Roald Dahl’s eerie landlady: A macabre tale of aging

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Roald Dahl’s adult short story ‘The Landlady’ through the lens of age studies and the horror genre. It explores how different symbolic and gothic textual elements contribute to the narrative of decline and the negative notion of later life. Special attention is given to female aging and dementia, which is presented as a horrifying ‘silent killer’ embodied in the figure of a witch. In the story, older age is portrayed as a source of horror and evokes a fear of aging that is linked to gradual bodily, mental, and social decline. Although Dahl’s tale provides some hints that aging can be empowering and liberating for older women, the portrayal of the landlady proves that older age is enshrined in negative and even grotesque perceptions of later life. The use of horror helps further expose the individual and societal fears of growing older and the challenges of aging. The sardonic and twisted ending of the story also reveals the complexities of both growing up and growing older. Shedding light on Dahl’s dark narrative from the perspective of age studies offers new vantage points from which to review the author’s literary legacy and rethink the representations of aging in popular literature. Ultimately, the article adds to interdisciplinary approaches to older age and shows how humanities-based perspectives can contribute to expanding research into aging and later life.

Introduction

Getting older is one of the biggest contemporary fears or ‘gerontophobia’ and it is often associated with unease and anxieties (DeFalco, 2010; Woodward, 1991). Although there is increasing visibility of older adults on a global scale, old age continues to be stereotyped and gendered in contemporary western culture. During the last decades, there has been noticeable growth and attention given to the dynamics of aging from interdisciplinary approaches that go beyond the traditional field of gerontology. Age scholars have argued that gerontology needed cultural and humanities-related perspectives in order to enrich and expand gerontological knowledge and scientific approaches to later life, which cannot be measured or understood by empirical research alone (Barry & Vibe Skagen, 2020; Casado Gual, Domínguez Rué, & Worsfold, 2016; Gullotte, 2004; Hepworth, 2000; Oró-Piquerás & Falcus, 2018). The humanities have made important contributions by shaping the research agenda on older age and bringing cross-disciplinary exchanges between these fields of study with an aim to better comprehend the realities of aging (Barry & Vibe Skagen, 2020; Casado Gual et al., 2016; de Medeiros, 2016; Falcus, 2016; Oró-Piqueràs & Falcus, 2018; Zeilig, 2011).

However, even though gerontological scholarship had been in place for decades before the emergence of age studies and had greatly contributed to unmasking the dynamics of aging and improving the quality of older people’s lives through interdisciplinary research, practice, and the application of knowledge about aging, it has been rather reluctant to recognize contributions from the humanities (Randall, 2013). Nevertheless, there is now an increasing growth of studies incorporating gerontology and humanities-based approaches to aging that provide us with important tools for interpreting aging and giving voice to the often underrepresented and tabooed aspects of later years (Barry & Vibe Skagen, 2020; Casado Gual et al., 2016; Falcus, 2016; Zeilig, 2011). Age scholars argue that literature, culture, and the arts not only mirror the established notions of old age, but can also reshape preconditioned beliefs about aging and even create different narratives about later life (Oró-Piqueràs, 2016). Marshall states that literature has the power to “mirror culture, reinforce it, resist it, or do a combination of those things” (2015: 3). Similarly, Hepworth highlights that “gerontologists occasionally draw on fiction to illustrate the findings of empirical research or to interweave gerontology and fiction in order to enhance our understanding of aging” (2000: 3). Relatedly, literature and character identification permit the readers to sympathize with specific characters and even experience some degree of ‘narrative empathy’ that may act as a stimulus to emotional responsiveness and as a

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consciousness-raising mechanism (Keen, 2007). And yet, there is not one specific research method or heuristic technique in literary studies of aging, as there is not one single experience of aging (Zeilig, 2011). A literary approach does not give us clear answers to questions about old age, but rather helps reveal what aging implies socioculturally, politically, and individually from a life course perspective (Falcus, 2016; Kriebneregg, 2015; Zeilig, 2011). According to Orio-Piqueras, “literary representations of the aging process and old age can therefore portray and create understanding of the intricacies of aging as a complex and multifaceted experience within the life course, encouraging the reader to reconsider stereotypes and spare images of old age” (2016: 194). Age studies approaches to literature can provoke further investigation and contribute to unmasking the public blindness to old age by exposing many age-related challenges and intricacies.

