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Old Age and the Gothic

Introduction

Since its genesis, the Gothic genre has consistently pushed to the forefront aspects of existence that the wider society would rather ignore. During the first wave, texts such as Matthew Lewis' bestselling *The Monk* (1796), explored madness, sex, and terror; challenging dominant Enlightenment rhetoric about human progress and intellect. A century later, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) undermined the, albeit surface, respectability of late-Victorian England, tapping into panic caused by ideas about evolution and showing the human subject as a 'bite' away from transforming into a bestial vampire. It is fitting then, that contemporary Gothic literature and film, which has flourished since the late 1960s, responds to a society that problematizes old age and characterizes it in terms of deterioration and loss. Betty Friedan, in *The Fountain of Age*, suggests that these discourses make old 'age so terrifying that we have to deny its very existence' (1993: 9). Gothic texts counter this trend and shine light onto old age and those ageing into it. Their refusal to let us bury our anxieties is consistent with a genre that 'offers ways of exposing, and articulating, some of the horrors and fears' that preoccupy us 'without ignoring them, dismissing them or panicking' (Wisker 2016: 238).

In terms of old age, the panic manifests itself in widespread ageism, at both an individual and institutional level. We need only consider prejudiced attitudes towards the most vulnerable old during the Covid-19 pandemic to gain a sense of their extensive and insidious nature. Numerous studies have commented on the fact that from 'health advisories on age vulnerability, to the

ghettoizing of older adults for risk mitigation, ageist rhetoric has been a dominant theme for pandemic control' (Lichtenstein 2021: 206). Policy makers and the media promote a 'them' and 'us' attitude drawn along generational lines which supports a 'rhetoric of disposability' surfacing in 'questions about who should live or die when medical resources are scarce, hospital systems overwhelmed, and Covid-19 roils the globe. Older patients are deemed disposable' (Lichtenstein 2021: 206). However, stress about older people placing a strain on reserves is not solely tied to this historical moment but amplifies pre-existing concerns about an ageing population as an unmanageable and devastating 'grey tsunami'.

Ageism is one of the reasons why age is 'an undertheorized sign of difference in the humanities' (De Falco 2009: 1). This has been true of Gothic studies in the past but recently there has been an increased interest in this aspect of identity. Much of the scholarship centres on the figure of the vulnerable orphan or the demonic child, the proverbial 'bad seed', however, discussions of characters at the other end of the life course are beginning to appear. British academics, Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, for example, in 'No Country for Old women: Gender, Age and the Gothic' examine the older female protagonists who populate texts from the late 18th century to the present day. Spanish researcher Marta Miquel-Baldellou, in essays such as ''I Wanted to Be Old': Gender and Aging in Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca* and Susan Hill's *Mrs de Winter*', approaches work by Gothic authors from Edgar Allen Poe to Stephanie Meyers through the lens of ageing. Following a slightly different route, Marlene Goldman argues in *Forgotten: Narratives of Age-Related Dementia and Alzheimer's Disease* that Canadian writers of both fiction and non-fiction have relied on Gothic tropes of apocalyptic ageing in portraits of dementia and Alzheimer's to the detriment of more productive discourses. This chapter aims to join the growing conversation and highlight some of the interesting texts that foreground older characters. I largely discuss European and North American material due to the dangers of literary colonization and co-opting texts for what is a traditionally European canon. Work by Latin American authors, for instance, is as likely to be in dialogue with magic realism as it is the Gothic. Whilst it is certainly possible to discuss transnational Gothic without

appropriation especially in an increasingly globalized world, as Glennis Byron points out in 'Global Gothic', it is beyond the scope of this chapter to engage meaningfully with this area.

