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## Facing Our Future: An Examination of Age and Gender in Margaret Atwood's *The Stone Mattress*

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**Facing Our Future:  
An Examination of Age and Gender in  
Margaret Atwood's *The Stone Mattress***

**Makenzie Krause**

**4/28/2016**

In Margaret Atwood's "Torching the Dusties," the final tale in her collection *The Stone Mattress*, the character Tobias professes what he believes are the real reasons as to why women live longer than men: "Women hang around longer because they're less capable of indignation and better at being humiliated, for what is old age but one long string of indignities?" (204)

While the reasoning for why women live longer than men has been explained through scientific facts, Tobias instead relies upon his knowledge of social hierarchies to formulate this explanation: Women are able to live longer than men because they are better equipped to suffer the indignities that are endured by elderly people. Because women have spent their whole lives being shamed on account of their gender, it is no different for them to continue suffering the humiliation of old age. Men, on the other hand, are ill equipped for old age because their relative privilege and experiences have failed to prepare them for the restrictions of old age.

I begin with Tobias's claims because they are central to Margaret Atwood's project in *The Stone Mattress*. This is a collection of nine tales which provides the basis for launching her powerful critique of the prevalence of ageism in our society. Focusing on the different ways in which women and men approach aging, Atwood reveals how age and gender determine where a person exists within a given social structure and the quality of that existence. Through the narration of several different elderly characters, she invites her readers to consider how the norms of our youth-obsessed society fail to address the difficult and inevitable process of aging. In keeping with the speculative mode of fiction she is known for, Atwood paints a disturbing picture of a world in which older people have no idea how to grow old without feeling alienated and oppressed.

In this essay, I examine the tales in *The Stone Mattress* to reveal how the intersecting discourses of gender and aging shape the lives of the elderly in contemporary Western society.

Atwood's stories draw attention to the individuals' relationship to the power structures that prevent them from recognizing that they are being oppressed. As noted by one Atwood critic,

Atwood explores in her novels the ways in which individuals become implicated in power relationships that often manifest themselves in forms of domination and victimization. However, at the same time, Atwood's writing displays a profound awareness that involvement in a power structure often entails some degree of internalization of the ideology that supports that structure, and that individuals are collaborators in the perpetuation of the assumptions that define their society (Özdemir, 58).

The stories I examine expose Atwood's interpretation of aging and the problems faced by the elderly<sup>1</sup>. As she examines the intersectionality of these discourse, she also speculates as to how future societies could be. By scrutinizing these problems and describing how they mirror current social practices, I argue that we must take her speculations seriously. Only once this is accomplished can we examine another aspect of her writing: hope. While Atwood uses her works to portray the problem of aging and speculate what will result from the failure to address this issue, she also argues that the recognition of the problem will enable us to avoid it and embrace the identity of the elderly person, thus altering the way we see aging.

Despite the fact that we must all someday face a future in which we exist as elderly people, we have paid surprisingly little attention to the systematic ways in which the elderly are marginalized. Part of the reason for this, as noted by Atwood, is because ageism is a problem that didn't used to exist. In an interview about *The Stone Mattress*, Atwood states that

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<sup>1</sup> The term "elderly" is ambiguous, of course, and its meaning is constructed variously in different discourses, like health administration, labor, or public assistance. In Atwood's fiction, she does not give the ages of any of her characters, but classifies them as "elderly" because they are past retirement age.

Once upon a time there were not nearly so many people living to that age; people that old would have been freakish. In the Victorian situation they would have been cared for within the extended family home; in hunter-gatherer societies, should you have someone that old, the group would have cared for such a person – except when they decided, ‘OK, that’s enough,’ and they would choose to go out themselves (Quoted in Wagner, 36).

With this claim, Atwood hypothesizes that ageism is relatively new because people are living longer now. However, while she does recognize that this may be the case, she uses her works to remind her readers that this problem is nevertheless unacceptable. As noted in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies*, “The second-wave feminist movement was accused of ageism and ignoring the older woman; however, feminist writing about aging and gender has more recently begun to proliferate into a substantial critical literature” (Watkins, 223). Through her works, Atwood provides this missing literature and acts on her knowledge that, while ageism has only recently come into the conversation of gender in literature, that does not mean it is a topic that is one to be omitted from feminist studies.

As feminists have begun to address the problem of ageism, they have discovered that the discourses on age and gender are intimately tied together in such a way that creates a social hierarchy that is discriminatory towards elderly women. My analysis of Atwood’s fiction is grounded in the feminist studies of this intersectionality between gender and aging. The intersectionality perspective may be described as “an analytical strategy that facilitates understanding the experience of marginalized people enmeshed in constant identity struggles,” and it is able to “denote the plurality of identity grounds and the array of frames organizing social life” (Quoted in Wilińska, 883). This perspective is crucial to examining *The Stone*

*Mattress* because one cannot discuss either theme of gender and aging without relating it to the other.

The intersection between age and gender is prominently displayed in the research of sociologist Monika Wilińska. In her study on the discourses of age and gender, Wilińska claims that age and gender as co-determining factors “can be seen in the methods of organizing various sociopolitical systems, dividing and/or differentiating groups of people and establishing certain social spheres available to each. In fact, discourses *are* those systems” (Wilińska, 881, emphasis added). By examining society through this lens, Wilińska discovered that, while men are able to age and take on the role of a retiree, elderly women are confined to their roles as women and must continue serving society in this motherly role (Wilińska, 890).

Wilińska’s study is echoed in Tobias’s claims that “women never know when it’s game over” (Atwood, 204). While Tobias does argue that aging is more difficult for men<sup>2</sup>, he also claims that men are able to accept death more easily. Like Wilińska, he notes that women are held to standards that encourage them to resist death and strive to maintain the roles associated with women such as mothers and caretakers. Men are permitted to wither away, but women are continually expected to fulfill the same roles they performed in their youths. Outraged at this idea, gerontologist Nancy Hooyman argued that this common social perspective has “denied women’s centrality in the aging experience” and that “such an individualistic approach overlooks how existing structural arrangements of work and caregiving create women's dependency and

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<sup>2</sup> Tobias’s argument diverges from Wilińska’s because he comes at it from a psychological standpoint. He makes this argument because of his belief that aging is more difficult for men because they are not used to being treated as inferior. Wilińska on the other hand approaches the argument from a social standpoint, arguing that social factors make it easier for men to age because society is more forgiving towards the aging male than it is towards the aging woman.

low economic status in old age” (Hooyman, 115). Therefore, social expectations of aging women contribute to and form the basis of the struggles they face as they age.

