Meanings of Home and Age," highlights, in later years "the concept of home enables retreat for the self where the past can be remembered, the present leads to the preservation of identity that is supportive and the future remains concealed" (2015: 452). Although homes can trigger sad and painful memories, they also symbolise a place of stability, sometimes compared to a refuge from the outside world (Blaikie, 1999: 2000). Moreover, Blaikie observes that for women of previous generations who performed the roles of wives and mothers, a home place is more important than for men, who tended to inhabit the public domain (1999: 200). Some women like to redecorate their homes in accordance with the times, whereas others prefer to preserve a sense of authenticity and identity intact, which provides a space for memories, rootedness, and a sense of family continuity (Blaikie, 1999: 200).

If Jong's earlier fictional characters craved to explore the world, especially the Old World, and live an adventure in search of autonomy, novelty, and romantic encounters, her ageing characters become more aware of the importance of the home space. They realise that extra-marital sex cannot guarantee self-fulfilment and, consequently, they start looking for stability at home:

As a child, not knowing there is an alternative, you never really appreciate home. As a young adult, home is what you want to leave as soon as possible, brandishing a new driver's license and a boyfriend. Only in midlife – our sexy new term for dread old middle age – does home beckon seductively again, inviting you to pleasures running away can never supply. (*What Do Women Want*, 199)

The increased importance of one's dwelling also shows that home acquires new connotations in old age, including a sense of safety: "[h]ome is the place where you feel safe" (*What Do Women Want*, 199). As stated in her memoir, this association becomes even more accentuated in Jong's life because of her busy agenda as a well-known

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writer: “I travel so much that often I wake up with a start, wondering whether I am in Rome or Hong Kong or Auckland, but in my house in the hemlock woods of Connecticut, I always know I am home no matter how jet-lagged” (*What Do Women Want*, 200). To Jong, her house is alive and provides her with calmness and tranquillity to engage into her creative projects. The writer sees her house as her own mother that takes care of her and her family: “[t]he house has mothered me as I mothered Molly and my books” (*What Do Women Want*, 202). Jong also appears to suggest that what really sets her free is not sexual adventures and passions, but a calm and familiar place surrounded by nature and a sense of intimacy and security:

Home is where you get out of bed at three A.M., wink at the full moon through the bathroom skylight, and go back to sleep perfectly contented, knowing no demons can follow you here. Home is where the trees are all part of your history: the weeping cherry planted for your daughter’s birth, the Scotch pine that once was a Christmas tree, the birch that was hit by lightning and came back the next spring, the oak that seemed to die the winter you were divorced but revived three years later with patience and pruning. Home is where the same bird’s nest on the front-door lintel receives new robin’s eggs year after year. (*What Do Women Want*, 199-200)

For Jong, home is also a space that brings her closer to art and objects that are dear to her because it “contains collections of [her] life.” In her house, Jong can store things that bring back cherished memories and welcome friends:

What would I do with the clutter of manuscripts, pictures, collections? What would I do with my walls of books? What would I do with family and friends, arriving to paint on the desk or compose concert at my father’s old piano in the guest room? (*What Do Women Want*, 202)

As seen in the final sections of this chapter, as Jong and her fictional characters age, they ‘de-mystify’ the significance of the erectile phallus as an object of female pleasure, and show that a sense of physical and emotional closeness between the spouses and the home space become more significant in creating a sense of belonging and continuity in life.

Conclusions

This chapter has shown that Jong’s female characters, regardless of their age, use sex as a means of female liberation from sociocultural and religious constraints, and as a form of sexual experimentation which enables them to gain life experiences that render them

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more mature, autonomous, and self-confident. A longitudinal analysis of the author's works has revealed that her early and midlife writings, which provide a special focus on sexual adventures abroad, clearly eulogise sexuality and pleasure as important sources of self-discovery and personal growth. Although Jong gives space for a woman's right to erotic fantasies in those works, she also reminds her readers that sexual relationships may be pernicious, self-destructive, and annihilating. Hence, Jong's female characters eventually learn that temporal love affairs are not fulfilling and do not guarantee security and continuity. As a consequence, and especially as her heroines grow older, they start to lay more emphasis on long-lasting relationships and on home as a location of calmness, safety, and creativity.

Jong's tendency to bring her main characters back home to their husbands after having experienced sexual adventures, either abroad or on online sites, may suggest that, over time, her writings become less progressive than her outspoken first novels. Even though the treatment of female sexuality continues to be provocative and witty in Jong's most recent literary works, by cherishing the home space in her later writings the writer seems to reveal herself as a new defender of traditional roles. In a way, this could be interpreted as a betrayal to her long-defended feminist ideology, for which she became famous. In a similar vein, the fact that Jong's fictional characters are never single might indicate that, for Jong, women's happiness and self-satisfaction are closely related to the presence of a male figure in their lives, whether it is a long-term partner or a temporary seductive Venetian lover. Moreover, the depiction of sexually-explicit scenes in her books, like the portrayal of courageous and sexually-active older women, may be seen as commercial strategies that enable her to maintain the public image that made her first books best-sellers.

However, the novelist does not solely reduce women's self-fulfilment to the domestic domains. In fact, in one of the interviews on her memoir *Fear of Fifty*, Jong claims that she writes "about the fact that society hates, truly hates, older women; ... that the industrial world wants to put women back in the home" (Templin, 2002: 190). Instead of promoting traditional values, the writer continues to advocate an open vision of female sexuality, and, especially, that of ageing women. By doing so, she challenges the narrative of decline and undermines culturally-constructed taboos about the lack of libido in old age. In her later-life works, the novelist overtly defends pro-active female sexuality and challenges the prejudice that sexual appeal and attractiveness fade with age, and that aged individuals are not capable of enjoying sex (sometimes with much

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younger lovers), or of fostering loving relationships. Jong's ageing heroines are self-confident and assertive women who do not regard ageing as a stage of losses, but as a new phase in life that allows to reconcile both their past and present sexual experiences. Instead of falling into oblivion, they emerge as more self-assured and active older women who celebrate ageing and their sexuality.

In this light, Jong's frank writings about alternative ways of sexual performance in later life, and the emphasis on the benefits and pleasures of intimate touch may be regarded as narratives that encourage the engagement into both feminist and active and healthy lifestyles. Jong's fictional baby-boomers are depicted as sexually active not because they have succumbed to tempting discursive approaches to sexuality, but because sex has never lost its centrality in their lives, which were greatly marked by the sexual revolution and the idea of free love. The focus on sex in Jong's whole *oeuvre* can be seen as a reflection of the ideology that Jong defended in her youth, and that she continues to promote in her later writings. Especially through Vanessa, Jong conveys these ideas by arguing that sex, pleasure, and "orgasm" have always been in the "bill of rights" of her generation, which "never gave up sex" (*Fear of Dying*, 150). Jong's interviews and works also suggest that sex is an important part of human nature; thus, active sexuality in later life should not be seen as an attempt to adjust to the demands of the successful ageing discourse and the contemporary anti-ageing ideals. In fact, there are scientific studies that also reveal that those individuals who regarded sex as a significant part of their lives when they were young are more likely to practise sex in older age, whereas those who had always had little interest in sexual performances would tend to remain less sexually active (Roberts and Padgett-Yawn, 2011: 110).

This chapter has also shown that, as Jong grows older, she realises that sex "doesn't really bring people together" if it is isolated from emotional or a significant relationship (Young, 1 June, 2011). According to Jong, the belief that sex could lead to self-satisfaction "was probably the mistake of [her] generation [because it] could be exploitative [and] boring" (Young, 1 June, 2011). Her later work shows that the only true and fulfilling way to "reach a certain level of connection" is through emotional closeness, love, and mutual understanding, which become even more exciting and stimulating as couples discover alternative forms of intimacy (Young, 1 June, 2011). In Jong's works, therefore, growing older and sexual dysfunctions are not seen as problems or as signs of the inability to adjust to traditional masculine ideals of sex, but rather as new opportunities to rediscover one's sexuality and new bodily sensations. The

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ideas that sexuality is a part of our nature and that its perceptions change as we grow older, are clearly expressed in one of the most recent interviews, in which Jong states that:

I don't think people realize that sexuality is present throughout our lives. It may not be exactly as it was when we were younger, but we have this longing to connect with our bodies as well as our minds. And I think people would be so much happier if they realized it's not always the same form, but it continues through our lives. (Lacher, 18 Sept, 2015)

The writer's late works also show that home becomes more important in later years. In Jong's writings, home is as a space for creativity, security, memory, and family relations. Moreover, the home space also appears as a refuge in a society that encourages older people to travel, to remain active, and to have sexual relationships as a proof of their successful and healthy ageing. In conclusion, the author's work greatly contributes to current discussion in feminist gerontology, cultural gerontology, and popular discourses on ageing and later life, as it provides a critique of the monolithic discourse of successful ageing, active sexuality, and the traditional focus on the 'forever-functional hard' phallus. According to Jong, her mission as an ageing woman writer and a representative of the baby-boom generation is to speak loudly about the concerns of older women and challenge the negative stereotypes about ageing, especially in regards to socially constructed sexuality: "I want to learn to break the taboo of old and make poetry of it" (2014: 92). Like sexuality, maternity is another important topic in the feminist scholarship that is critically explored in Jong's *oeuvre*. The following chapter addresses the social construction of motherhood and looks into how it is treated and perceived in the author's works from a life-course perspective.

CHAPTER V: Ageing and the Complexities of Motherhood

Introduction

Motherhood has always been a controversial topic among feminist writers and theorists, and it has also been widely discussed by scholars working in the areas of gender or queer studies (Zygadło, 2012: 347; Bueno-Alonso, 2006: 138).⁹⁸ While some feminists see the mothering experience as an essential part of female nature and as the most fulfilling experience in life, others regard maternity as a burden and as a limitation to the formation of a woman's identity and her sense of femininity.

Both mainstream First-Wave and Second-Wave feminist discourses took a critical approach to maternity. In fact, the exploration of the meaning and implications of motherhood became more nuanced in the second half of the twentieth century (Caporale-Bizzini, 2006: 7; Taylon-Allen, 2005: 1). The maternal experience was interrogated by the French feminist Simone de Beauvoir and later by other feminist activists and writers, such as Adrienne Rich, Nancy Chodorow, Kate Millett, Germaine Greer, and Betty Friedan in the US; Mary O'Brien and Juliet Mitchell in the UK; and Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Hélène Cixous in France. These feminists questioned the importance of motherhood and exposed its political and social repercussions within patriarchy. Arguing that motherhood is a cultural and historical construct in which women are regarded as natural caregivers, they aimed at deconstructing this view and showed that womanhood and motherhood are not synonymous. The sexual revolution, the development of new contraceptive methods, and the access to higher education and the labour market have also contributed to advancing the idea that motherhood is an option for women rather than destiny (Taylon-Allen, 2005: 209).

While First and Second-Wave feminist critics considered that motherhood affected gender equality and led to the subordination of women, postmodern and

⁹⁸Throughout history, motherhood and the home space have been idealised and romanticised. The identification of maternity with womanhood, the private sphere of family, and the emotional attachment between mother and child can be traced back to the beginning of civilizations, when the survival of a tribe depended on a woman's role as a bearer of children (Taylon-Allen, 2005: 1; Glenn, 1994: 13). The importance and the need of a mother figure in childrearing and household duties have led to the construction of a traditional view, in which maternity is regarded as natural and desired by all women. The cult of motherhood was intensified during the times of the industrial revolution and the division of labour that excluded women from the public sphere, especially visible among the white bourgeoisie in the eighteenth century (Glenn, 1994: 14). The understanding of childcare and the image of children also underwent important shifts during that time – children came to be seen as innocent creatures in need of constant protection. Women, who were thought to have a natural disposition for care and sacrifice, were seen as perfect caretakers who would devote themselves to full-time mothering (Glenn, 1994: 14).

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poststructuralist feminist theorists see motherhood as a distinctive part of women's nature. Post-feminist voices stress the emotional and intellectual aspects of the mothering experience, and seek to rethink motherhood not as an oppressive institution rooted in conventional family models and values, but as a personal choice and as a space to develop subjective female identities. Their central arguments focus on the relationship between motherhood, a woman's self-realisation, and her sense of agency (Caporale-Bizzini, 2006: 7).

The experience of motherhood has been explored not only by feminist thinkers; it has also been studied by theorists belonging to other disciplines, which shows the complexity of this topic. The maternal experience has been examined by psychoanalytic and sociology theorists who have offered valuable insights into the representations of mothering practices. These new approaches have helped to bridge the gap between those who see motherhood as a burden and those who consider it is an important part that contributes to women's self-development. While psychoanalytic studies tend to look at mothers' unconscious actions and their attachment to children, sociologists examine how social and cultural trends influence maternity and childbearing. For instance, sociologist Alice Rossi⁹⁹ has explored the connection between mothers and children, and called for shared parenting to ease mothering duties. In a similar vein, psychoanalytic sociologist and feminist Nancy Chodorow¹⁰⁰ has looked at both anthropological and social literature to understand maternal imperatives and a woman's role as a caregiver. Chodorow considered that motherhood subjects women to domestic duties and childcare, which leads to an unequal distribution of child-caring duties among men and women. Like Rossi, Chodorow has also advocated the need for social change, gender equality, and the reconsideration of motherly and fatherly duties within the family unit.

Studies on mothers' experiences have become more extended and more multidisciplinary in recent years, producing a prolific body of criticism about mothering practices and mother-child relationships (Arendell, 2000: 1192). At the moment there is a deeper understanding of the intersection between motherhood, culture, power relations, and female subjectivity (Donath, 2015: 200). As Kinneret Lahad argues, feminist and cultural theorists "are paying increasing attention to the ways in which

⁹⁹See: Alice Rossi. "Equality Between the Sexes: An Immodest Proposal." 1964.

¹⁰⁰See: Nancy Chodorow. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. 1978.

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choice has become a cultural obligation deeply ingrained in neoliberal, post-feminist, therapeutic and consumerist norms” (2014: 240). Hence, the current feminist agenda points to the need to look for subjective experiences of motherhood which very often reveal “uncertainty, hesitations, confusion, contradictions, mixed feelings, luck, and randomness” (Donath, 2015: 200). For instance, sociologist Orna Donath’s study (2015) discovered that, even though the interviewed mothers loved their children, they also displayed ambivalent maternal emotions such as guilt and suffering.¹⁰¹ The fact that Donath’s work has generated a lot of controversy in many countries shows that women have not been liberated from the ideals of traditional motherhood seen as their prescribed biological destiny. According to Donath, “the transition to motherhood symbolizes – ‘even’ in feminist theorizations – a passage to a whole new realm, and although it is already well-known that it is not always a rose garden, there is no room for reevaluation, let alone regret” (2015: 201).¹⁰² More views on the maternal experience and transitions in emotional and psychological responses to motherhood can be found in literary texts. These narratives contribute to the notion that motherhood can be experienced in different ways that do not necessarily reveal personal fulfilment or contentment, but rather lead to distress and frustration (Arendell, 2000: 1196; de Beauvoir, 1971; Donath, 2015).

Erica Jong is one of the feminist writers who explores motherhood and gender politics, and offers critical insights into women’s changing perceptions about mothering in different stages of their lives. In her work, the author questions the dominant perception of motherhood as a natural, worthwhile, and universal phenomenon, and examines how the process of growing old contributes to changing notions about the mothering experience. As literary gerontologist Ruth E. Rays states, one of the reasons why the representatives of the post-war generation started to explore motherhood and the generational gap past their midlives was because “second-wave feminists have become middle aged” (2003: 118). This chapter starts with the examination of the perceptions of pregnancy and motherhood as revealed in Jong’s early and midlife works. In them, Jong reflects upon the social control over female bodies and shows that, in spite of advances in contraception and the ideals of the sexual revolution, women are still perceived as naturally inclined to maternity and, consequently, are expected to become mothers and caregivers. As will be shown in the first section, Jong also looks

¹⁰¹Donath’s study (2015) was based on twenty-three Israeli-Jewish mothers’ interviews.

¹⁰²See also: Kinneret Lahad. “The Single Woman’s Choice As a Zero-Sum Game.” 2014, p. 258.

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into the relationship between motherhood and her identity as a woman and as a feminist, and questions the idealised vision of motherhood that is prevalent in her society. The chapter continues with the representation of mother-daughter relationships and their evolution in later works. In particular, the section dwells on how these relationships change as both a mother and a daughter grow older. Finally, the chapter concludes with the analysis of the grandmothering experience in later stages of life as reflected in Jong's later-life writings. Grandparenting is seen as an exhilarating new stage which, as shown in her work, leads to new understandings of family relationships and the ageing process itself. The shifting perceptions about motherhood, mother-daughter relationships, and grandparenting that are reflected in Jong's writings reveal how these life-changing experiences positively affect the creation of female identity and their perception of the process of growing older. In this respect, the writer's latest literary works become an instrument to reassess the negative representations of ageing and older women's position in society, and to vindicate the need to challenge the narrative of decline in everyday realities. Moreover, the topics examined in this chapter add to a broader picture of the changing experiences and perspectives towards motherhood, and significantly contribute to critical feminist, gender, and ageing studies from a life-course perspective.

From 'Fear of Pregnancy' to the Glorification of Motherhood

By thirty-five I knew that art cannot exist without life (Erica Jong, *What Do Women Want*, 125)

Erica Jong's early works manifest her unwillingness to have children because of the fear of losing her creative capacity and sense of freedom. The protagonist of *Fear of Flying*, Isadora Wing, sees pregnancy as an "arrogant decision," pointing out that a woman cannot take responsibility of a child unless her true self has been found and understood (52, emphasis in original). According to Isadora, the majority of women get pregnant without even taking into consideration the responsibilities and effects that having a child will have on their lives. Though messy and chaotic, the young woman in the novel is conscious of the lifelong commitment that motherhood entails. She confesses to never having missed a day taking 'the pill,' which sets her apart from her friends, who have already had abortions (*Fear of Flying*, 53). Yet, the pressure to become a mother comes from Isadora's three sisters – all of them are young mothers with at least two children

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each. Isadora is the only sister who has put her professional career before motherhood; thus, she is never “allowed to forget it” (*Fear of Flying*, 61). None of the family members understand her life-choice and the passion she feels for writing. Hence, she only receives fierce criticism for her “filthy writing” and “farting around with poetry” instead of “doing something meaningful,” namely, having children (*Fear of Flying*, 59-61). Although Isadora is rejected by her family for her “egoist” decision, she confesses she does not “miss having children,” because she gives preference to her professional career as a writer (*Fear of Flying*, 63, emphasis in original).

Isadora’s fear of pregnancy is also exacerbated by her mother Jude’s confession that if it had not been for her children, she could “have been a famous artist” (*Fear of Flying*, 53). Jude is a skilled painter who had studied in Paris and met famous artists of her time, but could not progress because she became a mother. Isadora even feels that she is *the* reason why her mother could not achieve her goals. Moreover, Jude always reminds Isadora that a woman cannot choose whether “to be an artist or to have children” (*Fear of Flying*, 56). Having seen how motherhood had stalled her mother’s pursuit of a professional career, Isadora fears she will follow the same destiny. Therefore, the protagonist makes her choice: she decides to have passionate romantic adventures and to find her inner-self instead of settling down and leading a “normal” life (*Fear of Flying*, 427). Although the young writer rejects the prevailing discourse on motherhood, she cannot escape the emotional and psychological pressures that make her question her “normality”:

What was wrong with me? Was I unnatural? I just hadn’t the normal female compulsion to get knocked up. All I could think of was me with my restlessness, with my longings for zipless fucks and strangers on trains – being tied down with a baby. How could I wish *that* on a baby. (*Fear of Flying*, 53, emphasis in original)

The protagonist also admits that what she really craves for is not having a baby, but “to give birth to [*herself*] – the little girl [*she*] might have been in a different family, a different world” (*Fear of Flying*, 65, emphasis in original). Isadora’s attempts to establish her identity as a woman instead of becoming a mother go against social expectations and the ideals of traditional motherhood. As sociologist Gayle Letherby notes, motherhood operates as a proof of ‘real’ femininity, womanhood, and even adulthood, often seen as a natural consequence of long-term heterosexual relationships or marriage (1994: 525). Terms such as ‘childfree,’ ‘barren,’ or ‘childless’ are often charged by negative overtones and understood as selfish and egocentric decisions for

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women (Letherby, 1994: 525). Thus, Isadora's decision to be childfree becomes problematic because she does not fulfil her social role as a woman and is seen as a failure by her family members.

By expressing Isadora's willingness to pursue a writer's career instead of having babies, Jong might have also wanted to challenge the negative image of the typical Jewish mother as a caring protector and completely devoted to her family, a type often disseminated by Jewish male writers. In the article "The Jewish Mother: Comedy and Controversy in American Popular Culture" (2000), Martha A. Ravits argues that the image of the Jewish mother as dominant and even aggressive in its overprotectiveness was ridiculed during the Second-Wave feminist movement in the US. Jewish male writers and artists saw the Jewish mother as a manipulator of her children, especially her sons, and as a threat to the established patriarchal system. Thus, it is not surprising that the controlling Jewish mother was often chosen as a target of satire and presented as grotesque by Jewish comedians and writers who employed jokes and negative representations to weaken her power.¹⁰³ According to Ravits, the creation of such a caricature was rooted in frustrations that Jewish male immigrants had when climbing up the social ladder and trying to acclimatise to the materialistic American culture. Jewish men's fears of failure to fit in American society when trying to ascend the socially competitive social ladder were projected onto older females. Jewish mothers were blamed for holding men back and preventing them from assimilation in the competitive public sphere. Therefore, they denied the Jewish mother, the most outstanding embodiment of Jewish ethnicity.¹⁰⁴ As Jewish young men gradually gained prestige and power, mothers lost their influence over them. The Jewish mother was also seen as a transgressor in the fifties; first, because she challenged the American myth of masculinity and competitiveness by trying to keep Jewish sons in the private sphere; and, second, because she was seen as dominant instead of docile and obedient mothers and wives whose only dream was to live in a cosy suburban area raising children and taking care of a household (Ravits, 2000: 10). In other words, "the stereotype of the Jewish mother was constructed to signify and mock the Jews' concerns about the process of Americanization" (Ravits, 2000: 29). By creating a young Jewish female in

¹⁰³The most outstanding novel of a satirized Jewish mother is Phillip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969). Woody Allen's films are another example that portray the fears and misfortunes of young Jewish males onto their mothers because the female figure operates as a reminder of their immigrant status (Ravits, 2000: 6, 11).

¹⁰⁴As Ravits points out, many of the Jewish male writers of the epoch made jokes that "no Jewish male can become an adult while his mother is still alive" (2000: 11).

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search of ‘zipless fucks’ instead of bearing kids, Jong subverted Jewish men’s literary stereotypes and offered a different image of a liberated, courageous, and creative American Jewish woman that had nothing to do with the image of the over-protective and controlling mother. Isadora’s unwillingness to become a mother, therefore, can be read as a defence mechanism to combat the devaluation of Jewish older women as well as to challenge the image of submissive wives.

The fear of motherhood and childbearing is also visible in Jong’s early poems. In them, the fear pregnancy and childbirth that were fictionalised in *Fear of Flying*, are associated with a loss of creative and artistic faculties. In the collection *Half-lives*, published when the author was in her early thirties, the poem “Gardener” reveals the speaker’s constant preoccupation over pregnancy and her relief upon having her monthly period. The voice in the poem compares herself to an overprotective gardener who carefully defends her garden from dangerous plants, ‘monsters’ that symbolise children:

I am in love with my womb / & jealous of it. / I cover it tenderly / with a little pink hat / (a sort of yarmulke) / to protect it from men. / [...] But I fear the barnacle / which might latch on / & not let go / & I fear the monster / who might grow / [...] So I keep my womb empty / & full of possibility. / Each month / the blood sheets down / like good red rain / I am the gardener. / Nothing grows without me. (83-4)

Jong herself showed a similar resistance to becoming a mother in her midlife memoirs. Like her heroine in *Fear of Flying*, the writer had to bear her family’s warning not to “wait too long,” because at thirty she would become an “*elderly prima gravida*” (*Fear of Fifty*, 166, emphasis in original). Like Jude, Jong’s mother, Eda Mirsky, a talented artist at the National Academy of Design, did not have a chance to pursue her artistic career in Rome and had to sacrifice her dreams for a domestic life and child-bearing: “as a woman, she was expected to marry, bear children, and waste her gifts, she was enraged. That rage has powered my life – and also, in many ways, impeded it” (*Fear of Fifty*, 27). In *Fear of Fifty*, the author explains that familiar and social expectations to comply with motherly duties resulted in Eda’s constant anger, sadness, and inner frustration. Jong’s mother’s inability to make a successful career fuelled Jong to voice women’s concerns from a feminist perspective and to prove that women had a right to avoid being trapped into traditional womanhood. Eda’s inner frustrations and her constant rage were the reasons that paved Jong’s desire to avoid the glass ceiling against which women crashed. Although the novelist disapproved of many of her

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mother's decisions, she knew that Eda's life choices were limited because of the socio-political background of her times, which restricted the pursuit of her professional career and personal aspirations. As Jong explains in *Fear of Fifty*, she was lucky to be part of a new generation of women who longed to break free from their mothers and their traditional value system. Instead, the women representatives of Jong's times had to fight for their rights and liberation in order to encounter new models of womanhood, mothering, and self-expression, which included freedom of choice and guiltlessness:

My mother's frustrations powered both my feminism and my writing. But much of the power come out of my anger and my competition: my desire to outdo her, my hatred of her capitulation to her femaleness, my desire to be different because I feared I was too much like her. Womanhood was a trap. If I was too much like her, I'd be trapped as she was. But if I rejected her example, I'd be a traitor to her love. I felt a fraud no matter which way I turned. I had to find a way to be like her and unlike her at the same time. I had to find a way to be both a girl and a boy. (*Fear of Fifty*, 28)

Both Eda and Jude are the products of a generation of women chained to the archetype of 'perfect mothers and housewives,' constructed as the ultimate aspiration for women, which has been questioned by many feminists in their writings.

De Beauvoir, in her famous *The Second Sex* (1949),¹⁰⁵ demythologised the concept of motherhood as a natural and universal condition for women. Beauvoir's rationalist viewpoint positioned maternity as enslaving and resting upon essentialism and patriarchy rather than as a fulfilling life experience. The writer saw the maternal institution as a socially constructed and fixed role in women's lives that limited their freedom by unconsciously forcing them into subordination and turning them into the 'other:' "[h]e is the Subject, he is the Absolute - she is the Other" (1971: xvi). According to de Beauvoir, maternity is employed as a tool to reinforce male dominance and relegate women to a passive role. The writer also pointed out that women who become mothers due to social and cultural pressures are unhappy and unsatisfied because motherhood prevents them from fulfilling their dreams.¹⁰⁶ The feminist

¹⁰⁵Originally published in France in 1949 as *Le Deuxième Sexe*, and in the US in 1953, the book is regarded as one of the most significant historical documents in feminist history.

¹⁰⁶Simons observes that in *The Second Sex* de Beauvoir recognized "that motherhood can be the source of authentic experience for women [because] it confronts the mother with the profound human realities of identification and separation from another person and provides her with the opportunity to develop the authentic human value of generosity" (Simons, 1984: 353). Yet, these observations are not incorporated "into the fundamental philosophical position defined in its opening chapters" (Simons, 1984: 353). In a similar vein, feminist Toril Moi defends de Beauvoir's negative perception of motherhood and womanhood by arguing that the writer's inability to see power in women was related to a historical situation in France at the time. As Moi states, "[i]n 1949 it was far easier to envisage the necessity of an

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Adrienne Rich, in her classic *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), also highlighted that in American society motherhood and the household became an institutionalised duty that chained women to male dominance and authority. However, in her work, the writer made a distinction between the oppressive institution of motherhood and the enriching mothering experience that allowed women to exploit the full potential of their bodies and their female nature.

The post-war trend to move to suburbs in the US did not set women free from expected motherly and household responsibilities and from economic dependence on their husbands. Margaret A. Simons states that during the sixties and seventies, the rebirth of the cult of motherhood became even more intensified (1984: 350). Helen Gurley Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962) and Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* (1972), to name just two well-known titles, reflect the suburb-based lifestyles and personal frustrations of women caught into these social pressures and ideologies. The novels show how homebound lives and socially constructed motherhood can be a source of boredom and even mental breakdown for women who have been limited in their pursuit of professional paths and personal freedom.

Betty Friedan's seminal work, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), also addressed the complex situation of American women and their inability to accept their socially pre-assigned roles as mothers. In her book, she exposed women's personal concerns and helped to frame the ideas that emerged during Second-Wave feminism. The movement challenged the myth of motherhood, allowed women to phrase the negative aspects of the mothering experience, and emphasised that a right to choose also meant a right not to have kids. Friedan expressed the anxieties, frustrations, and lack of opportunities of women of the post-war generation by publicly challenging marriage and motherly duties as women's rightful destiny. The 'modern housewife and mother' spent her husband's salary on consumer goods and new devices for the house, shopped in the mall, watched TV, baked cakes, and fulfilled the needs of her spouse and children. Yet, her personal and professional aspirations were deeply buried under the needs to serve the family and the country by being a devoted mother and wife. For Friedan, the only way to escape from this socially-constructed trap and the idealisation of motherhood was education and employment, gender equality and justice, and the need to reconsider male and

autonomous movement for blacks than for women" (2008: 230). Similarly, scholar Sonia Kruks notes that France was still a very agrarian Catholic country, in which women had just obtained the right to vote. Moreover, the defeat and the occupation of France by German troops pushed French women to traditional domestic roles (1992: 104).