Whilst negotiating generic boundaries, I am going to offer a definition of what constitutes a Gothic text. It is a necessarily provisional description because the Gothic is a particularly slippery term. Marie Mulvey-Roberts captures its elusiveness in the 'Introduction' to *The Handbook of the Gothic* asking: 'What is Gothic literature? Is it a plot, a trope, a topos, a discourse, a mode of representation, conventions of characterisation or a composite of all these aspects?' (1998 xxi). Taking on board the implication that Gothic literature is a 'composite', Kelly Hurley usefully offers a summary of its key elements. She suggests that texts are generally 'popular', contain 'sensationalist and suspenseful plotting' and:

> depict supernatural or seemingly supernatural phenomena or otherwise demonstrate a more or less antagonistic relation to realist literary practice; actively seek to arouse a strong affective response (nervousness, fear, revulsion, shock) in their readers . . . are concerned with insanity, hysteria, delusion, and alternate mental states in general and offer highly charged and often graphically extreme representations of human identities, sexual, bodily and psychic. (Hurley 2002: 192)

Although Hurley is describing literature from the turn of the 20th-century, this broad account captures the continuing preoccupations of contemporary Gothic fiction and film. Authors and directors continue s to create emotive, and emotional, works that draw audiences and readers to a 'dark yet familiar brew' driven by 'an uneasy and eerie dialectic between anxiety and desire' (Mulvey-Roberts 1998: xxi).

The abject older person

Bodies under siege from the vicissitudes of ageing are central to discussions of old age. Without wanting to replicate a stance that pathologizes the older individual, the ageing body as a biological 'machine' that is 'running down' stands as a stubborn counterpoint to discourses of ageing that posit it as a period of potential growth and positive transformation. This sketch of the older figure chimes with the wider concerns of the Gothic, as the body under duress, regardless of its age, is at the forefront of many narratives. From the start, authors have focused on figures who are menaced by torture or painfully transformed, that bleed and cry and monstrously challenge the limits of what it is to be human. Whether villainous or vulnerable, they are often represented as abject: a concept discussed most influentially by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* (1980). She takes a psychoanalytic perspective on abjection, considering phenomena that trouble the subject's 'borders' and sense of possessing a stable self, ranging from bodily waste (sweat, blood, pus and faeces) to the more abstract things that have no respect for boundaries (a 'so-called' friend who betrays one). Such things elicit 'queasiness and horror' because 'they remind 'one of traumatic infantile efforts to constitute oneself as an ego' and 'of the fragile nature of an ego that remains threatened by and yet attracted to the possibility of dissolution' (Hurley 2007: 138). Readers are simultaneously drawn to and repelled by scenes of abjection, helping to explain its prevalence in Gothic texts. Kelly Hurley, in her essay 'Abject and Grotesque', helpfully emphasizes that the fear of dissolution can also be triggered by thoughts of our 'fate'; the loss of identity that comes with our eventual death (2007: 145). Authors use this unease to abjectify an older character's struggles with embodiment as a signifier of our ultimate dissolution. Their depictions of unruly bodies, subject to illness and loss of function, act as reminders of our 'clumsy earthiness and changeful mortality' emphasizing 'the material thingness of the human subject' (Hurley 2007: 38).

Bestselling American author, Stephen King uses the abject body's ability to create disgust in a fascinated reader in *Dolores Claiborne (*1992). The eponymous sixty-five-year-old protagonist narrates the novel in the form of a confession to the police. To convince them that she did not murder her wealthy, elderly employer, Vera Drake, Dolores admits to killing her physically abusive

husband thirty years earlier. The supernatural elements of this story are slim and instead the horror comes from King's portrayal of the female body as consistently under threat, focusing on a handful of visceral episodes to illustrate its vulnerability. At one end of the life course, Dolores' adolescent daughter is sexually abused by her father and at the other end, Vera must battle her own body and learn to manage physical dependency. Bodies are not only misused by those who share the domestic space but also by the labour it takes to care for those in it. King painstakingly describes the effort it takes for Dolores to launder Vera's sheets in winter, a process which culminates in hanging them on the line with 'hands numb, fingers purple, shoulders achin, snot leakin off the end of y'nose' (King 1992: 21). Not only is housework gendered in the novel but so too is the caring role as Dolores slowly transitions from Vera's housekeeper to her caregiver. This reflects the fact that in wider society, it is usually women who adopt this position. In the U.S., at the time of the novel's publication, '90% of paid aides to older adults, regardless of whether the care provided is offered in the home or institution, is provided by women' (Browne 1998:30). King captures Dolores' difficulties as the lone carer of a wheelchair bound and overweight individual, who also suffers from episodes of confusion.

