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'Tomorrow may be a good day': old age in Jean Rhys's later texts

Old age seldom arrives smoothly or quickly. It's more often a succession of jerks.

(Jean Rhys, 'Close Season for the Old?', 1975)

While Jean Rhys's protagonists have, from her earliest publications in the 1920s, been unflinchingly recognised for their sense of alienation, inability to connect and self-destructive tendencies, her writing on 'the fears and obsessions of the old' (Staley, 1979) has often been neglected. All her main characters consistently reveal a profound sense of dislocation; they feel excluded from mainstream society and Rhys's condensed elliptical prose style seems particularly appropriate to subtly emphasize a bleak examination of loneliness, without leaving too much space for self-pity.

The characteristic Rhys protagonist is an outcast as well as a woman; a displaced figure, vulnerable and fragile. Her recurrent social and financial weakness together with a persistent dependence on other people's (usually unsympathetic) help more often than not expose the outsider's status as a kind of sore unescapable condition. Rhys's characters have also been recognised as ultimately presenting a strong resilience. Such distinctive and somewhat conflicting traits become particularly significant when the protagonists confront death. In extreme loneliness, the old ladies in Rhys's later texts display a clear-headed perception of their eventual fate. However, and I would say, predictably, when you have read her nearly five decades of writing, the terrors of old age, so bitterly anticipated in earlier texts, once more offer the reader an ambivalent perspective.

Short pieces like 'Sleep it Off Lady' (1974) or 'Close Season for the Old?' (1975) speak from the simultaneously confined and free territory of old age. With very different narrative strategies - the distanced 3rd person dominant perspective of 'Sleep it Off Lady' and the admittedly autobiographical 1st person of the sketch 'Close Season for the Old?' - both texts declare the writer's awareness of impending death and her failure to fight it.

'You don't realise that you will die soon because while you are alive this is inconceivable. But the knowledge is there, unconscious, hidden, suppressed. Willingly or not you find yourself thinking: will

I ever see another summer, another spring, ever do this, that or the other again?' ('Close Season for the Old?', np).

Because of this insightful alertness the old women in Rhys's later narratives are perhaps more unsettling than any of her previous younger protagonists. Those who disregard her displaced heroines or disapprove of their ill-advised choices - their inability to succeed in making money, or in actually connecting with other people, their regular bouts of alcoholism, their dependable proclivity to isolation – may come to realize that, at the end of the day, helplessness, decline and death are our common human destiny.

Throughout her work Rhys exposes real communication between people as habitually impossible, or at best flawed. When writing from that place inhabited by a solitary voice facing death she makes yet another contribution to our literary tradition. Transcendence being alien to her, decay and subsequent demise inevitably lies in waiting. And death comes to be equated with the complete loss of identity.

Old age as a simultaneously confined and free territory as well as the widespread insensitivity towards aged people have recently developed into research mainly devoted to the cultural construction of ageing and to the self-representation of the elderly. Inevitable physical decline often goes hand-in-hand with social isolation, medicalisation regularly means not only an answer to older people's needs but an increasingly profitable business, women being the favoured target of ageist discrimination and stereotyping. Before we attend to the two short texts by Rhys, let us pay a brief visit to Simone de Beauvoir's foundational *La Vieillesse* (1970), particularly the way in which the philosopher considers the social disregard and contempt that ageing invariably seems to denote. Her long essay is a pioneering study in the contemporary understanding of old age and one very near to Rhys's twilight prose. De Beauvoir aims at breaking the conspiracy of silence encircling old people, she denounces their loneliness and isolation, the concealed discrimination they are the objects of as well as the economical, physical and emotional difficulties of growing old. 'Old age exposes the failure of our entire civilisation. And this is why it is so carefully hidden.' (De Beauvoir, Interview to Nina Sutton, *The Guardian*, Feb.16, 1970). Considering people merely for their economical productivity, society stops to value those who no longer work. And the uninviting reality of old age has become a problem towards which all of society's former difficulties seem to converge. To look old age in the face often actually means to confront poverty, sickness and neglect and the impuissance, powerlessness, frequently despair, which inexorably escort 'la vieillesse', the inevitable degradation it brings about. De Beauvoir's essay maintains that such pervasive situation demands collective recognition.

Except for an early death, there is no evading the reality of old age. Rhys declares:

Old people, especially women living alone, are very vulnerable. Some are protected by money (up to a point), some by friends and relatives (perhaps, perhaps). But some are not. And the older and frailer they grow, the weaker their position, the greater their dread of being interfered with.' ('Close Season for the Old?', np)

Among the various (unequally satisfactory) analyses which have been devoted to Rhys's oeuvre since her 1966 *Wide Sargasso Sea* was published and became a canonical text, only two essays expressly address the discourses of aging in her writing. Carol R. Hagley's 1988 'Ageing in the fiction of Jean Rhys' and Cynthia Port's 2001 'Money, for the night is coming: Jean Rhys and Gendered Economies of Aging' both help us appreciate the issue and both have many shortcomings.