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female duties and responsibilities in every aspect of life. These ideas were integrated into the feminist agenda of the Second-Wave movement, in which women advocated equality in the labour market, and the right to education and control over their bodies, sexual lives, and childbearing.

In her middle years, Jong did not cease to question the institution of motherhood as compulsory, which shows a pattern of continuity with her early works. In *Fear of Fifty*, Jong confessed that, as a young writer, she considered her diaphragm “the keeper of [her] flame, of [her] brain, [her] independence” and used to admire “childless queens of literature and power” such as Simone de Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf, and Elizabeth I of England (166). The same idea is present in her other memoir, *What Do Women Want*, in which she expressed her early admiration for female artists who refused to have children and gave preference to their professional goals: “[f]or years I was determined not to have a child because the women writers I admired most had avoided maternity. If childlessness was good enough for Jane Austen, Emily Dickinson, and Virginia Woolf, it must be good enough for me” (125).

Although Jong never stopped glorifying these female writers and defending women’s right to choose to become mothers, her attitude towards motherhood changed in her mid-thirties. When Jong started “adopting all the stray dogs in Connecticut,” she realised it was high time she became a mother (Fairyrington, 16 Oct, 2013). At the age of thirty-six, the writer gave birth to her daughter Molly. The symbolic fear of ‘flying’ that led to the creation of her fictional Isadora in *Fear of Flying* was transformed into Jong’s self-acceptance and increased confidence, manifested in her desire to become a mother. In *What Do Women Want*, aged fifty-seven, the writer admitted that “only by doing the things [she] feared the most had [she] progressed in [her] life,” motherhood being one of her biggest fears (125). According to the author, her rejection and fear of motherhood and the childbearing experience were the reasons that propelled her to have children: “[t]he desire for a child gnawed at me. Images of childbirth kept bustling forth in my poems. Precisely because I was so afraid of childbearing, I was drawn to it” (*What Do Women Want*, 125). Jong ceased to idealise Romantic poets who worshipped illnesses because they fostered their creative experience and who died because of their diseases or committed suicide (*What Do Women Want*, 123). Instead, the author decided to embrace health, life, and motherhood to prove that “both poets and women could be survivors” (*What Do Women Want*, 123).

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In the collection of poems *Ordinary Miracles*, published when Jong was forty-one, pregnancy, motherhood, and the joys of mothering are the most recurrent themes. In the poem “For Molly,” the speaker confesses that she used to hate the idea of motherhood, but upon becoming a mother herself she realised that having a child was another expression of love and kindness that she did not know before:

You – my purest pleasure / of my life, / the split pit / that proves / the ripeness of the fruit, / the unbroken center / of my broken hopes – / O little one, making you / has centered my lopsided life / so that if I know / a happiness / that reason never taught, / it is because of your small / unreasonably wrigglish / limbs. / [...] / I used to hate the word Mother, / found it obscene, / & now I love it / since that is me / to you. (19)

The poem “The Cover of the Book,” from the same collection, reveals the inner conflict and doubts that artists have when faced with the decision to have children. The speaker in the poem realises that the fear of losing creativity is unjustified because pregnancy and childbearing bring new sensations that promote creative expressions, as reflected in the following lines:

Oh we poets / are so afraid / of making babies – / & yet / of all / the fleshy chains / that bind us, / our children / are the chains / that bind / most closely / to heaven. [...] Poets are always / saving themselves / for their poems. / Yet in that saving / there is no grace, / while in the child / there is distraction, / chaos, disorder / & through that fleshy chaos / peace. (36-7)

Another poem “The Protection We Bear” shows how pregnancy makes a woman less frenetic, safer, more grounded, and transcendental. Having a baby in one’s womb protects the speaker from the outside world and provides her with a sense of calmness and inner peace:

Pregnant, we know god, / this presence inside us / which protects us / yet makes us / vulnerable. / My baby / flowed around me / protecting me / in her own radiance / for nine whole months. / I was never alone. / I did not fear death. / The baby within / & the spirit without / were one, / & I was at peace. / When she was born, / & fear reclaimed me. / Erica, Erica, / don’t you know / that if you can create / a baby, you can also create god? / & if god can bloom / a baby in your belly, / the She / must be / with you always? (16)

“On the First Night,” which appears in the same collection *Ordinary Miracles*, depicts a speaker giving birth to a girl in a full moon night and the creation of a female connection of various generations of women:

On the first night / of the full moon, / the primeval sack of ocean / broke, / & I gave birth to you / little woman, / little carrot top, / little turned-up nose, /

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pushing you out of myself / as my mother / pushed / me out of herself, / as her mother did, / & her mother's mother before her, / all of us born / of woman. (17)

The second part of the poem shows a four-week old baby-girl. It is compared to a lioness that symbolises female power:

Now the moon is full again / & you are four weeks old. / Little lion, lioness, / yowling for me breasts, / growing at the moon, / how I love your lustiness, / your red face demanding, / your hungry mouth howling, / your screams, your cries / which all spell life / in large letters / the color of blood. (18)

The love for a new-born baby and the close bonding between the mother and the child are also exemplified in the following poem from the same collection, entitled "The Birth of the Water Baby." In it, the mother observes her baby's body and describes it using different animal and plant images. In this way, the baby is connected to the power of nature. The speaker in the poem expresses her awe at the perfection of her creation, which is seen as a vehicle between herself and the external world:

Little egg, / little nub, / full complement of / fingers, toes, / little rose blooming / in a red universe, / which once wanted you less / than emptiness, / but now hold you / fast, / containing your rapid heart / beat under its / slower one / as the earth / contains the sea... / [...] / Here, under my heart / you'll keep / till it's time / for us to meet, / & we come apart / that we may come / together, / & you are born / remembering / the wavesound / of my blood, / the thunder of my heart, / & like your mother / always dreaming / of the sea. (4-5)

The wonder the baby inspires is seen in the poem "Anti-Conception," in which the mother's voice also expresses the gratitude for the joys of motherhood. The allusion to karma suggests that the experiences of pregnancy and having a child involve a spiritual transformation in a woman's life, in which the baby becomes the centre of her existence:

Could I unthank you, little heart, / what would I do? / [...] You hold on, beating / like a little clock, / Swiss in your precision, / Japanese in your tenacity, / & already having / your own karma, / [...] *you* are the star, / & like your humblest fan, / I wonder / (gazing at your image / on the screen) / who you really are. (8-9, emphasis in original)

The bliss of the presence of the baby is depicted through cosmic metaphors and rose-coloured images that suggest that a child brings vitality and kindness to a woman's life. Romantic landscapes associated with the Romantic poets and the splendour of nature are equated to the beauty and tenderness of the baby. Moreover, the poem also contains

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references to Judaism and Christianity, which reinforce the spiritual dimension of the experience of pregnancy and childbirth:

& here you come, / pink as dawn, / rosy as the aurora borealis / blooming over
Yorkshire / & the ruined abbeys / of the Lake District, / curly as baby sheep,
hungry as little billy / goat, cuddly / as a lap dog, / [...] I welcome you / with my
breath / & guts; / I hallelujah / to your eyes, your heart, / your tender toes. / May
I keep growing younger / with your years / until, when you are just my age, / or
more, I have gone back to zero / & am ready, / perhaps then, / to be reborn. (12-
3)

It is also worth mentioning that the mothering experience opens up a space to reconsider time and the perception of the process of ageing. After becoming a mother, the lineal view of time loses its significance because the desire to go back in time becomes more spiritual. The speaker in the poem does not want to become younger, but wishes to feel younger. The presence of a child rejuvenates the poem's persona ("I keep growing younger / with your years"); but, she also knows that time cannot be turned back, and she will age and die, and will be eventually replaced by her own daughter. However, there is no fear of death, because the voice in the poem believes in a spiritual transformation of her inner self. The changes in meanings of the perception of time and a sense of spiritual self-transcendence, which are closely related to various turning points, will be further developed in the last chapter of this dissertation.

These poems, published when the writer was in her early forties, clearly pay homage to the myth of the Mother Goddess or the witch.¹⁰⁷ The rich nature-based

¹⁰⁷In Jong's poetry, the figure of the Mother Goddess or the witch embodies a personification of humanity, fertility, creation, and death. It is equated with the power of the universe and the natural world, sometimes referred to as Mother Earth. The writer uses ancient myths, which, in the words of a poet Robert Graves, are "bound up with popular religious ceremonies in honour of the Moon-goddess or Muse" (1999: 6). Jong's interest in a woman's life-giving power, the world of witchcraft, and symbolism may have coincided with the exaltation of female aspects of mysticism that were evoked during the Second-Wave movement. At that time, some feminist activists appropriated the image of the Mother Goddess and witch to exalt the idea of sisterhood and that of female bonding and power. Divine magic rituals and spiritual neopagan symbolism were employed as tools to combat patriarchal oppression and victimisation of women (Sanders, 2007: 80). In the study *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (1948), Graves established that the representation of the White Goddess of Birth, Love and Death has different faces that vary across diverse European pagan myths. According to the poet, 'pure' poetry is closely linked to ancient cultural rituals and female divinity. That fertility, sexuality, and death are closely linked to each other is also mirrored in the images of many other deities and goddesses in various cultures. For instance, a fierce blood-drinking and lion-headed Nubian war goddess blends sexuality, fertility, and death. When introduced in Egypt, she has been transformed into the cow whose milk represented the food of the gods that kept them fecund (Westwood, in Kastenbaum, 2003: 335). Similarly, the link between life and death is embodied in Innanna, Sumerian goddess of sex and fertility, who is the twin sister of Ereshkigal, queen of the underworld. Both Innanna and Ereshkigal represent a dual vision of light and darkness, and that of life/fecundity and death (Westwood, in Kastenbaum, 2003: 335). The representations of these goddesses mirror the figure of the witch / Mother Goddess that is evoked in Jong's poems.

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imagery and descriptions of the baby as if it was the bearer of female power suggest allusions to paganism and the figure of the witch, who embodies both life and death. The references to the full-moon, night, thunder, “the ruined abbeys,” deep oceans and seas, “rose blooming / in a red universe,” and “the wavesound” of mother’s blood paint a mysterious atmosphere that suggests witchcraft and magic. The comparison of the baby-girl to a “little carrot,” a “little egg,” a “little lion, lioness” or “the aurora borealis” remind of nursery rhymes, which suggest gentleness, calmness, and a loving mother-baby relationship. Also, allusions to female bonding as reflected in these lines – “pushing you out of myself / as my mother / pushed / me out of herself, / as her mother did, / & her mother’s mother before her, / all of us born / of woman” – acknowledge both the power of nature and the ancient wisdom of women that is passed from one generation to another.

For Jong, women’s life-giving power, their preservation of ancient wisdom, and their status as representations of sexuality are a source of male envy. These reflections are observed in her study *Witches*, written at the age of thirty-nine, in which she explores the fantastic and factual universe of witchcraft and the historical figure of the witch in the form of poetry and prose. The figure of the witch, evoked in Jong’s poems about pregnancy and childbirth, suggests her belief in female divinity and the special status of women. Symbolic and magical references to witchcraft, paganism, the occult, and the natural world in these poems reinforce a woman’s life-giving capacity and her power of continuity. In the poem “To the Goddess” the poetic voice glorifies the great witch / goddess figure and makes references to nature and her female body:

[g]oddess, I come to you / my neck wreathed with rosebud, / my head filled with visions of infants / my palms open to your silver nails, / my eyes open to your rays of illumination, / my vagina & my womb gaping / to be filled by your radiance... / O goddess, I would be a worthy vessel (23).

In Jong’s works, the figure of the witch can be read not only as a source of magic and female power to give life, but also as a symbol of rebellion against the patriarchy and the inferior status prescribed to women. According to Jong, men always feared the power of beautiful temptresses and saw it as a source of danger that may lead to losing their positions and social status. Therefore, throughout history, they tried to suppress women’s sexual attractiveness, as was the case with the Inquisition. Women were accused of heresy and burned at the stake not “by the rabble, but rather by the most intellectual, learned, and religious men of their day” to the extent that they were blamed

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for men's impotence, wet dreams, and carnal temptations (*Witches*, 38, 66, 69). These ideas are distilled into Jong's poem "Smoke," which appears in her book *Witches*:

For centuries, the air was full of witches / Whistling up chimneys / on their spiky brooms / cackling or singing more sweetly than Circe, / as they flew over rooftops / blessing & cursing their kind. / We banished & burned them / making them smoke / in the throat of god; / we declared ourselves "enlightened." / "The dark age of horrors is past," said my mother to me in 1952, / seven years after our people went up in smoke, / leaving a few teeth, a pile of bones. (57)

Allusions to witches may also represent the need to empower women who have been denied the access to the public sphere and have been victimised by powerful men-dominated religious and political institutions.¹⁰⁸ Yet, the writer highlights that even if female power is driven underground by a patriarchal culture, it is never suppressed, but evoked in various myths, representations, and writings. In a poem "Baby-Witch" the speaker makes a direct link between a baby-witch and her daughter, and implies that even though women are "condemned to the fire" and must fight for their rights in a male-dominated society, they carry a fire inside their body that protects them from gender inequality:

Baby witch, / my daughter, / My worships of the Goddess / alone / condemns you to the fire... / [...] / O child of fire, / O tiny devotee of the Goddess – / I wished for you / to be born a daughter / though we know / that daughters / cannot but be / born for burning / like the fatal / tree. (71)

In "Her Broom, or the Ride of the Witch," in the same collection, the speaker in the poem empowers the woman/ witch and even ridicules a man who thinks that female sexuality can be repressed and controlled. The witch figure in the poem has no fear of expressing her female subjectivity through the powerful and liberating act of flying:

I ride / over the roofs / of doom. / I ride / while he thinks me safe / in our bed. / [...] / Ah, I will ride / over the skies – / orange as apricots / slashed red / with pomegranate clouds – / He will think me / safe in our bed. / He will think I fear / such fabulous / flight. (89)

All in all, in Jong's works the figure of the witch is represented as a powerful symbol that embodies female aspects of divinity, which are used to fight against the

¹⁰⁸Thone argues that in the past, old women were seen as wise and powerful figures and healers, but their power was taken away by the Church, businessmen, and medical science, dominated by men. Inquisitions and witch-hunts, according to Thone, are the most obvious examples of male authority over women, especially older women, who have been denied their traditional activities ascribed to them for ages (1992: ix). Along the same lines, Segal states that the most unpleasant images, such as those of witches or hags, have always had a face of an old woman in our collective consciousness, popular culture, myth, or folklore (2015).

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victimisation of women in a men-dominated society. Women's life-giving power is expressed in the transformation of their bodies and their inner selves after the childbirth experience, which renders them stronger and immune to symbolic forms of 'burning'.

In her later writings, written passed her midlife, Jong elaborates again on her changed attitudes towards her body, her creativity, and her inner self after the experience of giving birth to her daughter Molly. The writings from this period show how maturity has contributed to changing the authors' perceptions towards motherhood and pregnancy, as exemplified in these lines:

All my life, until I became pregnant, I had mistrusted my body and overvalued my mind. I had sought a very high degree of control over my body. I never became pregnant, not even 'accidentally', until well after my thirty-fifth birthday, having spent a year or more consciously wishing for pregnancy and trying to become pregnant. Before that I had dreaded pregnancy and a loss of control over my destiny. I had fantasies of death in childbirth, the death of my creativity during pregnancy, the alteration of my body into something monstrous the loss of my intelligence, through mysterious hormonal sabotage, of my energy, my creativity, my looks. (*What Do Women Want*, 122)

In her thirties, Jong admitted that childbearing required immense effort, time, and energy – “raising a daughter requires superhuman patience” that is “tougher than writing” (*What Do Women Want*, 5). However, the author also highlighted that being a mother enriched her whole being. In Jong's own words, pregnancy turned out to be a very positive experience, which allowed her to experiment with her body and get to know herself better. According to the writer, not only did her looks improve, but so did her creative processes. She explains:

For the first time in my life, I controlled my weight effortlessly; my face grew thinner, my skin clearer, my eyes brighter. I never felt sick or lacked energy. I worked as hard at my writings as I ever had in my life. In fact, I worked with greater consistency, I wrote a whole book of poems, continued productively writing the novel I'd begun a year before becoming pregnant, even undertook a gruelling book tour in my fifth and sixth months of pregnancy. (*What Do Women Want*, 122-3)

The author stated that it did not make sense to be a female “without experiencing all the potentialities” of one's bodily capacities: “[i]t would be like being incarnated as a bird and never flying” (*What Do Women Want*, 125). Pregnancy and childbearing were lived as unforgettable life-experiences during which Jong “was happier than [she had] ever been at any other time in [her] life” (*What Do Women Want*, 174). Motherhood made her wiser and “more philosophical than [she] ever was. [She'd] grown up” (*What Do Women Want*, 5). In a similar vein, in the novel *Inventing Memory*, written at the age of

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fifty-five, the protagonist Salome also realises that having a daughter made her stronger and more self-assured:

You became the focus. Everything else became less important. Life became more important than anarchist ideas, than art, than theories. If this is stumbling, then let me go on stumbling. I regret nothing. I consider this stumbling the real dancing! Life is the dance that never ends! (223, emphasis in original)

At the age of fifty-nine, the author confessed again that the presence of a child left a deep footprint in her creative trajectory: “[m]y relationship with Molly has crept into all my writing. It’s the most profoundly transformative experience of my life” (Templin, 2002: 199). Similar to Jong’s own mothering experience and that of her previous fictional characters and poetic personae, in *Fear of Dying* Vanessa’s exposure to motherhood and childbearing helps her to become more mature and self-confident. She learns to listen to her body and understands its great capacity to store memory in a completely new way: “I know how illuminating it is to suddenly discover the wisdom of the body when you’ve spent much of your life denying the body and its vast intelligence” (*Fear of Dying*, 202).

Research shows that a unique emotional and physical relationship between a baby and a mother is established from the very early stages of pregnancy (Roberts and Padgett-Yawn, 2001: 88). The mother-child bond occurs when the baby is still within the mother’s body, and this connection becomes more intensified with time. The same ideas are shared by feminist and literature scholar Sandra M. Donaldson, who believes that being pregnant, “especially with a first child, is a profound change” in a woman’s developmental life course, which is manifested by substantial psychological, philosophical, and artistic transformations (1984: 227-8). Tess Cosslett, an expert in women’s fiction, autobiography, and children’s literature, also lends weight to these statements by arguing that having a baby is always a turning point in a woman’s life, as it alters her sense of identity in different ways (1990: 154).¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹The American writer Nancy Friday explored the topics of female sexuality and liberation in her classic *My Mother / My Self: The Daughter’s Search for Identity* (1977). In it, she illustrated that before women become mothers, they try to “find in men and other women what [they] missed” with their own mothers; however, this “search for a perfect, blissful union” comes to an end upon having a child (1979: 443). For Friday, motherhood guarantees a connection and the absence of loneliness because the existence and the caring of a baby create a special bond between mother and a child, and emotional stability for a woman. Breastfeeding, in particular, “activates hormones that encourage closeness and intimacy” between the baby and the mother (Roberts and Padgett-Yawn, 2001: 88). Roberts and Padgett-Yawn state that even the mother and her baby’s “sleeping patterns may be synchronized,” which allows a mother to interpret her baby’s actions and sounds even though they are simple nonsense words (2001: 88).

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Although in her earlier and midlife writings Jong employed romantic overtones and pagan imagery to praise pregnancy and the whole childbirth experience, in her later works, the writer appears less optimistic about the natural birthing process. Even if Jong does not belittle her own experience as a mother, as she grows older, she becomes more critical about the social construction of maternity. Jong's later writings highlight that culturally constructed conceptions of the forms of childbirth and mothering practices are historically-variable discourses. These shifting ideas are shown through her fictional character Vanessa in *Fear of Dying*, who thinks that there is "nothing natural about childbirth – but death" (198). Vanessa recalls her unpleasant and painful natural childbirth experience that lasted for nine hours, which "seemed like ninety," during which she felt she was nearly losing her life (*Fear of Dying*, 198). Thus, at the end, she opted for "a C-section" (*Fear of Dying*, 198). To Vanessa, childbirth should not imply pain, suffering or even death that can be avoided by improvements in medicine and science. Similarly, Cosslett states that pregnancy and childbirth can be lived as either positive or negative experiences, as the following quotation suggests:

A mother can feel in harmony with the foetus inside her, or she can feel it as a hostile antagonist; she can experience birth as a splitting apart of her body, and of her mind from her body, or as flowing process that integrates body and mind in harmonious co-operation; childbirth can create a new, more solid self for the mother, or it can disperse her sense of identity. (1990: 117)

As Jong grows older, she also evokes the difficulty to combine the role of mother and that of writer effectively, and laments the lack of institutional support for working mothers. In her novel, *Sappho's Leap*, the author inspects the extent to which motherhood can interfere with a professional career. Jong's Sappho argues that a woman cannot rely only on maternity to achieve personal satisfaction. Even if the poetess loves her daughter Cleis more "than life itself," she would not sacrifice her career, which provides her with self-fulfilment and vitality (*Sappho's Leap*, 247). Sappho confesses that teaching, singing, and poetry kept her alive and provided her with a sense of wholeness, for they were her passion and her "calling" at the same time (*Sappho's Leap*, 253). Similar to Jong's Sappho, the author, aged thirty-nine, also commented that although she was happy to be a mother and adored her job as a writer, these roles required a lot of effort, energy, and sacrifice: "[t]here has to be 48 hours in a day to do it all. And there are very few men who are willing to make the compromises that it takes to be married to such a woman" (Templin, 2002: 134). When asked by American journalist and political commentator Bill Moyers if women "[s]hould live for

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love or motherhood or intellect,” the writer, then sixty-one, stated that women should not choose, but rather try to combine all three elements (June 27, 2003). Yet, she also admitted that it was not an easy task:

That’s always been difficult for women, to express themselves intellectually, maternally, and passionately. And I wanted to bring all those parts of a woman together. In fact you could say that all my novels have been about that, how to integrate the different parts of a woman. (Moyers, 27 June, 2003)

The social construction of motherhood and the difficulties it entails are also explored in Jong’s latest novel, *Fear of Dying*. Vanessa is critical of the idea of ‘intensive mothering,’ which she refers to as “new ecological mothering” (*Fear of Dying*, 201). ‘Intensive mothering,’ which is a prevailing ideology in the US, defines mothering as an exclusive full-time baby-centred practice that is more common among white, middle-class heterosexual couples (Arendell, 2000: 1194). The idea that a baby needs a constant caretaker, namely, a mother, to develop its selfhood and to establish maternal bonding was made popular in the sixties (Glenn, 1994: 9). As Arendell observes, this normative standard became even more reinforced by the representations of conventional notions of mothering in popular culture, which intensified traditional gender-bias and the existence of differentiated male and female spheres. In popular culture, socially constructed normative models of motherhood, often based on psychological aspects of the mothering experience, perpetuate sexist and heteronormative notions of the family and traditional gender roles (Phoenix *et al.*, 1991). “New ecological mothering,” as Vanessa states, suggests that for a baby to develop in the best possible way, a mother is supposed to “farm a baby,” which makes the mothering experience seem as “a thirty-six-hour-a-day job” (*Fear of Dying*, 201). The protagonist thinks that “new ecological mothering” is part of discourse that promotes intensive child-raising in which the baby, rather than the mother, occupies a central position.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰Although in this intensive attachment parenting a mother self-consciously puts herself before her child, current paediatric and psychological investigations show that this model benefits the growth, maturity, and the emotional development of the baby. Closeness right from birth, baby wearing, breastfeeding, nurturing and constant communication favour sensitivity, harmony, and greater emotional bonding between the mother and the child. It also fosters the baby’s happiness and contributes to long-term benefits in child’s growth. However, this child-centred practice, in which the mother is fully committed to child rearing and nurturing at every stage of the baby’s development, is very difficult to achieve. The majority of contemporary mothers are involved in full-time employment and cannot maintain around-the-clock care for their children. It is also important to note that even if this model creates more pressures to working mothers and seems to perpetuate traditional values, gender differences, and the ideals of conventional motherhood, it is focused on the benefits for the baby and its development.

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Although this demanding and intensive full-time stay-at-home practice guarantees the unconditional presence of a mother in a child's life, it circumscribes 'good mothering' to perpetual caretaking and limits women's possibilities in the labour market, their professional aspirations, and the development of their selfhood outside the experience of mothering. Mothers who do not conform to the idea of 'intensive mothering' or do not have the means to adopt this practice are often targeted as 'bad mothers' and perceived as failures. Very often single, lesbian or immigrant mothers belong to this targeted category, which shows that race, social class, sexual orientation, and gender, among other aspects, are defining elements for the implementation of the so-called 'good' motherhood ideology (Arendell, 2000: 1195). In other words, different child rearing and nurture practices reveal that mothering, rather than natural and biological, is shaped by dynamic sociocultural, political, and gender-based contexts and power relations. In this light, intensive childcare bears evidence to the fact that, as observed by Foucault,¹¹¹ cultural hegemony is established and preserved on the basis of social expectations that are very often unavailable to less favoured social groups (Johnson and Swanson, 2006: 510; Arendell, 2000: 1195). Hence, Vanessa holds that "each mother should find her own way of mothering, that all the advice we give on mothering is useless. It's hard enough to be a mother without having some book or blog to obey" (*Fear of Dying*, 201-2).

Through Vanessa, Jong offers a critique of contemporary motherhood ideologies and complains about the lack of institutional support in the US to ease motherly duties. The American writer and journalist Pippa Biddle, in her blog post "The Problem With Motherhood in America," complains about the situation of working mothers in the US. Biddle observes that the federal legislation for unpaid maternity leave only covers 60% of the workforce, "leaving a whole 40% with few options after bringing life into this world other than going straight back to work" (29 May, 2016). The writer adds that having a child in America and taking unpaid leave is too expensive for a woman, especially for a single working mother who is obliged to come back to work with very little or no support from the state. A new mother, who is not able to adjust to the idea of 'intensive mothering' can be seen as a failure in the light of the child-centred discourse. Hence, Biddle laments that in the US "we respect women so little that we refuse to

¹¹¹According to Foucault, ideologies are established and implemented by setting up for failure those individuals who cannot comply with hegemonic forces and social expectations. See: *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1.

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honor the time and energy that goes into creating life with a fair period of recovery post birth” (29 May, 2016). According to the journalist, ‘intensive mothering’ is rooted in an old patriarchal system which does not provide policies that protect working mothers and their children:

Perhaps all of this absurdity is a byproduct of old white men still being in the vast majority of positions of power in major corporations and government. It sort of makes sense that they wouldn’t make policies that protect and serve women, seeing as there are so few women in their ranks, but that isn’t a good excuse. (Biddle, 29 May, 2016)

In the same line, Jong, in her essay, *A Letter to the President*, written at the age of seventy, appeals to the former US president, Barack Obama, to fulfil his promises to make women’s lives more dignified. The author blames politicians for ‘using’ women’s votes but never dealing with the real social and economic problems that concern them, as shown in these lines:

Considering that we are well more than half of the population, you started to ask for our votes rather late. It’s hard to believe that just days before the presidential election, I have to clue you in on what we, as women, want – and what we need! [...] You both let your women do the dirty work, which is the cleanest work there is! But did they ever explain to you what it means to be female in 2012? (1)

In order to help and protect mothers, Jong calls for policies related to pregnancy, social and health care, maternity leave, abortion rights, and equal pay among other issues that women in the US have to cope with:

Many of us are the sole support of our children and many of us make more money than our significant others – if we even *have* them. Some of us sleep with men, some with women, and many sleep alone. We adore our children and want the best for them in every way – just like you. (1, emphasis in original)

Apart from criticising traditional motherhood and the idea of ‘intensive mothering,’ Jong also highlights the importance of freedom to choose whether to be a mother or not. For her, having a child was her personal decision, in contrast to many women of former generations, who had to comply with the social expectations of their time. Jong’s awareness of the importance of having freedom to choose is reflected in an earlier poem from the collection *Loveroot*, which was published before she gave birth to her daughter, Molly. In “Dear Marys, Dear Mother, Dear Daughter,” the poetic voice gives freedom of choice to her imaginary daughter. The persona in the poem wants her child to pursue her dreams and to freely express her feelings, which she equates to

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unconditional motherly love: “& if her finger falters / on the needle / & if she ever needs to say / she hates me / & if she loathes poetry / & loves to whistle, / & if she never / calls me Mother, / she will always be my daughter – / my filament of soul / that flew, & caught” (21). In an interview for *The Guardian*, “Erica Jong: Sex and Motherhood,” Jong again referred to the freedom that she gave her daughter to make her own decisions in life, even if some of her choices or comments were painful and unpleasant. As Jong stated, Molly has “taken on things I never did:” “I had one child, she has three. She’s brave. And she must feel very loved, because otherwise how could she satirise me? She knows I’ll never take umbrage. I give her permission to be whatever she wants to be” (*The Guardian*, 16 July, 2011). In one of the interviews for *The Belfast Telegraph*, “Erica Jong Explores Death and Ageing in Her Latest Book, *Fear of Dying*,” conducted in 2015, the seventy-three-year-old novelist again emphasised the importance of having freedom of choice as an expression of feminist thought and ideology: “I think the sort of feminism that tries to preach to women the way you must do things is the antithesis of real feminism: real feminism’s about choice” (11 Nov, 2015).

