

INVISIBLE ENVIRONMENTS: OLD AGE AND ITS SPACES*

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Abstract: Despite the progressive ageing of a worldwide population, negative attitudes towards old age have proliferated thanks to cultural constructs and myths that, for decades, have presented old age as a synonym of decay, deterioration and loss. Moreover, even though every human being knows he/she will age and that ageing is a process that cannot be stopped, it always seems distant, far off in the future and, therefore, remains invisible. In this paper, I aim to analyse the invisibility of old age and its spaces through two contemporary novels and their ageing females protagonists –Maudie Fowler in Doris Lessing’s *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* and Erica March in Rose Tremain’s *The Cupboard*. Although invisible to the rest of society, these elderly characters succeed in becoming significant in the lives of younger protagonists who, immersed in their active lives, become aware of the need to enlarge our vision of old age.

Keywords: Old age, ageing, youth, environment, invisibility, culture, body, self, society.

Resumen: A pesar del progresivo envejecimiento de la población mundial, actitudes negativas hacia la tercera edad han proliferado gracias a construcciones culturales y mitos que, durante décadas, han representado la vejez como sinónimo de deterioro y pérdida. Los seres humanos somos conscientes de que el proceso de envejecimiento es imparable; no obstante, siempre nos parece muy lejano, parte de un futuro que preferimos no visualizar y, en consecuencia, el concepto de vejez permanece invisible. En este artículo, pretendo analizar la vejez como un espacio invisible de nuestra sociedad a través de dos novelas inglesas contemporáneas protagonizadas por dos personajes femeninos bien entrados en la tercera edad –Maudie Fowler en *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* de Doris Lessing y Erica March en *The Cupboard* de Rose Tremain. Aunque invisibles para el resto de la sociedad, Maudie y Erica, a sus ochenta y tantos, se convierten en parte esencial y significativa de la vida de dos protagonistas más jóvenes que, inmersos en sus activas vidas, acaban cuestionando el espacio físico y simbólicos que ocupa la vejez en nuestra sociedad.

Palabras clave: Vejez, envejecer, juventud, espacio, invisibilidad, invisible, cultura, cuerpo, personalidad, sociedad.

Despite the reiterative affirmation from different media sources that the world population is ageing and the action from a number of associations to instigate all governments around the world to take measures in front of this coming reality, the terms ‘ageing’ and ‘old age’ are

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still surrounded by a stereotypical negative aura. Old age has traditionally been associated with decay, deterioration and loss. The prevailing images of our Western society relate old age with the last stage in the life course in which the individual is not only deprived of a young and gracious body, but of a full social life and even economic abundance. As Kathleen Woodward supports, “[i]n every culture, age, like any other important category, is organized hierarchically. In the West youth is the valued term, the point of reference for defining who is old,” and concludes by stating that “in the West, our representations of old age reflect a dominant gerontophobia” (Woodward 1991: 6, 7).

Therefore, old age has remained and still remains invisible to most of those who have not reached it, energetic people who form an active part of society and who usually fail to notice ageing citizens and their spaces which contain both the richness of a past life and the paucity of their present state. This is precisely the situation described by Rose Tremain in *The Cupboard* (1981) and by Doris Lessing in *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* (1984). Both novels present two main characters, an elderly woman who lives mostly inside her home and her memories and a younger protagonist who, by pure chance, meets the elderly character and becomes strangely attached to her to the point that they start to question the importance of their busy lives and to value not only human relationships, but also the knowledge and wisdom acquired from past experiences of their elderly friends. The questions that arise from the situations presented in the novels and which I intend to develop in this paper are to what extent old age had remained invisible to the younger protagonists and what does the entering of these protagonists into the reality of old age provide to both the younger and older characters. It is also important to note the way in which the spaces where the elderly protagonists live are described and compare them to those of the younger ones.

Environment is everything that surrounds us and that has some influence on us either physically or psychologically. In Webster’s dictionary of the English language, the term ‘environment’ is defined as “[t]he aggregate of surrounding things, conditions, or influences, esp. as affecting the existence or development of someone or something” (1996: 477). According to Jeffrey Garland, “[e]nvironment’ is a complex term embracing internal and external factors, and incorporating physical, psychological and social features.” (1990: 124). As Kathleen Woodward suggests, in our culture, young and old are not only two differentiated categories with different cultural implications, but they also seem to be part of two clear separate environments.