These expectations yield suffering whether or not they are adhered to. For those that attempt to abide by social norms, they are inevitably shaped into someone who performs according to societal beliefs. In the case of the aging population, they are marginalized by the perspective that gender and sexuality are discourses limited to a youthful population. As noted in Kathleen Riach’s studies on sexuality, gender, and ageing, “the sociological literature on sexuality... is driven by a preoccupation with youth, leisure and consumer cultures rather than ageing... (and it) tends not to examine the intersections between sexuality and other aspects of identity such as ageing” (Riach et al. 1680). This results in what Riach describes as “chrononormativity,” a conscious and unconscious perspective that holds ideas about the correct times for particular life stages, including the “right” time for a woman to be seen as a sexual being (Riach, et al. 1678). Unfortunately for most women, this window of time is notably smaller than it is for men.

This perspective ties to the stories found in *The Stone Mattress* because it reveals why Atwood’s female characters, none of which fill the chrononormative roles for women of their age, are unable to fit in with their societies. As noted by Kate de Medeiros in the *Journal of Aging Studies*, “The aged individual, the older ‘self,’ is socially constituted... A collective and shared understanding (of this self) forms the basis of a culture” (de Medeiros, 5). Therefore, when the characters in these stories fail to fill these roles created by their cultures, they discover that, by not fitting in with their societies, they are thus oppressed by it. In her book *Women, Feminism, and Aging*, sociologist Dr. Colette Browne notes that, “Sex and age are also viewed as processes that are defined, shaped, and influenced by social and power relations. These power

relations involve a hierarchical structure of both opportunity and oppression” (Browne, xxv).

Like Wilińska, Browne also notes that the factors of gender and age are intertwined in that they serve as means for society to judge and place its citizens in a social hierarchy.

Atwood’s efforts to discuss these topics in her literature reflect one of the most powerful means of discussing the relationship between age and gender. Through her work, Atwood mirrors the efforts of her few predecessors who were able to strengthen their voices (rather than allow them to diminish) as they aged. This trend of empowerment with age was exhibited by one of the most famous feminists, Simone de Beauvoir.

de Beauvoir made a name for both herself and for women everywhere when she published *The Second Sex* (1949). This work served (and continues to serve) as a critique of women’s roles in society. It is in this work that she argued that “One is not born woman, but becomes one,” thus laying the foundation for the argument that society shapes the way humans behave and that gender is in fact a social construction. By making this claim, de Beauvoir shaped the face of feminism and revealed the results that occur when one succumbs to societal expectations.

While she did focus one chapter of this work on thoughts about the aged woman, it was not until 21 years later when she was 62 that she published her thoughts on the process of aging and its relation to society in her book *The Coming of Age* (1970). In this book, she addresses the failures of her previous work by outlining the numerous ways that elderly women are oppressed by both men and women and pointing out how society fails to take into account its tendency towards ageism. de Beauvoir’s delayed action of addressing this issue demonstrates the hidden strength of ageism and its inherent tendency that we fail to address it until we experience it. Like



de Beauvoir, several authors have found that their portrayals of older women have altered throughout their works as they themselves are becoming aged women.

Margaret Atwood is one of these authors. At the age of 76, she continues to impress her readers by publishing more and more pieces of remarkable literature. Like the many elderly characters she has created, Atwood demonstrates an ability to refine how others perceive the world around them. Because she has been writing since the early 1960's, she has created numerous characters from all stages of life, thus allowing her to paint a broad image of the ageing and aged woman. "I've written about older people before," she says... "But one of the beauties of it is that you have a whole life, or quite a lot of one, so that the people's earlier lives are always coming into play as well. So you get to write about younger people AND older people" (Quoted in Ubelacker, 2014). By studying her works, academics are able to establish whether Atwood sees aging "in terms of decline or ripening, and as creating generational conflict or continuity" (Watkins, 224). This study is crucial because, by scrutinizing her works, we are able to reflect our own culture and how we allow the factors of age and gender to influence our lives.

From studies such as these, we are also empowered to examine and create new ways to think about the connections between feminism and aging. Teresa Gibert, one of many Atwood scholars, points out about Atwood's fiction that it "both reflects accepted views on the subject and may be influential inasmuch as it helps readers to revise the cultural images that inform contemporary attitudes towards ageing and, in particular, to deconstruct and challenge the negative stereotypes of female ageing" (Gibert, 40). Since Atwood's publication of *The Edible Woman* in 1969, readers have observed her projection of society's treatment towards elderly

women and have thus observed new means of perceiving their ideas about the elderly woman in modern society.

Through her confrontation with modern stereotypes, Atwood addresses the horrifying potential of what could happen if society were to actively practice ageism through oppression of the elderly. Gibert points out that, “A close analysis of the metaphors in Atwood’s fiction reveals her various ways of approaching this multifaceted phenomenon which is attracting her attention increasingly and which she has already treated from different perspectives” (Gibert, 31). When we compare her works to each other, we see that she formulates a complex argument that addresses how society treats its members and how these members’ age and gender define their place in society. This argument claims that, if we continue ignoring the problem of ageism, we will encounter a future in which younger generations actively oppress the elderly.

Throughout *The Stone Mattress*, we discover that Atwood uses her characters to express this disturbing possibility of what can occur when ageism becomes a quotidian factor in the day-to-day routine. This possibility emphasizes her tendency to use the theme of power to “embody a critique of humans’ exploitative attitude towards nature, as well as towards their fellow men” (Özdemir, 59). As we will see in later chapters, the characters from Atwood’s short stories realize too late that their ignorance of ageism results in their suffering when they, seemingly out of nowhere, reach old age. When readers encounter this idea, they cannot help but note that it is an echo of themes that Atwood has expressed in her earlier works.

Of Atwood’s repertoire, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is one of her most famous works that most directly exemplifies these themes. Similar to *The Stone Mattress*, this novel demonstrates the extreme contrasts that can take place amongst different generations of women as a result of the misogynist societal influence by which they are enslaved. Offred, the main character in *The*

*Handmaid's Tale*, embodies ideas found in *The Stone Mattress* because she believes that her current state is a result of her generation's obliviousness to the problems that engulfed them. For example, when all women are told that they no longer have a job, she asks, "What was it about this that made us feel we deserved it? (66)" Willed ignorance, Offred learns, is sister to victimization and to passive acceptance of blame for what is done to one (Neuman, 862). In the portrayal of the effects of willed ignorance, Atwood argues that it will lead us to accept whatever happens to us when we are older and thus be oppressed by it.

Throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*, both Offred and her readers question who has more power in this situation, she or Serena, the wife of the Commander. Because Offred realizes too late that she is powerless, the only way she can gain some semblance of autonomy is through her rebellion against Serena. This mirrors not only the scenarios portrayed in other Atwood novels, but also our current society because, instead of fighting the patriarchal norms to which they are subjected, women instead lash out at each other, thus strengthening the patriarchal grasp on society. As noted by Emily Gordon in her *New York Times* article, "When our value is tied to the people who can impregnate us, we turn on each other" (Gordon, 2015). Therefore, rather than tearing down masculine power, women tear down each other and therefore uphold the patriarchal society.