In a different novel these aspects of daily life might be overlooked but King uses them to take readers deep into the realms of the abject. Near the start of the story, he focuses on the battle of wills that takes place on 'cleanin day'. Vera deliberately soils herself when Dolores is busy elsewhere, one day pushing her to breaking point:

> She was sittin up in bed, wide awake, covers thrown back, her rubber pants pushed down to her big old flabby knees and her diapers undone. . . Great God! The bed was full of shit, she was covered with shit, there was shit on the rug, on the wheelchair, on the walls . . . It looked like she musta taken up a handful and flang it, the way kids'll fling mud at each other. . . Was I mad! Mad enough to spit!
>
> 'Oh Vera! Oh, you dirty BITCH!' (King 1992: 32)

The visceral language, describing an excessive amount of faeces, confronts readers' anxiety about the loss of bodily control which can generate 'penalties of stigmatization and ultimately physical exclusion' because to be 'ascribed the status of competent adult person depends upon the capacity to control urine and faeces' (Featherstone and Hepworth 1991: 377). Vera, here, is not a 'competent adult' but infantilized by the narrator's reference to 'diapers' but more so by the fact that her actions are likened to those of children who willfully make a mess. Paradoxically, this 'loss' of control is a way of trying to claw back some of the mastery she has lost in becoming dependent on Dolores. Vera is willing to lose some dignity to shift the balance of power and in this scene is both victim of an ageing body and a disruptive grotesque. Interestingly, this episode also works to amplify the question that runs throughout the novel: why does Dolores put up with such abject behavior? The narrative offers a slow reveal as to the nature of their relationship. We gradually learn that they helped each other out at various life-changing moments and, although often their interactions are fraught, they continue to support one another. In exploring the sisterhood between two old women, King moves us beyond the usual stories about husbands and wives, or mothers and daughters, and into less charted territory.

Although there is a long tradition of Gothic texts portraying the female body as monstrous, as a fatal temptation or a castrating mother, the senescent male body easily crosses into this territory. Mexican Canadian novelist Silvia Moreno-Garcia makes much of the abjection inherent to the twisted patriarch, Howard Doyle, in her novel *Mexican Gothic* (2020). As the title suggests, she taps into a slew of generic conventions, not only presenting us with a villainous head-of-family but also his reign over an isolated and dilapidated ancestral home, 'High Place', moldering in the mountains of rural Mexico. Noemi, a young socialite from Mexico City, is sent there by her father to investigate her cousin's claims that she is being poisoned by her husband, Howard's son, and that the house 'brims with every single evil and cruel sentiment' (Moreno-Garcia 2020: 8). Obviously, her cousin's report is true. 'High Place' is a living organism in a symbiotic relationship with its inhabitants, a relationship which extends their lives if they do not leave the site for too long.

Howard, originally from England, is over 400 years old and made his fortune from Mexico's silver mines. Moreno-Garcia works to expose the country's exploitation by unscrupulous colonialists who paid native labour a pittance to work in dangerous conditions. She also connects Howard to the suspect practice of eugenics. He is fascinated by why the Mexican workforce lasted longer than their original European counterparts and wants Noemi to marry one of his heirs as he believes she will strengthen the family's bloodline. Yet, it is not just outsiders that he exploits; he also feeds vampirically on younger members of his family and demands that one of them sacrifice their body to him once his current one degrades due to senescence. Noemi is shocked to learn that they agree as they see him as Godlike and the transfiguration as a way of retaining a measure of immortality.