To sum up, Jong’s works show a transition from unwillingness to have children because of the fear of losing creative capacity, and perhaps, because of the author’s Jewish background, to the glorification of motherhood. Yet, even if Jong and her heroines embrace the joys of maternity, they continue to question the institution of motherhood as compulsory and emphasise freedom of choice. Throughout her *oeuvre*, the author criticises the prevailing discourse on motherhood, natural childbirth, and the idea of ‘intensive mothering,’ which she sees as a socially constructed normative model of motherhood that perpetuates traditional heteronormative notions of the family and gender roles. Therefore, the writer warns about the need to create better policies in order to protect working mothers and their children. Although the perceptions about motherhood become more realistic in Jong’s later works, she continues to think that having a baby, either through natural or surgically assisted birth, is a turning point that changes a woman’s priorities, her perception of her body, and her understating of time. The experiences of pregnancy and childbirth inevitably put into question a sense of her identity and individuality. After a woman becomes a mother, her baby occupies a central position in her life and “[e]verything else became[s] less important” (*Inventing Memory*, 223). Different attitudes between one’s self before and after childbirth, as well as the relationship to the baby inside and outside a woman’s body, reinforce

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reconsiderations of a mother's sense of who she is and of who she is becoming (Cosslett, 1990: 118). Another important aspect related to the trope of motherhood, which is the relationship between mothers and daughters, is also distilled into Jong's works and is discussed in the following section.

Transformations in a Love-Hate Mother-Daughter Relationship

[...] the generations of women are linked in their ambivalence (Erica Jong, *Fear of Fifty*, 31)

The problematic and complex relationship between mothers and daughters is a leitmotif in literature written by women (Zygadło, 2012: 333). With an increase in human longevity, generational and family relationships have become one of the central issues in feminist, sociological, and gerontological studies from a life-course perspective (Hareven, 1996: 1). In her essay, "Inventing Generational Models: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, Literature," Woodward examines the Freudian psychoanalytic model of subject formation and generational transformations. In her analysis, she argues that Freudian theory, based on the traditional parenting model, sets one generation against another: in particular, the younger generation strives to break free from the producing generation, which creates a generational gap and power struggles (1999). Diverse cultural backgrounds and age differences often give way to tensions and misunderstandings between the representatives of one generation and the other. Some scholars suggest that the main sources of generational conflicts between older parents and adult children are related to different interaction styles and personal habits, child-rearing practices and values, and household standards, among other issues (Clarke *et al.*, 1999).

Different understandings of feminism and family relationships may also set one generation of women against another. If Second-Wavers replaced daughterhood by sisterhood and, through that substitution, motherhood was interpreted as a form of female subordination, Third-Wave feminists did not identify with the idea of collective sisterhood and, instead, gave more value to daughterhood (Henry, 2004: 10). They gave more importance to individual experiences and personal subjectivity than to family bonding in comparison to the former feminist movement (Ray, 2003: 118). Differences between generations of women and their interpretation of feminism are especially visible in a "lifelong, intimate, and developmentally important" mother-daughter bond

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(Bojczyk *et al.*, 2011: 453-4). Although mothers and daughters are separated by a generational gap and influenced by different political, feminist, and sociocultural agendas, they tend to give each other emotional support, which becomes even more intensified when a daughter becomes a mother herself. Yet, this emotional bondage is largely unidirectional, and mothers never cease to provide guidance to their adult daughters; in fact, a “mother continues to mother and the daughter continues to be the dependent daughter” (Bojczyk *et al.*, 2011: 470). Their findings show that as daughters mature and their mothers become older, they often reflect on their dynamic relationships and interactions in a new light: “when daughters are young adults and their mothers are middle-aged, the past [...] is revisited and reassessed by both generations (2011: 473). In other words, as mothers and daughters grow older and mature, they tend to become closer to each other, which is reflected in an enhanced mutual understanding, a sense of female solidarity, and their emotional support. These changes are visible in Jong’s literary writings and are reviewed in this section. Jong’s works show how the collective values and lifestyles of American middle-class baby-boomers conflict with those of their previous generations, and, therefore, lead to complex mother-daughter relationships. In her work, the author explores how female characters respond to changing sociocultural realities marked by the sexual revolution and Second-Wave feminism, and shows that young women do not really appreciate the relationship with their mothers until they grow older and gain enough life-experience to understand their progenitors better. Through the representations of the mother-daughter link in her *oeuvre*, we can observe how the writer illustrates an uneasy and rocky generational gap that is only partly softened in old age.

In *Fear of Flying*, Jong depicts a tense love-hate relationship between Isadora and her mother Jude. Their bond is two-dimensional: Jude is Isadora’s enemy and friend at the same time, and this duality generates conflicting feelings: “[m]y love for her and my hate for her are so bafflingly intertwined that I can hardly *see* her. She is me and I am she and we are all together” (*Fear of Flying*, 201, emphasis in original). On the one hand, Jude encourages Isadora to embrace traditional motherhood; on the other, she advises her daughter not to be ‘ordinary’: “[a]bove all, never be *ordinary*” (*Fear of Flying*, 202, emphasis in original). Jude embodies her daughter’s own fears and represents the type of woman Isadora does not want to become; but, at the same time, she gives her the courage to pursue her own dreams and desires.

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Jude is the mother of four daughters, but she is not presented as a stereotypical matriarch. Instead, she is described as a bohemian artist who “smells of *Joy of Diorissimo*,” does not know how to cook well, and wears “Chinese silk pyjamas to the theatre, Balinese toe-rings on her sandaled feet, and tiny jade Buddhas mounted as dangling earrings” (*Fear of Flying*, 202-3). By criticizing mainstream culture and “maintaining an air of cultivation, mystery and aloofness,” as observed by Ravits, Jude tries to teach the young Isadora never to be ordinary and to eat fast because “the world is a predatory place” (Ravits, 2000: 18; *Fear of Flying*, 202). Jude is so unconventional that sometimes Isadora wishes she had had a traditional Jewish mother, like the one depicted in Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* (1969): “[w]hen I think of my mother I envy Alexander Portnoy” (*Fear of Flying*, 201). Jude’s artistic nature and unwillingness to be ordinary might have influenced Isadora’s decision not to embrace traditional marriage and motherhood. Likewise, she might have contributed to Isadora’s desire to experience the sexual revolution at first hand. As the heroine confesses, her mother “believed in free love, in dancing naked in the Bois de Boulogne, in dancing in the Greek Isles, in performing the Rites of Spring” (*Fear of Flying*, 211). Nonetheless, Jude is aware of the dangers of sexual drives and uncontrollable passions. Thus, she instructs Isadora to “play hard to get” so that men will respect her (*Fear of Flying*, 211).

But Isadora is too frenetic and too young to understand her mother’s teachings; moreover, she “never had the courage to ask [her] mother directly” about sex (*Fear of Flying*, 211). Jude’s bohemian nature and her at times liberal, at times conventional thoughts on sex confuse Isadora and make her “furious ... for not teaching [her] how to make peace between the raging hunger in [her] cunt and the hunger in [her] head” (*Fear of Flying*, 212). According to the feminist literary critic Marianne Hirsch, daughters tend to position themselves in opposition to their mothers and break free from the patriarchal constraints that their mothers represent and propagate (1989).¹¹² The role of the mother is to prepare her daughter for a future that involves becoming a mother, a wife, and a lover. However, a daughter tends to act in opposition to the demands of a mother so as to assert her identity and escape a patriarchal family model. Isadora’s youthfulness and lack of life-experience do not allow her to understand her mother. The heroine, obsessed with her professional career and with the desire to find her female

¹¹²See: Ruth E. Ray. “The Uninvited Guest: Mother/Daughter Conflict in Feminist Gerontology.” 2003.

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subjectivity needs to take some time to grow, to mature, and to discover who she is; only then will she be able to understand and identify better with her mother.

Jong's earlier poems also reflect an ambiguous and uneasy bond between mothers and daughters. In her collection *Half-Lives*, published when the writer was thirty-one, the speaker in the poem reveals the complexity of the mother-daughter rapport and the inability to understand each other. The daughter in Jong's work is caught between the feelings of love and hatred towards her mother, the need of the presence of a motherly figure, and a longing to escape from her. The poem "Mother" clearly illustrates this two-dimensional link between a mother and a daughter, as it points to the misunderstandings, fights, but also their shared tenderness and the inability to ignore the importance of a mother in a daughter's life:

I have cursed you enough / in the lines of my poems / & between them, / in the silences which fall / like ash-flakes / [...] / I have cursed you / because I remember / the smell of *Joy* / on a sealskin coat / & because I feel / more abandoned than a baby seal / [...] / I have cursed you / as I walked & prayed / [...] / Because you saw me in your image, / because you favoured me, / you punished me. / It was only a form of you / my poems were seeking. / Neither of us knew. / For years / we lived together / in a single skin. / We shared fur coats. / We hated each other / as the soul hates the body / for being weak, / [...] / I would have said nonsense / to please you / & frequently did. / This took the form, / of course, / of fighting you. / We fought so gorgeously! / [...] / Now we're apart. / Time doesn't heal / the baby to the womb. / Separateness is real / & keeps one growing. / [...] / I have made hot milk / & kissed you where you are. / I have cursed my curses. / I have cleared the air. / & now I sit here writing, / breathing you. (33-5)

As Jong herself stated, only in midlife could she finally find courage to abandon her prejudices against her mother and have a better rapport with her: "[w]e finally let go of that ambivalence that was our mothers' collective lot – and we crashed through the glass ceiling inside ourselves, to real freedom" (*Fear of Fifty*, 29). Jong and the women of her generation had to learn to understand, to live with, and to identify with their mothers, but, at the same time, they had to "overthrow their mothers to become themselves" (*Fear of Fifty*, 29). As the writer stated, "[w]e are our mothers, but we are also women of the future" (*Fear of Fifty*, 32-3). In her later works, the author continued to show that mother-daughter relationships undergo important changes as women grow older. In her memoir *What Do Women Want*, written when Jong was fifty-six, the writer described how her own ageing process provided space for a better understanding of her mother: "[a]s I grow older, my mother grows mellower along with me" (*What Do*

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Women Want, 9). The writer admitted that, in her “teens or twenties or even thirties,” she was not able to identify with her mother, as is the case with Isadora in *Fear of Flying*, but when her mother turned eighty-six and Jong “endured and surpassed [her] fear of fifty,” they became “very tender with each other” (*What Do Women Want*, 5). The author also emphasised the importance of female solidarity and intergenerational dialogue, which, according to Jong, gains more relevance in a woman’s life as she grows older. The writer stated that love, wisdom, and knowledge were passed from one generation of women to another: “[a]ll we know of love comes from our mothers. Yet we have buried that love so deep that we may not even know where it comes from” (*What Do Women Want*, 3). Jong argued that women get closer to and influence each other as they grow older, but this understanding only comes with age: “[w]ith mothers and daughters you never really know *whose* is the initiative. We are so interwoven, so symbiotic, that you cannot always tell the mother from the daughter, the dancer from the dance” (*What Do Women Want*, 6). The importance of female bonding in later stages of a woman’s life is again brought to light in the following lines, in which the author reflected on the increasing closeness and better communication between mothers and daughters:

My mother is a centipede, and so is my daughter. Sometimes our paths intersect as we trudge along on our three hundred feet. But we have already marked each other in millions of ways. We share the same DNA, the same dreams, the same daring. If Molly is destined to be the most daring of all, it’s no less than I expect. So many generations of women have empowered her. So many mother and grandmothers have gone into her making. [...] Make no mistake, these ancestors are watching you. If you disappoint them, you disappoint yourself. (*What Do Women Want*, 9)

To highlight her statements, Jong used Virginia Woolf’s quote that bears evidence of the importance of the matrilineal line as women grow older: “[w]e think back through our mothers if we are women.’ Virginia Woolf said. And through us, our mothers think forward into the future” (*What Do Women Want*, 9). In one of her interviews, Jong also noted that as she grew older, she could identify better with the women in her family: “[t]he older I get the more I see myself becoming my mother and my grandmother” (Mitchell, 1997: 38).

In her historical novel *Inventing Memory*, written at the age of fifty-five, Jong again examines a mother-daughter relationship and the significance of intergenerational dialogue as a source of wisdom, self-formation, and female subjectivity. This Jewish family saga covers four generations of women and is narrated through fictional

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collections of diaries, letters, myths, and oral transcriptions that represent the women's personal stories and the collective family memory. The story starts around 1880 with Sarah, who escapes a Russian pogrom¹¹³ and flees to New York, where she becomes a famous artist. To preserve her family traditions, her Jewish values, and, especially, the wisdom of the women of her generation, the character starts to write her family history, which she passes to her daughter Salome. Salome, a flapper in the Roaring Twenties and a writer herself, continues to carry her family records in her notebook into the forties. In contrast, Salome travels to Paris to become a famous artist. Her escape from the US into the Old World attests to her rebellion against her mother, who was not able to become a professional painter; at the same time, it reveals the frustrations of the previous generation of women who were chained to traditional values and a conception of motherhood that limited their personal and professional choices. Moreover, Salome also asserts that women's lives are shaped by both the need of a mother figure and a desire to escape it: "[m]others and daughters – it's a comedy, but also a tragedy. We want them to be free as we were not" (*Inventing Memory*, 279). In the novel, Jong shows that the mother-daughter bond is a profound, powerful, and significant element in a woman's life and her search of identity. Salome, upon giving birth to Sally Sky, forgives her mother Sarah and understands her frustrations better. By depicting this reconciliation, Jong reveals that the mother-daughter relationship improves as a woman grows older, as exemplified in the following quotation: "[a]h, my little mama – *Memele* – how I missed her! And the older I get, the more she is with me. She is always with me. [...] she is part of me. She is also part of you" (*Inventing Memory*, 285).

Sara, the youngest character of the four women depicted in the novel, lacks emotional support from her troubled and chaotic mother Sally Sky, who was not able to manage her fame as a pop star and her addiction to drugs and alcohol. Sara becomes a professional historian who recollects the memories of her generation of women and publishes a book based on the personal stories of her female ancestors. By reconciling and reuniting the mothers and daughters of her family in her writings, Sara creates a transcendental link between generations, finds her inner voice, and establishes a special connection with her ancestors. Their struggles and aspirations not only make Sara stronger and more self-assured, but also provide her with alternative models for female

¹¹³In Russian, the word 'pogrom' means 'riot' or 'devastation' of an ethnic or religious group. The term refers to the semi-official anti-Semitic violence in the Russian Empire that started around the 1880s. Because of the persecution, massacre, and arrests, many Jewish families escaped the Russian Empire trying to reach America, which was seen as the Land of opportunity and salvation.

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subjectivity: “[s]he had to try on the souls of all these women in order to become herself” (*Inventing Memory*, 364). In this novel, Jong’s fictional characters are connected through female bonds and even share the same dreams and aspirations; however, even though they are united, they do not lose their own authenticity and sense of uniqueness:

And sometimes she caught herself dreaming Sarah’s dreams or Salome’s or even Sally’s. For in truth she was all these women. Each of them had a part in making her who she was. But she was also herself. Their blood ran into her veins. Their DNA spiraled in her cells. Their memories teemed in her brain. She was telling a story – *their* story – the story of how one generation gave way to the next, the story of how the strengths of one generation rescued the next generation even in its darkest moments. (*Inventing Memory*, 363, emphasis in original)

As professor of America studies, Grażyna Zygałło, observes, Jong’s novel highlights that “in order to uncover and reinvent their inner life, daughters need to realise that they are part of some bigger whole, to which each generation contributes” (2012: 338). In the article “Motherhood, Feminism and Identity,” Margaret A. Simons also claims that a woman’s sense of identity “results from the experiences with the various women who have been important throughout our lives, especially the women who nurtured us in our childhood” (1984: 357). A mother acts as a vehicle through which a child learns about its place in society and defines its identity and roots. By giving visibility to the importance of the mother figure, female bonding, and the collective memory that is passed from one generation of women to another, Jong shows the complexities of the relationships between mothers and daughters and the need to preserve family traditions and wisdom. Similar ideas are also present in Jong’s memoir *Seducing the Demon*, in which the author states that, with age, family bonds acquire more importance, and that one of the best things of “getting older is this: watching the circles get completed and former enemies or lovers join hands again” (200).

At the age of sixty-one, Jong again explored the complexities of mother-daughter bonding in her historical novel *Sappho’s Leap*. In the book, the writer shows that ageing women very often – and mostly unconsciously – tend to identify with and adopt the practices they see in their progenitors, as exemplified with Sappho. From being “terribly impatient” with her mother, Sappho starts to regard her as protective and supportive (*Sappho’s Leap*, 60). The experience of motherhood makes the heroine more aware of the difficulties women have to go through in child-raising, which helps to establish a better relationship with her mother. As Jong’s Sappho argues, “[n]o woman

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can understand her mother until she becomes a mother” (*Sappho’s Leap*, 60). The Greek poetess realises that her and her mother are becoming very similar to each other: “[m]y mother was dead and I become my mother! As I aged, I was even beginning to look like her. I would catch a sidelong glimpse of myself and think – there goes my mother” (*Sappho’s Leap*, 256).

In her latest fictional work, *Fear of Dying*, Jong does not abandon the theme of motherhood. In her return to the trope of the mother-daughter bond, the author explores a daughter’s relationship with her ageing mother. According to Vanessa, in earlier stages of her life, her relationship with her mother was ambiguous and complicated. She blindly believed that her mother “was right about everything;” therefore, she “echoed her tastes in theatre, in art, in music, in books, in politics. Until the dead age of thirteen [...]” when she began to rebel and act in her own way (*Fear of Dying*, 223). Her mother’s overwhelming protection also made Vanessa indecisive, since her mother’s sharp eye would never abandon her: “[s]he wanted to hold us captive. She would never let us go” (*Fear of Dying*, 172). The character knew that there was no way to deceive her mother because she would always catch her lying or hiding something. In fact, she was Vanessa’s harshest and “toughest critic” (*Fear of Dying*, 172). Bojczyk and colleagues write about this aspect in a mother-daughter relationship. They note that daughters tend to view their mothers as too judgmental; mothers, on the other hand, do not perceive themselves as such (Bojczyk *et al.*, 2011: 465). These ideas are visible throughout the whole of Jong’s work, and especially in her earlier writings, which stress the mother-daughter conflict and the inability to understand each other.

However, as the characters grow older, there appears to be less tension in their relationship. For instance, Vanessa realises that, actually, she is deeply grateful for her mother’s critical viewpoint. The fictional character understands that her almost ninety-year-old mother’s fierce competitiveness and sharpness until the end of her life is an example of female strength and self-confidence. Although her mother had a strong personality and displayed steely determination throughout her life, she becomes mellower, more loving, and less critical with age. According to Vanessa, she is “much nicer than she was” and more prone to an open and honest talk (*Fear of Dying*, 9). Vanessa secretly wished her mother was as smooth and caring in her younger days as she is now, facing her death: “[s]he looks at me with an endless love I wish I could have taken for granted when I was young. My whole life would have been different. Or so I think. The truth is she often terrified me when I was young” (*Fear of Dying*, 10). As

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Vanessa grows older, she, too, becomes tenderer and less afraid of displaying her affection and love towards her mother. If, in her youth, the heroine was not able to talk honestly with her and was afraid of being rejected or misunderstood, with age she acquires more self-confidence to confess her deep love for her. Vanessa expresses her gratitude “for the acting, the rare books, the paintings, all the love” that she has given to her family, and thinks she is “a wonderful mother” (*Fear of Dying*, 171). Ageing grants both mother and daughter a capacity to open up to each other, and this mutual understanding and love become even more intensified when confronted with death. Vanessa’s dying mother looks very smooth, as “if the wrinkles on her old face were disappearing, as if she were going back to being a baby” (*Fear of Dying*, 171). Her mother’s weak ageing body reminds Vanessa about the fragility of humankind and reveals her inability to accept her mother’s death: “I knew her death would not be an easy one for any of us” (*Fear of Dying*, 170). The protagonist sends a mental letter to her ill mother just before her death, in which she asks the gods not to let her go too soon. Vanessa even wonders if her prayers are an act of selfishness because her mother’s death also signifies the fading of her own uniqueness. Since mother and daughter share a special connection, losing one part of this link implies weakening or missing the other, as exemplified in this passage:

*Darling Mother,
Please don't ever die. I know you are sleepy, spend most of your time dreaming – I wish I knew your dreams – and that you can no longer speak to me or hear me. And yet I want you to live forever because I am not ready to be without a mother. Is that the most selfish of wishes? You say it is. And yet you don't want to die either. You are holding on because you fear extinction – your absolute uniqueness being lost forever. I understand that. I don't want to lose your uniqueness either, but most of all, I don't want to lose mine. (Fear of Dying, 227-8, emphasis in original)*

Although Jong’s work shows that a loss of one’s mother is an essential turning point in a woman’s life, it also reveals that these significant occurrences grant new meanings about one’s existence, identity, and the process of ageing, which will be further explored in the last chapter of this thesis. The next section demonstrates how the discovery of the grandmothering experience provides alternative types of bonding, which allow to remediate previous painful experiences and losses and give inner strength to confront upcoming challenges in life.

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Discovering the Joys of Grandmotherhood

When I became a grandmother, I came to understand that all the children in the world are my children (Erica Jong, in Kutchinsky, 12 Nov, 2015)

Several studies show that every stage in life is defined by its own social roles, responsibilities, and markers (Lahad and Hazan, 2014: 134). The role of a grandparent, especially, may be seen as one of the most fulfilling and satisfying experiences in later life (Roberts and Padgett-Yawn, 2001: 113). In fact, grandparenting can sometimes be even more gratifying than the actual mothering experience, because grandparents are freer from social and work burdens and domestic chores, and, therefore, they can spend more time with their grandchildren. In the same vein, the American writer Hope Edelman, in her book, *Mother of My Mother*, observes that “the grandmother, finished with the full-time responsibilities of child rearing, can take her hands off the wheel” in the relationship with her grandchildren (1999: 27). As Ruth E. Ray argues, the presence of the grandmother “takes the focus of mother/daughter dynamics and introduces the figure of the older woman (the woman that both mother and daughter are becoming) as vital and wise” (2003: 116). Emma Domínguez-Rué lends weight to these arguments by stating that a “woman’s coming of age often results in a form of empowerment, as women break free from the constraints of the wife/lover/mother role” (2012: 432). Sociologists Kinneret Lahad and Haim Hazan also state that ageing grants new visions to life and very often shifts previous perceptions and preferences that become part of new experiences, sensations, even lifestyles:

Age then is perceived as an essential trait, an absolute status that defines its own expectations and capabilities. As such, each life phase designates its own age-appropriate behaviors, and serves as a key tool for producing knowledge and stereotypical labels. Age appropriateness norms then serve as a crucial parameter for constituting one’s persona and life trajectory. (2014: 134)

The communication between grandparents and their grandchildren also diminishes feelings of loneliness and isolation that may appear in old age, since the arrival of a grandchild allows to regain lost or broken relationships with children and to re-establish family bonds (Roberts and Padgett-Yawn, 2001: 113). Gerontologists Sara Arber and Virpi Timonen reach the same conclusions by stating that grandparenting is part of creating or renewing family relations, care and support, and intergenerational dialogue (2015: 237). They regard grandparents as figures of knowledge who transmit values and family heritage to younger generations (Arber and Timonen, 2015: 237).

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Edelman adds that the grandmother figure embraces the existence of her grandchildren, which “ensures the integrity of the tribe” because she embodies a source of family heritage (1999: 27). She observes that the relationship of grandmothers with their children is different from that with their grandchildren. Contrary to their parents, grandchildren are “far enough removed from the process [of ageing] to view it as a natural and inevitable progression,” because they do not “perceive a grandmother’s ageing as a threat” and as a loss of youthful energy and critical faculties (Edelman, 1999: 195).

In Jong’s latest works, and, especially in her novel *Fear of Dying*, the presence of grandchildren fosters the creation of new relationships and implies the adoption of different roles and responsibilities for the woman protagonist. The writer reveals how the grandmother figure acts as a bridge between different generations, which become connected by a sense of continuity and a renewed family bonding. As Vanessa ages, she starts to give more importance to cherishing her family bonds and to her new role as a grandmother of Leo, who provides her with joy and personal fulfilment: “[n]ow he was the one who grounded me. He was my rock – small as he was” (*Fear of Dying*, 247). Holding Leo and “inhaling his aphrodisiacal newborn scent” she feels as if she has been taken to another dimension that she calls “a land of harmony where sleep comes easily, milk flows like tears, and all is well” (*Fear of Dying*, 200). Leo’s arrival also makes it easier for Vanessa to endure her mother’s death - the existence of the baby gives her a new meaning in life and allows her to focus more on the needs of her now extended family rather than on the loss of her older family members. Becoming a grandmother also involves the need of caretaking for the second time, and gives Vanessa an opportunity to grow, change, and experience new sensations that come with the new caring role. Being around Leo brings memories of her daughter Glinda when she was still a baby:

What came back to me was Glinda’s infancy – how I stared and stared at her, finding perfection in every finger, every toe, how I loved nursing her, listening to the gurgling of her stomach, her pooping as I switched her from one breast to the other; my complete delight in what a friend of mine called ‘the tube stage of life’. (*Fear of Dying*, 200)

The ageing protagonist’s devotion to her grandson and her desire to take care of her family members is “so much more satisfying than an audition or waiting for reviews,” which suggests that as she ages, she alters her value system and preferences (*Fear of Dying*, 200). Vanessa even thinks that visiting her grandchild is far more exciting than

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meeting a lover. Consequently, her role as a grandmother becomes more important than her personal ambitions: “[y]ou focus shifts in a crucial way. All your lovers pale before this little squirming lump of hope. The future! And you are already part of it – through no fault of your own!” (*Fear of Dying*, 199) For Vanessa, grandmothing is so rewarding and satisfying that she would even disregard her fervent wish to travel in time to regain her youth if this also implied renouncing her newly discovered role as a grandmother: “I no longer want to go back in time. Now that I’m a grandmother, I want to stay where I am” (*Fear of Dying*, 209).

Also, as Vanessa grows older and discovers her new fulfilling role in life, the lineal perspective of time becomes substituted by a multi-layered vision of life. This changed vision brings us back to Jong’s midlife poems, analysed before, in which the writer, upon becoming a mother, realised that her perception of time became a multifaceted experience that could not be measured in chronological terms. The shifts in the understanding of time, intensified during the turning points in one’s life, such as becoming a mother or a grandmother, are, therefore, an aspect that characterises Jong’s works. The delights of grandmothing and Jong’s belief in the potential of the new generation are also expressed in her essay, “Breaking the Final Taboo,” in which the author, aged seventy-two, recalls her invaluable experiences with her grandchildren and their insatiable curiosity:

My grandchildren thrill me with their newness, their discovery of the world. Their need to learn new things – swimming, painting, history – delights me. When my granddaughter says to her twin brother that he can’t cut off her head because she is *not* Anne Boleyn but Queen Elizabeth the First, I cheer. At four and a half, both twins demand historicity even in play. Poetry and grandchildren never cease to delight, like music. (2014: 85, emphasis in original)

In *Fear of Dying*, Jong also demonstrates how the presence of a grandchild helps to connect and to merge different historical realities into a broader picture that illuminates the process of growth and maturity. As Vanessa grows older, she realises that her family, which becomes the milestone in her life, fosters her inner strength, grounds her to life, and provides her with a sense of continuity: “[w]e are held to this life by our connections with others – family, friends, lovers. Otherwise we might drift off in space” (*Fear of Dying*, 248). The protagonist even regrets not having more children and, if she wishes to travel back in time now, it is to change her priorities: “[n]ow that I am sixty and my eggs and my acting career are all washed up, every child I did not have cries out to me like a ghost on a cloud seeded with shadowy infants”

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(*Fear of Dying*, 39). Consequently, by expressing her wish to travel back in time, she does not want to become younger but, rather, to be able to have more children who, like her grandson, Leo, would bring more happiness and a sense of self-fulfilment to her life. Vanessa believes that what makes the world go forward is the new generation that replaces the older one, since it has potential, youthful energy, and optimistic eagerness to change the world: “[s]urvival of the tribe is always more important than survival of the dying” (*Fear of Dying*, 123). As she states, “[i]n the end, that’s all that matters, leaving children behind on the earth to replace you when you go” (*Fear of Dying*, 25). For Vanessa, the new generation is the only way to progress: “[w]e’d better harden our hearts as the earth becomes overrun with the dying. The old are rigid. They don’t want to give up their power. Unless we replace them with flexible new people, we have no chance of changing the world” (*Fear of Dying*, 123).

By emphasising the belief in the future potential of the next generation, Jong’s appears to reproduce rather contradictory and ambiguous understandings of old age and ageing. Although, through Vanessa’s character, Jong enhances positive aspects of female ageing and intergeneration relationships, she also falls into stereotypical representations of older people. Vanessa’s statements that older people are too rigid and stubborn show that Jong is not exempt from the complexities of growing older. As has been demonstrated, the writer’s work challenges negative representations of older people, and, in particular, of the now ageing female representatives of the baby-boom generation. However, by exalting the young as the harbingers of future development, she devalues older people and their contributions to societal betterment. Jong’s indirect perpetuation of negative representations of old age suggests her uneasy and troubled position within the shifting discourses of ageing. The writer shows the complexities of the narrative of decline and, at the same time, advocates the need to undo stereotypical characterisations of the elderly. In this respect, Jong seems to envision herself as an ageing writer and as a victim, who is caught into the difficult dilemmas of the rapidly changing dynamics of her time.