Unlike the perspectives found in *The Stone Mattress*, *The Handmaid's Tale* only offers the point of view held by the younger generation. However, we are able to get the elderly generation's outlook in another one of Atwood's works, *The Blind Assassin*. In it, the main character Iris thinks, "Weak knees, arthritic knuckles, varicose veins, infirmities, indignities – they aren't ours, we never wanted or claimed them. Inside our heads we carry ourselves perfected – ourselves at the best age, and in the best light as well" (311). This double awareness

of Iris's identity echoes Atwood's ability to reveal and undercut the various socially constructed roles that women are called to perform throughout their lives (Bouson, 254). As readers are exposed to these roles in these two works, as well as in *The Stone Mattress*, they cannot deny how women are constantly constrained by their societies' perception of them.

In *The Handmaid's Tale*, despite everything that Offred has been through though, she still pauses to wonder who has it worse, she or Serena. After one of the ceremonies- during which she and Serena become "one flesh" (94)- Offred ponders Serena's situation and the pain she is going through. Although Offred had her life completely ripped away from her, she recognizes that Serena is being oppressed by this society as well. Serena may be the one who is married to the Commander, but her inability to bear children renders her worthless. This exemplifies the failure to recognize sexuality within the aging community. Our society's preoccupation with youth and fertility encourages us to ignore the intersections between sexuality and other aspects of identity such as ageing (Riach, 1680). As readers, we are reminded that we do not consider the sexuality of aged women, which results in the ignorance of a crucial part of who they are.

When we debate which woman has more power, we come to realize that the battle for power stems from the patriarchal society in which they live. In this type of society, women are encouraged to have animosity towards one another and must fight in order to receive the attention of men. Because they cannot overcome the patriarchy, they turn on each other in order to survive in a society that takes away feminine power. As women struggle to find their places in this society, the generational gaps amongst women become apparent when men transcend them in search of younger sexual partners. Therefore, tensions between generations of women appear

as the older women struggle to keep hold of their men while the younger women desperately seek someone who can help them survive in this society.

Because of its reflection on modern society, *The Handmaid's Tale* has been meticulously scrutinized. However, some of Atwood's more recent works, such as *The MaddAddam Trilogy* (2003-2013) or *The Stone Mattress* (2014) have not. *The Stone Mattress* is particularly interesting in its commentary on the topics of age and gender because most of the tales are told from the perspective of an elderly person. While some of the tales are related to each other, others are not, and it is with this collection that Atwood contributes yet another unique insight as to how elderly people interact with the world around them.

Margaret Atwood is one of few contemporary novelists who make the connection between age and women's struggles throughout her works. *The Stone Mattress* is set apart from other contemporary literature because it addresses a gap in studies of and writings about feminism that has been missing until recently. By studying and writing about *The Stone Mattress*, I will continue the studies that examine Margaret Atwood's portrayal of the influence of gender and age in the creation of social hierarchies. Because she continues to publish great literature, her books are able to reflect the ideals of a society that, though relatively stable in its values, constantly experiences minute changes that alters how we see the world around us. Therefore, as we study her works, we can see that they continue to reflect our modern society's ideals.

I will begin by examining the Atwood's use of escapism and how her characters try to "escape" the life of an elderly person. These characters struggle to do this because they attempt to be youthful while respecting the chrononormative standards to which they are held. As the characters discover, this task is impossible; one cannot be an elderly person pretending to be

younger while at the same time believing that elderly people cannot have youthful characteristics. The characters who attempt this feat, whether by altering their appearances or altering their states of mind, only find suffering. By struggling to recreate themselves as younger people, the characters reflect how their gender and age create a new discourse that limits them and their ability to exist happily in their placement in society.

My second chapter will examine the implications of creating social hierarchies based on the discourses of age and gender. Many of Atwood's works are self-proclaimed creations of "speculative fiction", and Atwood uses them to speculate what the world could be like if we were to determine a person's rights based on his or her age. In *The Stone Mattress*, as in her earlier works, dark consequences can and do arise when chrononormativity reigns as the perspective to determine a person's role in society.

The final chapter of this paper will comment on Atwood's portrayal of those who manage to defy chrononormativity. While many of her tales highlight the depressing aspects of aging, she also creates characters that are able to age happily. These characters are able to do this because they release their grip on their younger identities and instead embrace the new selves that they grow into as they age. By creating characters that recognize that they do not have to perform as old people are expected to, Atwood creates a new discourse that respects the intersectionality of age and gender while rejecting norms presented by chrononormativity. The means the characters use to discard their younger selves are unique and extreme, but they achieve the goal of helping us see that the process of accepting old age is a monumental act, and that it is very difficult to do if one is unwilling to take the risks associated with it.

In this study, I will follow the footsteps of previous Atwood scholars and examine how the factors of age and gender influence one's role in society. By examining Atwood's portrayal

of social hierarchies in her works, I am able to comment as to how they mirror real-world social hierarchies and their flaws. Because her works reveal that the discourses of age and gender are used as tools of marginalization, my analysis of these works will contribute to the conversations about these discourses and encourage my readers to reflect on their own biases towards age and gender.

## **Escape Routes:**

### **The means we use to avoid our futures**

A theme that reigns prominently in Atwood's works, especially *The Stone Mattress*, is that those who are aging frequently attempt to escape their reality by rejecting the fact that they are aging. In their desperation to evade old age, her characters use a myriad of methods to avoid being seen as an old person. These methods vary, ranging from altering one's appearance to behaving as one did decades earlier. No matter the means Atwood's characters use to escape their identities, they demonstrate an unhealthy desperation to reject them.

When we examine the methods used to escape their realities, we can easily accept their normalcy because we are accustomed to rejecting old age. For example, the method of escaping by means of altering one's appearance is frequently revisited in Atwood's works. Similar to Serena's action of adorning herself in flowers to attract her husband's attention in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Jorrie from the tale "Dark Lady" also makes alterations to her appearance in order to escape the reality of her old age. Because society readily classifies people based on their appearance, those whose looks are fading are often desperate to maintain them.

Although this tale is primarily about Jorrie, it is actually told from the perspective of Tin, Jorrie's twin brother. As her twin brother, Tin fills the role of Marjorie's mirror image. However, despite the fact that he reflects her age, she is able to achieve the mindset of a youthful woman

by projecting her old age onto Tin's image and thus ridding herself of it. In her discussion on aging, de Beauvoir claims, "Since it is the Other within us who is old, it is natural that the revelation of our age should come to us from outside – from others. We do not accept it willingly" (288). In his role as Jorrie's twin, Tin is the Other, and because he is outside her, it becomes his duty to embody cultural expectations and remind her of her old age.