Hagley devotes most of her study to the writer's younger protagonists, in both novels and short fictions. She finds Rhys's concern with the ageing process as central to an archetypal modernist literary pursuit of human exile and loss of a sense of identity. And she observes how Rhys's heroines may be apprehensive about old age because they 'depend on their physical beauty in order to survive in a male-dominated world.' (Hagley, 121) Nevertheless, Hagley's reading of 'Sleep it Off Lady' is oversimplified and far from accurate. By emphasizing the undisputable coldness and cruelty of a negligent neighbourhood, the essay fails to appreciate how far the protagonist's distorted imagination of the rat actually corresponds to a continuing perception that death is closing in on her. The old lady is not going down willingly or easily but the narrative consistently builds up on the tension that culminates in final humiliation.

The commodification of the body, representative of most of Rhys's (female) characters, involves a reduced market value that further alienates them from any human connexions. Cynthia Port, while thoroughly aware of such predicament, emphasizing how much the discourses of and on modernism excluded the topic of ageing, recommends the 're-evaluation of the place of aging in our understanding of 'the modern' '(Port, 215), but fails to address any of the few short texts where such characters are essential.

The protagonist of 'Sleep it Off Lady' is certainly not interfered with. To put it bluntly her approaching end bears no interference whatsoever.

The short story begins with the ageing Miss Verney talking about death to an acquaintance. And she has recently come to realise that 'the lilac tree wouldn't flower again, not for ten years they told her,' (SIOL, 360), she has decided to dispose of the 'hateful', 'astonishingly large' (SIOL, 361) shed in her backyard, and 'found herself imagining that a fierce and dangerous animal lived there' (...) (SIOL,

361). The text shows how the big shed, really not easy to get rid of - 'Long after she was dead and her cottage had vanished it would survive.'(SIOL, 362) - acquires for the old lady distorted expressionistic proportions. In her isolated bungalow, Miss Verney may have sensibly decided not to worry about the shed but she feels unwell and it has come to haunt her dreams.

One night she was standing looking at it changing its shape and becoming a very smart, shiny, dark blue coffin (...). It reminded her of a dress she had once worn. A voice behind her said: 'That's the laundry.'

'Then oughtn't I to put it away?' (...)

'Not just yet. Soon,' said the voice so loudly that she woke up. (SIOL, 362).

As the lady feels older, lonelier and more helpless, by now her body no longer able to respond easily to what her mind has decided upon, as her usual routine of taking out the large dustbin to the entrance gate is no longer viable and gets substituted by 'a small yellow bin' (SIOL, 363) that she empties into the large one, she begins to see a large rat. Terrified, she walks up the road to her neighbour Tom. A reassuring cup of tea is offered, he later comes with 'an infallible rat poison' (SIOL, 363). The short story builds up on the increasing disquiet of the old lady as she faces what has by now become a huge rat. The frightening experiences of Miss Verney soon turn into an encroaching obsession with the rat. And her neighbour Tom now mocks her:

'Are you sure it wasn't a pink rat? '

She knew that the bottles in her dustbin were counted and discussed in the village. But Tom, who she liked so much? (SIOL, 364).

The old woman in 'Sleep it Off Lady' is patronised and marginalised; at first some neighbours show her a little respect, later their hostility becomes very strong. Her fears and obsessions are attributed to an old mind muddled by too much drink and too many books. While such traits actually correspond to Miss Verney's character they do not represent her whole being. The story initially makes the existence of the rat quite plausible, totally consistent with the depiction of the old shed, yet how real both the shed and the disgusting rat may be is beside the point. They have come to represent Miss Verney's own degradation, particularly her terrified perception of impending death. The old lady's

isolation and loneliness direct the reader to the finale. This frail person tries to block out her enemy. 'She dragged what

furniture there was away from the walls so that she would know that nothing lurked in the corners and decided to keep the windows looking on to the shed shut and bolted.' (SIOL, 365). When the large dustbin has been tipped over, she advises the charwoman to put 'two stones on the lid turned the other way up' (SIOL, 365), she retains some common sense and thinks to herself, she does not say it out loud: 'I defy any rat to get that lid off.' (SIOL, 365). She may be haunted by an imaginary rat but her fear of the darkness awaiting cannot not be locked out.