When Noemi arrives, she describes Howard as 'ancient, his face gouged with wrinkles, a few sparse hairs stubbornly attached to his skull. He was very pale too, like an underground creature. A slug, perhaps' (Moreno-Garcia 2020: 28). Although this description is unflattering, as the text progresses and Noemi comes to understand his plans, he becomes increasingly abject with his rotting body mirroring his psychological corruption. Forced to take part in preparations for the body-swapping ritual, she is shocked when taken to his room to find him nude on the bed with lips 'as bloated as his leg, crusted with black growths, and a trail of dark fluid dripp[ing] down his chin.' She is repulsed: 'It was horrid, horrid, and she thought he was a corpse, afflicted by the ravages of putrefaction, but he *lived*.' (Moreno-Garcia 2020: 204). Horrific and abhuman, his remaining grandson turns against him and breaks the unnatural cycle by escaping to a new life with Noemi. Like Howard's grandson, readers of both *Mexican Gothic,* and *Dolores Claiborne*, are presented with older bodies that fascinate as much as they disgust and work as a monstrous *memento mori*.

The demonized older person

Intergenerational tension is also at the heart of the American author Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* (1967). A young couple, Rosemary, and her actor husband Guy, move into an apartment and become friendly with their older neighbours, Roman and Minnie Castevet who we gradually learn

are practicing Satan-worshippers. Guy secretly joins their coven and, in exchange for career success, allows them to drug Rosemary and take her to a black mass where she is impregnated by Satan. Although disorientated, Rosemary is partially aware of what is going on and is 'suddenly surrounded by naked men and women, ten or a dozen' who 'were elderly, the women grotesque and slack-breasted' (Levin [1967] 1994: 77). Tellingly, Levin offers no equivalent details about the male members of the coven and his distasteful description points to the idea that women are valued for their youthful bodies. Colette Browne, in *Women, Feminism and Ageing* says on this subject that 'society's emphasis on youth and physical beauty has negative implications for women's changing appearance' adding that rather 'than physical changes being viewed as signs of character and distinction, a woman's aging appearance marks the end of her worth as defined by her sexuality and ability to reproduce' (1998: 41). These barren female characters can only stand by and assist Rosemary's impregnation and Levin represents their nakedness as monstrous because of their age. In the faithful 1968 film adaptation, director Roman Polanski also portrays the older women as verging on the grotesque. Even when clothed, the female actors look coarse and incredibly outmoded next to Mia Farrow's ethereal Rosemary with her avant-garde Vidal Sassoon pixie cut. Minnie, played by Ruth Gordon, is plastered in clownish make-up which emphasizes her age whereas her husband Roman, actor Jason Isaacs, looks distinguished throughout the film dressed in a variety of smart jackets and ties.

Until we reach the black mass which demonstrates Roman's power and influence, Rosemary, and by extension the reader who only has access to her limited perspective, are encouraged to dismiss the older protagonists. Levin relies on ageism to drive the initial undecidability of the narrative. Readers must underestimate them for the slow build-up of terror to work as we try to piece together the various clues and discover what is going on. Guy, after their first meeting, mockingly refers to the Castevets as 'Ma and Pa Kettle', referring to a 'hillbilly' couple who starred in a series of comic American films from the late 40s (Levin [1967] 1994: 48). Levin presents them as figures of fun, particularly Minnie who is fussy and self-confessedly nosey. Guy also assumes that

they will be lonely, warning 'if we get friendly with an old couple like that we're *never* going to get them off our necks' (Levin [1967]1994: 48). Although, he is right about the consequence, he is not about the cause; the coven forms a self-made urban family and the Castevet's do not want the young couple for friendship but for Rosemary's ability to reproduce. The newcomers' ageist misreading prevents them from avoiding danger and even Guy, who gains a measure of acting success for his part in the plot, is ultimately manipulated to further Roman's ends.

Levin not only demonizes the coven because they are Satan -worshippers but because they fail to step down for the younger generation. Roman does not cede any power to Guy and remains the alpha male, eventually greeting the baby's international visitors himself. He pushes aside his female contemporaries, who are fussing over the child, simultaneously encouraging Rosemary 'to be a real mother' as they are 'too old. It's not right' (Levin [1967]1994: 200). Duplicating the social disqualification of older women, he self-servingly ignores the fact that normative masculinity has come to be 'embodied by middle-age and younger men', and that during the 19th and 20th centuries "old" was 'incorporated as a cultural gauge for what masculinity is not' (Thompson 2004: 1). Roman, as a leader of a powerful, largely aged cabal is neither 'normal' in his dealings with the devil nor 'normal' in his refusal to sit on the periphery of events.