From Tin's narrative, we are able to see how age has weakened Jorrie. While she still expresses the confidence she had in her youth, her brother is forced to remind her that having the confidence of someone youthful does not actually mean that she can behave as if she is in the prime of her youth. In her actions, Jorrie exemplifies de Beauvoir's stereotype of the aging woman:

There is nothing that obliges us in our hearts to recognize ourselves in the frightening image that others provide us with. That is why it is possible to reject that image verbally and to refuse it by means of our behavior... This is a usual choice with some women who have staked everything on their femininity and for whom age means being entirely out of the running. They try to deceive the rest of the world by means of their clothes, make-up and behavior; but above all they make a hysterical attempt at convincing themselves that they are not affected by the universal law. (295)

Because Jorrie constantly recreates herself to appear like a younger woman, it is up to Tin in his role as the Other to keep her in check. For example, he frequently reminds her that her confidence doesn't grant her the ability to wear trendy clothing fashionably and that she is looked down upon for trying to dress as the youth do. Along with comments on her clothing, Tin also notes that Jorrie is obsessed with her make up and her Botox. This obsession reflects that Jorrie is also attempting to maintain an image of power that she once held in her youth. Because



her declining position in society is a constant reminder of her age, she is doing everything she can to reject the image of age that society places upon her.

As noted by de Beauvoir, women who obsess with their image as Jorrie does are oppressed by their self-perceptions in regards to their social status. de Beauvoir states,

Old age is something beyond my life, outside it – something of which I cannot have any full inward experience... my ego is a transcendent object that does not dwell in my consciousness and that can only be viewed from a distance. This viewing is effected by means of an image: we try to picture what we are through the vision that others have of us (291).

Jorrie, in a desperate attempt to see herself as being youthful, alters her appearance because she cannot see herself as being young unless society sees her that way as well.

Like Tin, de Beauvoir points out the results of the constant obsession with youth and the tragedy that occurs when this image is lost: "... our unconscious mind knows nothing of old age: it clings to the illusion of perpetual youth. When this illusion is shattered, in many cases it causes a narcissistic traumatism that gives rise to a depressive psychosis" (292). Because Jorrie is able to see her age mirrored in her twin brother, her experience is even more traumatic, which is why she uses any means possible to appear youthful. Instead of accepting her old age, she projects it onto her mirror image and is thus able to enter the depressive psychosis in which she "escapes" her age through the rejection her image.

While Jorrie serves as an example of a woman who escapes her old age through her obsession with her appearance, Atwood also offers characters that escape by means of their actions. Some of these actions are relatively harmless. For example, in "I Dream of Zenia with the Bright Red Tooth," the characters escape their age by participating in what they believe are

“adolescent” activities. For example, they frequently get together to watch trashy horror films.

Roz, one of the characters, reflects on this activity and can’t seem to grasp why they all find it so enjoyable:

Why are the three of them indulging in these adolescent pursuits? Is it some kind of grisly substitute for diminishing sex? They seem to have thrown away all the maturity and experience and wisdom they’ve collected like Air Miles over the middle years; just tossed them out, in favour of irresponsible buttery and salty munching and cheesy, adrenaline-soaked time wasting (124).

Because this activity is recognized by society as being a youthful one, instead of seeing it as a fun means of spending time with her friends, Roz instead sees it as a desperate attempt to escape her old age and immerse herself in a youthful mindset.

The “youthful” activities in this story are extremely harmless when they are compared with other means Atwood’s characters use to escape back to their youths. For example, in the first tale of the collection, “Alphinland,” we meet the character Constance, an elderly woman who goes to drastic means to preserve her younger self. Constance is a recently widowed world-renowned author. Although her works are critiqued as being trashy, they are incredibly popular, and it is in her world of Alphinland, the setting of the books she writes, that Constance is able to escape her depressing and lonely life. In her work *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir points out that women living in this state of aging struggle to distinguish between the real and the imaginary, and that “one of the most salient characteristics in the aging woman is the feeling of depersonalization that makes her lose all objective landmarks” (623). Through her depersonalization, Constance creates a sort of double identity, one in which she balances between her obedience to her late husband Ewan and her independent power in Alphinland.

Because Constance refuses to acknowledge her husband's death, she escapes from that reality by continuing to interact with him as though he were still with her. In this story, Constance must face a blizzard, and in order to do so, she relies on her husband Ewan's "voice" to guide her as to how to survive. In her desperation to ignore the reality of her old age and widowed status, she escapes by recreating Ewan in her head and interacting with him as if he were real. However, instead of freeing her, her desperation to escape actually hinders her mental state as she goes about her daily activities. By reverting to her past obedient self, she allows Ewan to become so engrained in her system that she fails to recognize that she is capable of taking care of herself. For example, when she prepares to go out into the storm, she attributes her careful planning to his guidance: "when she's at the front door with the wheeled shopping bag, Ewan says to her, "Take the flashlight," so she trudges upstairs to the bedroom in her boots. The flashlight is on the nightstand on his side of the bed; she adds it to her purse. Ewan is so good at planning ahead. She herself never would have thought of a flashlight" (12). She recognizes that he is not physically there with her, yet at the same time she convinces herself that he is present and is still advising her on how to take care of herself.

The fascinating aspect of this relationship is that, throughout her whole life, Constance has never actually needed someone to take care of her. In fact, it is quite the opposite. When she was younger, Constance first began writing her acclaimed book series in order to support her boyfriend Gavin who was struggling to make ends meet. Even though he humiliated and degraded her, she remained faithful to him and supported him under the belief that she needed him, when in reality, it was he who needed her. Constance conformed to the male dominated hierarchy that surrounded her, and as she aged and outlived the men who once degraded her,

instead of embracing a new and independent self, she instead escaped to her youthful mindset in which she was ensnared by a patriarchal hierarchy.

As Constance obsessively reflects about Ewan and her youth, one cannot help but notice that she is doing so to fortify her perception of her role in society. Because Constance has always believed that she needed a man, she reinforces the power of Ewan's voice in order to maintain her position in the subservient woman's role she has always known. Constance, who won't even light a fire because it symbolizes renewal, is so obsessed with maintaining her past that she is willing to encourage the voices in her head so that she may continue acting as a submissive partner, the role she has known for most of her life. By attempting to escape into her past, Constance sets herself up to suffer in her present and thus give in to a social hierarchy that constantly oppresses her.

When we transition from "Alphinland" to "Revenant," the second tale in the collection, we meet Gavin, Constance's ex-lover. Like Constance, Gavin also struggles to battle the strength that his youth has over him. However, while Constance escapes to her youthful mindset and purposefully ensnares herself in it, Gavin is haunted by the aftermath of his attempt to escape. Gavin, who was known as being a womanizer in his youth, tried to maintain this image by marrying a woman who was decades younger than him. At first, this youthful woman represented the perfect means of escaping the stereotypes of old age; because she was young, he would supposedly be able to maintain his image as a youthful womanizer. However, exactly the opposite occurs. Instead of escaping old age, Gavin is only increasingly reminded of it, and he learns that trying to escape actually ensnares him more.