While going through this heart-breaking process the fussy old lady has been turned from a nuisance into an invisible creature. And much too suddenly, from her own perception. The reader understands that Miss Verney has changed from a feisty old woman into a ruin; when confronted with her decay such awareness turns into our own disquiet.

The absence of community feeling or of mutual support works both ways. She avoids her neighbours, disapproving of their manners. They have her labelled and disposed of as a person even while alive – on her best days useless, on her worst garbage to be carried away with the trash. The doctor is sympathetic, but powerless; his concern forewarns the reader about the old lady's likely end: 'Don't go moving the furniture about, (...). Don't lift heavy weights. Don't....' Don't worry, (...)' (SIOL, 367). The lack of compassion of the neighbours is reinforced by Miss Verney's ever more paranoid attitude, a formerly unwelcome location becomes increasingly bleak. Shunned by her neighbours she eventually becomes inaudible and invisible. Until near the end of the story, the neighbours are not particularly cruel or mean. Her somewhat eccentric behaviour may have alienated them but being old and frail is the ultimate crime. The process of bodily and mental decay is felt as a threat. The old lady's loss of independence and control over her life is a 'memento mori' no one wants to confront. Death is dreaded by the community. As Lear would say, Miss Verney 'smells of mortality'.

Once the old lady slowly goes out into the twilight to empty the small bin, and realizes the charwoman had forgotten to take the big one outside the gate. One heavy stone on the lid proves too much for her.

She was sitting on the ground with her back against the dustbin and her legs stretched out, surrounded by torn paper and eggshells. Her skirts had ridden up and there was a slice of stale bread

on her bare knee. (...) darkness was coming on very quickly. (...) Dear God, let someone come! (SIOL, 369-70).

No one hears her calls for help. She cannot get up and is finally beaten by the enemy that had been lurking all through the story. Then, before facing death, she has to submit to one last humiliation. When a young neighbour finally sees her the only response she receives is: 'Sleep it off lady,' (...) So Miss Verney waited in the darkness for the Super rat.' (SIOL, 370-1).

Objectified by society, considered as no longer entirely human, old people hover in a kind of limbo between life and death. The biological inevitability of senescence, the intractable reality of physical decline and decrepitude - not accompanied by any sort of personal or spiritual growth - are determinedly confronted in 'Close Season for the Old?'. The process of aging was predicted or felt as an ordeal by the author's former characters, and approaching the endgame as presented in 'Sleep It Off Lady' is utterly lonely and terrifying, Rhys's ambivalent perspective in this brief very personal narrative invites the reader to the resilient personality of an elderly woman somehow able - if not to make peace with her final demise - to calmly accept it.

'(...) I (for must it not be I?) wake up very early, when at the time of year I am writing this it is still dark. (...) Tea and cigarettes, then it begins to get lighter and I am happier, though happy is hardly the word. Perhaps the real deep feeling is of joy, even triumph, that one has survived the night. Once more darkness has been conquered and, however dreary, day will soon be here. Of course you could die during the day, but it's not likely, not even possible, is it? This year, next year, sometime, again becomes, never.' (np)

Miss Verney desperately tries to resist approaching demise, the 1st person narrator in 'Close Season for the Old?' faces old age and death as the ultimate site of loneliness. 'Sleep It Off Lady' is dominated by a sense of impending annihilation. To the emotional and physical effects of isolation and poverty, old age adds the 'finishing' touch. In 'Close Season for the Old?' the silence surrounding the personal voice is part of a giving in to the inevitable, a final capitulation. Sometimes with old age comes the privilege of serenity. 'The intoxicating feeling of freedom repays you a thousand times for any loneliness you may have endured. (...) Loneliness is not the worst by any means.' (np)

The last four stories in Jean Rhys's short story collection, *Sleep It off, Lady*, as well as the three pieces published in *My Day*, all of which treat the loneliness and degradation of *la vieillesse*, reveal that Rhys in her eighties had not lost her skill as a storyteller. In spite of severe ailments, in spite of alcohol

and old age, the writer persisted in her devotion to the art and craft of writing. She kept her mind clear and her talent insightful. Old age may have become the last site of marginalisation and isolation, but as Diana Athill lucidly wrote: 'Who else reported back from the frontier of old age with such clarity, speaking truthfully about being old (...)?' (Int. to *The Collected Stories*, ix).

'(...) nothing much does matter any more. This indifference or calm, whatever you like to call it, is like a cave at the back of your mind where you can retire and be alone and safe. The outside world is very far away. You sometimes long for a fierce dog to guard your cave. That's only on bad days. Tomorrow may be a good day.' (np)

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