In Doris Lessing’s *The Diary of a Good Neighbour*, Janna Somers, just about to turn fifty, meets Maudie Fowler, a woman over her nineties who lives on her own in a flat in London and who is remarkable for her strong and stubborn personality. Although Janna is smart, attractive, a member of upper middle-class society and very successful in her professional life as editor of a glossy magazine, she becomes strangely attached to Maudie Fowler to the point that she becomes her friend and carer. Janna senses a special attachment between them the first time they meet in the chemist’s:

I saw an old witch. I was staring at this old creature and thought, a witch. (...) She saw me looking at her and thrust at me a prescription and said, “What is this? You get it for me.” Fierce blue eyes, under grey craggy brows, but there was something wonderfully sweet in them.

I liked her, for some reason, from that moment. I took the paper and knew I was taking much more than that (Lessing 1985: 20).

Janna presents herself as a very practical woman who had felt affection for her husband and her mother, the two only important people in her life she has recently lost due to cancer. Once they die, Janna describes herself as a “handsome, middle-aged widow with a very good job in the magazine world” (Lessing 1985: 18) but she goes on to admit:

Meanwhile I was thinking about how I ought to live. In Freddie’s and my flat I felt I was being blown about like a bit of a fluff or a feather. When I went in after work, it was as if I had expected to find some sort of weight or anchor and it wasn’t there, I realized how flimsy I was, how dependent. That was painful, seeing myself as dependent. Not financially, of course, but as a person. Child-daughter, child-wife (Lessing 1985: 18).

It is not until she finds herself alone and is forced to give a look back at her whole life, the social and the inner one, that she is able to trespass the superficiality that has characterised her for many years and change her priorities. She not only becomes friend and carer of a stubborn and frail elderly person such as Maudie Fowler, but she also realises an attractive and young appearance is no longer the common vision of our contemporary world. As she explains: “Before a few weeks ago, I did not see old people at all. My eyes were pulled towards, and I saw, the young, the attractive, the well-dressed and handsome. And now it is as if a transparency has been drawn across that former picture and there, all at once, are the old, the infirm” (Lessing 1985: 29).

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In Rose Tremain’s *The Cupboard*, Erica March is an eighty-seven-year-old writer who also lives alone in a little flat in London. Her quiet life is ‘disturbed’ by the appearance of a young American journalist, Ralph, who intends to write her biography. In their first encounter, Ralph shows his ignorance of old age when he refers to a few of his assumed stereotypes about elderly people:

‘I don’t know where you want me to start.’

The voice didn’t sound particularly old. There was an almost childlike breathlessness in it.

‘I don’t know either,’ said Ralph, ‘but I hope you’re not shy of talking.’

‘Shy? I’m eighty-seven, you know.’

‘Old people are sometimes shy . . .’

‘Are they? They’re deaf, those ones, I expect. I’m blind, without my glasses, but I’m not deaf.’

‘You don’t feel shy of me?’

‘How old are you, dear?’

‘Thirty-five.’

‘Well. I’m eighty-seven.’

He looked up at her. He expected to find her stern, but she was smiling (Tremain 1999: 7).

During their interviews, Ralph increasingly admires Erica for her cheerful personality and becomes completely caught up in her storytelling. Ralph almost envies her choice to live intensely, taking the best of her good times and learning from her bad times. It is Erica's capacity to love and to fight for her ideas and her ideals that Ralph feels to be lacking both in him and in the present times in which he is living:

I knew, after the first few days' talking, that there was some fundamental thing, informing what I must call Erica's life but which also goes outward from her and informs the times she lived in. I believe this thing is passion, or desire, or call it what you will, a craving of the spirit that's lacking not just in me but whose lack characterizes this era (Tremain 1999: 117).

Mirroring the circumstances of the relationship between Janna and Maudie, Ralph meets Erica at a turning point in his life and it is their close attachment that makes him reflect on his past, present and future life.

Immersed in their successful careers and a full, though superficial, social life, as they themselves qualify it, both younger protagonists become aware of their blindness not only towards old age but also towards elderly citizens. Soon after Ralph meets Erica and during the time they spend together, Ralph has continuous dreams about his grandmother. He realises that despite being the only person in his family who really cared for him and his parents, she had been almost neglected in her old age. She counted on a popular wisdom acquired from a harsh life and multiple experiences; however, she was dismissed as a stubborn and old-fashioned woman unable to understand the nuances of a modern world. Ralph remembers her funeral with sadness:

'My only brush with death is Grandma: funeral packed with black people come to make sure this time she's really gone. "Oh my," they wail, "she was one stubborn old lady, your Gran," and then with relief, "there ain't no more like her left. She all was the last one, man!"