Because it is impossible to escape the physical effects of old age, Gavin's wife uses this to her advantage and constantly reminds him of it, thus encouraging him to remain in a perpetual

spiral of impotence. Gavin cannot escape his physical limitations and is thus tormented by his youthful ideals that, in their focus on overpowering women, are inherently designed to ridicule the aged man who is no longer able to have sex. In the book *Gender and Aging*, Susan Krauss Whitborne points out that, “Given that the human sexual response is highly sensitive to emotional and other psychological processes, one does not have to stretch one’s speculative energies very far to predict that the sexual behavior of aging men is likely to suffer almost as much from exposure to prevailing social attitudes as from any physiological changes” (49). Gavin, who used to be known as a womanizer, cannot bring himself to have sex anymore and is troubled for the sake of his youthful self. Unlike other men of his age, he does not have the excuse of blaming his wife for his impotence; because she is still young, he has no opportunity to make excuses as a means of escaping the reality that his physical body is now limited by his age.

Just as Gavin humiliated Constance when they were both young, Gavin’s wife is able to do the same to him because she has her youth on her side. She is able to retain this power because she is decades younger than Gavin, which means that she is not facing the same problems related to aging as he is. As noted by Whitborne, “The aging male’s intimate heterosexual relationships are inevitably influenced by changes in his sexuality... The adaptational process that takes place is made far more difficult by cultural stereotypes in the aged... and the notion that the male must demonstrate his sexual prowess by showing off his manly vigor” (49). Because Gavin lacks the sexual prowess he had in his youth, he therefore has lost his powers as a man, which means that his wife, Reynolds, is able to overcome patriarchal power with her power of young age. Since he cannot bring himself to have sex with her, or with any woman for that matter, he foregoes any status he has as a male.

Patriarchal standards can be as detrimental to men as they are to women when men are unable to perform up to par. While de Beauvoir offers examples of how aging can be easier on men in her book *The Coming of Age*, she points out several cases where aging is just as horrifying for them as well. When talking about Yeats, de Beauvoir writes, “What infuriated him was the accidental, casual aspect of this inescapable old age; he too tripped over the odious stumbling-block of this unrealizable reality – he was the same person, but he was being forced to suffer revolting usage” (297). In other words, he was attempting to escape his old age by focusing on his youthful, mirrored image of himself, but was then horrified to discover that his attempts to escape only hindered him further.

de Beauvoir’s case is easily relatable to Gavin’s because, like Yeats, Gavin was angered at how he could not escape his age and how he was unable to behave as he once did. He still feels the same way about women that he did when he was in his 20’s, but now he is unable to satisfy his masculine identity by acting upon these feelings. Even worse, he is forced daily to face a woman decades younger than he, one that he cannot control because he cannot have sex with her. Because he is not able to exert power over her, it is he who is powerless, and it is in this powerless state that he recognizes that she is only interested in being with him so she can inherit his wealth.

It is this aspect of Gavin’s story that makes us feel the most sorry for him. Because Gavin lives in such a way that he is severed from his youth, we can see that the lack of love in his life further contributes to his spiraling loss of a sense of identity. This tale therefore emphasizes the importance of how feelings of genuine love contribute to the aging society’s identity and how it is the relationships we form that help us rationalize our existence. Instead of encouraging the elderly to try to escape to their youthful pasts, we must instead encourage them to embrace

themselves in their current state of being. When reflecting on sexuality in the aging male, Whitborne states, “In expressing these feelings, the knowledge that one can love and is loved can provide a unique source of strength and inspiration to the identity of the aging person—male or female” (51). Thus, without real relationships to ground us and prevent us from “escaping” reality, we lose a sense of whether or not our existence is meaningful in the social hierarchy in which we are rooted.

## **Speculation: The dangers of blinding ourselves to the future**

By examining Atwood’s novels as speculative fiction rather than science fiction, readers are able to gain new depths of understanding of the messages she is striving to convey. When we see her works as being speculative, we concede that, under the right circumstances, they actually could happen. Therefore, we finish her books feeling somewhat terrified.

One of her more recent examples of this is *The MaddAddam Trilogy* (2003-2013). In this work, Atwood speculates that humanity will eventually cause its own self-destruction and that the only way to protect the planet from harm will be to destroy the human race and replace it with a new species of human. The species of human in this work, the “Crakers”, are programmed to be genetically efficient and environmentally beneficial. One interesting aspect of the Crakers is that, in order to remove the negative feelings surrounding death, they are designed to disregard death and simply die when they reach the age of thirty. The fact that their creator, Crake, believed that living past this age is unnecessary is fascinating, and it forces us to contemplate what we would want for our aging selves.

After reading about the Crakers and their seemingly idyllic way of life, we cannot help but wonder if, given the choice, we would prefer to not age. While aging gives us an opportunity

for a longer life, it also yields to a melancholy outlook on life as the elderly cannot help but reflect on the experiences they once had and will no longer be able to have. Despite this potential aspect of our future, most of us would likely choose aging over an early death because we have hope for a good future. However, as speculated by Atwood in *The Stone Mattress*, perhaps this future will be darker than we ever imagined.

Of all the tales in *The Stone Mattress*, “Torching the Dusties” is most disturbing in the sense of how it portrays the powerlessness of the elderly. This tale is told from the elderly Wilma’s point of view, and in the story, she narrowly escapes being burned to death in her nursing home. She flees with the help of her friend Tobias, and their story ends as they watch a younger generation torch the nursing home with the purpose of killing the elderly people living inside. Although the younger generation in this tale claims to be following a “liberal” set of ideals, what they fail to see (just as our younger generations fail to see) is that a liberal mindset “assumes that people can make meaningful life choices regardless of their gender, race, class, sexual orientation, or age” (Browne, 50). Much like our current generation, the young generation in this tale fails to properly define and rationalize its actions. The youthful narcissistic generation competes with an elderly, disbelieving one and tries to establish its place in society by means of physical force rather than through rational thought.

Although Wilma is more strong willed and independent than most of the other characters in *The Stone Mattress*, she remains hindered by her age because she is slowly going blind. She suffers greatly from this disability, and her case mirrors the cases of several other women who are recognized by Barbara Frey Waxman in her book *From Hearth to the Open Road: A Feminist Study of Aging in Contemporary Literature*. Waxman notes that, “For some (elderly) the deterioration suffered is largely physical, and if they have keen minds, their deterioration and



dependency evoke anxiety about the loss of dignity and identity” (137). Although Wilma is lucky to not also be suffering from mental loss, her luck is bittersweet because she is forced to endure a loss of identity which thus removes her power and status in any social hierarchy.