In a similar vein, through the glorification of the newly-discovered role of grandmother, the author again appears to adopt traditional family values and to defend the importance of the home space, as has already been observed in the previous chapter. In fact, Jong seems to embrace the ‘New Domesticity’ phenomenon that entails a desire to live slower and calmer lives in which home and family are at the core value. In *Homeward Bound: Why Women Are Embracing The New Domesticity* (2013), the

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American writer Emily Matchar claims that many contemporary women, tired of workplace pressures, the poor labour market, and the lack of maternity benefits, return to the hearth and embrace traditional values rooted in nurturing and caring, and perform pastime activities such as knitting, quilting, or gardening. Their “longing for the handmade, the old-fashioned, the authentic,” and nostalgia for romanticised domestic ideals, contrast with a career-oriented and technology-based culture where there is no space for creativity, family values, self-sufficient lifestyles, and a more sustainable environmental consciousness (Matchar, 2013: 3). Jong seems to reproduce this tendency in her later work through the portrayal of a sage, loving, and tender grandmother figure who finds pleasure and self-fulfilment taking care of her family and the home space. However, the re-appreciation of traditional values and domesticity may also be seen as an escape from the new pressures and cultural expectations based on the discourse of successful ageing, which stresses the importance of active lifestyles and the participation in the public sphere in order to age ‘well’. Jong’s return to the domestic space through her ageing characters may be seen as the literary creation of a counter-discourse that shows that inner satisfaction, happiness, and well-being are not necessarily linked to active engagement in public lifestyles. Although grandparenthood may put forward new demands for aged people and limit the freedoms and choices on how to age, as mentioned in the second chapter, Jong does not see the grandmother role as an obligation. Yet, time and again, even if the author seems to indirectly perpetuate contradictory beliefs about old age and, eventually, defends traditional roles, she does not equate older women’s self-fulfilment to the home space alone. As has been demonstrated in previous chapters, the writer advocates an open vision of femininity and self-fulfilment through the discovery of new joys in a woman’s life in later years. For Jong, ageing is not shrouded in fragility and passiveness, but appears as a new stage that allows for the experimentation of new sensations, one of them being the pleasures of grandmotherhood and, another, the revival of the relationship between mothers and daughters.

Conclusions

The aim of this chapter has been to demonstrate how the representation of pregnancy, motherhood, and grandparenthood undergoes important changes in Erica Jong’s works. As reflected in her midlife and later life writings, Jong’s middle-aged and older fictional

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characters no longer fear pregnancy and childrearing. Instead of perceiving them as a danger for women's creative capacities, female subjectivity, and freedom, they see them as new life experiences that increase a woman writer's productivity and contribute to a positive development of her identity and maturity. In her autobiographical writings, Jong also regards pregnancy, birth, childcare, and motherhood as life-changing bodily and psychological transformations in a woman's life, and celebrates the matrilineal line that positively contributes to a sense of stability.

As Jong grows older, she reflects a more realistic perception of childbirth and mothering practices in her writings. If, in her earlier works, the author romanticised natural birth, in her later work, she thinks that this transforming experience should not imply pain, which can be avoided by medical advances. Jong's later works also display her critical position towards 'intensive mothering,' which, according to her, alienates women from the labour market and their personal goals. Thus, the writer acknowledges the importance of the freedom to choose the form of childbirth and mothering practice, and whether to have children or remain childfree. Although, as reflected in Jong's writings, the privilege of being a mother seems to foster gender differentiation and to subordinate women to their 'natural' inclination towards care, altruism, and emotional attachment, the author shows that motherhood does not jeopardise a woman's identity. In her work, it is compatible with women's desire for professional achievement as long as it does not imply 'intensive mothering' and does not limit the options for women's self-expression and self-formation. Her literary corpus reveals that the combination of private and public roles becomes even easier to manage as a woman grows older. Such a standpoint also suggests that Jong does not identify with the radical feminist agenda, nor with the backlash movement, discussed in the first chapter. Instead, the writer advocates the ideas promoted by Third-Wave feminism, as reflected in her glorification of motherhood and her concerns about the difficulties to combine motherly duties with the work outside home. By realistically reflecting on the mothering experience, Jong, like the Third-wavers, calls for the need to establish gender balance, equal pay, freedom of choice, and greater economic and professional power for women, among other significant aspects to improve mothers' situation and their dignity. All in all, her later writings highlight that motherhood, its practices, and its perceptions are social constructions that vary across different historical times and cultures.

This chapter has also examined the complexity of the mother-daughter relationship in Jong's *oeuvre*. The writer reveals that the process of growing older helps

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to ease tensions between different generations of women and contributes to the development of new models of the mother-daughter relationship. These new discoveries provide space for the reassessment of intergenerational bonding, a better understanding of each other, and a more intimate mother-daughter connection. Jong's later writings also attest to the fact that ageing fosters female affiliation and proves the importance of the collective family memory that is mostly cherished and preserved by women, who come together to create new forms of self-expression and female subjectivity as artists, mothers, daughters, and wives.

Finally, her latest works reveal the joys of the role of the grandmother and convey positive aspects of the experience of grandparenting. Jong's ageing characters do not regard grandmotherhood as a social burden or a cultural expectation, but as an awakening or rebirth that arouses new emotions and provides better understandings of the ageing process. In Jong's works, the grandmother figure is represented as a jubilant character who derives pleasure and self-fulfilment from her grandmotherly duties. In Woodward's words, the older woman in Jong's late-life work appears as a "a figure of knowledge" who unites different generations separated by time and space and "represents the difference that history, or time, makes, a difference that she in fact literally embodies" (1995: 86). Jong's representation of the grandmother also echoes Naomi Lowinsky's argument in which she states that "[o]nce you reach back to the grandmother level, and the great-grandmother level, you're getting into the soul of the family. You really don't know your own soul until you can place it in the soul of your family. And that requires knowing history" (Edelman, 1999: 235). By offering positive representations of old age through the grandmother figure, who is portrayed as a connecting element across different generations, Jong makes an important contribution to feminist and ageing scholarship. Through her latest work, the author calls for the need to create new cultural models of older women through the positive representation of the transformative experience of grandmothering. In summary, by using the trope of motherhood in her literary universe, Jong demonstrates how, over time, the perceptions about pregnancy, childbirth, mothering practices, the mother-daughter relationship, and grandmotherhood undergo significant changes and generate new understandings of ageing and old age. Other important turning points in life that greatly influence Jong's heroines' social and individual identity, their creativity, family relationships, and the meanings attached to the process of growing older are explored in the last chapter of the present study.

CHAPTER VI: Ageing, Creativity, Wisdom, and Death

Introduction

The meanings that older people attach to their life cycle and, especially, to their experience of the final years, can reveal important aspects about the development of their creativity, wisdom, and self-perception (Cohen-Shalev, 1989). In this respect, Wyatt-Brown's and Cohen-Shalev's studies show that creative expressions, which change over time, can provide a nuanced picture of older adults' inner worlds and their ageing experiences from multiple perspectives and beyond medically-oriented research. Wyatt-Brown argues that one of the best ways to determine the effects of ageing on an artist's life is to examine the transformation of creative processes, with a special focus on memoirs and other works produced in later adulthood (1989: 175). According to this scholar, "[o]nly by combining research with novels and memoirs can we begin to comprehend the varieties of ageing experience in our time" (2010: 57).

Literary gerontology research also widely reports that the process of growing older can grant a higher degree of self-confidence and wisdom (Cohen, 2010: 191; Randall and Kenyon, 2004; Randall, 2013). Yet, although wisdom and maturity are commonly associated with old age and have positive connotations, they are not natural consequences of living longer – wisdom requires effort and reflection about important changes and occurrences in life (Achenbaum, 2001: 4; Baars, 2012; Cohen-Shalev, 1992: 297; Kenyon *et al.*, 1999: 50). Seeking sense in our lives is basic to the human condition and the development of self-assurance, inner strength, and knowledge, all of which become more imperative as people approach the final years (Baars, 2012: 1).

Looking back at classical perceptions of wisdom and age, Baars observes that in ancient Greek philosophy age had no role to play in the notion of wisdom, because a person was considered wise by the soundness of one's argument; therefore, age-related issues were pushed to the margins of Greeks' agendas (2010: 105; 2012). Plato, for instance, believed that the ability of self-reflection and the capacity to understand philosophy regardless of one's age were signs of wisdom and maturity (Baars, 2012: 94-5). All in all, for classic Greek culture, wisdom was not something people developed as a result of growing older, but it was "something to love and search for;" however, the Greeks did not deny that this search was a life-long process (Baars, 2012: 125). Hence, the chances to become wiser increased with age. Gerontologists William L. Randall and

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Gary M. Kenyon share similar thoughts as they state that wisdom is closely linked to the exploration of our own potential, limitations, and search of meaning (2004: 340). For Randall, having more knowledge does not mean being wise, because wisdom also implies the capacity of introspection and retrospection of life experiences (2008: 216-7). Since it is an ongoing holistic process rather than an ultimate achievement, wisdom-related stories are never static, but dynamic and always unfolding – they reflect changes in life and are bound to other stories that become part of our personal experiences (Randall, 2008; Randall and McKim, 2008). Also, Randall and Kenyon note that “the material for our wisdom stories comes, of necessity, from our engagement with other people. Effectively, each of us is on a journey to her/ his own wisdom story by way of other’s wisdom stories” (2004: 341). Representations of relationships with other people and their knowledge, as well as stories about how people cope with life challenges and losses can be found in literary texts.

Many scholars in the field of literary gerontology argue that textual representations yield unique insights of personal crises and turning points, and show how people accommodate their developing sense of finitude in life as they grow older (Maierhofer, 2011; Ruth and Kenyon, 1996; McAdams, 1996). One of the most life-changing occurrences that highly impact our lives is the confrontation with death and bereavement. The deaths of family members and friends, along with changes in one’s body, are the major causes of “unsettled feelings” in later life, which have a great impact on our self-perception and that of the world (Wyatt-Brown, 2010: 58). Our finitude is a cause of concern and makes us wonder about our existence, provides new meanings of life and death, and influences the development of wisdom and artistic expression (Baars, 2010: 114). In other words, the proximity of death can make people redefine their life goals, priorities and values. These inner transformations are often reflected in changes that affect our identity, self-perception, relationships with others, and creativity.

The importance of turning points in life and their relation to one’s creativity, a sense of self, and wisdom are addressed in Erica Jong’s later works. The ageing writer turns to literature to deal with new social and family roles and changing realities, and to share her life experiences and renovated viewpoints with her readers. Taking a life-course perspective, the first section of the chapter considers the intersection of creativity and ageing in the author’s work and explores the underlying changes in Jong’s self-perception as a female artist and her sense of self as she grows older. It starts with an

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analysis of the evolution of Jong's career and reveals important transformations in her late-life creative development. Jong's later literary work challenges the assumption that creativity is related to youthful energy.¹¹⁴ Instead, it reveals that artistic expressions are greatly influenced by life-changing experiences, such as parental care, death, and bereavement. Cohen-Shalev notes that internal conflicts and existential dilemmas are usually resolved in later maturity and transcended in older age, as they offer new assumptions about life and the experiences of ageing (2008: 80). Through the honest voices of her fictional characters and her poetic persona, Jong reflects the complexity of the experiences of ageing in her late writings, and, in so doing, she challenges the negative notions of old age which prevail in Western cultures. Finally, the chapter considers the power of life narratives and storytelling as tools that give the writer a sense of transcendence and self-fulfilment in advanced stages of her life.

Randall and Kenyon argue that storytelling helps us to find the meaning of life and makes our lives meaningful by telling stories (2004: 333). Literary approaches to life and ageing are crucial, since people organise their life experiences "through and into narratives, and assign meaning to them through storytelling" (Phoenix *et al.*, 2010: 2). Personalised narratives, regarded as a creative mental activity that requires both the writer and the reader, also expand people's imagination and their critical thought, and allow for different variations about the process of growing older (Hepworth, 2000: 5). Similar ideas are shared by the expert in psychology of ageing and death Robert Kastenbaum who states that creative processes help us to recreate ourselves and cope with "intrapyschic and interpersonal conflict;" yet, he laments that these attempts are scarcely examined among gerontologists and "life-span developmentalists" (1992: 286, 303). These themes are addressed in the last sections, which give space for the reconsideration of the relationship between artistic creation and the life course in the context of emotional struggles, personal aspirations, fears, and ageing realities. As detected in close readings of Jong's work, and, in particular, in her mid-life memoirs and late-life writings, Jong's work bears evidence to Randall's observation that the

¹¹⁴Creative achievement has predominantly been identified with the period of youth, as exemplified in the works of well-known Romantic poets who died young: Keats died of tuberculosis, Lord Byron of cholera in Greece, and Shelley, drowned (Cohen-Shalev, 1989: 25). Similar ideas are also observed by Domínguez-Rué, who argues that artists of the first decades of the twentieth century associated ageing with the loss of their creative potential, which led to personal conflicts and anxieties (2004: 63). These notions are reflected in the works of some well-known writers, such as T.S. Eliot in his "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915), F. Scott Fitzgerald in his *Tender Is the Night* (1934), or Evelyn Waugh in her *Brideshead Revisited* (1944). Yet, Cohen-Shalev claims that the assumed power of youthful creativity is a cultural construct and depends on dominant ideologies about age in different historical periods (1989: 25).

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development of wisdom, creative expression, and the understanding of one's inner being can be perceived as a "narrative of self-knowing," regarded as a life-long transition and constant interaction with the outside world in changing sociocultural realities (2004: 228, 333). The chapter, therefore, testifies to the importance of Erica Jong's later works which significantly contribute to the studies of late-life creative processes as a means to better understand the realities of ageing and to challenge the negative connotations associated with the artistic achievements of older adults.

From 'Fear of Writing' to a Growth of Self-confidence

A poem under a man's name smells *virile*. Under a woman's name, the same poem smells thin (Erica Jong, *What Do Women Want*, 41, emphasis in original)

Ruth Raymond Thone claims that the ageing process prompts people to be more inclined to speak their mind, tell their own truth, and say 'no' "to things more easily and not to waste energy tilting at the windmills of fools quite so often" (1992: 49). Regarding women in particular, the writer May Sarton also notes that as they grow older they become more self-assured and less concerned with external opinions and criticism (1997: 230). Drawing from her own personal experiences, in her article "Toward Another Dimension" Sarton confesses that age has given her more courage to express herself more openly: "I have found that the greatest joy is that one can be absolutely open, say outrageous things if they are true" (1997: 230). She states that, with age, we "have greater freedom than ever before to be our true selves. Everything is opening out inside and around us," and we "are permitted to be eccentric" because "there is less tension, less drive, [and] the margin for giving is wider" (1997: 230-1).

Self-assurance and courage to speak one's mind are closely related to wisdom and the process of maturation. Because of "the summation of growth and development," aged people become more "experienced, accomplished, and seasoned," which leads them "into an increasingly harmonious whole" and wisdom (Ross and Mirowsky, 2008: 2393). William L. Randall and A. Elizabeth McKim have extensively elaborated on the narrative dimension of wisdom and expanded the field of literary and cultural gerontology through it. In their work, *Reading Our Lives: The Poetics of Growing Old* (2008), they provide a brighter picture of the interplay between wisdom and ageing, and consider its direct relationship to self-knowledge and creativity. These scholars claim

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that wisdom is not only about learning, but also about unlearning – it keeps people curious and open to changes, discoveries, and new experiences that render them more mature and wiser (2008: 221). For Randall and McKim, life is about never-ending interpretations of turning points and specific self-defining events, where imagination and memory come into play. In their book, they elaborate on a storied narrative-self that is created through various themes, whose examination becomes more self-reflective and pronounced as people grow older. These scholars remind us that the development of maturation and the awareness of the complexity of human nature is an ongoing process that can be interpreted in multiple ways.

In *Ageing, Insight and Wisdom: Meaning and Practice across the Lifecourse* (2015), Ricca Edmondson also explores the notion of wisdom in connection to the life course, and looks at how we respond and interpret life changes as we grow older. According to this sociologist, meaning-making “is a socially and existentially significant activity,” whose importance increases with age (2015: 15). Yet, Edmondson also acknowledges that the understanding of life and wisdom can be read in various ways based on different times, contexts, discursive settings, and interactions: it can be seen as a vibrant engagement with life; as a connection with spirituality and our inner-self; as a deeper reflection of life and death; or as an association with lifetime-related questions. To Edmondson, the development of knowledge is related to seeking new perspectives and wise actions that can be seen in everyday realities and the meanings attached to them (2015: 204).

These ideas are distilled into Jong’s life narratives and her fictional works from a lifespan perspective. This section starts with the evolution of Jong’s career as a female artist who becomes more self-confident in late-life stages. The changes observed in her later works point to a gradual development of her wisdom, which, as Jong reveals, is an unfolding life-long process. The substitution of the writer’s initial ‘fear of writing’ by her late-life self-assurance, courage to speak her mind, and gradual capacity to learn how to ignore external opinions and negative criticism, demonstrate her increasing inner-strength and maturity.

As explained in the second chapter, in her early career as a writer, the author was afraid to address the problems, anxieties, and aspirations of women of her generation. Jong was convinced that for a woman to obtain literary recognition, to be accepted, and to be heard, it was necessary to write from a male perspective. The young writer believed that nobody would care about “a woman’s fate” because the issues that

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concerned women were considered insignificant and trivial (1974: 264; 1980: 118-9). Therefore, thinking that the majority of “serious novels were about men,” Jong “tried to sound either male or neutral” (Jong, 1974: 264; 1980: 118-9). Since her childhood, the future writer had been used to reading books written by men and, unconsciously, she “identified with male heroes” (*Fear of Fifty*, 145). The author was also aware of the fact that it was harder for a woman writer to obtain literary recognition than for a man. At the age of thirty-one, Jong stated that:

[...] there is still a feeling that women’s writing is a lesser class of writing, that to write about what goes on in the nursery or the bedroom is not as important as what goes on in the battlefield, that to write about relationships between men and women is not as important as writing about a moon shot. Somehow there is a feeling that what women know about is a lesser category of knowledge. [...] There is a kind of patriarchal prejudice which infuses our whole culture. I think it is not always malicious on the part of men – it’s often purely unconscious. (Templin, 2002: 8)

As a young woman, Jong observed that if women “were good, they were good *in spite of* being women. If they were bad, it was *because* they were women” (1980: 118, emphasis in original). However, the writer did not blame men for ascribing an inferior status to women writers. According to her, men took in this notion through mainstream culture and patriarchal discourses, which make women’s writing seem less valuable, weaker and more sentimental. Although Jong has achieved celebrity status as a writer, past her midlife, she continues to think that women are less represented in male-dominated literary circles. For the author, “[a] woman writer must not only invent the wheel, she must grow the tree and chop it down, whittle it round, and learn to make it roll. Then she must clear a path for herself” (*Fear of Fifty*, 145). Even though men, like women, also struggle to be recognised in the literary domain, they are not obliged to “convince the world that [they have] the *right* to find [their] voices” (*Fear of Fifty*, 145, emphasis in original).

Hence, it comes as no surprise that in her first attempts to write Jong tried to imitate men and create male protagonists. She wrote a Nabokovian style¹¹⁵ novel under the title *God on West End Avenue* about a young mad poet who considered himself God (Jong, 1974: 264). Yet, writing from a madman’s perspective ended up being too difficult and Jong decided to write another novel, still from a man’s perspective, *The*

¹¹⁵In her early forties, Jong confessed that since graduate school she considered Nabokov as the “cleverest writer in the world” (Templin, 2002: 146).

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Man Who Murdered Poets, about a male poet living in Heidelberg¹¹⁶ who tried to kill his *doppelgänger*. However, after having produced about two hundred pages, the author gave up because she felt that this attempted novel could not reveal her inner female voice, because it “was false” and “lacked life and authenticity” (Jong, 1974: 264-5). Jong’s decision to write *Fear of Flying* from a female perspective in her early thirties can be seen as a first successful step towards the growth of her self-confidence as a woman writer. Yet, the writing of *Fear of Flying* was accompanied by the fear of being rejected and misunderstood – the young author was afraid nobody would publish her book. Aged thirty-five, Jong stated that “[i]t was terrible. I wrote *Fear of Flying* in a constant state of tremor. I was so scared my hands and feet kept getting cold. I kept thinking, ‘What are you doing, what are you putting on the page, you nut, you can’t publish this’” (Templin, 2002: 79). Jong’s poem “The Hole” from the collection *Loveroot*, which was written around the time she was writing *Fear of Flying*, perfectly depicts her insatiable need to write as well as her fear of failing and insecurity after having completed the book:

She is frightened when the book is done. / The novel whose scrawled yellow pages / have filled her heart from seven years / is snacked away. / The book-in-progress / was the mattress of a bed / where her past made love / to her future, / She has no choice - she will begin again. / Her loneliness: the motor of her pain. (106)

Although writing from a female perspective was challenging, it helped Jong to find her inner voice and to learn about the art of writing:

At times, the writing was hell and at times it was bliss. At times I would grow bored with Isadora and long to be in another consciousness, and at times I would love her and learn from her things I had never known about myself. I sensed I was doing something new with this book in certain ways and anticipated great resistance. (Jong, 1974: 266)

Looking back at her literary career past her midlife, Jong realised that the creation of novels based on “doppelgängers, mirror images, and obscure words” were not helping to reveal her inner voice, which “proved the opposite of Nabokovian” (*What Do Women Want*, 67-8). At sixty-four, Jong again admitted that she was very “young and green” when the novel came out, but she felt proud to have written *Fear of Flying* because “it has guts and juice – two things [she] prize[s]” (*Seducing the Demon*, 2-3).

¹¹⁶When writing this novel, Jong was living in Heidelberg, Germany, with her second husband (*Fear of Fifty*, 126).

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The courage to overcome her ‘fear of writing’ helped Jong to become more grounded and self-confident in her later writings. As gerontologists Fredda Blanchard-Fields and Lisa Norris state, “the ability to deal with paradoxes, changes, and contradictions encountered in social situations [...] in the face of uncertainty” reveals the development of self-knowledge and maturity (1995: 103). In her memoir *Fear of Fifty*, Jong even acknowledged that when she hit her midlife, she could write from a male perspective if she wanted, because she “had lived with enough men to know their feelings as if from the inside” (146). Yet, she refused to do so, because many women needed “their own stories to be told” from a female point of view (*Fear of Fifty*, 146). *Fear of Flying* was a sincere manifestation of her thoughts and encouraged other women writers to voice their concerns and to get rid of their fear of writing: “I had written honestly about things I had to write about, although I was scared to death to do it. The sense of triumph was exhilarating. I felt I was gaining territory for other women and other writers” (*Seducing the Demon*, 2-3; Templin, 2002: 29). The writing of *Fear of Flying* helped Jong to realise that the act of creation can grant more strength and self-assurance to continue exploring the issues that concern women of her generation:

Having shed my own autobiography I now felt ready to invent in a new way. I wanted to write a novel about the twentieth century and how it impacted the lives of women. [...] Liberated from my own place and time, I found myself inventing a woman’s voice quite different from my own. (*What Do Women Want*, 179)

As the writer grew older, she also understood that the process of writing was far more rewarding than the feedback she received because the act of creation was about listening to her inner voice rather than about looking for external approval. As previously suggested by Randall, Jong’s increasing introspection and retrospection of her experiences as a female writer point to the development of her self-confidence and wisdom. If, in her early career, Jong considered writing a “very tough discipline” and was very ambitious and “bedeviled by her professional jealousy,” the ageing process has taught her “how to love the work itself without expectation” and how to appreciate it more than the actual outcome (Templin, 2002: 10; *Seducing the Demon*, 262). According to the author, only by openly expressing ourselves can we find joy and fulfilment in the experience of writing, which is sometimes painstaking and fatiguing, but also rewarding and gratifying. This process is similar to the ongoing development of wisdom. Jong’s poem “Flying at Forty,” from the collection *Ordinary Miracles*, written when she was forty-one, clearly illustrates that, with age, the author became more self-

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assured and less afraid to speak out her concerns; the fear of rejection and criticism no longer inhibited her: “[f]ear was my element, / fear my contagion. / I swam in it / till I became / immune. / The plane takes off / & I laugh aloud. / call me courageous. / I am still alive” (82). In her midlife memoir, *Fear of Fifty*, Jong again stated that the greatest “compensation for being fifty in a culture that is not kind to older women is that you care less about criticism and you are less afraid of confrontation” (xxvi). The same thoughts are also embodied in this statement, when Jong was fifty-one: “I have reached the point, hitting my fiftieth birthday, where everything terrible has been said about me, right? I can’t lose. I’m no longer afraid” (Templin, 2002: 189). This becomes even more relevant taking into account that, sooner or later, “every artist encounters rejection” (*Fear of Fifty*, 132, emphasis in original). In various late-life interviews and memoirs the author emphasised that writing must come out of love and not interest in profit, because “no money will ever be enough and eventually you will start imitating your first successes, straining hot water through the same used tea bag. It doesn’t work with tea, and it doesn’t work with writing. You must give all you have and never count the cost” (*What Do Women Want*, 181).

Jong’s growing self-confidence as a writer and her lesser concern about public opinion are also exemplified in her “Twenty-One Rules for Writers,” which appear in her later memoir *Seducing the Demon*, published when she was sixty-four. The author sets up some rules for young writers, in which she states that, in order to succeed in the literary domain, one must have faith, not be afraid of change, and not expect approval (*Seducing the Demon*, 4). At the age of seventy-two, the author again affirms that, as she ages, her value system and goals in life change. The things that she had considered important in her younger days, such as fame, her social position, or literary recognition, become less significant in later years:

Other things drop away – rituals like charity benefits, the endless jousting for social position, become boring – as do literary awards, once you have sat enough committees and realize how arbitrary they are, how much horse-trading goes on, and how nearly always the compromise candied rather than the mist radical and fresh voice wins. (Jong, 2014: 85)

Similar arguments are also visible in an interview, in which Jong, a year later, states that she has more imagination and is less concerned about what people think about her and her work:

But age is the last taboo, and it’s so wrong because, in a weird way, life is just beginning. You’re confident. You’re good at your work. I’ve more imagination

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now than ever. I've come into my own. I'm not afraid of anyone. (Cooke, 25 Oct, 2015)

As these quotations demonstrate, for Jong old age it is a stage in life marked by new discoveries and a greater capacity of artistic expression. The following comment also illustrates that the writer has learned how to come to terms with her inner self and gained more power in her later creative output:

I'd say I'm ageing very gracefully. I'm happy and happier with every passing year and I feel more empowered in my writing and even more empowered when I have to do a book tour because it reminds me that I don't suffer fools gladly. I have absolutely no problem saying to people, 'That's a stupid question, move on!' (Finch, 13 Nov, 2015)

As reflected in these lines, ageing has granted Jong new perceptions about fame and her social position, and has increased her maturity, courage, and self-assurance. Yet, Jong's struggles to establish herself in competitive literary circles also indicate that self-confidence is a life-long learning process that requires effort, courage, and introspection. Similar thoughts are reflected in an interview, conducted in 2015 after the publication of her novel *Fear of Dying*:

I'm freer, I have these beautiful grandchildren and a daughter who adores me, finally. I see that the greatest thing about getting older is how your judgment changes and how you come to understand the cycles of life. And you keep having these amazing flashes of understanding. (Burns, 8 Sept, 2015)¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷The idea of life cycles, evoked in this quotation, echoes German psychoanalyst Erik's model of the eight stages of identity and psychosocial development, often regarded as one of the most influential theories of the human life cycle in contemporary Western culture. This model was first presented in his book, *Childhood and Society* (1950), and later developed in other writings. Influenced by Freud's theory on psychosexual development, Erikson states that one's identity formation depends on a high number of external factors, upbringing, and sociocultural background. According to this theory, people go through eight interrelated periods in their lives: infancy; early childhood; pre-school period; school-age; adolescence; young adulthood; middle adulthood; and late adulthood. The latest life-stage in life, also defined as the "Integrity versus Despair" phase, which spans from fifty-five onwards, is characterised by an increased capacity of reflection, wisdom, a feeling of integrity, and a search of meaning in life. To Erikson, 'integrity' means a reconciliation with one's inner being and the acceptance of one's life. Nevertheless, although the eight stage usually involves a deep sense of self-satisfaction, Erikson also notes that many ageing people may feel despair or anguish as a result of a sense of unfulfilled potential or the approach of death. Erikson's partner in authorship, Joan Erikson, expanded the idea of the eight life circles by introducing the ninth stage in a jointly published book, *The Life Cycle Completed* (1997). To her, the ninth stage, which spans from the ages of eighty to ninety, is mostly defined by health-related problems, isolation, and death. Joan Erikson notes that those who reach this stage are "often ostracized, neglected, and overlooked; elders are seen no longer as bearers of wisdom but as embodiments of shame" (1997: 144). Therefore, Joan Erikson calls for more positive evaluations of old people and better care provision. She also suggests society should give more value to their wisdom, their life experiences, and their connectedness with the past. To Joan Erikson, ageing is not a burden, as commonly understood in Western society, but "a great privilege" (1997: 128). In *The Life Cycle Completed*, Joan Erikson also pointed to Lars Tornstam's (1993) concept of gerotranscendence, characterised by spiritual connectedness, a philosophical perception of death, and a sense of self-expansion. This theory will be further discussed in the last sections of this chapter.

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The evolution of Jong's understanding of the experience of ageing is also mirrored in her works and her personal statements, as well as in the transformations of her characters, who become more introspective and mature as they grow older. Through Leila in *Any Woman's Blues*, written when the author was approaching her fifties, Jong shows that ageing grants women a possibility to go back in time to find their lost selves that have vanished because of family and social obligations:

Nature gives us thirty years of blindness to male bullshit so we can make the maximum number of babies. And when the estrogen begins to wane, and we come back to ourselves again. We return to the bliss we knew as nine-year-olds, coloring in our coloring books. We get our lives back, our autonomy back, our power back. (161)

Another example is also visible in Jong's comment about her inability to understand Sappho's poems when she was in her college years. According to the writer, she could not identify with the Greek poetess' writings because she was too young and inexperienced. Only when Jong felt sufficiently grown-up to appreciate Sappho's poetry, did she go back to her verses. In one of her interviews, aged sixty-one, Jong stated: "[s]o I read Sappho, you know, at another time in my life. And suddenly I realized here was a woman speaking to me across 2,600 years. And her concerns were my concerns" (Moyers, 27 June, 2003). The same idea is voiced in the afterword of the novel *Sappho's Leap*, where the writer explained that she had to mature to identify with classical literature: "[i]t is in the nature of those books we call classics to wait patiently on the shelf for us to grow into them. I read Sappho again in my fifties and suddenly I understood" (314).