Another Gothic horror film that dramatizes this intergenerational tension is American director Ari Aster's *Midsommar* (2019). He literalizes the gerontological 'fair innings theory', the advocates of which Sara Schotland in 'Forced Execution of the Elderly: Old Law, Dystopia, and the Utilitarian Argument' explains, 'hold that if all else is held equal, one should devote the scarce resources to prolong the life of younger individuals who have not yet had their "fair innings." (171) She goes onto explain how authors over the centuries have pushed this logic to extremes in dystopian imaginings where geronticide is the norm. Aster's vision taps into this movement, focusing on a group of American anthropology students accompanying their Swedish friend to his home village, which is holding a midsummer celebration. Far from the quaint experience they envisaged,

the festival is underpinned by a series of bizarre rites. The first shocking ceremony consists of, what Aster terms, 'attestupa'; a violent ritual suicide where senescent members of the community throw themselves off a cliff, symbolically making way for the next generation, who orchestrate events. Although the old characters here are not physically forced to jump, the cultural coercion that they experience is plain.

Dani, the only female visitor, thinks her insensitive boyfriend takes it too coolly, asking 'are you not disturbed by what we just saw?' He replies 'I'm trying to keep an open mind though. It's cultural, you know? We stick our elders in nursing homes. I'm sure they find that disturbing. I think we really need to at least try to acclimate'. The audience is supposed to find such cultural relativism foolish, although he is right that the experience of ageing is affected by culture and the spectre of being institutionalised in a 'bad' nursing home haunts the popular imagination. Schotland usefully reminds us that 'While geronticide might seem a far-fetched, dystopian nightmare, the question of whether and how to distribute health care resources as our population ages is, of course, a topic of extensive commentary' (2013: 171). Although the film was released before Covid-19 struck, its dramatization of a generational struggle for resources is timely.

The uncanny older person

The Visit (2015) portrays a more intimate, but equally disturbing, cross-generational encounter. It is a 'mock-doc' about fifteen-year-old Becca and her brother Tyler's first visit to their grandparents, Nana and Pop Pop. It. Indian American director M. Night Shyamalan turns the old couple's home into an uncanny space 'marked by the collapse of boundaries, by the strange trespassing into regions of the familiar, and vice versa' (De Falco 2009: 6). Even before they meet, Becca, who is recording the trip for a school project, captures this sense of defamiliarization as she muses: 'We don't know their temperament or their proclivities'; a sensation which, counter-intuitively, intensifies as the week progresses. This bewilderment is largely due to the fact that the

siblings are not familiar with old people and find even very ordinary things odd; such as when Pop Pop tells them that there is an early curfew which he puts down to age: 'we are old people and go to bed at 9.30'. They are surprised but accepts his explanation as it fits in with their conception that older people are intrinsically strange and do things differently. Their judgements are related to an internalized ageism which, as Robert Butler – who coined the phrase in the late 60s – says, allows 'younger generations to see older people as different from themselves' to the extent 'that they subtly cease to identify with their elders as human beings' (qtd in Bytheway 2016: 338). Shyamalan takes this as a starting point and plays with the siblings' judgement about the line between the 'usual' and the 'unusual'. Later, they hear sounds outside of their room and see Nana vacantly wandering around in an old-fashioned nightgown, but the next night, more disturbingly, they see her jerkily running up and down the corridor. When Becca asks about this Pop Pop explains her conduct as 'sundown syndrome'; a symptom of dementia where an individual becomes agitated at the onset of dusk. Becca passes this onto Tyler and reassures him that although this is not 'normal' adult behavior but it is a 'normal old age problem', although he remains skeptical.