This article contributes to interdisciplinary approaches to aging and shows how humanities-based perspectives can illuminate research into aging, ageism, and the socioculturally constructed images of later life. By merging literary age studies and the horror genre, this study focuses on well-known British writer Roald Dahl’s short story ‘The Landlady,’ first published in The New Yorker and later reprinted in the anthology Kiss Kiss (1960). It pays special attention to female aging and cognitive impairment, which is represented as the ghastly and horrifying ‘silent killer’ embodied in a figure that resembles a witch. Dahl’s narrative also reminds us that gender plays a crucial role in creating dominant master narratives of aging and cultural images of later life in popular cultural expressions (de Medeiros, 2016; DeFalco, 2010). Additionally, the tale demonstrates how different macabre and symbolic elements reinforce the stereotypical images of aging and older women. In Dahl’s work, horror is employed to evoke a fear of aging that is linked to gradual bodily, mental, and social decline. In fact, it can be said that old age per se is positioned as a source of horror and disgust. The author offers a twisted, grotesque, and slightly humorous ending that reveals the dynamics of aging, cognitive and bodily decline, and sexual desire, as well as the challenges of stepping into cruel adulthood, which is characteristic of Dahl’s writings.

Roald Dahl, the Master of Horror

Roald Dahl is, without a doubt, one of the most internationally successful and acclaimed masters of short stories for children and adults. His adult short story collections Someone Like You (1953), Kiss, Kiss (1960), and Switch Bitch (1974) were best-sellers in a market that was dominated by novels and autobiographies. Dahl’s work was translated into many languages worldwide, making him a celebrity figure (Mehni, 2014; Warren, 1988). The writer’s famous short story ‘The Landlady,’ which is the focus of this study, also resembles Ernest Bloch’s novel Psycho (1959), which was adapted into Alfred Hitchcock’s pivotal 1960 film of the same name (Mehni, 2014). Even though Dahl is never included in the list of Gothic writers, except for his children stories, which are commonly defined as gothic, his adult tales cannot be easily categorized, and are often described as macabre, supernatural, uncanny, bizarre, mad, and threatening the social order (Burger, 2002; Mehni, 2014; Sohier, 2011; Van Haegenborgh, 2015; West, 1990, 1992). His adult short stories contain explicit savage and fantasy elements, perversive and unpredictable deaths, intense insanity of his characters, and ironic unexpected endings. Dahl’s most popular short stories fuse different stylistic, thematic, and formal elements that reflect “a vivid eye for detail, an elegance of writing and a real virtuosity in plotting” that are derived from the American short story tradition initiated by Edgar Allan Poe, O. Henry, and Ernest Hemingway (Mehni, 2014: 2–3; Van Haegenborgh, 2015).

Ghastly, violent, grotesque, and mysterious features in Dahl’s suspense fiction are used to project the deepest fears and taboos that society tends to mask or ignore. At the same time, gothic elements and settings make the readers question reality in ways that realistic or mimetic fiction could not do (Fabrizi, 2016, 2018). While fantasy tends to provide escape from the mundane existence, horror offers a more profound analysis of the unfamiliar and can even lead to catharsis (Fabrizi, 2018). The creation of an anxiety-and-suspense filled atmosphere, fused with exaggeration and mystery, guides the readers towards a climactic effect that is aimed to evoke a feeling of unease, and to question conventional reality and the dark side of humanity (Van Haegenborgh, 2015: 65). Relatedly, horror texts and subversive meanings allow for “a safe exploration of the feelings of fear and danger” and offer a possibility “to wallow in the forbidden—to take joy in destruction and the normally unacceptable or unthinkable” (Brock-Servais, 2018: 18). Such narratives also represent not only individual but also societal concerns of repressed, marginalized, or disadvantaged individuals, and show the limits of humanity (Clemens, 1999). Contrary to common belief, horror is not aimed at scaring the readers, but rather at moving them out of their comfort zones and exposing real-world issues and individual struggles (Brock-Servais, 2018; Ostenson, 2018). As Brock-Servais argues, supernatural and scary figures in horror literature often represent “mindless conformity, a fear of contagion or pandemic, anxiety concerning the underclass (the masses), the loss of identity, or a critique of consumerism” (2018: 23). Horror literature functions as a mirror that reflects our inner desires and fears by providing spaces to critically rethink our understanding of the world and human nature.

Although Dahl’s fiction, especially his children’s literature, has been under a great deal of scrutiny and received more acclaim than criticism (Cameron, 1972, 1973; Mehni, 2014; Warren, 1988; West, 1992), his adult stories did not receive much attention. Moreover, his adult fiction has not been approached through the lens of age studies, which, as will be shown, leads to novel readings and interpretations of his writings and fills a certain research gap. ‘The Landlady’ is of particular interest because it features the confrontation of two phases in life: youth and older age. The main characters, an aging lady and a young man, are staged in a demonic setting charged with perverse sexual tension and a mysterious atmosphere. In the story, horror serves as a means to empower the older character and challenge the conventional notions of old age as a stage of frailty, asexuality, and dependence (Gullette, 2004).