Jong's poem "To a Transatlantic Mirror" from the collection *Becoming Light* demonstrates that, as people age, they start to look for a sense of congruence between their minds and bodies as a means to find their true selves: "[w]e are jaded, / divorced from our selves / without ever having found / ourselves – and yet we / long for wholeness / if not fixity, / for harmony / if not music of the spheres" (39). The speaker in the poem highlights the desire and the difficulty of finding balance and wholeness in life. In the poem "Love Spell: Against Endings," which appears in the same collection, the poetic voice again demonstrates that ageing grants more confidence and self-assurance; however, it takes learning to grow into self-confidence: "I am ready now, Muse, / to serve you faithfully / even with / a graceful dancing partner – / for I have learned / to stand alone" (54).

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In *Fear of Dying*, Vanessa's life story also highlights that life is a continuous process of becoming, characterised by fewer regrets and a greater sense of wholeness, maturation, and a sense of harmony. Although Vanessa wishes to travel in time to correct her mistakes, to make wiser choices, and to reconstruct her life – “[a]ll you long for is to go back and do it all over, correct the mistakes, make everything right” –, she comes to the conclusion that her life energy has not been wasted but, on the contrary, has made her wiser and more mature (*Fear of Dying*, 104). It is also worth mentioning that in the original draft of *Fear of Dying*, Vanessa turned back the clock thirty years by the aid of magic. Jong wanted her fictional character not only to look young and beautiful, but also to be wise and mature as a woman after her midlife. However, such a plot did not make sense to the author: “I tried to imagine getting her wish to look 30, but knowing what she knows at 60. It seemed very artificial, so I tore up that draft of the book” (Finch, 13 Nov, 2015).

Jong's decision to create a female artist who realistically accepts her own age again suggests that, for Jong, growing older is not perceived as a narrative of decline, but as a stage in life that is characterised by an increased self-confidence, new visions, and a sense of completion of the life cycles. Along the same lines, gerontologist Armin Grams argues that ageing brings along a stronger urge to “somehow put it all together, to achieve at least some degree of wholeness” (2001: 108). These ideas are reaffirmed in one of the interviews in which Jong stated that “we become ourselves more when we get older, we know who we are and we like who we are. [...] The important thing about getting older is that we are more unapologetic about who we are” (Finch, 13 Nov, 2015). In another interview, conducted after the publication of *Fear of Dying*, Jong again pointed out that she did not regret anything in life. Although she admitted that she made unwise mistakes – “[t]here were things I did that were incredibly stupid. But who hasn't?” –, her life experience has made her stronger, wiser, and more self-confident: “I say, ‘I don't regret anything.’ I mean, what kind of question is that? [...] I don't regret anything. Everything in my life taught me something that was valuable. There's a sense of power in that” (Finch, 13 Nov, 2015). The acceptance of mistakes and a positive view towards growing older imply a higher degree of self-fulfilment and demonstrate that Jong sees ageing as an evolving story in time characterised by a greater sense of wholeness, wisdom, and self-knowledge. According to Catherine E. Ross and John Mirowsky, as people grow older, they experience less anxiety and negative emotions due to a greater maturity, fewer time pressures and social relationships that help them to

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function more “efficiently and successfully” (2008: 2392-3). More positive attitudes towards lived experiences and past mistakes also contribute to a sense of self-fulfilment in older age. For instance, Becca Levy states that happiness and self-assurance depend to a great degree on how people approach their lives and how much they take negative aspects to heart (in Jaffe, 28 May, 2016).¹¹⁸

Jong’s midlife memoirs are also of significant consideration. Research in literary gerontology shows that midlife is a creative turning point in a writer’s career, and that the works produced around this stage in life can provide new meanings about an artist’s creative process and self-development (Casado-Gual *et al.*, 2016; Wyatt-Brown, 1989). As Wyatt-Brown notes, while some “confront the ghosts of their past that they have previously avoided,” others try to “reconcile themselves to the often unsatisfactory aspects of their lives” (1989: 176). Along the same lines, Randall and McKim argue that in late adulthood people become more able to make use of “naturally increasing cognitive complexity to reflect on our accumulated experience from ever more comprehensive horizons” (2008: 223-4). Similar patterns are visible in Jong’s later works. Compared to her earlier writings, *Fear of Fifty* (1994), *What do Women Want* (1998), and *Seducing the Demon* (2006), produced around her midlife, reveal a more consolidated authorial voice and a more integral examination of her life experiences. Jong’s memoirs and her honest explorations of her intimate life from the perspective of a mother, a female writer, and a wife, suggest that ageing has granted her more self-confidence and has reduced her concerns about external opinions and criticism. The author’s initial fear of writing and her inner insecurity have been substituted by the cultivation of artistic expressions, the development of her wisdom, and her inner growth. As Vogei observes, growing older and a desire to tell one’s life story is both a transforming and transformative process that is characterised by an increased self-assurance and rethinking of one’s life (1995: 75). Jong’s decision to weave her personal and intimate experiences in the form of memoirs past her midlife suggests that ageing has allowed her to reconcile her internal conflicts and anxieties, to overcome her fear of writing, to discover her strengths and weaknesses, and to develop a heightened feeling of self-awareness and self-worth in her writing.¹¹⁹ A greater degree of self-assurance, as

¹¹⁸Levy’s study of older people’s attitudes to life also reveals that those with positive views of growing older live about seven and half years longer than those who regard ageing as a negative experience (Jaffe, 28 May, 2016).

¹¹⁹Gerontological research shows that recalling memories and telling stories contribute to cognitive functioning and stimulate mental abilities (Birren and Deutchman, 1991: 19). Life writing can be seen as

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reflected in her midlife memoirs, is followed by a gradual process of maturation through the continuous “journey of transformation in a conscious, mindful manner” (Randall, 2008: 236).

Although Jong has become more self-assured as a woman writer, her works also reveal that it takes time and effort to learn to trust one’s inner voice and be confident in writing. This observation reminds us that wisdom and a sense of self-confidence are life-long reflective processes. These thoughts are reflected in Jong’s essay “Breaking the Final Taboo,” which appeared in the 2014 anthology *A Story Larger Than My Own. Women Writers Look Back on Their Lives and Careers*. In it, Jong, aged seventy-two, reinforces the idea that age brings a greater sense of serenity, knowledge and maturity, and reminds her readers that even though “[y]outh still beguiles us” and we wish to revive it, it is actually a delusion, because ageing grants other abilities and capacities that are absent in youth (2014: 85). The author looks back at her life from the vantage point of her more mature self and uses a developed sense of irony and a “double vision which innocence cannot have” (2014: 86). This observation bespeaks her increased wisdom as it reveals her capacity of introspection, the search of meaning in her creative processes, and the development of her critical thought.

Yet, Jong also acknowledges that sometimes this adult double vision has its downsides because it lacks the naivety and innocence of small children, attributes that she used to have as a young writer (2014: 86). In fact, Jong states the act of creation becomes more challenging with age because it is harder to find a ‘middle voice’ that speaks for both young and aged people: “[t]he search for a voice in our books becomes more difficult as we age. When young we only had to learn to write as we spoke – both aloud and in our own heads. As we grow older we strain to find a voice that both age and youth will thrill to – a much harder task” (2014: 86). To prove her statements, the author looks back at the writing trajectory of well-known writers, such as Ernest Hemingway, Kurt Vonnegut or J. D. Salinger, and highlights that the public interest in their books decreased as they grew older because they could no longer interest the same readers who had looked for innovation and youthful inspiration in their earlier writings:

Youth has a kick, the excitement of the new. Age may sound too world-weary. Think of the writers who thrilled you with their viridity, if not virility – Ernest Hemingway, Kurt Vonnegut, J. D. Salinger – and see how they aged.

an exercise that enhances our cognitive capacity and prevents dementia. Moreover, a person who has been highly creative throughout the life course tends to maintain the same or even greater creativity in later stages in life (Birren and Deutchman, 1991: 82).

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Hemingway's voice palled unless he was writing out of his youth, as in *A Moveable Feast*. Vonnegut became grumpy unless he has a real historical event to describe, like the fire-bombing of Dresden in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. And Salinger refused to age at all. Where are his hidden unpublished books? (2014: 86-7)

In Jong's eyes, writing is even more challenging for older female writers because the image of the ageing woman is often correlated with that of the crone or witch:

And for women writers, as we deepen from the voice of the ingénue to that of the wise woman, it's even worse. Few have mastered this metamorphosis except in memoir. Maybe this is because of our prejudice against old crones – wise or not. And why do we hold on to this prejudice? Out of fear? Intimidation? [...] Perhaps it is the Crone's breadth and depth of experience we find so threatening. (2014: 87)

The process of growing older also makes Jong question her voice and its appeal to a broader audience. According to her, nowadays people are interested in youth, love, sex, and the new. As the writer ages and incorporates older women in her books, she realises that her readership becomes more limited and her works are less popular in mainstream culture in comparison to her earlier works:

I never expected to get this old [...]. I get excited about writing a poem as I ever did. The question is whether other people get as excited about poems about aging as they do about poems of first love. [...] And our society is in love with the new. As we age, our writing ages with us and sometimes we wonder if anybody cares but other women of a certain age. Yes, they are the most avid readers, but often they are readers whose taste goes unconsidered and unmarked. The young are the important tastemakers, and if we write about the ironies of aging, perhaps they can't identify. (2014: 84-5)

Jong's comments about the increasing difficulty to express her thoughts as an ageing female artist reveal the persistence of ageism in Western society. The obsession with rejuvenation and youth culture is not only visible in the desire to stop the ravages of age, but it is also reflected in the writer's wish to adjust to readers' preferences. As Jong ages, she becomes more empowered by her more mature and self-confident voice; yet, she is disempowered by society that, as Jong states, "is in love with the new" (2014: 84-5). Even if Jong feels constrained by societal expectations and readers' preferences, and, as she ages, she loses her youthful innocence, the author does not want to renounce her achieved self-confidence in writing and the courage to speak her mind. In the light of Randall's and McKims's (2008) and Vogel's (1995) theories, Jong's unlearning of her previous ways of self-expression and incorporation of new perspectives in her writings is also a sign of a better self-knowledge and greater wisdom. As Jong ages, she claims

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to find pleasure in writing about “who we are now, as we age in utterly unexpected ways” (2014: 86).

The idea that with age it becomes more difficult to write and to express one’s thoughts in a frank way is also mirrored in her latest novel *Fear of Dying*. In an interview following the publication of the book, Jong said that she “found it very, very hard to write [the novel] because of the shadow of fame still cast by Isadora Wing”:

The fact was, everybody kept wanting me to write a book about Isadora Wing, [...] And I honestly tried, but I felt that it as a character she had so much baggage that it was hard to write. And I thought, ‘I’m not there any more. I’m in a different place in my life, and the voice should be a different voice’. (Larsen, 4 Oct, 2015)

Similarly, in another interview conducted the following year, Jong said that in order not to disappoint the audience, she made Isadora a minor character in the novel:

The other reason was I couldn’t find a voice for the book. Everybody wanted me to write the last Isadora book, and Isadora just had too much baggage. And it was only when I was almost finished with the book that I introduced her as a minor character who was best friends with my major character. (Lacher, 18 Sept, 2016)

These quotations suggest that the process of growing older help Jong to reconsider her values and preferences – she can no longer identify with the youthful and frenetic Isadora. Instead of reviving her famous heroine, the writer creates a more grounded and mature fictional character, Vanessa. Through Vanessa, Jong reveals the difficulties of writing in this phase of her life: “I used to have no problem being mean. But as I age, I censor myself” (*Fear of Dying*, 170). This statement slightly contradicts Jong’s previous ideas, in which she stated that with age she gave less importance to external opinions and could express herself more openly, because the ‘fear of writing’ no longer inhibited her. Like Jong, Vanessa, too, appears quite ambiguous: even though she expresses her inability to be as sincere as she used to be in her earlier writings, she still believes that being a frank writer is her job. For Vanessa, good writing should not be subjected to self-censorship because it is the only way to change the perception of older women and get closer to her readers. Like Jong as a young writer, the character believes that if a woman writes under the mask of a male character or represses herself, she can never be true to herself. Vanessa decides to continue being open in her books because this is her commitment to her readers and to herself as a writer: “[y]ou can’t be honest if you censor yourself. Mean in part of life and part of me. I have to let it rip. That’s my job.

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Censorship is not my business” (*Fear of Dying*, 170). Jong’s opposition to self-censorship and her belief that reading opens people’s minds is also mirrored in an interview, carried out after the publication of *Fear of Dying*:

I am totally opposed to censorship. I would never force anyone to read my books or anyone else’s. I think we should all read as much as we can. The more we know different points of view, the more we are able to understand human beings. Even Chairman Mao’s *Little Red Book* and Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* are enlightening. We may disagree but even disagreement is salutary. (Kutchinsky, 12 Nov, 2015)

Jong’s defence of her honest writing can be found again in one of the culture webchats that appeared in *The Guardian* in 2015. At seventy-three, the author pointed out that she believed that “books can change the world, and that [her] job [was] to communicate as honestly and humorously as possible” (*The Guardian*, 27 Oct, 2015). According to Jong, “books open minds and promote choice” (*The Guardian*, 27 Oct, 2015). This belief is reflected in her *oeuvre*, which gives voice to women who lack role models on how to age in a sexist and anti-ageing-driven society, as has already been argued in previous chapters. The author’s unorthodox and thought-provoking books attempt to reformulate the ways older women are perceived in contemporary culture and show alternative models of self-expression and female subjectivity. Committed to her readers, mainly to women of her generation, and opposed to self-censorship, Jong tries to communicate that women should not have to adhere to the Western ideals of beauty and femininity, but, instead, express themselves freely. In other words, her books demonstrate that women do have a choice to express themselves freely and to age the way they want to. Yet, as has been shown, although the writer challenges stereotypes that associate growing older with inactivity, the loss of creative energy, and invisibility, she also struggles to escape the pressures that are imposed onto older women. However, on a more positive note, ageing and the continuous process of self-discovery through the act of writing help Jong and her heroines to become more self-assured. In an interview, conducted after the publication of her latest novel, Jong highlighted: “I’m 73, and my writing is better than it’s ever been” (Burns, 8 Sept, 2015). Her mid- and late-life works reveal that the writer becomes less afraid to speak her mind and to liberate women from age-related stereotypes. Her always provocative and nonconformist voice becomes stronger and less fearful over time, which suggests her enhanced self-confidence and courage to openly voice her concerns about what it means to be an ageing woman in contemporary society.

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Jong's reflections confirm Blanchard-Fields and Norris' observation that, as individuals age, they are more prone to reflect inwards and look for the meaning of their lives, which usually leads to growth and more "harmonized and balanced construction of reality" (1995: 108). The same idea is echoed in Liang and Luo's 'harmonious ageing' theory (2012), referred to in the first chapter, which challenges the Western idea of successful ageing. Jong's later literary productions, like the contradictions included in them, reveal that ageing cannot be divided into either a decline narrative or a success story. The process of ageing encompasses a multiplicity of meanings, in which a search for balance between body and mind and a feeling of continuity are essential for harmonious ageing and the development of a sense of wholeness. Jong's more mature, grounded, and wiser literary persona reveals the complexity of the process of growing older that goes beyond hegemonic Western-specific definitions of ageing. The open and ongoing re-evaluation of life changes in Jong's work shows that the development of wisdom and self-assurance is never static. Rather, it unfolds along personal growth, which is at the same time influenced by self-reflection, interpretation of life events and uncertainties, and the relationships with others, as stated in the opening sections of this chapter. A greater sense of self-knowledge, which comes with age, is also closely related to the changing perceptions of life and death, which are examined in the following section.

It is also significant to note that the realities of ageing, manifested through the deaths of Jong's parents, the illness of her husband Ken, and the need to take care of her daughter and her grandchildren, have also had an impact on the author's creative processes. There has been a ten-year gap between her most recent novels in her career as a writer. As the author explains: "[...] my father was dying and I was very, very close to him. And my mother was dying [...]. So life interrupted. And I wanted very much to be near my grandchildren and be there for [daughter] Molly [Jong-Fast], who's an only child, and she and I are very close" (Lacher, 18 Sept, 2016). These statements not only show how turning points in life may inhibit one's creative processes, but also reveal a gendered position of older women who, as mentioned in previous chapters, are expected to take care of their family members and look after their ageing parents. These sometimes voluntary and sometimes reinforced family 'duties' may significantly affect women's everyday realities, their relationships, and their professional lives, as is the case with Jong's literary career.

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The Meanings of Life and Death

Death is the inevitable outcome of life, but ageing is a privilege (Germaine Greer, 1991: 143)

Death has always been associated with ageing and finitude (Baars, 2010; Kenyon *et al.*, 1999). Zygmunt Bauman has observed that each occurrence in life has a past and a future, even written “in the smallest of prints,” except death, which annuls everything one has learned and strived for (2006: 29). Similarly, Jacques Derrida has stated that death signifies the end of a unique world that will never be resurrected or recovered.¹²⁰ From a lineal perspective, the transition from life to death is the result of the chronological ageing of the human body – when the bodily functions begin to fail, a person dies. Yet, clinical and legal definitions of death do not contemplate the meanings that people associate with it, including pain or bereavement. After all, the interpretation of death is influenced by historical times and social realities (Kenyon *et al.*, 1999: 47). In this study of the nature and meaning of death, Kastenbaum states that death used to be much more present in everyday lives than it is today (2003). Traditionally, it used to be associated with magic rituals aimed at protecting one’s home from mortality and illnesses, as exemplified in these lines:

This history of darkness concealed threats from predators and enemies; child-bearing women and their young children would suddenly pale and die; terrible plagues would periodically ravage the population; the dead themselves were sources of terror when resentful of the living; contact with corpses was perilous but had to be managed with diligence, lest the departing spirit be offended; the spirit world often intervened in everyday life; gods, demi-gods and aggrieved or truculent ancestors had to be pacified by gifts, ceremonies, and conformity to their wishes; animal and human sacrifices were deaths intended to protect the lives of the community by preventing catastrophes or assuring good crops. (Kastenbaum, 2003: vii)

Along the same lines, Woodspring notes that, in the past, death was inseparable from everyday lives and was often seen as a public event rather than a personal issue (2016: 181). In contrast, in present-day society we are less connected to images of death because we no longer die at home surrounded by our communities (Oró-Piqueras, 2014: 1). However, although death is less common in our daily lives, mortality is still present in the media in the form of war, famine, terrorism, illness or murder (Woodspring, 2016: 181-2). Although advances in science have helped to increase life expectancy and

¹²⁰See: Jacques Derrida. *Chaque Fois Unique, La Fin Du Monde*. Presented by Pascale-Anne Brault and Micheal Nass, Galilée, 2003, p. 160.

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ameliorate the conditions of older people, the relationship between death and old age still connotes feelings of anxiety and fear in Western cultures (Woodward, 1991: 4).

As Jong grows older and starts to face the illnesses and deaths of her family members, narratives of death and pain become more present in her later writings. Although the concern about death, seen as an inevitable occurrence in human life, has always been present in Jong's work, its perception has changed over time. As the author ages, her works give more importance to the present moment and the celebration of life, which is not perceived as finishing with death, but as a transition into another dimension.

References to death are already present in Jong's early poems, in which she raises her existential questions about ageing, life, and death, and embraces mortality as a natural part of life. Although allusions and references to the final stage of life abound in her collection *At the Edge of the Body*, written when Jong was thirty-seven, the fear of dying is almost non-existent in her poems. The poetic voice embraces the coming of death, often presented as her life companion and as a form of liberation from life struggles. The speaker faces her own mortality calmly and peacefully because she believes in eternity. In the poem "If Death," for example, Jong states that she will accept death because it does not mean the end of her existence:

if death should take me / here, now, with half my honours / or, with half my years, unchilded, / loved, well loved, & half / believing in a god of love, / as I did not before, oh say, / half my life ago. / I would give up in peace. / I would go quietly / & not protest my youth / [...] I am ready. Whenever / the branch breaks. (3)

The speaker in the poem is not anxious about her death – she would embrace the final stage in life even if her life was half-lived. In the poem "Is Life the Incurable Disease," which appears in the same collection, Jong compares living to a disease that has no cure, which suggests that death is inevitable and that human life is just a passage in time:

Is life the incurable disease? / The infant is born howling / & we laugh, / the dead man smiles / & we cry, / resisting the passage, / that turns life / into eternity / [...] Perhaps the dress of flesh / is no more than a familiar garment / that grows looser as one diets / on death, & perhaps we disregard it / or give it to the not learned yet / what blessing it is / to go naked? (17)

The persona in "Self-Portrait in Shoulder Stand," which appears in the same collection, says that death is experienced in solitude: "[b]orn alone, / we depart alone" (7). Yet,

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the speaker befriends her death that is always by her side: “[s]he lives to my left, / at exactly an arm’s length. / She has my face, hair, hands; / she ages / as I grow older” (10). The personalised version of the speaker’s own death appears in her dreams and in reality; yet, again, there is no fear or anxiety about mortality. In fact, Jong uses humour to talk about the terminal stage in life and her willingness to write even after her own death. This poem contrasts the temporality of human lives with the permanence of books that prevail in time and survive into another dimension. Through its lines, Jong demonstrates that mortality is a new stage. The belief in the continuation of life after death is also expressed in her faith that her writings will linger in the universe along with her immortal soul, which may appear disguised in a multiplicity of shapes:

Sometimes, at night, / my death awakens me / or else appears in dreams / I did not write. / Sometimes a sudden wind / blows from nowhere, / & I look left / & see my death. / Alive, I write / with my right hand only. / When I am dead, / I shall write with my left. / But later I will have to write / through others. / I may appear / to future poets / as their deaths. (10-11)

In the poem “Aura,” from the same collection, the poetic voice lives “on the edge of time, / gazing / at the infinite,” which may imply the temporality of human life and the passage of time (19). In Jong’s earlier poems, death announces a transition towards a new transformation and becoming:

My bones, I know, are only a cage / for death. / Meditating, I can see my skull, / a death’s head, / lit from within / by candles / which are possible the suns / of other galaxies. / I know that death / is a movement towards light, / a happy dream / from which you are loath to awaken. (“The Buddha in the Womb,” in *At the Edge of the Body*, 23)

In “How-to-Books & Other Absurdities,” from the collection *Loveroot*, written when Jong was thirty-three, the poetess declares the inevitability of death and claims that she should enjoy her life while still alive: “Death: it will come / when it will come / A Life: not reasoned or easy / but at least / her own” (70).

Similar ideas persist in Jong’s later life verses, too. In the poem “To a Transatlantic Mirror,” from the collection *Becoming Light*, published when Jong was forty-nine, she writes about change as the “world’s only fixity” (39). Jong’s later poems demonstrate that ageing is an unfolding and fluid life-long process that transcends our life stories and grants them new meanings that are celebrated in the light and vitality of old age. The writer continues to express the idea that living involves constant change and that the passage from life to death is not a loss, but a transition. Yet, time and again,

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there is no fear of dying, which suggests that mortality is natural. In *Becoming Light*, the soul is seen as an immortal entity that travels in time: “i dies – / but the breath / lingers on / through the medium / of the magic / alphabet / and in its wake. / Death is no more / than metaphor” (“Alphabet Poem: To the Letter I,” 10). The temporality of life is also expressed in “My Daughter Says”, in which Jong states that none of us belong to this world, and that people are only passengers whose existence is undefined: “[i]f only we could all admit / that none of us belongs here, / that all of us are Martians, / and that our bedtimes / are always / too early / or / too late” (20). In the poem “In the Glass-Bottomed Boat,” which appears in the same collection, human life is seen again as “time-bound.” In it, there is no certainty or eternity:

We pass, we pass, / always looking down. / The fish do not / look up at us, / as if they knew / somehow / their world / for the eternal one, / ours for / the merely time-bound / [...] The creatures of the reef / spell death, spell life, / spell eternity, / & still we putter on / in our leaky little boat, / halfway there, / halfway there. (31-3)

The separation of life and death is visualised as a sailing boat, which may signify a transition and lack of fixity – the boat is never stable on water. The speaker appears caught between the bottom of the sea and the earth, which can be read as a reference to uncertainty, danger, and the temporality of human nature. The same idea is voiced in the poem “The Color of Snow,” which shows that neither life nor death are certain, and that people are subjected to constant life changes: “[w]e are all halfway there, / preferring not / to think about it” (61). In “Sleep,” which appears in *Love Comes First*, the curiosity and doubts generated by the unknown not always allow the writer to embrace the terminal stage in life with calmness and tranquillity:

What is death / if only a forgetting / to wake up in the morning, / a dream that goes on / into other corridors, / other chambers / draped with other silks, / libraries of unwritten books / whole kaleidoscopic pages / can be read / only by the pineal eye / [...] What if our love of sleep / is only a foretaste / of the bliss that awaits us / when we do not have to wake up again? / What frightens us so / about falling? / To drop the body and fly / should be as natural / as drifting into a dream – / but we are insomniacs / tossing on soaked sheets, / hanging on / to our intricate pain – / while God with her sweet / Mona Lisa smile / sings lullabies / the ears of the living / cannot bear. (54-5)

Jong’s doubts and her ideas about the temporality of life are in line with research that shows that the expression of uncertainties and a sense of mutability are necessary in the maintenance of wisdom and spiritual growth (Blanchard-Fields and Norris, 1995: 103). According to Blanchard-Fields and Norris, a wise person acknowledges the uncertainty

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of life because he/she is aware that personal judgments are not the final answers to the multiplicity of questions about life and death (1995: 104). Jong's poems, in which existential questions and notions of temporality abound, suggest that she sees life as an ongoing process or a transition towards wisdom and self-knowledge, in which death is not an obstacle.

In fact, in an early poem, "Tempering," the writer implies that the power of life comes from the existence of death, which makes her stronger and more self-assured: "[p]ower, passion, despair – / how do we find the strength / to live / when living / is always nearly impossible / [...] the power that comes from death. / It alone / keeps us strong" (*At the Edge of the Body*, 14). The same idea is present in Jong's later poetry, which suggests a pattern of continuity in the writer's works. In her later poems, human life is compared to a film made to entertain gods who, at the same time, invent amusing scenarios and watch how they unfold as people struggle through life: "[i]s life much too long / for an immortal? / [...] Life is very long / for gods and goddesses, / and mortals are their movies, / their entertainment centers, / their soap operas ("Talking to Aphrodite," 84, *Love Comes First*). Yet, even if human lives are entertaining 'soap operas' for their creators, death is not meaningless because its very existence gives value and purpose to life. Jong's Sappho also thinks that death does not signify the end, but gives way to another dimension, which recalls the medieval *memento mori* theme (remember you are mortal): "[s]he understood / that her life / was a river / that opened into the sea / of her dying" ("Talking to Aphrodite," 89, *Love Comes First*). As Bauman notes, the admonition *memento mori* is accompanied by "the proclamation of life's eternity" – remembering the imminence of death gives purpose to one's existence and "makes every lived moment precious" (Bauman, 2006: 31-2). In a nutshell, *memento mori* means to live one's life in such a way as to experience happiness in the life after death. Life after death does exist, yet, its quality depends on how we carry out our lives while alive (Bauman, 2006: 32). In the same vein, Kenyon *et al.* also argue that human lives cannot be complete without the existence of death, because the understanding and contemplation of death allow to approach the meaning of life in a more profound way: "[a]n existential dictum is that human nature is characterized by the search for love and meaning in the face of death" (1999: 47). The presence of mortality appears as a fundamental element in one's life trajectory because it allows to see life as a journey towards self-discovery (Kenyon *et al.*, 1999: 49). Kastenbaum, too, follows the same arguments by stating that "life and death are so intimately entwined that knowledge of

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one requires knowledge of the other” (2003: vii). Jong’s common treatment of death, which is viewed as a rebirth and as the beginning of new life, is clearly influenced by both the Greco-Roman tradition and by the Romantic Movement. Poets like Wordsworth, Keats, Blake or Coleridge, following the classics, depicted mortality as an inevitable part of human nature that signals regeneration and even salvation. This literary tradition is mirrored in Jong’s early and later works, in which existential topics and references to death and the temporality of life abound.