The older characters' uncanniness is emphasized by their duality, with familiar and kind exteriors hiding interiors that are unsettling and erratic. Shyamalan here employs a classic Gothic trope, which can be traced back most famously to Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), to create a sensation of uncertainty. Both the viewer and children become increasingly unsure as to which 'side' of the grandparents they will be presented with. Pop Pop cares for and protects Nana but saves his soiled incontinence pants in a fly-infested pile in the woodshed. Nana, tidy by day in her neat cardigan, possesses a hidden 'night-time' body which, sometimes nude, scampers on all fours and retches. Freud's suggestion that 'everything is uncanny that ought to have remained hidden and secret and yet comes to light' seems particularly apt and helps explain why the children are so disturbed (qtd in De Falco 2009 :7). In *The Visit* these secrets are age-related, and further, often connected to an abject body.

In the final scenes of the film, the ultimate 'secret' is revealed when Becca finds out that Nana and Pop Pop are imposters; escaped patients from a psychiatric hospital, who have murdered her actual grandparents. The uncanny house is replaced by a terrifying and violent one, with Nana trying to vampirically bite Becca, who delivers a fatal blow with a shard of broken mirror. Meanwhile, Pop Pop sadistically punishes Tyler by rubbing his incontinence pants in the germ-phobic's face until Becca rushes in to save her brother. As in *Rosemary's Baby*, there is an element of the film which warns the audience about underestimating the old as it turns out they can be just as dangerous as the next adult. Shyamalan parodies the ease with which the old can be Othered and, ultimately, they are not frightening because of their age-related behaviors but because they are insane and murderous. However, the film does not fundamentally challenge ageist presumptions that places older individuals in a category that lies outside 'normal' adulthood, because it relies on these attitudes for the plot-twist to work. Further, ageism drives the horror of the film with the audience being both entertained and repulsed by the grotesque bodies and 'secret' age-related behaviours that Shyamalan reveals on screen.

The 'youthful' older person

Vampires do not suffer from being underestimated and socially disqualified because, despite being some of the oldest characters in literature and film, they tend to appear young and so are treated as such. Yet this was not always the case. Stoker's Dracula, for instance, is described by Jonathan Harker as a 'tall old man' with a 'long white moustache' who is 'clad in black from head to foot' ([1897] 1994: 25). Miquel-Baldellou in 'From Pathology to Invisibility: Age Identity as a Cultural Construct in Vampire Fiction' suggests that the popularity of this figure in Victorian literature coincides with the period's interest in old age and 'the creation of the elderly subject as a category in the medical discourse' and a figure in need of 'public provision' (126). Miquel-Baldellou suggests that over the years the cultural erasure of the old figure has overtaken its pathologization, resulting in contemporary vampires who are still ancient in years but look youthful and supernaturally

beautiful. Old bodies have been literally written out of the vampire script. She credits Ann Rice as leading the way, in *Interview with The Vampire* (1976), with her aristocratic creation Lestat de Lioncourt and the even younger vampire child, Claudia. This generic shift fits with Nina Auerbach's assertion, made in *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, that there is no such creature as "The Vampire"; there are only vampires' (1996: 5). She argues that they are not a homogenous group but reflect the concerns of their times and so blend into the 'changing cultures they inhabit' (Auerbach 1996: 6). In the late twentieth and twenty-first century, society consistently applauds those individuals who look younger than their years, holding them up as role models with which to chastise those who do not, at the very least, try to minimize physical signs of ageing, and contemporary vampires reflect this obsession.

This worship of the youthful is certainly echoed in the global phenomenon that is the *Twilight* series of five books, written by Stephanie Meyer and published between 2005 and 2020. The stories focus on the romantic relationship between the human Bella Swan and vampire Edward Cullen. Like Rice's Lestat, the Cullen's occupy the position of glamourous outsiders, but unlike their predecessor, they are ethically sound as they do not eat humans to survive. Therefore, not only are they set apart from the local community, but also the wider vampire community which views them with suspicion. Theorists such as Lauren Rocha in 'Wife, Mother, Vampire: The Female Role in the Twilight series' note that Bella internalizes ageist attitudes about beauty being synonymous with youth, and that 'aging, will endanger her future with Edward because Edward will not be attracted to her as her looks fade' (2014: 72). The second book in the series, *New Moon* (2006), begins on the morning of Bella's eighteenth birthday and is often referenced to illustrate her fear of ageing. She dreams of her grandmother, whose 'skin was soft and withered, bent in a thousand tiny creases that clung gently to the bone underneath' (Meyer 2007:3). However, this dream turns into a 'nightmare' when she realizes that it is her reflection: 'That was me. . . Me, ancient, creased and withered'. Her fears are intensified because Edward is 'excruciatingly lovely, and forever seventeen' and she believes he will not desire her as she ages (Meyer 2007: 6). Bella is not alone in her belief that with