Yet, the landlady’s emancipation is enshrined in irrationality, forgetfulness, and grotesqueness, reinforcing the stereotypical image of older women as witches, crones, female monsters, or women gone wild (Greer, 1991). Dahl’s representation of aging is controversial and further underpins the negative notions of later life that emphasize contemporary fears of old age, bodily decay, and, especially, cognitive decline. Nevertheless, revisiting the tale in the light of age studies within the genre of short horror stories offers new vantage points from which to review the author’s literary legacy and rethink the representations of aging in popular literature. The following section briefly describes the plot of the story and examines Dahl’s tale from two opposing perspectives: the narrative of decline (Gullette, 2004) and the narrative of coming-of-age or the Bildungsroman, which reveal the complexities of both growing older and growing up.

The narratives of growing up and growing older

Roald Dahl begins his sinister short story by depicting a young man, Billy Weaver, who travels alone in search of work, and is extremely surprised when the boarding house seems like a cozy and inviting place, decorated with yellow chrysanthemums, — flowers often used in funerals in many parts of Europe. As the boy lingers outside, the door is suddenly opened by a woman who offers him a cheap price for lodgings (Dahl, 2004: e12). Although she is between 45 and 50 years old, which is not considered old in contemporary society, we only see her through the focalization of a young man to whom anyone over 40 might seem quite old. Billy Weaver is informed that there have only been two previous lodgers. His adult stories did not receive much attention. Moreover, his adult fiction has not been approached through the lens of age studies, which, as will be shown, leads to novel readings and interpretations of his writings and fills a certain research gap. ‘The Landlady’ is of particular interest because it features the confrontation of two phases in life: youth and older age. The main characters, an aging lady and a young man, are staged in a demonic setting charged with perverse sexual tension and a mysterious atmosphere. In the story, horror serves as a means to empower the older character and challenge the conventional notions of old age as a stage of frailty, asexuality, and dependence (Gullette, 2004).

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The narratives of growing up and growing older

Roald Dahl begins his sinister short story by depicting a young man, Billy Weaver, who travels alone in search of work, and is extremely excited about the new opportunities that await him. As he walks through the unfamiliar city of Bath in miserable and “deadly cold” weather, he decides to lodge in a charming B&B hotel (Dahl, 2004: e10). The boarding house seems like a cozy and inviting place, decorated with yellow chrysanthemums, — flowers often used in funerals in many parts of Europe. As the boy lingers outside, the door is suddenly opened by a “terribly nice” woman who offers him a cheap price for lodgings (Dahl, 2004: e12). Although she is between 45 and 50 years old, which is not considered old in contemporary society, we only see her through the focalization of a young man to whom anyone over 40 might seem quite old. Billy Weaver is informed that there have only been two previous guests – Mr. Christopher Mulholland and Mr. Gregory W. Temple –, who,
apparently, have never left the hotel. The boy realizes that he has seen their names in a newspaper mentioning their odd disappearance. Yet, he is not suspicious and is even amused by the lady’s strange behavior. In fact, the boy decides that she is not harmful but rather “a kind and generous soul” (Dahl, 2004: e14). The landlady serves her new guest a cup of tea and, by scrutinizing his body, compliments him on his youthful looks and his unblemished body. She also reveals that she is a skilled taxidermist and has stuffed her dead pets, a dachshund and a parrot, which Billy Weaver thought to be alive. At this very moment, the boy realizes that his tea tastes of bitter almonds and inquires of the landlady if there have been any other guests except for the two visitors, to which she smilingly replies: “No, my dear” […]. Only you” (Dahl, 2004: e18). Although Dahl leaves an open ending, the readers are given enough hints to understand that Billy Weaver’s fate will be that of the stuffed pets and the previous guests.