However, as Jong grows older, her literary treatment of death undergoes some changes. Her later poems become less concerned about rebirth and give more importance to the present moment rather than to the finitude of life. In the poem “You Are There,” from *Becoming Light*, the writer reminds her readers that life is not about certainties, but about ‘now’: “[t]o live is to be / uncertain. / Certainty comes / at the end” (14). The same idea appears in “Against Grief,” in which the speaker emphasises the significance of the present, as opposed to the past: “[i]t takes / your present / to keep it alive” (28). The poems in this collection show that although past experiences help us to grasp the meaning of life better and direct us to our inner selves, the present moment is far more important: “[t]here is time / enough for that. / meanwhile, dance / on the bubbles” / “and that the moment NOW is all we ever have” (“Against Grief,” 29; “Smoke,” 43). The emphasis on the present moment in Jong’s later poems shows that, as the author ages, she becomes more inclined to highlight the immersion in the present and perceive life as a transitory stage in which there is no fixity. Although in Jong’s work there is no direct evidence that she embraces Buddhism, her thoughts are closely linked to this Eastern philosophy, which has become very popular in the US over the last century.¹²¹

“From the marginal religion of Chinese and Japanese immigrants on the West Coast,” Buddhism has been smoothly transformed into a leading modern spiritual resource in America (Bielefeldt, 2013). Carl Bielefeldt, a professor of religious studies, observes that Buddhism in America is not a religion, but “something that might be called American ‘secular spirituality’” – a longing for something special, more personal and private than institutional religion (2013). It is linked to the desire “to transcend its status as a religion and present itself as a free-floating spiritual resource not tied to a particular institution, community, dogma, or ritual” (Bielefeldt, 2013). The development

¹²¹American Religious Identification Survey shows that from the years 1990 to 2000, Buddhism grew 170 percent (Quinn, 2011).

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of Buddhism in the US is also due to its “relative simplicity and universal applicability” – Buddha’s teachings do not “rely on faith in any deific being,” as is the case in other religions (Quinn, 2011). Its flexibility allows its followers “to create their own traditions and schools of thought” (Quinn, 2011). Buddhist ideas and teaching are visible in New Age religions, psychology, medicine, educational institutions, and many social movements that range from feminism and pacifism to animal rights (Bielefeldt, 2013). For instance, the popularity of Buddhism in America is distilled into Elkhart Tolle’s book, *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment* (1999).¹²² It focuses on a spiritual journey to one’s inner self through the discovery of truth and light. Tolle claims that only by liberating ourselves from mind and avoiding thoughts of the past and future, can we regain awareness of being in the present moment and “the radiant joy of Being and the deep, unshakable peace that comes with it” (2004: 12). As he states,

Being is the eternal, ever-present One Life beyond the myriad forms of life that are subject to birth and death. However, being is not only beyond but also deep within every form as its innermost invisible and indestructible essence. [...] When you are present, when your attention is fully and intensely in the Now, Being can be felt, but it can never be understood mentally. (Tolle, 2004: 13)

In an article about Zen Buddhism,¹²³ journalist and writer Tim Lott states that this philosophy teaches us that life “exists in the present, or nowhere at all, and if you cannot grasp that you are simply living a fantasy” (21 Sept, 2012). Lott also notes that in Zen Buddhist thought, the doctrine of reincarnation is seen as constant rebirth, powered by universal energy, which is part of us before and after death. Like in Eastern thinking, Jong’s work shows that human life is not about the denial of the past or the

¹²²Tolle’s book seems to offer a “synthesis of Eastern spiritual teaching” and, by giving focus to living in the present moment, it challenges the ways “we think about ourselves” (Bloom, in Walker, 20 June, 2008). William Bloom states that this thought “has always been the major assertion of Eastern religion: that thinking is not the core of who you are. The core of who you really are is that part of you that can watch yourself thinking” (in Walker, 20 June, 2008). Although Tolle’s book has gained popularity and sold over two million copies worldwide, it has also received negative criticism and has been accused for borrowing from established religions. Aside from the Church, the book has been dismissed “as New Age rubbish of the worst kind, popular only because he [Tolle] has managed to get the attention of Oprah Winfrey” (Walker, 20 June, 2008).

¹²³American Buddhism is not uniform, but split into many different groups that have their own organizational structures and practices; it “is characterized by a very broad sectarian, ethnic, and cultural diversity” (Bielefeldt, 2013). Bielefeldt explains that the three major forms of this spiritual resource – Zen, Vajrayana, and Vipassana – are only a very small fraction of many different models of Buddhism in the American landscape. The oldest and most successful form of Buddhism, which was introduced in the US around the turn of the twentieth century, is Zen Buddhism. Bielefeldt observes that the American form of Zen Buddhism is actually “a package of traditional forms of monastic practice wrapped in Western philosophy and psychology. This package was first developed by Japanese intellectuals in early twentieth-century Japan, in response to their study of Western ideas. Thus, the religion was already ‘prepackaged’ for export to the West” (2013).

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ignorance of the future, but rather about the acceptance of the unforeseeable. The writer seems to suggest that the basis of human life should not be defined but, instead, lived through the present moment, which constitutes the essence of and provides meaning to one's existence.

Apart from the emphasis on 'now,' the natural world also plays an important role in Jong's later poems. In "Middle Aged Lovers, I" from the collection *Becoming Light*, the author states that inner peace and spirituality can only be found in nature: "[t]rust the wind, / my lover, / and the water, / They have the / answers / to all your questions / and mine" (27). The celebration of nature and life instead of pain and mourning is also present in the poem "Testament (Or, Homage to Walt Whitman)," which is dedicated to the famous American poet. Jong renounces agony, rage and resentment, because she considers them "cheap," and, instead, chooses to be filled with joy and dissolve into laughter:

Erica Jong, in the mist of my life, / having had two parents, two sisters, / two husbands, two books of poems / & three decades of pain, / [...] declare myself now for joy. / There is pain enough to nourish us everywhere; it is joy that is scarce. / [...] Rage is a common weed. / Anger is cheap. (3)

In fact, the celebration of life becomes more emphasised in her poetry as Jong ages. In the poem "For my Sister, Against Narrowness," death is again depicted as inevitable and life appears as a dangerous place; yet, the poetic voice invites her sister, to whom she dedicates the poem, to still try to embrace life to its fullest because it is only lived once: "[y]ou'll die anyways – / wide or narrow / you're going to die. / As long as you're at it, / die wide. / Follow your belly to the green pasture. / Lie down in the sun's dapple. / Life is not as dangerous / as mother said. / It is more dangerous, / more wide (*Becoming Light*, 186-7).

This perspective to life is especially visible in her latest collection, *Love Comes First*, published at the age of sixty-seven. Although the poetic voice explores depths of pain, mourning, and sorrow, the poems appear lighter and more joyful than her previous ones – they celebrate the importance of finding love and a sense of transcendence. Jong's poem "Holding On to The Light" reveals the speaker's search for spiritual freedom, light, and inner peace in the natural world: "I plant my heart in the earth / I water it with light. / The sweet, green tentacles / of Spring urge toward the light" (3). Allusions to spring and light point to a free-flowing feeling nourished by life energy, purity and liveliness, and show that ageing is not about decay or obliteration, but about

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the gaiety of the soul when it is closely connected to nature – “[a]ir, water, earth are all we need” (4). This shift goes along with a more refined stylisation of her poems, which appear lighter and simpler in style, yet more complex and multifaceted in their content. The poem “Speaking with the Dead” demonstrates that there is no need to mourn and be sorry for the dead; instead, the voice in the poem, who speaks to the departed, learns that it is vital to reconsider the importance of living in the present:

Speaking with the dead, / I try to hear them / instead of my perpetual monologue. / *What have you learned?* / I ask. / And they reply: / That we are leaves in a storm, / salt dissolved in the sea, / that a year reduces us / to our irreducible elements / which are speechless in the old way / but full of the sound / an earthworm makes, burrowing, / or a bird falling out of the sky. / No – don’t mourn for us in this new form / which admits no mourning. / Mourn for yourselves / and your un-lived lives, / still full of questions / Language, while you possess it, can heal you. / take this salve, this balm, / this unguent / with our blessings of silence. (61-2, emphasis in original)

In these lines, Jong proposes to embrace life while one is still alive and declares herself ready for happiness and the joy of life, which can be read as signs of increased serenity and maturity.

That the treatment of death has always been significant in Jong’s poetry is stated in various interviews. In one of them, the writer, aged seventy-three, said that:

Love and death are the only subjects of poetry. And I started as a poet. I am aware of that. Embracing love and death is what the poet does, because those are the two most important things in life. End of story. We love and we lose people. It’s the essence of being a human being. (Abraham, 24 Nov, 2015)

The same idea is confirmed in another interview published under the title “Why Erica Jong decided to take on mortality in *Fear of Dying*,” in which Jong affirmed that the topic of mortality has never abandoned her creative writing (Lacker, 18 Sept, 2016). To Jong, poetry has always been linked to existential questions, as seen in the following lines:

I always thought about it. The only subjects of poetry are love and death. If you think like a poet, you always think of mortality. As somebody who loved Keats, I was very aware of mortality, but I think as a novelist, I started to be really aware as my parents were failing, and I used some of that material about my own parents, although Vanessa’s parents are not exactly my parents. But you see them weakening and weakening and weakening. So that’s really a life-changing moment. (Lacker, 18 Sept, 2016)

Yet, if in her later poems Jong looked for the ‘light’ and the joy of the present moment when trying to cope with unpleasant occurrences, as she grows older, her

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perception of death changes because it becomes *real* – Jong starts to face the deaths and illnesses of her beloved ones. As Sarton argues, after reaching the age of sixty, the concept of death acquires another meaning and a sense of mortality becomes more present in an ageing person's life (1997: 230). The following sections draw examples from Jong's later-life writings, and, especially, from the novel *Fear of Dying*, which reveals the difficulties of parental care, pain, and the presence of death. The author shows how significant turning points in life, as suggested by Wyatt-Brown, Randall and McKim, Baars, and Cohen-Shalev, contribute to better self-knowledge and the development of creativity and wisdom. Jong's latest novel bears evidence to these statements as it reveals how certain situations and the real experience of death impact our lives and provide new meanings about our self-development, the essence of existence, and spiritual growth. As James E. Birren observes, ageing and the proximity of death grant new meanings to our daily lives as we turn our attention not to the completion of what we are doing, but to the inward meaning of how we exist (2001: xii).

Parental Care, Bereavement, and Spiritual Transitions

What on earth are we going to do with our old, old, old, very old parents? (Erica Jong, *Fear of Dying*, 122)

There is a substantial body of theory on the so-called Third Age, closely related to the retirement age of the now ageing baby-boom generation. However, the last stage in life, commonly known as the Fourth Age, has not been the object of so much attention and has even been considered a 'black hole' in ageing studies (Gilleard and Higgs, 2010; Baars, 2012; Blaikie, 1999).¹²⁴ This phase in life is usually marked by numerous psychological and bodily afflictions and is often characterised by decrepitude and deaths of friends, family members, and life-partners (Daniluk, 2003; Lloyd, 2015; Baars, 2012). The Fourth Age is also linked to dependency and the loss of mobility and

¹²⁴Blaikie criticises the categorization of age-related life stages into infancy, childhood, adolescence, and maturity up until the Fourth Age. As he notes, following the Victorian trend to classify things, "society became a population, statistically monitored and increasingly subdivided into age bands" (1999: 68). According to this sociologist, age-related categories are clear examples of social constructions that guarantee a better organization and surveillance of society. This categorization also translates into ageism, the medicalization of older individuals, and the existence of neglect and loneliness that increase as people grow older. Moreover, as Blaikie argues, age classifications create the paradoxical ambiguity of age-based transitions. Both teenagers and Third-Agers are placed into ill-defined statuses; that is to say, teenagers experience adolescence trauma, while the latter suffers from midlife crisis (Blaikie, 1999: 184).

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cognitive capacities, which reveals the cultural failure to see the Fourth Age beyond the narrative of decline (Sandberg, 2013; Lloyd, 2015). As Liz Lloyd observes, this stage in life is usually regarded as “a troublesome concept, an inevitable outcome of the emergence of the Third Age as a period of personal growth and active engagement” (2015: 261). According to Blaikie, the importance given to the Third Age in the successful ageing discourse masks the darker aspects of the Fourth Age, which is hidden “behind the screens of nursing homes and geriatric wards” (1999: 110). In fact, the deep old age is often regarded as the time when one suffers illnesses before death in old people’s homes or nursing centres (Blaikie, 1999: 195). Blaikie qualifies the generational gap between the Third and the Fourth Age as the “near-medieval grotesque” and laments the negative portrayals or even the invisibility of the representatives of the Fourth Age in contemporary culture and age studies (1999: 110). He also notes that although those entering this phase in life can richly contribute to the understandings of age, since they have lived through the pre-technological era and the rise of mass consumerism, there is a lack of interest in the life experiences of the representatives of the Fourth Age. According to Blaikie, this indifference is explained by the fact that, in our Western societies, we tend to focus more on the young, which we see as the potential future workforce to guarantee the growth of consumer culture and the development of society (1999: 60, 19).

The concept of the Fourth Age is also closely related to the culture of care of ageing subjects. Although care is especially needed in the first years of life as well as in case of illnesses, it becomes much more pronounced when older people start to require daily assistance and support because of diseases, loneliness, or disability (Fine, 2015). Yet, very often, older people are perceived as a homogeneous group that is in need of charity or pity from the younger sectors of the population (Arber and Evandrou, 1997: 10-11). Although the Fourth Age is seen through a rather negative lens, the search for the meaning of life becomes more emphasised in those who approach the final years and those who have to face parental care and deaths. In other words, the essence of existence becomes the most important aspect of life. Moreover, time becomes more irrelevant and death becomes less fearsome (Atchley, 2001: 165). Sartre points out that as individuals grow older, “[t]he walls [begin to dissolve] between being and essence, and when they dissolve altogether, when our selves, as we have known them, dissolve into death, it will be that we have grown into another dimension” (1997: 231). Marita Grudzen and James P. Oberle also observe that “as we age, we are challenged to

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transcend the bonds of measured time and explore the realm of timelessness and eternity” (2011: 172).

Erica Jong’s latest writings reveal how the proximity of her own death and the real experience of losing her loved ones open up a space for the reconsideration of the meanings of life and death. Her later work also makes visible the problems associated with the Fourth Age and addresses the issues of care of ageing subjects and their illnesses. In *Fear of Dying*, for instance, Vanessa depicts the experiences of caring for her ageing parents.¹²⁵ Although her parents are aided by caregivers, she is a frequent visitor to their apartment and makes sure they are being taken care of: “[t]hey have deteriorated drastically in the last few months. They both spend their days in bed attended by aides and caregivers” (*Fear of Dying*, 9). It is significant to note that Jong does not place Vanessa’s ill parents in a nursing home or hospital. This choice may be read as the author’s belief in a dignified death at home rather than in an institution for the elderly. It may also suggest the importance that Jong gives to family bonding in later life and implicitly it offers a critique of medicalised institutions that deprive older people of their intimate home space. Blaikie notes that being taken away from home can also be seen as a betrayal and may cause pain and disappointment to ageing parents, now thought of as dependant and even childlike figures in need of constant attention (1999: 2000).¹²⁶

The vital energy that Vanessa’s parents used to possess decreases day by day as they grow older: “[e]very day they sleep more and wake less” (*Fear of Dying*, 16). Vanessa’s father, for instance, refuses to sleep fearing to never wake up again; yet, he is also reluctant to stay awake, because his gradual deterioration makes him feel depressed. Vanessa’s parents’ frequent bad mood, their anxiety about death, their unpleasant smells, and the sick-like atmosphere that reigns in their apartment propel the daughter to secretly wish that people did not get as old and ill as her parents:

¹²⁵Jong’s own parents’ longevity and her struggles with parental care are reflected in these lines: “[w]hen I tell people my mother is a hundred and a half, that my grandmother lived to ninety-eight and my father to ninety-three, they look at me approvingly and say ‘You’ve got good genes’ as if they are about to find a new reason to be envious. They have no idea what they’re saying” (2014: 84).

¹²⁶As was demonstrated in the chapter of sexuality and ageing, the home space becomes more important as individuals grow older because it is a place full of memories, family roots, and a sense of belonging (*What Do Women Want*, 199-202). Home, where images, pictures, and albums are stored, provides a sense of continuity and a feeling of security, even if death may already be standing on the threshold. However, Blaikie also notes that being moved away from home may be a relief to both ageing individuals and their children: children become liberated from care-taking duties and are no longer exposed to the painful images of their parents. Older parents, on the other hand, may benefit from peer-group sociability and interaction with others in hospitals or care houses. They can also develop a sense of safety in case of emergency because they are not alone at home, but share a public space with others (Blaikie, 1999: 2000).

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They both wear diapers – if we're lucky. Their apartment smells of urine, shit, and medications. The shit is the worst. It's not healthy shit like babies produce. It seems diseased. Its fetid aroma permeates everything – the oriental rugs, the paintings, the Japanese screens. It's impossible to escape – even in the living room. (*Fear of Dying*, 9)

The very image of her parents' ageing and their sagging bodies makes Vanessa feel disgusted by the process of growing older. The protagonist tries to avoid seeing the body of her ageing mother – “the crepey neck, the sagging arms, the bunioned feet” – because it reminds her of her own ageing and the ravages of time (*Fear of Dying*, 9):

I have to force myself to look at her. Her cheeks are sallow and crosshatched with a million of wrinkles. Her eyes are rheumy and clotted with buttery blobs. Her feet are gnarled and twisted, and her thick, ridged toenails are a jagged mustard color. Her nightgown keeps opening to reveal her flattened breasts. (*Fear of Dying*, 10)

Although Vanessa is exposed to the bodily deterioration of her father, her mother's physical decay is more visible and more explicitly described. Her father's aged body is hidden under blankets. Contrary to her mother, whose sagging breasts can be seen through the nightgown that keeps opening, Vanessa's father is described as a little mummy that is immobile and almost invisible: “[h]is wasted body takes up remarkably little space under the blankets” (*Fear of Dying*, 11). His smallness, calmness, and practical nonexistence are also shown in his disconnection from the exterior world. Because of his impaired hearing, he can no longer follow conversations and communicate. However, according to Vanessa, even if he could be helped by a hearing aid, he would not be interested in talking, because he “prefers to spend the day sleeping” (*Fear of Dying*, 11). After his cancer surgery, he becomes even more enclosed in his inner world: “[j]ust six months ago, before his cancer surgery, he was a different man” (*Fear of Dying*, 11). As Vanessa's father approaches his death, he becomes more negative, nihilistic, and bored with everything to the point that he even considers life as a big joke. If, in his younger days, he thought that competition and fighting for goals was important, ageing and the presence of death make him realise that he was fooling himself only to stay active and functional. According to him, all the things “you were so passionate about don't mean a thing. You only did them to keep busy” (*Fear of Dying*, 25).

Vanessa's ageing father's criticism of busy lifestyles can be read as critique of the successful ageing discourse, which, as discussed in previous chapters, encourages

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older people to maintain functional lifestyles to prevent the ‘degrading’ effects of ageing and to prolong life. His refusal to ‘keep busy’ may suggest Jong’s negation of the need to actively engage in social circles in order to improve one’s quality of life in old age. Vanessa’s father’s comments make the daughter rethink her pursuit of personal goals and her life choices. Yet, the heroine refuses to see life as a joke, as her father does: “[p]lease tell me that life is worth living. Please tell me that all the hassle of getting up, getting dressed, is worth the trouble. I don’t want to believe that life is only a joke. I don’t think parents ought to tell that to their children” (*Fear of Dying*, 26). It is also interesting to note that although Vanessa’s father is nihilistic about life when still alive, he becomes more positive when he appears in Vanessa’s dreams after his death, and encourages his daughter to keep on living:

And the strangest thing is this: When he was alive, I thought all our conversations were partial, frustrating – unintelligible. But once he was dead, we really began to talk. We talked through all my dreams. We talked every night till the small hours of the morning. Alive, he was closed and careful. Dead, he told me everything. I think he may be dictating to me now. (*Fear of Dying*, 126)

As the novel reflects, this positive approach to life after his death shows that the final stages in life are difficult times for both caretakers and the dying persons not only due to their physical illnesses, but also because of their psychological breakdowns and grim visions of life.

Vanessa becomes more aware of the inevitable and of life through her father’s cancer operation. Even though the cancer tumour is successfully removed from his body, he cannot prolong his life because “the anaesthesia invaded his brain,” suggesting that “if death can’t march in the front door, it’ll sneak in the back” (*Fear of Dying*, 21). Vanessa believes that Americans disregard death and think it can be ignored: “[w]e have trouble with death. We think it’s un-American. We think it won’t catch us” (*Fear of Dying*, 134). These lines seem to suggest the popularity of the successful ageing discourse in Western countries and, especially, in the US, where this discourse was originated. A wide array of medical services and drugs that offer a possibility to prolong life in a ‘successful’ way have accelerated the idea of ‘success’ in old age. This belief extends not only to the measurement of old age, but also to other spheres in life. As Harry R. Moody comments, “[w]e, in the USA, tend to celebrate ‘success’ in all domains (sports, politics, business, and, yes, academia)” (3 Feb, 2017). As mentioned in the second chapter, Moody and Hayflick also observed that preventive medicine and

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pharmaceutical business spread an idea that we age and die not because it is natural, but because medicine has not yet found ways to cure death (in Baars, 2010: 116).¹²⁷

Vanessa's mother, who seems to become more outspoken as she ages, is not ready to confront death. Her energy and her strength are observed in her bad treatment of her caretakers, which makes Vanessa believe that her mother has become more forthright with age: "[s]he was biding her time. One of these days, she'd get up screaming like her old self and throw all the strangers out" (*Fear of Dying*, 24). Yet, later on, the daughter realises that her actions demonstrate her rage, anxiety, and the denial of her own death. Vanessa's mother also suffers from a sense of abandonment and loneliness because her husband refuses to talk to her. His age-related hearing loss and his unwillingness to communicate makes his wife sad, lonely, and depressed because she can no longer share her life experiences with "the closest person in the world" (*Fear of Dying*, 23). Although Vanessa's mother is physically close to her husband, she feels very far away from him, which generates feelings of rejection and neglect. Vanessa, who observes her ageing parents' inability to communicate with each other and their emotional and physical suffering, wonders in fear whether she will end her days "the way her mother is ending hers" (*Fear of Dying*, 225). The heroine also ponders whether her ageing mother is aware of her own closeness to death because she suffers from the "near extinction of consciousness:" "[b]ut maybe she doesn't know she's ending her days" (*Fear of Dying*, 224-5). However, her mother has not completely lost her consciousness and is aware of the burden of caregiving that she inflicts on her daughter:

'What are you thinking about?' my mother asks.
'Nothing,' I say.
'You're thinking you never want to get as old as I am,' she says. 'I know you'.
(*Fear of Dying*, 11)

After the death of her husband, Vanessa's mother wishes to join her departed husband as soon as possible, because his physical absence makes her feel unsafe, unprotected, and afraid: "[s]he doesn't want to stay here. She wants to join him – wherever he is. That must be love" (*Fear of Dying*, 230).¹²⁸

¹²⁷See: Leonard Hayflick, and Harry R. Moody. *Has Anyone Ever Died of Old Age?* 2002.

¹²⁸In an interview conducted after the publication of the novel, Jong revealed her personal experiences after her parents' death. Jong emphasised her mother's longevity and her calmness when facing her final days: "[w]hen my mother died, she was incredibly peaceful. She was 101, she was really ready, she said" (Finch, 13 Nov, 2015). The writer also contrasted the deaths of her parents: if her mother died 'ready' in a calm way, her father was reluctant to give his life up. As Jong stated:

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Although parental care is difficult and requires extra time and effort, Vanessa also learns new ways of seeing the world and of understanding human nature from taking care of her parents at this stage of their lives. Her dying mother's inability to remember and to speak, which intensifies as she approaches her death, teaches Vanessa that language is not the only means to connect with the external world: "[w]hen dementia has been with us a long time, the means of communicating change" (*Fear of Dying*, 226). Although the protagonist confesses that sometimes she was not "alert enough to her new ways of communicating," her mother's dementia has taught her that senses, colours, tastes, smells, sounds, and body language can be as powerful and efficient as the spoken language:

We are so unaware of different languages – not Latin and Greek, but the language of color, the language of food. We hardly know all the different kinds of human music. My mother could speak without speaking, laugh without laughing, sing without having voice. The parents of special-needs kids know this and so do the children of the dying. (*Fear of Dying*, 229)

Through her body language, Vanessa's mother tries to show her approval of Vanessa's clothing, which reminds her of her younger days and, thus, makes her happy:

She sits up and tries to exclaim at the color of my shirt – red and purple with mossy green. An Etro confection she might have worn when she was young. Her taste in clothes was always over the top, ahead of her time, widely artistic. But she can't speak. She croaks like a frog that might sit on mossy green ledge, then dive swiftly into the water. She lifts her shoulders strongly, though by now she can't sit up. She exclaims without exclaiming. I know she is approving of my colorful colors – so like those she wore in her salad days. She has found a new sort of speech that is wordless. (*Fear of Dying*, 228-9)

Vanessa also learns that her mother communicates with the exterior world by expressing her sensitivity to the sounds of music and tastes: "[m]usic delights her, though I think she doesn't hear. Chocolate slides on her tongue like love" (*Fear of Dying*, 228). In her essay "Breaking the Final Taboo," which precedes *Fear of Dying*, Jong addresses her fascination with the discovery of her mothers' alternative ways of communication through colours, signs, and touch:

In the last few days, she was alert enough to respond to color, though she could not speak. I came to realize that I had underestimated her grasp of language. Color was her language, and a bright shirt I wore to sit by her side and tell her I

My father was the one who fought against time. I saw him being the health freak, getting on the treadmill as if he could not die, and it was really sad in a way, because he had that male thing of 'I can do whatever I want'. But you really can't. I saw them both approach life and death differently, which was fascinating. (Finch, 13 Nov, 2015)

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loved her evoked a passionate response. Her passing has changed me more deeply than I would have thought. (2014: 92)

In the same essay, the writer includes a poem “Dying Is Not Black,” which she dedicates to her dead mother. In it, Jong describes what she has learned from parental care and death, as exemplified in these lines:

Touch, words, color, / my expiring mother / notices the red & purple of my shirt / with delight. / Color is her language / though she taught me / both pain & poetry / interlocking languages for her / & now for me. / She has no words for my shirt / but exclaims nonsense syllables / of joy, her only brush now / for the ecstasy of red, / the blue note / of mauve over it, / making plum. / Her sounds become / a damson jam / like her mothers’, / sweet but muddled. / But her love is clear. / Her love assails / my eyes / as if it were / blood glittering / on a knife / aiming for / my heart. (2014: 92-3)

Even if these turning points in life provide new understandings of bereavement and the final years, Jong does not overlook pain and suffering. The writer even expresses her unwillingness to reach very old age. Having lived through disagreeable parental-care duties, Jong does not wish to live as long as her parents did:

My mother no longer speaks – she who was once a great talker, reader, painter – no longer recognizes anyone, and sleeps most of the time, peeing in her diapers. If these are good genes, spare me. Living to a century is a crock. I don’t see the joy of it. And I am saying it now while I still can. (2014: 84)

Care-taking experiences and the presence of death also teach Jong that even if older individuals can be still capable of communicating in a reasonable way, there are less and less people to talk to because death takes away not only friends, but also enemies, whose departure leaves an empty space in our lives:

I certainly couldn’t identify when my grandfather complained that he only had *me* to talk to because ‘all my friends are dead.’ Only now does his complaint resonate with me. Not all my friends are dead, but many are – and many enemies too. Strangely, I don’t exult when they die. Competitors are as necessary as fans. There is emptiness when they go. (2014: 85, emphasis in original)

The memories of the death of the mother also appear in Jong’s latest collection of poems *Love Comes First*. In “Continental Divide,” the speaker describes the fading and ravaged body of her mother who is dying in a hospital room. The dying mother apologises for the burden she is to her family members. The poetess laments that her love cannot save her mother from dying and questions the meaning of life:

Meanwhile / you are dying / in a New York hospital – / your beautiful face drained / of blood / your arms too heavy / to seize the day, / your shining eyes /

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dimmed in pain / and drugs to dull it. / You have boycotted food, / yet all you can do is apologize / to your grieving children / for the trouble you cause / by dying. / ‘Don’t worry, I’m fine.’ / you say, eternal mother. / Solitary as you will ever be, / our love cannot save you / from this last loneliness, this last rocky sea voyage / where no one dresses for dinner / [...] Doctor – / is death the aberration – / or is life? / As for love – / why is it never enough / to save us? (10-12)

In another poem “Against Grief,” from the same collection, Jong writes about two different feelings: one that refers to the pain of those who approach their deaths, and the other to sadness and emotional pain after the loss of our beloved ones: “[s]ometimes we are asked / to carry / more than we can bear, / and the weight / is so heavy / that it seems easier / to lie under the earth / than to stride upon it, / easier to stretch out / in a damp grave / than to stand up / and salute the sun” (27). In *Fear of Dying*, Vanessa even thinks that the pain of the dying should not be prolonged. To her, “[l]ingering may be much worse” than death (*Fear of Dying*, 175). Hence, she sees euthanasia as a solution: “[c]an you be joyful with a dead dog and a lingering centenary mother? There’s the rub. If only euthanasia were possible with mothers!” (*Fear of Dying*, 175) Vanessa confesses that many times she prayed for her mother to die sooner because she could no longer bear the sight of her mother’s suffering in a smelling room that embittered her own life: “[t]here were many times I prayed for her to die. She was so frail and so sad that I often couldn’t bear to visit her. I always preferred to be with my daughter and grandson rather than with her” (*Fear of Dying*, 237).