By creating a character with this disability, Atwood portrays a human who is noted by her peers as being oppressed by a physical entity rather than a socially constructed disability such as age or gender. However, when readers observe Wilma’s blindness, they are able to see and compare it with the hindrances of her age and gender. Although it is this blindness that actually weakens her, both Wilma and her readers are drawn to characterize her dependency as stemming from her age and gender.

We are drawn to make this conclusion because of Wilma’s casual comments remarking her relationship to those around her. She feels powerless and weak compared to Tobias, a man who is easily able to keep up with youthful society. Because he can do this, Wilma is in awe of him, and he becomes more real to her due to his understanding of youthful society: “It startles Wilma whenever Tobias uses slang words like cop. They don’t go with his standard verbal ensemble, which is much more pressed and deliberate... Now that she can no longer fool around on the Internet, Wilma has lost track of how people talk. Real people, younger people” (195). If we examine this statement through a Postmodern lens, we can clearly see that Wilma’s perception of her role in society depends on her definitions and conceptualizations of the world around her (Browne, 88). Because she defines reality as thriving in youth, it is no wonder that she sees herself as fading away and lacking any meaning in her life. We can see that Wilma is suffering from what de Beauvoir notes as being the “older woman’s tragedy” in which she realizes that she is useless (de Beauvoir, 633) and must therefore compensate for her inaction and overcome her lack of existence by feeding on the company of others (de Beauvoir, 634).

The interesting aspect of Wilma is that, despite the fact that she feels nearly nonexistent, when death is at bay, Wilma chooses to flee it. Although she feels useless and loathes that she has to rely on others in order to feel real, she still chooses to continue living. Our human desires transcend the conformities such as age and gender, and it is these desires that serve the baseline of human existence. Before we care about the effects of our age or gender, we first care to consider the fact that we exist. Although Wilma is close to losing this sense of existence, her choice to flee the nursing home and fight to live reveals that this desire is what helps us survive this life.

That being said, while Wilma is driven by her desire to continue existing, no matter her age or gender, that does not make her immune to the weaknesses caused by these two factors. As Wilma and Tobias escape the nursing home, Wilma is traumatized by a horrifying thought. She imagines that Tobias is making the whole scenario up and that he is actually dragging her out to the woods to kill her. Because she can barely see, this is a reasonable supposition, and it would have been plausible (in her mind, that is) that he could have faked the attack on the home. Her fear of being easily manipulated due to her blindness is understandable, which is why her blindness also gives her a tangible reason for society to accept the legitimacy of this fear.

Due to her age and gender, it is not hard to imagine her being taken advantage of or talked down to because, as a woman, she has spent her whole life competing against the powers of masculinity. While at one point she was young enough that her age could have been used to her advantage, this is currently no longer the case, and it is no wonder that she would feel as if she was a weaker member of the social hierarchy. However, to voice these feelings would be unacceptable; to say that she was feeling oppressed because of her age and gender would only draw in denials and mediocre reassurance that it was all in her head.

These feelings of oppression are mirrored in the side effects of her blindness. The syndrome she is experiencing, Charles Bonnet's syndrome, causes her to see tiny people walking around in her main line of vision. While she can only see reality in her peripherals, she in turn sees imaginary people dancing in the center of her gaze where reality is supposed to exist. Try as she may, Wilma cannot interact with these people. Whether she reaches out to touch them or tries speaking to them, they never acknowledge her. Just as she fails to grasp these intangible characters, so too does she fail to grasp the intangible concept of gender and age discrimination.

Because of her blindness, it is only Wilma who can see these people, and the same applies in the case of discrimination. The only people who can truly see it are the people suffering from it. When Wilma's doctor points out that what she sees is a normal side effect of her blindness, his statements mirror the fact that experts are frequently required to tell the elderly that the discrimination that they may feel from their age is a reasonable side effect, but that it must not be taken seriously. Wilma's age and gender are tangible concepts, but the world's treatment of her because of these concepts is not, which is why, just as she cannot touch the tiny people, she also cannot touch the discrimination that touches her and those who are similar to her. Because those in power see Wilma's fear of being discriminated as just another side effect, it is unacceptable for Wilma to express any fear of being oppressed by it.

The mob of young people who storm the nursing home and threaten to burn it down serve as the physical manifestation of Wilma's fears. These people voice Wilma's doubts, advocating that the elderly are not worthy to continue living because they serve no purpose to society. They try to make the claim that, because they do not serve society, their existence is not permissible. Therefore, when Wilma is able to escape the fire and thus escapes discrimination despite her age and gender, she demonstrates that she does in fact have the power to reclaim her identity as a

human being who deserves to live and that her existence is not rooted in her ability to serve society. Unfortunately, despite the fact that Wilma and Tobias manage to escape the burning anger of the younger generation, they are forced to recognize that they will still need to continue their battle for survival. Simone de Beauvoir points out that, “For those who do not choose to go under, being old means fighting against age. That is the harsh new aspect of their condition: living can no longer be taken for granted” (304). Now that they established they want to continue surviving, they must be prepared to fight.

Although the ending of Wilma’s tale is bittersweet, we see that, through her resilience, she has established a presence, albeit a weak one, in the social hierarchy. She escaped the generalized elderly population living in the nursing home, and because of this, she rediscovered her identity, not as an elderly woman, but as a human being. It is in this discovery that Atwood reminds us that we must look beyond discriminatory factors in order to truly promote the existence of all humans. When we reach this ending, we cannot help but recognize that many of our everyday actions, big or small, potentially serve as forms of discrimination from which others feel the need to escape. Unless we recognize these actions, our future has the potential to exponentially draw upon these actions and yield a deadly means of discrimination.

## **Freedom:** **The result of embracing our future**

While Atwood’s works tend to focus on the darker potential of the future, she also manages to reveal that there is hope for those who are aging. For readers who look closely, they discover that, when Atwood’s characters let go of their pasts and instead embrace their present selves, they are able to find peace. By writing this way, Atwood embodies the idea that one is only able to embrace one’s self if one accepts the present and does not cling to a past identity.

In the tale “Alphinland,” Constance discovers that, in order to live peacefully, she must stand up to her dead husband and reject his oppressive tendencies. When Constance steps back from her escape into her past, she begins to realize that Ewan, or any of the men in her life for that matter, never truly had control over her. After stepping away from Ewan’s influence and escaping into her world of Alphinland, a world in which she recognizes that she has power, she embraces the power she had all along. In Alphinland, Constance is able to embrace her true self. By stepping out of her past and instead living in her present, Constance is finally able to exist in peace.

Constance’s story reveals that our social hierarchies are mental constructs that ensnare their citizens into submission and that the constructs are able to function thanks to the ready support of these citizens. Constance had spent her whole life serving the men around her, and it was not until they disappeared that she realized that it was she who had the power over them all along. With this first story, Atwood created a character that introduces the theme of doubling through her reflection of her past and her current state of newfound independence. By introducing this theme, Atwood points out the unexpected power that arises in the aging individual who chooses to embrace her new identity rather than cling to her younger self.