age comes a loss of personal and sexual 'value', as Edward's sister Alice makes clear later in the chapter. Responding to Bella' s complaints about getting older, she asks: 'Don't women usually wait till they're twenty-nine to get upset over birthdays?' (Meyer 2007: 10) Behind the seemingly flippant question lies the assumption that all women do not want to age.

Meyer's texts suggest that whilst physical ageing is undesirable, being chronologically old has its advantages. Most obviously her vampires have accumulated wealth and experience. For instance, Edward's sire Carlisle, seen by Bella as 'impossibly youthful and lovely as ever' (Meyer 2007: 26), is a doctor with an encyclopaedic knowledge of medical practices garnered during the three-hundred-odd years of his existence. He is gratified by his profession and explains that it is 'pleasant knowing that, thanks to what I can do, some people's lives are better because I exist' (Meyer 2007: 34). Nevertheless, Meyer is not offering a radical reframing of the possibilities of old age, which allows for the continuing development of self-fulfilment for example. Instead, she represents the Cullens' as possessing both eternally youthful exteriors and largely youthful lifestyles based around, for instance, school and active parenting.

The wise older person

Overwhelmingly, Gothic texts tend to be moulded by cultural doubts about ageing. Still, there is a recurrent figure who moves the conversation into those areas nascent in Meyer's narratives: the wise old person. Although Roman Castevet and Howard Doyle in many ways fit this description, I want to discuss positive portraits driven by sympathetic intergenerational relationships where an older character's wisdom is deployed to help and protect others. Such stories counter the contemporary dismissal of the knowledge possessed by older people. Friedan bemoans the fact that 'we who are now approaching age can hardly remember a time when older people were respected, looked up to, venerated for their wisdom' (Friedan 1993: 9). Simone de Beauvoir famously explained this trend: 'Modern technocratic society thinks that knowledge does not accumulate with the years but grows out of date' (qtd in Horner and Zlovnik 2016: 184). Notwithstanding, Gothic

texts have a complex relationship with a past which refuses to stay put; individuals return from the dead in the form of ghosts and vampires, antique secrets and curses haunt the present, and there is suspicion about new ways of doing things. A belief in the 'old ways' and ancient knowledge is less obsolete here than in other genres.

An old Red Riding Hood narrates Jamaican Canadian author Nalo Hopkinson's 'Riding the Red' (2001), who calls on her life experience to educate her adolescent granddaughter about female sexuality. Carian Hart in 'Gothic Folklore and Fairy Tale: Negative Nostalgia' explains that 'the Gothic shares many formal and conceptual features with folklore and fairy tale' including 'heroines who are threatened with rape, incest, mutilation, murder', who 'are kidnapped, confined, rescued' and 'face monstrosity in all its forms' (2020:1-2). Feminist reworkings of fairy tales, of which Hopkinson's is an example, often make explicit the sexuality that underscores many traditional narratives; far from subtly in the case of 'Red Riding Hood' with its lesson that young adolescent women should not stray from the path in case they fall victim to strangers with 'wolfish' appetites. Hopkinson's Red Riding Hood coaches her granddaughter on what to do if she meets the wolf in spite of her 'saintly' daughter's attempt to dismiss her 'old wives tales'. The old woman asserts:

> it's the old wives who best tell those tales, oh yes. It's the old wives who remember. We've been there, and we lived to tell them. And don't I remember being young once, and toothsome, and drunk on the smell of my own young blood flowing through my veins? . . . I could make wolfie slaver, I could, and beg to come close (Hopkinson 2001: 3)