However, even if deaths and care-taking duties are unpleasant and hard to cope with, Jong seems to suggest that these turning points in life are valuable experiences that open doors to significant findings and reconsiderations of life and death. The deaths of Vanessa’s parents make her question her own existence, the brevity of life, and the uncertainty of what happens after death:

In the last few years I have spent much of my time waiting at hospitals. First my husband’s parents died nearly in tandem. Then my own parents began to fail. Once you have entered the hospital’s mythic maw, your life is no longer your own – or perhaps it is too much your own. (*Fear of Dying*, 97)

The protagonist realises that, although she is already a mature woman, she is not ready yet to accept the loss of her parents and face her own death: “[w]atching them die, I realize how unprepared for death I am myself. It doesn’t matter how old they are. You are never prepared to lose your parents” (*Fear of Dying*, 16). In fact, she has never imagined her parents’ deaths because they have always been vital, energetic, and strong:

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“they are never going to die” (*Fear of Dying*, 263). The same idea is voiced in an interview, in which Jong admitted that she could never think of losing her parents, who seemed to live forever:

Well, we all lose people. I didn't think my parents would ever die. My mother was 101 when she died. My father was 93. My beloved grandfather was 98. When you have a family that live that long you think they're never going to go. When they do, it's an emotional cataclysm. (Abraham, 24 Nov, 2015)

Vanessa's belief that death is ever present in human lives brings us back to the previously analysed poems, in which death appeared as one's twin: “[l]ife and death are always close as twins” (*Fear of Dying*, 205). The comparison of death to a life companion in her latest fiction shows that her vision towards the terminal stage in life has not changed much. In her later works, Jong and her characters still see death as an inevitable part of human nature: “[d]eath is always here in life yet willed invisible because we cannot bear it any more than we can bear news that our sun will someday go out” (*Fear of Dying*, 95). Yet, even if the perception of the end of life does not undergo significant shifts, death becomes a real presence in the lives of her characters as they age. In comparison to Jong's earlier works, bereavement, solitude, and sorrow are more pronounced in her late-life writings, which makes it more difficult to disregard the approach of her own death:

As you get older, the losses around you are staggering. The people in the obits come closer and closer to your own age. Older friends and relatives die, leaving you stunned. Competitors die, leaving you triumphant. Lovers and teachers die, leaving you lost. It gets harder and harder to deny your own death. (*Fear of Dying*, 10)¹²⁹

The same idea is voiced in an interview, in which Jong stated that the chain of deaths in her family made her more aware of her own death: “[i]n many ways it's wonderful to get older. Apart from the fact that you're on the edge, and after your parents die, you're the next to fall in. You do think about mortality a lot” (Bright, 2 Oct, 2007). As shown in *Fear of Dying*, the visual presence of the ageing process engraved upon the bodies of Vanessa's parents and the suffering that their illnesses inflict make the daughter wonder whether her supplications and prayers are not aimed at protecting herself from death. Vanessa confesses she was afraid to be left alone, abandoned by the rest of her family members, to take care of her ageing mother and her dead body: “[a]ren't I really praying

¹²⁹According to Vanessa, deaths not only bring pain and grief, but also a lot of useless and time-consuming administrative and procedures: “[d]eath begins the harvest – harvest of pain, of administration, of clerical work” (*Fear of Dying*, 234).

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not to be the last one standing on the precipice? Aren't I really praying not to have to dig her grave and fall in?" (*Fear of Dying*, 10)

The proximity of death also makes Vanessa question her role as a daughter and the emotional attachment to her parents. She believes that the presence of her parents made her feel safe and "reassured of [her] own immunity" since we "all secretly believe in our immortality" (*Fear of Dying*, 10-11). Consequently, the heroine struggles to assimilate her mother's departure because she cannot accept the pain that comes with loss and cannot come to terms with her becoming an orphan:

I became agitated and found it hard to sleep. One night I took a sleeping pill and found myself riding on clouds, at peace for the first time. Another night I paced the floor, unable to sleep and not wanting to take a pill. I wanted to fly with her, leaving all fear behind. I wanted to roll into her grave like some Shakespearean heroine. I wanted to scream, to cry, to exult, to dance, to die. And so the moods alternated for weeks [...] When she became mute and could not stay awake for more than a few minutes at a time, I prayed for her to die. But when she died, I no longer wanted her death at all. (*Fear of Dying*, 237)

Following her mother's death, Vanessa finds it very hard to conform to the thought that her mother is no longer present in her life, and her image haunts her in her dreams and visions: "[a]fter we buried my mother, I could not believe she was dead. I'd wake up every morning with a vision of her lying in bed as usual on the other side of the park" (*Fear of Dying*, 247).

However, as Vanessa's story unfolds, she emerges as the strongest sister who has had enough courage and commitment "to stare at death," which has not been the case of her other two sisters, who could not endure seeing the slow death of their parents (*Fear of Dying*, 237). The decision to look after her dying parents alone shows that Vanessa grows stronger and more seasoned as she ages: "I can handle it. I'm a grown-up. I'm almost an orphan" (*Fear of Dying*, 229). Her inner strength, maturity, and perseverance can also be observed in the scene when she forces herself to watch her mother's dead corpse. While observing her mother's weak and ill body, she reconsiders the value attached to the physical body in contemporary society, the worries about maintaining a youthful image, the desired body shape and weight:

They lifted her from her bed, took the sheet, and put her thin limbs into a white plastic bag, like a garment bag. I made myself watch all this to remember how little the body weights in death. How we all shrimp away to skin and bones – even those of us who worried about our weight. (*Fear of Dying*, 232)

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With the passing of time, Vanessa remembers her mother as she was before and the images of her change from the weak and frail woman lying in her death-bed to a strong, energetic, and vivacious person:

But my memories of her changed. Instead of the ghostly centurion lying in bed, she became the energetic mother of my youth. She was ice-skating, dancing, jumping, shouting, full of beans. Though I could not go back in time, it seemed she could. That was the secret to going back in time: You had to be dead to do it. (*Fear of Dying*, 247)

The gradual transformation of the memories of her departed parents – who became “nobler and nobler” and “funnier and more endearing. They come to deserve your desperate love” – demonstrates the author’s increasing appreciation of her parents after their deaths (*Fear of Dying*, 234). A more positive image of her beloved ones shows that, although death ends physical life, it does not necessarily end a life story or a relationship. Death can give new significance to an individual’s life and provide unexpected opportunities or even “catalysts for wonder, openness, or a search for meaning on the part of the survivor” (Kenyon *et al.*, 1999: 49). As Kenyon *et al.* explain, “the loss of a fellow traveler does not remove the experience of what the person meant to the traveler who remains” (1999: 49). The pioneers of life-course research, James E. Birren and Donna E. Deutchman, also state that our beloved people do not vanish from our memories after their deaths, but linger in our lives (1991: 22). Vanessa, in the same way, comes to the conclusion that both the living and the dead are connected by a higher power of transcendence and collective memories. To her, they constitute an ongoing and multi-layered life story that does not end because memories continue to be present in the lives of those who are still alive.

A more positive view towards Vanessa’s departed parents can also be explained by the fact that memories change each time they are recalled and are more determined by the present rather than by the past (José van Dijck, 2009: 109). Since the protagonist of *Fear of Dying* becomes less pessimistic and anxious about the death of her parents, her memories about them become more positive over time. Moreover, research shows that, as people grow older, they are more motivated to recall their past experiences in satisfactory ways in comparison to young adults (Mather, 2004; Kennedy *et al.*, 1994, in José van Dijck, 2009: 118). In memory of her departed parents, who start to acquire a new significance and meaning in her life, Vanessa wants to “create a museum [...] with walls of photographs, all the portraits of them and their children” that could have never

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been destroyed and would remain as a monument of her family history for future generations (*Fear of Dying*, 248). Although Vanessa is agnostic, she secretly wishes she believed in any kind of god to comfort her with the idea that human existence does not end with the rotting body, but keeps on living in another dimension in which the souls of her departed parents are being taken care of by divine forces:

I wish I believed in God – any god really. [...] I wish I believed my mother was not just rotting in her coffin in the ground. I wish I believed her life meant something besides giving birth to me and my sisters. [...] Why can't I believe in a god or goddess or grace? Why does her life become a heap of dust – and by extension mine? All her joie de vivre, her rage, her talent now rotting in a box. The Italian proverb goes: 'After the game, both the king and pawn lie in the same box.' The queen and the pawn too. I wish I believed that transfiguration followed death. (*Fear of Dying*, 248-9)

As she becomes aware of her own process of ageing, the deaths of her parents make Vanessa more spiritual and stronger to face her own life and to accept death as an inevitable part of human nature, which she sees as “a universal emotion that nearly everyone struggles with” (*Fear of Dying*, 182). According to Vanessa, no matter how hard we try to imagine death, we can never prepare ourselves for it, because one “cannot possibly imagine the loss of individual consciousness” that shakes you “differently than you thought it would” (*Fear of Dying*, 11, 182). Therefore, the fear of death is useless and hopeless. She thinks that people can never envision their death, its consequences and the impact that it may have on their lives. Hence, it is wiser to greet it with bliss and courage and make the most of one's life: “I am entitled to seize what's left of my life with joy” (*Fear of Dying*, 172).

The idea of the inevitability of death also resonates in the works and thoughts of other writers and philosophers. Socrates, for instance, said there was no real reason to be fearful, because nobody knew what death actually was (Baars, 2012: 93). Similarly, Bauman in his *Mortality, Immortality, and Other Life Strategies* (1992) stated that death cannot be perceived or visualised because it is “an absolute nothing and ‘absolute nothing’ makes no sense” (2). In a similar vein, Freud pointed out that it was impossible to imagine our own death. According to him, each time that we attempted to picture our own death, we understood that we were still in the present moment (Bauman, 1992: 13). In addition, Sartre thinks that death is not something to be feared, but, instead, it helps to make “certain decisions,” reconsider “some values,” and grow towards oneself (1997: 230). Similar thoughts are also expressed by Vanessa, who believes that death may lead to the discovery of new vantage points in later years. The proximity of a sense of death

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and that of spirituality make the heroine realise that “we are all too convinced of our individuality. Maybe the secret is to become part of the whole” (*Fear of Dying*, 224). The next section shows how Jong’s latest novel gives a broader picture of these ideas, which are further exemplified in Vanessa’s trip to India. In the novel, this journey is seen as a “break from all the deaths that had consumed [her]” (*Fear of Dying*, 256).

Self-Transcendence in India

India makes you feel different about your life. It’s like a rebirth (Erica Jong, *Fear of Dying*, 258)

Many religious traditions highlight a sense of self-transcendence and an increased spiritual development in later stages in life, especially when faced with death (Chinen, 1992: 205; Sapp, 2010: 132). In “Fairy Tales and Spiritual Development in Later Life: The Story of the Shining Fish,” the clinical professor of psychiatry, Allan B. Chinen, argues that all the world’s religions seem to highlight the significance of spiritual fulfilment and personal enlightenment in the second half of life, and encourage ageing individuals to turn away from material worldly aspirations (1992: 205). In Buddhism and Hinduism, especially, later years are seen as the time to cultivate an attitude of detachment from materialism in order to follow a spiritual path, as observed by the expert in religions and spiritual studies, Gene R. Thursby (1992: 189). Moreover, Hindu and Buddhist religions teach that a human life cannot be filled with a sense of meaning if it is not lived with full awareness of the presence of death, which is seen as an important aspect of the constantly changing and evolving life course (Sapp, 2010: 123).¹³⁰ The Buddhist understanding of existence and finitude, as well as the related method of meditation or mindfulness, helps to acquire a sense of transcendence and spiritual growth “that is directed toward the cessation of a desire-driven separate identity” (Thursby, 1992: 191).

The discovery of a sense of timelessness and spiritual transcendence is also developed in Lars Tornstam’s theory of gerotranscendence (1993, 1989, 2005).

¹³⁰The sociologist Stephen Sapp notes that these ideas are reflected in those Buddhists who seek to become monks – they are often required to sit in meditation in a graveyard and visualize bodies as corpses, until they come to the conclusion that this is the fate of our humanity. This understanding suggests the need to discipline their minds to the idea of the finitude of beauty, youth, power, body, and material goods in order to move “from life after life after life” (Sapp, 2010: 128). The contemporary Japanese Zen master Roshi Yasatuni also says that if we did not change, we would be lifeless; thus, we age and die because we are alive. Being alive implies both birth and death, and “creation and destruction signify life” (Sapp, 2010: 128). See: Philip Kapleau (1971). *The Wheel of Death: a Collection of Writings from Zen Buddhist and Other Sources on Death, Rebirth, Dying*, p. 8.

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According to Tornstam, the last human developmental life stage is marked by the increased interest in existential questions, and a redefinition of the Self and social relationships. Tornstam argues that ageing brings new meanings to life from a metaphysical perspective rather than from a rational and material vision. According to this scholar, as we grow older, we show less interest in superfluous social interaction, but give more importance to reflection upon our lives. He observes that there is a natural human tendency in old age to become more introspective and less interested in social participation and active lifestyles, an observation, which, in fact, contradicts the idea of healthy and active ageing. The theory of gerotranscendence also suggests that lesser visibility in the public sphere and the need to turn inwards do not respond to realities of loneliness or feelings of inadequacy. On the contrary, old age grants new ways of self-satisfaction from a gerotranscendental standpoint, as ageing individuals stretch the boundaries between 'self' and 'other.' Older people also experience an alteration in their perception of time in which the past, the present, and the future can be lived all together. Additionally, they are also more likely to feel a sense of transcendence, discover a feeling of cosmic communion with the spirit of the universe, and reconsider the meaning of death.

Similar observations are distilled into Jong's latest novel, *Fear of Dying*. The writer takes her heroine to a healing journey to India, which, in the book, is seen as a space for self-discovery and spiritual engagement with life and nature. India, which Vanessa sees as "a touchstone more than a tourist destination," spurs her to rethink the passage of time, her need for personal fulfilment, and her parents' deaths (*Fear of Dying*, 258). In India, defined in the novel as "a simmering pot of mythologies and mysteries," Vanessa finds herself reunited with the memories of her departed parents, who "[tell] [her] not to forget them," and remind her that "parental voices" do not leave the universe, but remain "in our heads and the strongest prayers" (*Fear of Dying*, 258, 263). To Vanessa, the departed ones "live within us. We keep them alive. They never die" (*Fear of Dying*, 263). The metamorphic trip to India again makes her think that there is neither birth nor death, but only different ways of manifesting our essence and existence: "the Buddha believed in neither birth nor death. [...] Birth and death are meaningless concepts in Buddhism" (*Fear of Dying*, 249).¹³¹ In India, Vanessa finds

¹³¹These ideas remind us of previously analysed Jong's poems in which life is regarded as transitory and death as inevitable. Jong's writings suggest that it crucial to learn to accept the unforeseeable and, meanwhile, to appreciate the present moment, as exemplified in Buddhist philosophy.

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reassurance that death does not end one's existence, but enables a passage towards another dimension and a rebirth of the soul in another realm, time, and space. Therefore, the very fear of death becomes pointless. The transformative power that India exerts on the character also reminds her of her mother's belief that people do not die, but are reunited with the natural world: "[s]he adored flowers and fruits and vegetables and would not have minded being born again as a dahlia, a rose, or a peony. Even a peach. Or a tomato. She knew that everything was connected" (*Fear of Dying*, 249). This observation confirms the importance of nature, which was highlighted in Jong's mid- and later poems. Vanessa learns that human beings are "not solid but fluid," but become a part of nature: "[w]e love sea because we *are* the sea. A wave is a wave is a wave" (*Fear of Dying*, 249, emphasis in original).

The spiritual trip to India also makes Vanessa realise that the essence of life is to live her life day by day by performing her role as "as mother, as a grandmother, as a wife" (*Fear of Dying*, 268). Vanessa becomes more aware that her existence is always in connection to the lives of others, who are in need of her presence and her love. She discovers a path to honest self-discovery and realises that everything she needs in life is within herself and the surrounding world. This notion leads the heroine to an intrinsic sense of transformation and of inner completion, which teaches her that instead of hiding under her former "cynical skin," she should open herself up to the exploration of "forgiveness, humility, love" (*Fear of Dying*, 273). In "a vast cosmos full of colours and smells and wonders and horrors," Vanessa realizes that India operates as a space that invites her to revise her own value system and her existence (*Fear of Dying*, 256). As Jong's heroine explains, India is "the cradle of religion and ancient civilization and you feel the possibility of starting your life anew" (*Fear of Dying*, 258). The fictional character again comes to the conclusion that life must be lived forwards and that the fear of death is ridiculous "because once we are dead we are utterly fearless" (*Fear of Dying*, 270).

Like the speakers in many of Jong's poems, Vanessa also reconsiders the notion of time and becomes more aware of the importance of the present moment, which helps her to restructure her life. She learns to abolish a chronological sense of time and to reunite her present, past and future "all at once," which she sees as a gift that the journey to India gives to her (*Fear of Dying*, 268). This subjective understanding of the passage of time is not compatible with its empirical notion, based on the natural sciences, and explained in Newton's work, which defines the contemporary vision of

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time (Baars, 2012: 147).¹³² Vanessa's new perceptions of time also mirror Tornstam's gerotranscendence theory in which he claimed that, as people age and turn inwards, their past, present, and future merge together. Similar understandings are visible in Martin Heidegger's philosophical thought. According to the philosopher, the perception of time can only be understood by human beings, and not science, because people represent the temporal 'being' by looking at the intersection of past, present, and future (Baars, 2012: 158). Heidegger stated that the future was not completely open, and the past was not abstractly closed to our experiences in the present, which suggests that they all are interwoven and extend into another dimension. Along the same lines, Baars also argues that the lived subjective time and chronological time cannot be derived from each other, but "rather *presuppose* each other" and reveal "the pluriform richness of living in time" (2012: 166, emphasis in original). Moreover, he highlights that the notions of ourselves and time are related to our ability to see our lives as unfolding in the interrelated temporal dimensions of the remembered past, living in the present moment, and the anticipation of the future – "something that includes but cannot be reduced to chronometric time" (Baars, 2012: 168).

The fact that India, rather than Italy, becomes a place of self-discovery, also suggests the writer's growth and maturity. If, in Jong's earlier and midlife fiction, travelling abroad was associated with youthfulness, eroticism, and sexual adventures, in her latest work, the author gives preference to other aspects of the travelling experience. Although Vanessa does not underestimate the transformative power of erotic pleasure and sexual fulfilment that can be found in seductive Venice, she becomes aware that Italy no longer provides answers to her existential questions and the meaning of life and death: "Venice was once the place where Americans and Europeans found a treasure palace of the body and the spirit in the nineteenth century. In the twenty-first century, it is India" (*Fear of Dying*, 256). The ageing protagonist learns that it is India, not Italy, which helps her to understand human existence and teaches her that ageing is not a loss, but an opportunity to get closer to her inner self and to find her spiritual path. Yet, even if Italy, which embodies eros and sexuality in both Jong's work and Western thought, is

¹³²In Newtonian natural science, the subjective understanding of time is limited to a "mere presupposition of the empirical knowledge of the world" (Baars, 2012: 147). Newton's physical cosmology eradicated previous theories of nature and revolutionized the notion of time – it explained everyday occurrences from empirical science perspective in combination with mathematical analysis (Baars, 2012: 135). As Baars notes, Newton's mechanical vision of nature implied that time is detached from living and it does not have a concrete direction; yet, time can be reversed, like every movement in the universe. However, the "laws of mechanics would still be true in a reversed sequence of movements" (Baars, 2012: 136).

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replaced by India, it does not mean that sexual passions and the need for emotional intimacy become less significant in later years, as has been demonstrated in the fourth chapter.

It is also worth mentioning that by placing Vanessa in India as a space for self-discovery and personal growth, the author seems to embrace the stereotypical (post)colonial conception of the ‘other’.¹³³ The (post)colonial outlook in *Fear of Dying* answers the needs of Vanessa at a time when she is in search of self-renewal from a chain of losses and pain. The heroine’s ‘displacement’ from the hegemonic centre, America, to the Indian continent, the periphery, suggests that the fascination for the ‘Eastern other’ has not ceased to exist in the collective Western imaginary. Not being able to find ‘salvation’ and a sense of transcendence ‘at home,’ the heroine projects her needs, fears, and dreams onto the periphery. By placing Vanessa, a Westerner, in India, Jong thus perpetuates the metropolitan clichés of this continent as a result of (post)colonial heritage. In fact, Vanessa’s need to rediscover herself may also stem from the high ‘demands’ of the West, characterised by neoliberalism, stress, capitalist economy, and new pressures imposed by the successful ageing discourse. Thus, the heroine’s ‘escape’ to India can be regarded not only as an emotional and spiritual necessity, but also as a response to the ‘wrongs’ of Western modernity. As the sociologist Ning Wang observes, the motivation to travel is a non-verbal critique of the ‘evils’ of modernity (2000: 18). People do not simply embark on a journey away from home – their desire to travel reflects their willingness of a change (Wang, 2000: 19). In Vanessa’s case, this change is closely related to the need to undo her suffering and recover herself from a period of psychological strain.

Vanessa’s trip to India also echoes the desires and psychological development of the protagonist of the novel *Eat, Pray, Love* (2006) written by Elizabeth Gilbert.¹³⁴ As Sarah Falcus and Katsura Sako observe, in Murthy’s film, this kind of “non-materialist, cross-cultural travel [to India] is in fact a vehicle for self-invention” (2014: 211). Although the film ends up with a romantic cliché – in the final shot, Elizabeth’s (Julia Roberts) new Brazilian lover, Filipe (played by Javier Bardem), takes her across sunset-lit waters to a remote island –, Elizabeth does find “her spiritual dimension” in her

¹³³The term refers to the colonised subject or place that is characterised as ‘other’ through the discourse such as primitivism and through the binary separation of the coloniser and colonised (Ashcroft *et al.*, 2009: 155).

¹³⁴The novel’s adaptation into a film was made by Ryan Murthy in 2010, in which Julia Roberts plays the main character, Elizabeth.

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travel (Falcus and Sako, 2014: 211-6). Both Elizabeth and Vanessa go to India seeking not romantic love, but spiritual fulfilment and self-renewal after a chain of emotional breakdowns and painful turning points in life.¹³⁵

Vanessa's new perceptions of time, self, and death in her later years are in line with the theory of gerotranscendence that emphasises the transcendence of the ego, the reflection upon one's personal life, and the expansion of horizons towards a new stage in life – old age. Vanessa's ability to overcome parental loss and pain through her journey shows that she is able to go beyond the limits of her own self-centredness, and find meaning even in unpleasant occurrences. Jong's later heroine seems to be able to merge several time frames as she chooses to live in the present moment without blocking her mind against "an imaginary future" and things that are yet to come (*Fear of Dying*, 187). In India, the protagonist lets go of her anxieties and fears, and experiences a newly discovered sense of timelessness and wholeness. In Jong's personal case, a feeling of wholeness and a voyage towards one's self seem to be found through her creative processes in later life stages. These ideas are further developed in the following section, which demonstrates how the writing process helps individuals to deal with important losses and to get closer to their inner being. Jong's later writings, in particular, reveal that personal narratives provide a meaning in life, and that the art of narration can also be therapeutic and remedial.

The Creation of a Personal Narrative

To be a person is to be a story (William L. Randall, 2001: 57)

History shows that life narratives have always been and still are one of the means to share life experiences with others (Baars, 2012: 171; Kaminsky, 1992: 307). Baars claims that, although the ways of telling a story have changed from common family or community gatherings around the fireplace to reaching out to the world through the use

¹³⁵Following the colonial tradition of E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), a (post)colonial reading of Murthy's *Eat, Pray, Love* mirrors John Madden's 2011 British film, *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, based on Deborah Moggach's novel *These Foolish Things* (2004). Madden's film explores the lives of a group of British retirees who travel to India to take up residence in the lesser expensive Marigold Hotel. Although the hotel appears less luxurious than advertised, the travellers are charmed by the exotic Indian environment, and become transformed by a series of shared experiences. These unexpected occurrences help them to abandon their past lives and find new meanings in life, which challenges the narrative of decline. As in Murthy's and Madden's films, in *Fear of Dying* travelling to India appears as a spiritual and transforming journey inwards for the Western traveller, which suggest the perpetuation of the (post)colonial vision.

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of new technologies and highly visual social media, the purpose of storytelling remains the same (2012: 171). That is, people continue to tell their experiences and, especially, they share important turning points in their life in order to get a better understanding of what has happened to them and how these occurrences had an impact on their lives (Baars, 2012: 171; Kenyon and Randall, 2001; Rahm-Hallberg, 2001). As Randall and Kenyon state, “humans are fundamentally storytelling creatures” and life narrative is “*the* paradigm for human time” (2004: 333-4, emphasis in original).

Personalised narratives allow for a more successful adaptation to old age, as they help us to develop a better understanding of how memory shapes the perception of our selves (Birren and Deutchman, 1991: 1). It is important to take into account that life narratives do not simply recall past events, but they also offer an interpretative and mediated vision of life experiences, which become especially important as people approach their later lives (Polkinghorne, 1996: 89). In fact, as Ingalill Rahm-Hallberg observes, telling stories is essential in life, because people do not “exist in a vacuum but in relation to others and to oneself” (2001: 239). Cohen notes that the willingness to write or to tell one’s life story becomes more important as people grow older (2010: 193). According to him, this need is especially prominent in those who approach their seventh and eight decades (Cohen, 2010: 193). That is, as people age, they are more eager to share with others what they have learned and lived through (Cohen, 2010: 193). Moreover, as Kenyon *et al.* observe, life stories can also be regarded as “a social construction that a person uses as a biography and as resources to create an identity and establish coherence and continuity” (1999: 53). Gerontologist Riitta-Lissa Heikkinen also establishes that personal stories are closely related to the construction of the identity of the self. She states that our identity, created in and through the story, is a never-ending process as it runs from birth to death and provides insights into how people understand themselves and the world they live in (Heikkinen, 1966: 189). Similar thoughts are expressed by the sociologist Eva Illouz, who claims that life narratives, constructed in interpersonal, cultural, and structural contexts, help to shape identities by providing understandings of selfhood in particular cultural and social environments (2008: 172).

In the light of these theories it is possible to state that Jong in her later works expresses the healing and transcendental power of storytelling and life writing. In her later fiction and memoirs, the author reveals that life narratives foster self-growth, identity formation, and grant new meanings to ageing and old age. Through her

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writings, Jong shows how using past experiences and turning points in life to build a poetic and narrative form can be both a therapeutic and life-assuring practice. Moreover, it also allows to cope with loss and pain. In *Fear of Fifty*, Jong acknowledged that life writing helped her to “refill” herself when she felt empty, for it was her solace when she experienced the “temporary trauma of a painful relationship, the career disappointments, the pains of motherhood, [or] the deaths of friends” (131). At that stage of her life, writing was a way to undo pain and to liberate herself by letting her anger and negative feelings go: “I often wonder how people who don’t write endure their lives. At least I can get through the pain by making up stories. Sometimes my funniest stories have come out of the blackest despair” (*Seducing the Demon*, 275). In her memoir, *What Do Women Want*, written at the age of fifty-seven, the writer again asserted the healing power of artistic expression, especially the writing of poems, which she saw as necessary to come to terms with her inner being:

But the need of poetry is such a basic human need that it adapts itself to new circumstances. When so called mainstream published stop publishing poetry and ignore the needs of young people for poets of their own generation, the young turn to poetry slams and coffeeshouses readings. Or to rap music. (191)

The need of poetry is further exemplified in the following statement, which reveals that poem-writing becomes especially significant when faced with difficulties or joys in life: “[p]eople think they can do without poetry. And they can. At least until they fall in love, lose a friend, lose a child or a parent, or lose their way in the dark woods of life. [...] At least until they become fatally ill, have a baby, or fall desperately, madly in love” (*What Do Women Want*, 189). For Jong, writing is a compensatory, liberating, and self-assuring therapeutic practice which allows to express her thoughts and feelings, and gives meaning to her life.

In *Fear of Dying*, Vanessa is also able to reconnect with her past through creative expression, which grants her renewed meanings of her life experiences. Because time blurs some details and intensifies others, the act of writing – recalling past events, and sharing them with others – becomes life-affirming and survives into future records. Vanessa finds out that her own life story, which is entwined with and influenced by the lives of others, is unique, and that each occurrence and experience, be it pleasant or painful, adds to her self-development, spirituality, and maturity. By narrating the lives of her departed parents, she also retells her own life story. This practice also adds to a feeling of self-worth and self-assurance (Randall, 2001: 47). By

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offering a narrative perspective of her life experiences and those of her family members, Vanessa not only learns what it means to face death and ageing, but also reflects on what it means to be a person. Her interpretation and reinterpretation of her life story and that of her beloved ones shows that constructing our lives around the lives of others helps us to come to terms with our inner selves and to overcome fears and struggles. Jong shows that by expressing our anxieties in a written form, we can find a sense of balance in our lives after painful losses and grief. In other words, the writer shows that writing and telling one's life is, in fact, a life-reaffirming personal journey towards self-discovery.

Although Jong explores painful occurrences through her writings, she is also capable of creating meaning and a sense of belonging in her late work. As sociologist Bettina Becker states, illness and unpleasant occurrences in life are regarded as “a disruption of biographies” (2001: 91). This sociologist argues that “pain is often seen as an inner state that is extremely difficult to share” and requires the narrator “to create meaning in the constant dilemma between the search of words and the experience of pain that seems to be beyond words” (Becker, 2001: 94). In her work, Jong shows that deaths do not end lives, but rather grant different meanings and directions out of new conditions. By providing a positive approach towards the final years in her latest writings, the author reveals her ability to find words to describe frustrating and disrupting experiences that are usually ‘beyond words.’ In a review of *Fear of Dying*, Stacey May Fowles also notices Jong's skill to even employ wit and humour when she writes about painful topics:

[...] the author deals so head-on with the idea of dying, and yet still manages to keep the book light and chatty – even comical – at every turn. It often feels as if Jong is simply exploiting a novel format (and Vanessa's voice) to deliver her own wisdom on aging, deliberately crossing a generational divide to tell it like it is. (4 September, 2015)

Wyatt-Brown states that writers are as vulnerable to the physical decline of people close to them as anyone else, but the ability to write about these experiences allows them to share their pain with others and, at the same time, gives opportunity to readers to “take comfort in the knowledge that others have experienced the struggles that feel so threatening, painful and never-ending” (2010: 57). Moreover, telling our story helps us to gain control over chaotic and painful emotions to the extent that sometimes writing offers the possibility to even recreate the story of our life (Wyatt-Brown, 1989: 177).