Jorrie is another character who eventually finds peace in her present by rejecting her past. In “Dark Lady,” we discover that Jorrie has an interesting obsession: death. For Jorrie, death is what determines old age, and because she is not dead, she is therefore not old. Never mind the fact that she is surrounded by people of her own age who are dying of old age. In Jorrie’s case, she makes herself distinct from these other people and further regresses into her own self-image. de Beauvoir comments on these types of actions, noting that, “When one is faced with people of the same age as oneself, one is tempted to say ‘I belong to a different category’, because one sees

them only from the outside and does not credit them with the same feelings that are possessed by that unique being which each man is for himself” (294). Because Jorrie categorizes herself as being different from those who are her age, she is able to find pleasure in attending funerals and looks forward to them with glee.

In this story, Jorrie is especially excited for a funeral because it happens to be for Gavin, the man who tormented both her and Constance. At the funeral, Jorrie and Constance come face to face for the first time since Constance had caught Gavin cheating on her with Jorrie. Their encounter at the funeral is interesting because instead of blaming the man who caused them misery, they stand face to face and compare themselves to each other. When Jorrie first sees Constance Starr, she can't help but think, “As the Starr star has risen, so has Jorrie's own star faded” (80). Rather than laugh over her ex-lover's grave after he abandoned her, she instead looks longingly at the woman who was her ex-lover's first love. Because of Gavin's power over Jorrie, she was unable to be mad at him. Driven by a society that encourages female competition, she instead sought to harass the woman who had also been hurt by him. Constance reflected these same feelings as she recalls how she condemned Jorrie's character to be stung by bees every hour of every day in the prison of her books. Like Jorrie, Constance felt driven to blame her “competition” rather than the man who deceived her.

In the conclusion of this story, Atwood demonstrates the power of reconciliation by means of recognizing what is real. The characters are able to do this when they pause to reconcile with and let go of their pasts. Both Jorrie and Constance became trapped in a downward spiral of constant obsession with their youthful selves. By doing this, they were unable to escape the mindset that required them to submit to the men in their lives. Therefore,

they could only express their hurt and anger through hatred of someone on their own level in the social hierarchy, namely each other.

They each blamed the other woman for her suffering, and it was this blame that kept them trapped in a youthful mindset that prevented them from coming to terms with their ages. Constance says, “We live in two places... There isn’t any past in Alphinland, There isn’t any time. But there is time here, where we are now. We still have a little time left” (92). It is in this statement that Constance reveals that it was their obsessions with hating each other that prevented them from both progressing into the future and recognizing that aging does not need to be a painful experience filled with regret. Because they were trapped in their pasts, they were unable to find peace in their futures.

Just as Constance and Jorrie were able to find peace, so do the characters Charis, Roz, and Tony in the tale “I Dream of Zenia with a Bright Red Tooth.” In this tale, the three women struggle with their feelings toward Zenia, a woman who lured men from each of them and thus wreaked havoc on their lives. Charis, the one of the three who was most hurt by, yet most forgiving of Zenia, nearly falls into the trap of her youthful self when she falls again for the man who left her for Zenia. However, when Charis’s dog attacks this man and castrates him, Charis becomes certain that Zenia is reincarnated in her dog and that she is trying to warn her to avoid the masculine power that hurt her in her youth.

While the three women were justified in their anger against Zenia, they were so caught up in a patriarchal hierarchy that they did not place any blame on the men who left them in the first place. Because Charis reverted to her youthful mindset, she nearly re-immersed herself in the patriarchal hierarchy that caused her so much pain in the first place. When she saw her ex-boyfriend become emasculated, it was then that she was able to realize she must let go of the

pain of her past and instead empower herself with her present image. With this tale, Atwood makes the claim that female friendships have the power to outlast male hierarchies. It is the bonds amongst women that result in the most successful end-of-life scenarios, which is why, instead of pitting themselves against each other, they must reconcile with their pasts and recognize the masculine power that initially pitted them against each other.

Of all the tales in this collection, “The Stone Mattress” is the story which offers the greatest and most dramatic sense of reconciliation with and freedom from one’s past. The tale after which the collection is named is a story of a young-old woman named Verna who is obsessed with killing men. As a self-created widow, her desire to overpower men led her to flirt with, marry, and eventually kill three of her suitors. This story follows her and traces her thought process as she contemplates what it actually means to her to commit these murders.

In this tale, Verna introduces herself to her targets through a simple yet tantalizing definition of her name:

“Verna,” he says. “That’s a lovely name.”

“Old-fashioned,” she says. “From the Latin word for ‘spring.’ When everything springs to life again.” That line, so filled with promises of phallic renewal, had been effective in helping to secure her second husband (168).

This passage not only reveals her thought process, but also her thorough interpretation of men and of the process of aging as well. Just as she knows that women such as herself strive to preserve their beauty as a means of preserving their youth, she also realizes that older men are desperate to maintain their sexual vigor, which is why she plays off that desire when she flirts with them.



In this story, Verna embarks on a cruise meant to serve people of her age group, and although she vowed to give up killing, she can't resist the thought of practicing, if only to prove to herself that she can still do it. As she scans the crowd of men, she notes that she is looking for ones who cherish the belief that there is still some life to be lived and that they are not too old to enjoy it. Although this reveals further that she loathes men, we do not see her motive until Bob comes onto the scene.

When she first sees him, Verna cannot believe that this man has returned into her life. While he doesn't recognize her, she knows him the instant she encounters him. It is this man who inspired her hatred of men, which began back in high school. On the eve of her first prom, Bob asked her out, only to then rape her at the end of the night and leave her on the side of the road. Because of the socially constructed assumptions of human nature – most notably, of male biology and its socially sanctioned tendencies (Browne, 108) – it was Verna who was blamed for the whole ordeal. To make matters more difficult for her, when she found out she was pregnant, she was sent to a convent to wait out the pregnancy and then give up the baby for adoption when it was finally born.

One reason why we as readers legitimize Verna's hatred is because we can clearly see that Bob's actions destroyed her childhood. Children, no matter their gender, are able to be "autonomous individuals with a free future opening before them" (de Beauvoir, 671). However, when female children are thrust into adulthood, they become "servants or objects, imprisoned in the present... they are separated from the universe, doomed to immanence and repetition. They feel dispossessed" (de Beauvoir, 671). After Verna was raped, this was exactly what happened to her. She lost control of her body when Bob took it from her, and from there her body was subject to her mother's control and embarrassment as well as the nuns' domineering power. Because of

this loss of control, her body was used as a means of labor and reproduction, and she did not regain control until she took it from the first man that tried to claim it.