'Remember my mother sat in the rocking chair and smoked. Chiffon dress. Tanned legs. Smoked and smiled. She was always fond of endings (Tremain 1999: 167).

By listening to Erica's life, to her values and morals, Ralph becomes aware of the extent to which his grandmother was important in their lives. Whereas his parents were busy earning money and piling up commodities, following the trend of their own and future generations, her grandmother still cared for such values as the family, a proper education or love: "In the magnificence of her Tennessee night, he suddenly heard his Grandma pronounce: 'I never saw in any-*wun* have what you' Ma do have, Ralphie, and that is leprosy of the soul. Now you must mind it ain't chatchin!'" (Tremain 1999: 35) Ralph silently asks Erica, as a representative of his grandmother's generation, to be his guide in order to recover these lost values. As Ralph exclaims: "In the glow of the Tiffany lamp, he had once caught a glimpse of his own shadow and Erica's, face to face on the wall and suddenly been appalled at the importance he was attaching to this assignment. He had wanted to shout out: 'Don't you see why I'm here? I'm half-way through my life and the first half's fucked. I need help'" (Tremain 1999: 34).

At thirty-five, Ralph realises that he requires the help and experienced advice of those elderly people around him. His youth-centred world in a youth-centred culture keeps on

making him feel inadequate, unsuccessful and completely empty. As he realises during his interviews with Erica, his life lacks true relationships and true passion.

As noted previously, in Lessing's *The Diary of a Good Neighbour*, Janna Somers also finds herself at a turning point in her life when she meets Maudie Fowler. She realises she has reached middle-age and is quite alone in the world, in a world that is growing older without her realising it and her being little prepared to cope with it. When Janna suddenly opens her eyes, she realises old age has been near her all the time. Her grandmother was frail and ill during her last years, just as her father was to be a few years later, but busy with her job and social life, Janna was completely ignorant of the difficult times through which other members of her family were living. When she asks her sister Georgie to recall those years to her, her sister answers:

It was all awful, Jane. Do you understand? It was dreadful. I went down there when I could, pregnant as hell or with the baby, and found Mother coping. Granny was bedridden at the end. For months. Can you imagine? No, I bet you can't. Doctors all the time. In and out of hospital. Mother was doing it all. Father couldn't help much, he was an invalid himself (Lessing 1985: 68).

When Janna meets Maudie, old age turns from being an invisible environment to being an issue which makes her think of her future and the future of those around her in a world that will no longer belong to the young. In one episode, Janna arranges for a young electrician, Jim, to mend some plugs in Maudie's kitchen. When Jim leaves, he lingers for a moment "troubled, ashamed, but insistent" (Lessing 1985: 32) and comments to Janna, "What's the good of people that old?" he said. And then, quickly to cancel out what he had said, cancel what he was thinking, 'Well, we'll be old one of these days, I suppose. Cheers then!' (Lessing 1985: 32) Jim's comments cause Janna to sit down and reflect:

What he said was what people do say: Why aren't they in a Home? Get them out of the way, out of sight, where young healthy people can't see them, can't have them on their minds! They are thinking — I have been thinking — I did think, what is the point of their being alive still?
And I thought, then, how do we value ourselves? By what? (Lessing 1985: 32, 33).

Through her dedication to Maudie and her friendship to other elderly neighbours, Janna not only learns to value human relationships above a successful job or fashionable clothes, but she also learns to be responsible for her decisions, to accept her future and to be more in consonance with the reality of an approaching world. By the end of the novel she explains: "I love sitting on a bench, for now I no longer fear the old, but wait for when they trust me enough to tell me their tales, so full of history" (Lessing 1985: 174).

In both novels, it is posited that the relationship the younger protagonists, Janna and Ralph, establish with their elderly friends, Maudie and Erica, nourishes the personal growth of the younger characters. The time they spend together gives strength to the younger protagonists in order to be able to take control of their lives and to be aware of their future and the future of the society around them. Moreover, they learn to value old age as another

stage in life. The sociologist Jeffrey Garland, when analysing the influence of environment on old age, reaches a similar conclusion to the one presented in the novels:

In considering environmental influences on behaviour, it is important to recognise a principle of reciprocity. Older people are not necessarily passive recipients of influence, but can shape the responses of the relatively young who may have set out to influence them. This fascinating phenomenon of reverse behaviour change ('the biter bit'), in which carers find their own activity being altered by a resistant target, has been described (Rebok and Hoyer, 1977) but has not yet received the attention it deserves (1990: 128).