Hopkinson offers an alternative take on the relationship between the girl and wolf, portraying a young Red Riding Hood as possessing agency and an active desire. Her older self feels that history will repeat itself but this time she will play the part of the grandmother rather than ingénue. Interestingly, the scenario is not without appeal: 'Ah, but wouldn't it be sweet to ride the red, just once more before I'm gone, just one time when I can look wolfie in the eye, and match him grin for grin, and show him that I know what he's good for?' (Hopkinson 2001:6) Not only does she refuse to

be silenced, but she also rejects the socially acceptable role of sexless older woman as she knows that she is more than a match for 'wolfie'.

Equally redoubtable is Aunt Lydia, from Canadian author Margret Atwood's *The Testaments* (2019), a sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) in which readers are introduced to Gilead, a totalitarian patriarchal theocracy where women are categorized according to their fertility status. The narrator, Offred, is a Handmaid, an involuntary surrogate chosen to carry a baby for a high-ranking officer in the regime. Often described as speculative fiction, *The Handmaid's Tale* is 'probably less clearly a Gothic fiction' (Wisker 2016: 72). Nonetheless, recently it, and by extension *The Testaments*, has been successfully claimed for the genre. As Gina Wisker, in *Contemporary Women's Gothic Fiction* (2016), points out 'the entrapment of women in their roles defined by childbearing capabilities and their silencing and mastering' are a 'set of Gothic curtailments which reconfigure the locked attics or dungeons' as a 'late twentieth-century incarceration in roles, clothes and behaviours based on religious fundamentalism' (2016: 72-73). The fearsome middle-aged Aunt Lydia haunts the text in her role as an instructor to the Handmaids, enforcing compliance and obedience to the regime. Offred portrays her as the villainous female face of the society who terrorizes her young charges with both psychological and physical violence and threats.

In *The Testaments*, set fifteen years later, Atwood makes a volte-face and dramatically rehabilitates the older woman. Lydia, now the narrator, remains an important figure in Gilead but explains how she has been continually working to destroy the system from within. Collecting and hiding evidence about crimes committed, Aunt Lydia also feeds information to the Mayday resistance movement who smuggle Handmaids to safety in Canada. Atwood establishes her as a complex character with a wry sense of humour and a sharp mind. Throughout the narrative she reflects on the often-hard choices and imperfect compromises she has had to make, asking her reader: 'Try not to think too badly of me, or no more badly than I think of myself' (Atwood 2019: 404). Towards the end of the book, we learn she has been successful in helping bring down the

regime but not before she is called to account. Stating that 'Torture is like dancing: I'm too old for it' (Atwood 2019: 404) she plans to inject herself with a fatal dose of morphine and die on her own terms, leaving behind her diaries to act as her testament. Although I have not discussed the age of the authors in this chapter, it is noteworthy that Atwood, a septuagenarian at the time of publication, bestows continuing influence and political acuity on her fictional peer. In the face of dismissive ageist discourses, this can be framed as an example of the social activism for which Atwood is known.

Conclusion

As this chapter has demonstrated there are many preoccupations that are shared by ageing studies and Gothic literature and film. At the top of the list, and where this chapter started, is an interest in the troublesome, and troubling, body. Writers and directors reflect society's anxious 'association of old age with decline and death' and the body as its 'dominant signifier' (De Falco 2009: 2). They push it to extremes, creating monstrous figures whose abject exterior reflects a rotten core or focus on uncanny bodies that unsettle those around them. Another key concern in both fields are intergenerational relationships. Some Gothic authors focus on the conflict this generates and the creation of an 'us' and 'them' boundary connected to age identity. This leads to tyrannical patriarchs guarding their power or younger characters trying to grasp it. Other writers show a more hopeful, cooperative, bond where the older figure often plays experienced guide to the younger one. It would have been interesting to find more positive representations of old age along these lines, but it is the nature of the genre to focus on, and expose, the anxieties that permeate our culture. Nonetheless, Gothic's engagement with older characters is such fertile ground that I am sure more stories, and studies, will follow that broaden our ideas about what it means to be old.

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