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Storytelling and narrative therapy open up a space to make a better sense of the surrounding world and highlight forgotten strengths and competences in order to cope with difficulties in life (Rahm-Hallberg, 2001: 274-9; Crow and Sawchuk, 2015: 192). In short, the revision of one's life in a story-form allows people to become more self-assured and even impressed with how much they have endured and survived, as well as "the many ways they have been tested by events and by people" (Birren and Deutchman, 1991: x). Baars, too, attests to this view as he argues that when important positive or negative events happen, such as death or disease, these occurrences not only impact our personal lives and change the way we tell stories, but they also encourage us to share these experiences with others (2012: 196).

Sharing memories with others is central not only to a person, but also to society and future generations (Randall and McKim, 2008: 144). According to Randall and McKim, a good life story is not the one that is kept to ourselves, but the one that is passed along to others – wisdom plays an important part in these life narratives as it "pushes us beyond ourselves" (2008: 242). The same idea is supported by Vidal-Grau and Casado-Gual, who state that personal life stories, which reaffirm the values of old people, may help us to forget our obsession with materialism, individualism, and consumerism, and promote intergenerational communication, which is "vital for quality ageing" (2004: xv). Bridging the gap between older and younger generations is especially important, taking into account that the young very rarely think about ageing because the topic does not concern them yet. In this vein, Evelyn Pezzulich affirms that is it "amazing how uninteresting ageing can be until one personally starts to walk down that largely unmarked path" (2005: 91).

As mentioned in the second chapter of this dissertation, personal and wisdom-related stories, which provide new perceptions of growing older to younger readers and bridge the intergenerational gap, are closely related to the *Reifungsroman*, namely, a novel of 'ripening' with an older (female) protagonist (Waxman, 1990: 18).¹³⁶ Jong's fictional works, often confessional in tone and presented through a female perspective, clearly reveal the inner transformations of her heroines. In fact, as the writer grows older, she moves from the European model of the *Buildingsroman* (novel of youth) to the *Reifungsroman*. Jong's late works in particular share the patterns of the *Reifungsroman* genre as they provide space for positive meanings of the experience of

¹³⁶See: Barbara Frey Waxman. *From the Hearth to the Open Road: A Feminist Study of Ageing in Contemporary Literature*. 1990.

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growing older through her heroines' increased sense of maturity and wisdom. Jong adopts this genre to recall her memories and to tell her life story through the vantage point of her later years, which shows that ageing is not bound to a loss of creativity and self-confidence. Instead, as reflected in her later novels, it is a life-long 'ripening processes' which involves a change in attitudes, a higher degree of wisdom, and a form of self-acceptance that usually takes the form of a journey. According to Waxman, the journey-maturity metaphor is commonly used to envision the "quest of self-knowledge, self-development, and a role for the future" in the *Reifungsroman* (1990: 16). Wisdom, in fact, is achieved after a transformative journey of self-discovery based on accumulated material, which can be made into stories (Randall and McKim, 2008: 236). As the British writer Julia Johnson observes, "[t]ravelling is a metaphor often used in connection with ageing – the idea of life as a journey, or as an odyssey" (2003: 84). During their life journeys, Jong's fictional characters come to terms with their own selves and gain more personal and emotional fulfilment. Through her writing, Jong demonstrates that ageing implies new ways of seeing ourselves and the others. Maturity and self-confidence become essential elements that foster the search for love and the transformative energy of becoming. In a video interview, "Erica Jong on Between the Lines", Jong, aged seventy-four, states that maturity and wisdom involve a long process of finding oneself in every stage of life regardless one's age, in which questions such as 'who are we and what do we want,' are always present (Kibrick, 5 Jan, 2016). In a similar vein, Randall and McKim highlight that, as people grow older, they acquire a better comprehension of their own self in relation to changing socio-cultural contexts; yet, it is not "an ultimate attainment," but a life-long journey of becoming which goes hand in hand with the evolution of one's identity (2008: 2030, 2016-7). The positive evolution of Jong's fictional characters and her autobiographical writings confirm that, as people grow older, their personal narratives, both joyful and painful, serve as a guide to achieve a sense of wholeness and self-growth. Hence, through them, the life cycle is perceived as a personal journey towards integration rather than a story of decline.

The creative trajectories of Jong's fictional characters also demonstrate how creativity in later stages in life is closely related to positive attitudes to life. As Casado-Gual *et al.* argue, "later-life creativity of different kinds has been associated with positive models of healthy ageing and for this reason it has attracted scholars of various fields" (2016: 11). The findings of Bradley J. Fisher and Diana K. Specht reveal that creative expressions foster the perceptions of different occurrences in life not as

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problems, but rather as opportunities for inner growth and accomplishment (1999: 459). Since creativity requires engaging with processes of innovation, it also contributes to well-being and provides a more “solid basis for coping” with life challenges (Randall and McKim, 2008; Fisher and Specht, 1999: 469). Artistic creativity attests to more positive patterns of ageing because it nurtures a sense of purpose, competence, and a movement towards our inner self (Fisher and Specht, 1999: 460-6). Jong’s works, and, in particular, her latest writings, reveal that creative acts serve as a tool to cope more effectively with unpleasant and painful occurrences in life, and to understand them from a more mature viewpoint. Jong, like Randall and McKim, seems to suggest that being open to new challenges adds to the life-long development of wisdom and self-knowledge (2008: 221). Jong’s ageing heroines learn that, through their artistic expressions and storytelling, they can find new meanings in life and meet various dilemmas more efficiently. Thanks to their narratives, they become wiser, more grounded, and more self-assured, and the fear of dying no longer inhibits their everyday realities.

Conclusions

This chapter has shown that in Jong’s later works the process of getting older is characterised by new understandings of life, enhanced self-confidence, wisdom, maturity, and an increased sense of spirituality and inner-strength. As reflected in both her writings and her most recent personal accounts, the author’s initial fear of writing has been replaced by a heightened sense of self-assurance over time. Jong has learnt to give more importance to the process of creation, the discovery of her inner voice and her own style, rather than to the actual outcome or reception of her work. These changes are seen in her self-reflexive narratives, in which a lesser concern for critics’ reaction to her work is shown. Instead of fading into invisibility and despair after the negative criticism that her first works received, the author emerges as a consolidated and mature writer whose later life writings shatter the prejudices associated with older women’s creative inactivity, invisibility, and lack of intellectual capacity. Her mid- and later-life works also reveal that although ageing does not render the creative process easier, the act of writing becomes less fearful with age.

Although Jong is concerned about death throughout her *oeuvre*, the perception of mortality also undergoes some significant changes, as reflected in the evolution of

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her fictional characters and her poetic voice. In both her fiction and poetry, death is presented as unavoidable, but, at the same time, as cathartically necessary to make sense of one's existence, and to attain a profound awareness of maturity and of emotional depth. The reconciliation with late-life experiences as depicted in the writer's representations of parental care, pain, and mourning, also shows that ageing grants older adults new perceptions of death and an increased value to the present moment. As Becker states, "narrating about one's life story is often seen as a way to review the past life and integrate experiences into a coherent story to develop a sense of individual wholeness" (2001: 92). The author's later works highlight how the fear of death has become substituted by the celebration of life and a process of reintegration into a new self.

Jong's late-life writings also show that the experience of ageing can be successfully transformed into a poetic and narrative form. Through the act of expressing their perspectives and telling stories, her heroines learn to understand their own lives better, interpret their past experiences, and transport themselves into the future, in which the fear of ageing is replaced by a greater sense of transcendence and timelessness. Jong's works reveal that the act of writing poetry, like that of storytelling, is about making sense of life. This literary quest for meaning can be compared to a life journey, during the course of which the writer and her characters learn that living is not about certainties or fixity, but rather a never-ending growth into harmony between body and mind. The author shows that the transformation of various occurrences and turning points in life into a narrative form enhances a sense of wholeness that is accompanied by a stronger and more confident self. The writer's works are in line with research that establishes that life-long creative processes and life narratives add value to past experiences and help us to project new meanings about our lives (Birren and Deutchman, 1991: 6; Fisher and Specht, 1999). Jong's writings illustrate that, in the words of Randall and McKim, telling personalised stories is an unfolding process of remembering, interpreting, selecting, and reading one's life both from inside and at a distance (2008: 62). For Jong, recalling past experiences in a written form is both therapeutic and empowering as it helps the author to come to terms with herself, as well as to leave a legacy for future generations.

On the whole, Jong's writings contribute to the development of a more comprehensive culture of ageing, which, as Baars puts it, gives value to ageing individuals and their experiences of growing older, their past memories, and their

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visions of the future (2012: 171). Even if Jong's late works depict pain of death, her heroines are capable of finding inner strength and solace in their lives in order to carry on with the journey of self-discovery in later years. The author's later poems, fiction, memoirs, and, especially, her latest book, *Fear of Dying*, show that growing older, although it is inevitably marked by losses and important turning points, is actually a movement towards a sense of completeness and wholeness. As the writer and her heroines age, they become more eager to try to fly towards their inner-selves through the liberating and transformative power of their own narratives and their own voice. This excerpt, from the poem "Talking to Aphrodite," which appears in her latest collection *Love Comes First*, clearly illustrates this idea: "[b]efore I curl / like incense to the sky, / before I study how to die, / drizzle the honey / of my wishes / on my waiting tongue. / Teach me how to fly" (Jong, 88-9).

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If the unexamined life is not worth living, then the opposite is true to some extent as well: the un-lived life is not worth examining (William L. Randall, 2008: 228)

At the age of seventy-two, Erica Jong wrote: “[h]ave women been afraid to write about ageing because we are not supposed to age, or is there another reason?” (2014: 88). Answers to this question are explored in her autobiographical and courageous writings, which have been examined in the present study. This thesis has attempted to demonstrate the complex interplay between age and gender in Jong’s fiction, poetry, and her more personal accounts in the form of essays, memoirs, and interviews. The analysis of Jong’s literary universe has revealed how, over time, her heroines incorporate and negotiate a range of different socially constructed models of femininity and old age that influence their everyday lives and the perceptions of their gendered selfhoods.

As has been argued, after the instant success of the ground-breaking novel *Fear of Flying*, which made Jong a worldwide celebrity, her popularity has progressively been reduced and has never been renewed to the same extent as in her early thirties. This dissertation has endeavoured to demonstrate that even if the author’s literary fame has declined, her work has never lost its importance. Jong’s writings show a pattern of continuity of different tropes, such as female sexuality, embodiment, motherhood, creativity, and death. As in her early career, in her late-life writings the author continues to address issues that concern women, especially older women of the baby-boom generation, and sheds light on their sexual, emotional, professional, and personal needs. Jong’s middle and later work raises important questions about how women negotiate their individual and social identities in a culture that is highly affected by rapid demographic shifts and anti-ageing ideals. This thesis has tried to reveal that Jong’s later writings add valuable insights into the female experiences of ageing, and challenge many social constructions that condition their subjectivity.

This study has given a special focus to ageing body politics. A close reading of Jong’s fictional and non-fictional writing has allowed to gain a deeper insight into how Jong and her characters respond to their bodily changes and how these physical transformations affect their self-perception. Although issues related to physical ageing are already present in Jong’s earlier works, the writer’s concerns about the biological

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process of growing older become more pronounced in her later writings. As Jong and her characters age, the dualistic conflict between their still youthful perceptions of self and their outer looks becomes more problematic. The now pathologised signs of physical decay urge Jong and her heroines to employ various bodily regimes and beauty work to stay sexually attractive and socially acceptable. Their continuous attempts to reshape their bodies in order to adjust them to desired images and cultural models of modern femininity generate ambiguities, troubled feelings, and fragmented identities. In Jong's work, the ageing female characters end up using medicalised forms of rejuvenation, which suggests the internalisation of the culturally constructed fear of growing and looking old, and the inability to overcome it. Jong's female figures simply "cannot imagine [themselves] middle-aged" or older (*Fear of Fifty*, xviii). Lacking role models that could help them to express themselves more openly, they are revealed as victims of a constant need to efface the signs of ageing as dictated by anti-ageing imperatives.

Although the author's less commercial writings and personal interviews reflect a resistance towards specific cultural archetypes of femininity and present the marks of physical decline as footprints of life experiences, one can still observe a desire to reshape the ageing body. The constant references to beauty work, diet regimes, and even plastic surgery in Jong's *oeuvre* show that consumerist anti-ageing lifestyles are deeply embedded in contemporary society, in which sexual appeal and the ability to attract the male gaze are still regarded as essential to women's self-appraisal in their respective social circles. Jong's work casts light on the difficulties to adhere to beauty ideals in society, in which youthful looks and attractiveness still determine women's social currency. The analysis of the writer's works has also reflected that the contemporary notions of femininity are never stable, but are inscribed in constantly changing cultural meanings and symbols that vary in different historical times and societies. All in all, Jong and her female characters cannot accept their physical decay and are unable to challenge the patriarchal realities and social expectations of their times.

Through the examination of the ways Jong's young, middle-aged, and older female figures try to adjust to beauty ideals, this thesis has also addressed how they approach sexuality from a life-course perspective. Although Jong never belittles the importance of sex in a woman's life, her perception towards sex and sexuality undergoes important changes, which is especially visible in her mid- and late-life works. In this study, a special focus has been given to the ways older women respond to

the narrative of decline, which portrays older adults as asexual and frail, and to the model of successful ageing, which constructs sexual activity as one of the essential markers of 'sexual health' and well-being in later life. The examination of Jong's later writings has revealed that human sexuality is multifaceted in nature and that older women's sexual desire and the need for emotional intimacy do not diminish or become less important with the advent of menopause and age. Jong's ageing female figures emerge as sexually active and technologically savvy individuals who explore their sexuality in alternative ways, such as online sexual dating or tantric sex. Yet, the author also alerts her readers that sex and romantic encounters can also be unpleasant and risky for women, especially older women, who are more vulnerable and marginalised in society than men. The dangers of unbridled sexual passions have been illustrated in the adventures that Jong and her heroines experience abroad, especially in Italy with seductive Venetian gondoliers, and in virtual dating sites, as depicted in her latest novel *Fear of Dying*.

In her later writings, Jong also addresses male sexuality and sexual dysfunctions. Rather than seeking to apply youth-based understandings of sexuality and pharmaceutical aids to fix erectile difficulties in old age, Jong's later work rejects the idea that sexual fulfilment can only be possible through traditional penile-vaginal intercourse. Instead, the writer depicts late-life sexual practices beyond the paradigm of successful ageing and its phallogentric nature. In this way, the author develops alternative, more realistic, and less Western-centred visions towards erectile dysfunction and sexual practices in old age. In Jong's later writings, emphasis is placed on the need of emotional intimacy, a sense of closeness and companionship, and marital happiness between the spouses rather than on sexual urges. This changed perspective towards sexuality reveals that the process of growing older renders Jong and her later heroines more mature and less interested in 'zipless fucks' in comparison to her earlier characters. At the same time, the study of Jong's later work has also demonstrated that the understandings of sexuality, like beauty ideals of femininity, are shared cultural constructions that are deeply embedded in our understandings of masculinity and femininity and vary across different generations, societies, and historical periods. In sum, the author's work reflects her changed perception towards sexual scripts and her critical position about biomedical perspectives of late-life sexuality in our drug market-oriented society.

It is also worth reminding that the transgressive and explicit treatment of female

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sexuality was also a source of complex feelings in Jong's literary career, which has been marked by negative criticism and gender-based attacks. Jong has always oscillated between the fear of writing and being tarnished, and the desire to show that women, like men, have a right to erotic fantasies. Constant battles between Eros and Thanatos, to use Freud's terms, or the 'flying' and 'fear' leitmotifs, which are reflected in Jong's writings, are of special consideration. The 'act of flying,' which is the driving force in Jong's work, is a manifestation of pleasure, desire, libido, youth, and escape. It prompts Jong's heroines to experiment with their bodies, sexuality, and make the most of their lives regardless their age. The inhibiting sense of fear, on the contrary, represents rationality and the awareness of the dangers of life and death. Since this fear generates doubts, risk, and insecurity, it disables the heroines' decisions, their potency, and their inner strength.

One of the fears that is reflected in Jong's early writings is that of being a mother. This thesis has highlighted changing perceptions towards motherhood and mothering experiences, which have always been a controversial topic among feminist writers and scholars working in the areas of gender and women studies. Jong's *oeuvre* interrogates the dominant perception of motherhood as natural and desired by all women, and reveals that the ageing process positively affects the notions about the mothering experience. Instead of perceiving motherhood as a danger to creativity and the loss of one's sense of individuality and freedom, Jong and her characters demonstrate that it enriches the development of their identities and provides them with a feeling of inner growth. Yet, even though her heroines embrace the joys of maternity, they never cease to question the culturally constructed institution of motherhood, natural childbirth, and the idea of 'intensive mothering' which perpetuate traditional values and gender roles. This thesis has also shown that in Jong's fiction and non-fiction, the mother-daughter bonding becomes more balanced and less tense as both mother and daughter grow older. In the writer's later works, grandparenting is also regarded as a rewarding stage which offers new understandings of family relationships and old age. The role of the grandmother is not depicted as a burden, but rather as an experience that provides positive emotions in old age. In sum, motherhood, mother-daughter relationships, and grandparenting do not take away Jong and her heroines' creativity, but, instead, positively influence the development of their female identities and artistic expressions in many different ways.

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The fear of death also occupies a special place in Jong's entire work. A close reading of her writings has revealed that important turning points in life change the perceptions and understandings of one's self and of life and death. The fear of dying and that of losing family members and friends, which have been significantly observed in the author's later writings, become assuaged by an enhanced feeling of transcendence and spirituality in later years. Death *per se* is fearful because it may involve pain and cannot be remediated – one can never prepare for and imagine one's finitude. Although a sense of the proximity of death increases as people grow older, Jong's ageing fictional characters become better prepared to deal with losses. Throughout her later work, the author invites her readers to celebrate life and cherish the present moment. Her writings highlight that human beings have the capacity to live with the inevitability of death and still make the most of their existence, which involves both joyful and painful events. In Jong's work, the presence of death is an integral part of the flow of life and the road towards self-transcendence. The analysis of her writings has revealed the complex patterns of the process of growing older and shown that, by balancing past, present and future, it is possible to find meaning in every moment. The fear of dying enhances new meanings of life and death, the development of wisdom and creative expressions, and gives space for the reconsideration of goals and values in later life. All in all, by confronting inevitable turning points in life, Jong's female figures accommodate their increasing sense of finitude and transport their more mature and grounded selves into the future.

A better adaptation to unpleasant life events is also aided by the therapeutic and healing power of storytelling, which, in Jong's case, is developed through the act of writing and the creative experience. The examination of the author's works has shown that telling one's life story can lead to change and self-recovery in later years. Building a narrative form through storytelling is a life-assuring practice, which confirms anthropologist Mary C. Bateson's view that writing one's life allows us reinvent ourselves "after every uprooting" (Wyatt-Brown, 1993: 3). Jong's late-life writings suggest that the powerful relationship between storytelling and ageing also helps to overcome the fear of writing. As the author grows older and matures, she becomes less afraid of criticism and more self-assured to speak her mind. Moreover, as has been argued, the 'flying' leitmotif in Jong's work shows that female writers subvert the 'pen-is-envy' metaphor and venture into literary territories ruled by male writers. Like Icarus with his wax wings, Jong and her heroines employ their creativity to courageously

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address many taboo issues that concern women of the post-war generation. Jong's self-reflective narratives show that, over time, the author finds her own voice and learns to appreciate the process of creation more than the actual outcome. In a way, Jong's later fiction is similar to the *Reifungsroman* (Waxman, 2010). Like the novel of 'ripening,' the author's late-life work presents the experiences of ageing as an ongoing process of becoming and growth rather than a narrative of decline. This 'ripening' process takes Jong and her characters along a life journey to senescence, and prepares them for new future discoveries that are yet to come. Jong's heroines construct their identities as they move on through losses and gains at a particular time and space within shifting social contexts. Their later years are not characterised by frailty or inactivity, but are marked by the celebration of life in which change, as Heraclitus stated, is the only constant. Jong's heroines learn to transform their inhibiting fears into personal 'victories' and courageous 'flights' as they move towards wisdom, maturity, and a sense of transcendence during their life journey into older age. Over time, they realise that the 'fear of flying' is not justified because, paraphrasing the author, only by doing the things that we most fear in life can we progress, grow, and age in harmony with ourselves and the external world (*What Do Women Want*, 125).

This dissertation has also demonstrated that, by adopting a literary perspective towards the dynamics of ageing, it is possible to have a broader picture of the ways the process of growing older shapes Jong and her characters' lives and their everyday realities. As has been explained throughout this thesis, the literary approach can provide space for more internal and personalised notions of how individuals cope with different challenges in life as they grow older. As the world population ages and innovative medical technologies continue to advance, there will be more people reaching old age and writing about their experiences of ageing; hence, according to Wyatt-Brown, their life narratives can give us more diverse views about ageing realities "from a variety of compelling perspectives" (2010: 78). Older peoples' personal accounts of ageing should, in fact, become an important part of the training of gerontologists, geriatricians, and doctors to understand the "particulars of vibrant literature and personal recollections to the generalisations of research on the field" of ageing (Wyatt-Brown, 2010: 79). In a similar line, Waxman also states that as people continue to live longer, the complexities of ageing will increase along with the urgent need for innovative solutions in public consciousness and decision-making processes (2010: 103). In this sense, literature and

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life writing can provide alternative answers to age-related issues, and can help to rethink the meanings attributed to the process of growing older (Waxman, 2010: 103).

With the passing of time, Jong's writings may serve as important historical and sociocultural documents for future generations interested in the ways women approach their later years and experience their ageing. Jong's fictionalised life narratives can help to reconsider the notions of old age and challenge negative stereotypes of older women, who still continue to be subjected to ageism, gender inequality, sexism, and the 'double standard' of ageing. Moreover, the author's later work sets the need for more realistic models of ageing that stress the importance of freedom of self-expression that is not influenced by contemporary anti-ageing ideals. By highlighting a number of different approaches towards old age through Jong's writing, this study hopes to have sharpened the awareness of the dynamics of ageing, and to have reinforced the significance of the examination of older writers' creativity from literary, feminist, gender, cultural, and age-related perspectives. This thesis also calls for more interdisciplinary approaches towards old age in the field of age studies in order to better understand the complex but enriching nature of the experience of ageing. Furthermore, a close reading of Jong's work has shown that many age-related notions are historically-variable social constructions that are naturalised and, thus, unquestioned. Bearing this in mind, Jong's later writings can help to reveal that the experience of ageing is not a narrative of decline, but a continuum with multiple possibilities and new discoveries.

There are many important areas and an array of topics that have not been addressed or fully explained in this study. Taking into account the richness and broadness of the field of gerontology, it has simply been beyond the scope of this work to do so. This dissertation is also predominantly limited to heterosexual notions of sexuality and Western-based visions of old age from a female perspective, as mirrored in Erica Jong's literary corpus, and, inevitably, to the interpretation that the author of this thesis has of it. However, it has not been the aim of this study to provide a complete picture of all the different aspects and disciplines of gerontological research but, rather, to understand the process of ageing through Jong's works. A close reading and interpretation of her writings has intended to provide new perspectives on the process of growing older that can be useful to future research in interdisciplinary age-related fields. In this respect, this thesis joins other approaches taken in the field of literary gerontology in the hope to encourage academics and those working in age-related disciplines to adopt more equal, acceptable, and less idealist approaches towards old age

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and ageing. As Woodward states, our contemporary society is “[u]nder the concrete pressure of demographic revolution in longevity” (1999: 155). Thus, there is a need to rethink what is meant by old and reassess the many ill-defined social constructs of old age. This is even more necessary in order to better understand the complex dynamics of gender, sexuality, and ageing.

To conclude, Erica Jong is an example of a writer who has gone from the image of an ‘unruly’ and ‘rowdy’ woman at the heyday of Second-Wave feminism and the sexual revolution to a more mature, consolidated, and prolific author who narrates female experiences of ageing in contemporary times. If Jong’s courageous and experimental earlier writings broke ground with the treatment of female sexuality in fictional representations and helped many young women to identify with Isadora Wing in many aspects, her later works mirror the anxieties, pleasures, and hopes of ageing women. The writer weaves into her later writings both the pain of loss and the joy of significant discoveries in old age in a moving, honest, and often witty form. As Jong grows older, she becomes a spokesperson for the female representatives of the baby-boom generation, who still face the marginalisation and derogative characterisations of old age. It seems that Jong’s mission as a writer, mother, grandmother, and ageing woman is to teach future generations about the realities of ageing and the ways women approach their latest stages of life. In one of her latest essays Erica Jong stated: “I think our grandchildren need us to stay here on earth, show them how to be old – really old” (2014: 92). The replacement of fear with the desire to ‘fly’ towards one’s self in later years shows that the author and her female figures become wiser and more self-confident to face new challenges in life. It seems that Erica Jong’s question whether she will “find courage to break the final taboo for women – being old” has been answered – the analysis of her *oeuvre* has demonstrated that the author “learn[s] to break the taboo of old and [makes] poetry of it” (2014: 82, 92).

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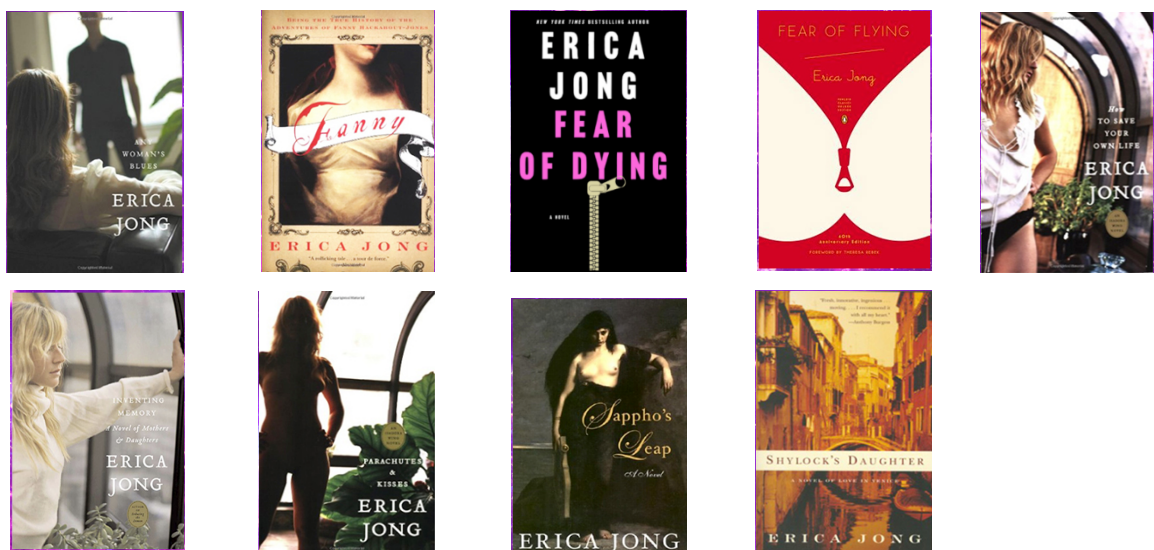


PRIMARY SOURCES

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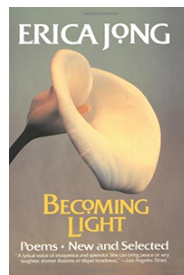
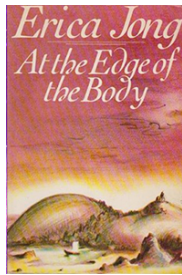
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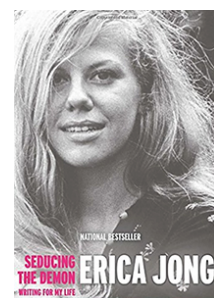
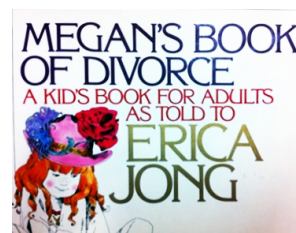
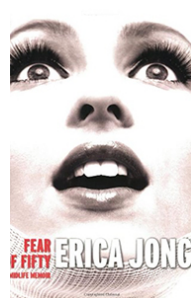
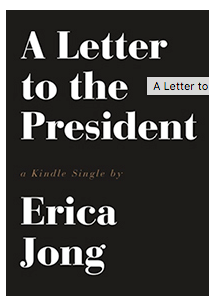
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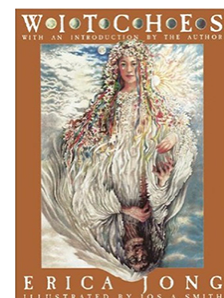
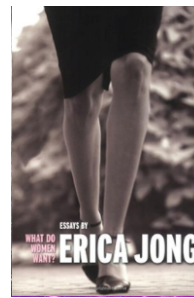
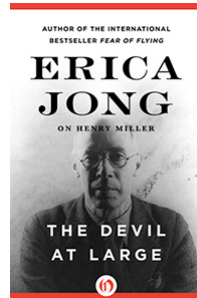
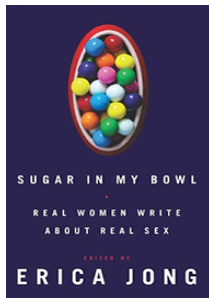
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