However, it is not only Janna and Ralph who are enriched from the merging of the two environments, the old and the young. Maudie and Erica also gratify their social selves, formerly quite neglected, with their new friends and take pleasure in being able to advise the younger individuals in the construction of their paths with their own life experiences as examples. According to Dorothy Jerrome, "[i]n the literature of social gerontology it is commonly assumed that sources of intimacy become attenuated through the lifespan, to the detriment of the ageing individual's health, capacity for social involvement, and general well-being" (1990: 181).

By sharing her everyday life with Ralph and by investing in conversations with each other, Erica March comes to realise that older generations do have an important role to play not only in the lives of younger persons, but also in history. As Erica expresses to Ralph: "Did you imagine (...) that we old people are the machines of history? Don't you understand that we very often forget?" (Tremain 1999: 19). For her part, Maudie Fowler, described as a strong, fiercely independent woman, often shows anger with the fact that her life has gone too quickly. Although in old age she needs some help and has to resort to the government services, she despises charity and is pleased to prove, on several occasions, that Janna is her friend because she freely chose to be so. As Janna explains: "She tells me about all the times in her life she was happy. She says she is happy now, because of me (and that is hard to accept, it makes me feel angry, that so little can change a life), and therefore she likes to think of happy times" (Lessing 1985: 96).

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If in our Western society, young and old seem to be part of separate environments, the spaces they inhabit are even more disparate in their characteristics. According to John Bond, the environment in which we live influences all our lives, and for older people, "this may be particularly so since they may spend more time in their own home than many other groups in society" (1990: 161). However, the same sociologist, providing data from the 1980s when the two novels were written, explains that a high percentage of elderly citizens live in poor housing conditions:

Elderly people are more likely to live in older housing which is likely to be in poorer condition, lacking in amenities and with sub-standard heating. Privately rented accommodation is particularly subject to these deficiencies (Wheeler, 1986). Elderly owner-occupiers are also

increasingly likely to be living in older housing stock than younger householders (Department of Environment, 1983) and they are also likely to experience poorer housing conditions (1990: 169).

Of the two elderly protagonists, it is Maudie who lives in the poorer housing conditions, reflecting a reality that is extended to the area she inhabits where many other elderly citizens live. Living in a luxurious flat with multiple comfortable implements, Janna is both surprised and scandalised at the bad conditions in which Maudie's flat is kept. The first time Janna is invited into Maudie's flat, she describes it in the following terms:

Although this door wouldn't keep out a determined cat, she fumbled for a key, and at last found it, and peered for the keyhole, and opened the door. And I went in with her, my heart quite sick, and my stomach sick too because of the smell. Which was, that day, of over-boiled fish. It was a long dark passage we were in.

We walked along it to the "kitchen." I have never seen anything like it outside our Distress File, condemned houses and that sort of thing. It was an extension of the passage, with an old gas cooker, greasy and black, an old white china sink, cracked and yellow with grease, a cold-water tap wrapped around with old rags and dripping steadily. A rather nice old wood table that had crockery standing on it, all "washed" but grimy. The walls stained and damp (Lessing 1985: 22).

Janna feels the necessity to keep on arranging and cleaning parts of Maudie's flat, as if being ashamed of the way in which elderly people live. Although she tries to find a solution to improve the conditions of Maudie's flat, she does not get any help from the community around them. Maudie is visited twice a week by a Home Help, a woman employed by the Council who helps elderly citizens with the cleaning and shopping, but her work is insufficient. When Janna asks Mrs. Rogers, the social services representative, for help, she admits they cannot provide a solution either and suggests that Maudie is moved out to a home. Moreover, the owner of the building is not only unwilling to improve it, but he is actually waiting for the elderly people there to die or leave so that he can sell it and make a good profit. As Janna explains, using Maudie's words: "the house was bought by 'that Greek' after the war (...) for four hundred pounds. And now it's worth sixty thousand. 'And he wants me out, so he can get his blood money for this flat. But I know a trick or two'" (Lessing 1985: 27).

In *The Cupboard*, Erica's housing conditions are better since she is lucky to be able to count on the help of a neighbour, Mrs. Burford, who comes in every day to do some cleaning and chat with her. Erica confesses to Ralph that if it were not for Mrs. Burford's goodwill, her house would be a mess. Mrs. Burford herself is very aware her help is granting Erica the possibility of remaining independent and living in comfort until the time she dies. In one episode, Mrs. Burford, who does not like Ralph's visits and interviews, clarifies for him: "'There's not a thing about that old lady I don't know. And what would she do if it wasn't for me? She'd be put in an old people's dying dump'" (Lessing 1985: 39).