As Verna reflects on these memories, she also notes that the word “rape” would have never been used to describe this event. Her story reflects one that has recurred throughout the ages. de Beauvoir’s claim that “Woman’s powerlessness brought about her ruin because man apprehended her through a project of enrichment and expansion” (66) rings true to this story, for while Bob may not have been looking to impregnate her, he did achieve a glorification by having sex with her and then spreading the news throughout the town. While Verna is happy that young women have more rights now, she is rightly bitter that she was never able to gain closure. Therefore, when she decides that she must kill him, she takes the weakness of her youth and gender and transforms it into power gained from her age and experience:

Why should she be the only one to have suffered for that night? She’d been stupid, granted, but Bob had been vicious. And he’d gone scot-free, without consequences or remorse, whereas her entire life had been distorted. The Verna of the day before had died, and a different Verna had solidified in her place: stunted, twisted, mangled. It was Bob who’d taught her that only the strong can win, that weakness should be mercilessly exploited. It was Bob who’d turned her into – why not say the word? – a murderer (176).

Verna’s recollections of that night reveal how she became the murderess she is today. Her obsession with her ruined younger self established her narcissistic personality that empowered her to recreate her identity and create a new role for herself in society. As noted by Simone de Beauvoir, “If she [a woman] can put *herself* forward in her own desires, it is because since childhood she has seen herself as an object. Her education has encouraged her to alienate herself wholly in her body, puberty having revealed this body as passive and desirable” (668).

Despite Verna's mother's desires, Verna's education, i.e. her rape and the following torture of being locked up in a convent, only further established her recognition that she is an object of desire. Because she learned this, she had two paths she could have chosen: One would be to conform to the society that tormented her and seek out a husband who would take her for who she was. This is what her mother, and all of society, wanted for her. The second option, the one she chose, would be to embrace herself in a completely different sense and offer up her desirability to the *Other* that could only be satisfied through her reclamation of her body. In order to reclaim it, she had to first give it up to those who oppressed her.

Throughout the years, Verna has put aside the desires of her ego and has striven for the desires of the *Other*, a higher form of herself that emerged from her trauma. Because Verna was able to create this new self, she was able to relocate her position in society. She thrived as a widow and bathed in this new life, and as pointed out by de Beauvoir, "Every woman drowned in her reflection reigns over space and time, alone, sovereign; she has total rights over men, fortune, glory, and sensual pleasure" (669). Instead of wallowing in her past, Verna used it to empower herself and create a new identity that enabled her to relocate herself on the social hierarchy and thus reclaim her body for herself.

An interesting aspect of Verna's tactic of satisfying her *Other* is how poetic it is. The fact that her rapist's name is "Bob" generates an image of a common man. Thus, as we reflect on the generality of his name, we can see that, when Verna kills him, she not only kills her rapist, but also symbolically kills all of the "average Bobs" out in the world who raped innocent young girls like her and got away with it. Just as he lured her away from the dance so he could rape and then abandon her, so did she lure him away from the cruise into a cave – a symbolic image of the female anatomy – where she could kill him.

The moment before Verna kills him, she reminds him of who she is. At this revelation, Bob smirks, and it is in this smirk that Verna finds her final justification for murdering him. Remaining true to his character, he shows no remorse. Because they aren't around others, he has no reason to behave as he wouldn't – namely as someone who regrets his past actions – so he doesn't. We as readers have no idea what would have happened had he shown remorse, yet we do not care. Just as Verna's image was destroyed when he raped her and ruined her reputation, his face was physically destroyed when she slammed the stone up into his lower jaw and then repeatedly dropped it onto his face. The youthful Verna died when he raped her, which is why he in turn needed to die before he could age any longer.

This story provides hope for the future, not because Verna killed her rapist, but because she was able to “kill” the image of herself that had been constructed by society. Verna murdered her previous husbands because she was unable to bear what Bob did to her. Bob stood for the society that marginalized and tormented her, and because she did not realize this until she saw him again, she remained a slave to societal expectations even when she killed her other two husbands. By killing the embodiment of societal oppression, Verna rejected societal norms and created a new, true image of herself, thus freeing herself from societal expectations.

As this story comes to a conclusion, we come to realize that perhaps, old age gives us the opportunity to come back to life. It is this story that vitalizes the idea that old age isn't necessarily a time for slowing down and weakening, but rather a time of self-fulfillment and self-empowerment, a time in which we can finally face our pasts and destroy the aspects of our younger selves that once weakened us.

## Conclusion

In her work *The Stone Mattress*, Margaret Atwood fills a gap in modern literature by addressing the intersection between age and gender. Through her stories, Atwood is able to illustrate the connection between age and gender and thus encourages her readers to not only reconsider how they interact with elderly populations, but also to rethink how they will face their own journey to old age. Because aging is an experience that is easy for young people to ignore, they fail to recognize how their casual thoughts, words, and actions form a gendered social hierarchy that marginalizes those who are categorized as being “elderly.” By writing from the elderly perspective, Atwood creates a discourse that forces us to recognize the intersection between age and gender and how it influences westernized societal norms.

As we have seen, age and gender are both independent and interdependent factors that create marginalized populations that are ill equipped to face old age. When examining de Beauvoir’s argument, we clearly see that her emphasis that “a woman is made, not born” directly ties in to her claims about *elderly* women. Just as women are shaped by society, so are the elderly. In order to fit in with society, they must yearn for the youths they once had while simultaneously acting the “role” of an elderly person, a role constructed by the society of which they were once part. Wilińska echoes this argument, noting that as women age, they are expected to always be women, and that the gender order is strengthened as they age because they are constantly held to new standards as roles such as ‘doting grandmother’ or ‘miserly pensioner’ are provided to them (Wilińska, 890). By recognizing this, we see that old age is not an identity; instead, it is yet another social construct that is used to marginalize people and thus preventing them from acting true to their identities.

It is crucial to be aware of these implications because, should we fail to address them now, we will then discover too late the deep-rooted harms they bring about in our society. By encouraging a patriarchal culture that glorifies youth, we inevitably lay the groundwork for a culture that will one day repress us when we are no longer young. With the help of Atwood's speculative fiction, we can see that the terrifying future which she imagines has the potential to one day be the reality that could exist should we continue to remain naïve to the impact of the intersecting discourses of age and gender.

While Atwood uses her works to portray the suffering that results from the failure to face old age and the potential horrors it could lead to, she also uses her stories to remind us that there is hope for our futures. We must note this because it serves as the groundwork for how we can change our mindsets towards gender and age and thus build the foundation of a new, happier future for ourselves. As we saw in her stories, the characters who were able to do this found peace with themselves as well as a desire to continue living. By embracing old age and rejecting the patriarchal glorification of youth, we can create a society that adapts more readily to old age and thus encourages happiness in old age.

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