During her lifetime, Erica does not care much about money or properties. When her father and stepmother die, she is left with their country house and land in Norfolk. However, as she advances in age, outliving the people she knows, she decides to give it to her

nephew-in-law in exchange for a flat in London, a place she finds handier. When Ralph asks her if she regrets losing her house, Erica answers: “Oh no. Imagine me living there on my own. I couldn’t manage. I’d have to pay someone to nanny me and I couldn’t bear that” (Lessing 1985: 230). Both Maudie and Erica insist on living on their own in their own homes; they value their private space and independence above all. According to Mike Hepworth,

The home is seen as the most appropriate place for older people and is defined in social gerontology as ‘an essentially private place which is the centre of domesticity, a place of intimacy and sometimes a place of solitude’ (Bond 1993: 204). Home is the place which is segregated from the public sphere—a place where the private self is cultivated, nurtured and expressed (2000: 90).

Just as Janna and Ralph see the time they spend in their homes, resting, reading or watching TV, as their most precious jewel, Maudie and Erica, still self-sufficient to take care of themselves, also value their privacy.

The elderly protagonists also have a special esteem for the objects they have kept from childhood, youth and adult life, as if they are precious parts of themselves, shrines of a memorable past, both good and bad, which have shaped their lives. According to Hepworth, the meaning human beings attribute to inanimate objects “extends the self beyond the boundaries of the material body” (2000: 73). This is particularly so in old age, since the object has belonged to the person for years, always accompanying them throughout their lives.

In *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* and *The Cupboard*, the younger protagonists realise there are a few objects which Maudie and Erica refer to as if being part of their own selves. Although Maudie Fowler finds it difficult to keep her house clean and tidy because of her reduced strength, Janna observes how she takes good care of her most loved objects, such as her photos, her dresses and hats and her china. Erica March has not kept many objects from her past life since she had been travelling around for most of it. However, she does possess a cupboard that she inherited when she was eight years old following her mother’s death. The cupboard reminds Erica of her origins and family; it had been witness to the many experiences that had made her thrill and cry and it is located where she plans to die. Erica keeps on mentioning the cupboard in her conversations with Ralph. When Ralph sees it for the first time, he understands why it is so important to Erica:

It was dark oak with carvings on the panelled doors and along its top. It was much more ornate, much finer than Ralph had imagined it. He touched it. Time and Mrs. Burford had given it a shine; the wood was pleasing to touch. For the first time — now that he had seen it — Ralph began to understand why she had attached so great an importance to it. It was the only thing in her life that had never changed (Tremain 1999: 102).

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In a youth-oriented society as ours seems to be, old age is an invisible environment, either because, up until a few decades ago, it was only a small section of the population

who reached old age; or because in Western societies old age has been associated with decrepitude and loss; or because it is considered to be the last stage in life, the nearest to the end, and perceived as far off in the future. However, nowadays, politicians, scientists and artists alike are faced with the reality that the population is ageing and a redefinition of social, cultural and economic structures will have to follow.

In The Second World Assembly on Ageing which took place in Madrid in 2002, it was stated that by 2050 one in five of the world-wide population will be over sixty and the number of people over sixty will pass the number of those under fourteen, a demographic revolution that most countries are little prepared to face. According to Sara Munson Deats and Lagretta Tallent Lenker, literature and the arts can contribute towards the re-thinking of negative stereotypes of old age:

Literature, the arts, and the media can provide both negative and positive examples of the receptivity we seek to acquire in viewing the aging process; and by opening up our doors of perception —reading, listening, and looking with awareness— we can learn to deconstruct the negative stereotypes of aging that we encounter, while also seeking positive exempla as templates for reconstructing ourselves and our society (1999: 2).

Following Deats and Lenker's dictum, in *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* and *The Cupboard* old age is presented as remaining an invisible environment to younger generations, while at the same time they show how young and old generations could benefit from the merging of these two environments. Moreover, it describes the price elderly people have to pay in order to be independent in their own homes. If they are lucky enough to be able to count on the unconditional help of a neighbour, as in the case of Erica March, their homes may be clean and tidy; otherwise, as in Maudie Fowler and her neighbours' case, their homes follow the natural deterioration of all buildings resulting in their having to live in poor housing conditions. Finally, in both novels, younger protagonists come to understand the importance the elderly protagonists give to both their independence and some of their personal objects, which become shrines of past stories and reminders of the need for all of us to widen our vision of old age.

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