A critical reading of Dahl’s horror tale from the lens of the coming-of-age narrative or a Bildungsroman reveals that the stereotypical images of adolescence are being challenged and distorted in the story. The writer places Billy Weaver in the liminal zone of blissful adolescence and twists the conventional narrative of growing up, which shows a young person seeking to establish his own identity through a series of challenges and obstacles. However, the young protagonist, who is searching for novel opportunities in a new city, never reaches the desired adulthood and maturity as he is paused on the threshold of this transition. The turning point or illuminating moment in the coming-of-age narratives, which often brings adult understanding of the world, is culminated with Billy’s death. The story ends with an unexpected, merciless, and sardonic culmination, which is typical of many Dahl’s writings (Raphael, 1991). In the text, a more mature version of the self is never achieved as the young protagonist is consumed by his own naivety and briskly youthful behavior, which is reiterated many times in the story:

Billy was seventeen years old. [...] He walked briskly down the street. He was trying to do everything briskly these days. Briskness, he had decided, was the one common characteristic of all successful businessmen (Dahl, 2004: e10).

Soifer observes that the frequent use of the word ‘briskness’ in the story hides the word ‘risk’ – briskness –, which underpins the whole narrative and sets the stage for sinister events to happen (2011: 4). Although Billy Weaver experiences a slight inner conflict, typical of every Bildungsroman, when he questions the eerie occurrences in the B&B hotel and a strange behavior of the lady, he is driven by his ingenuous and blinding trust. The heroine, though suspicious at times, projects an archetypical image of a kind, caring, and loving older lady or grandmother that is common in fairy tales (Henneberg, 2010). In the text, a more mature version of the self is never achieved as the young protagonist is consumed by his own naivety and briskly youthful behavior, which is reiterated many times in the story:

In Dahl’s story, the landlady embodies all of these types to some extent – she comes across as a gentle and caring grandmother in the eyes of Billy, but the story reveals that she is actually wicked and insane. The landlady’s evil actions may suggest her refusal to embody the grandmother figure, the fairy godmother, or the unconditional caregiver, as represented in many fairy tales (Henneberg, 2010). The landlady does not want to reduce her life to being there for others and denying her personal interests. However, older women are made visible and socially acceptable only as long as they support and serve others. The ongoing emphasis on functionality, productivity, and active lifestyles, as represented in the discourse of successful aging, spread the idea that being useful equates to being valued (Calasanti, Slevin, & King, 2006). Age scholar Paul Higgs (2021) notes that society judges our worth based on how much and what we contribute to societal betterment – if we are not useful, we are ‘deemed not to be full members of society’. Research also shows that grandparenting roles and care-related duties have significantly increased, making older women even more needed in intergenerational family relationships. However, although some women may enjoy caretaking duties, others may feel obliged to confine themselves to new roles and obligations, which limits their freedom in later life (Calasanti et al., 2006). Moreover, it is often assumed that women are more suitable than men for caretaking roles because they are ‘naturally’ inclined to serve and provide care, which shows the gendered nature of aging and the feminization of carework (Twigg, 2000). Twigg explains that such assumptions stem from motherhood and nurturance, and therefore, care is generalized as a female activity.

The horror narrative also points to persisting structural inequalities, social exclusion, and segregation, which are especially prominent in aging women (Calasanti & Slevin, 2003; Silver, 2003). Although the gap between older men and women seems to be closing now (WHO, 2021), older women still outnumber men and are more exposed to a double categorization and structural inequalities (Sontag, 1972). They are also more subject to social exclusion and marginalization, housing and economic problems, and isolation (Dahlberg, McKee, Fritzell, Heap, & Lennartsson, 2021; Nerenberg, 2002). As Nerenberg states, “discrimination and disadvantage associated with both gender and age combine to compromise older women’s ability to achieve or maintain self-sufficiency and render them more likely to be poor and/or dependent” (2002: 4). Since many older women outlive men, they are also more likely to end up living alone, which often leads to loneliness, the loss of connection to their local communities, poor health and misery, and the lack of civic participation (Dahlberg et al., 2020; Lennartsson & Lundberg, 2007). Although association between loneliness and age-related cognitive decline still remains unclear, studies reveal that diminished in-person encounters and isolation contribute to anxiety, negative mental health, and a greater dementia risk (Lara et al., 2019; Susanty et al., 2022; Zhou, Wang, & Fang, 2018).

The landlady, who runs a B&B hotel alone to sustain herself, reminds the readers not only of unequal structural and gender-based inequalities, old-age loneliness, and social exclusion, but also of the gradual cognitive decline. The fact that she remains nameless throughout the whole story may also be read as the epitomization of the abject and grotesque older age, invisibility of older women, and forgetfulness. One of greatest fears of old age par excellence in contemporary society is the fear of dementia, which is often defined as a ‘silent killer’ that alters our perception of self, memory, and rationality, and turns people into unwanted beings (Brody, 2003; DeFalco, 2010; Zimmermann, 2017, 2020). In ‘The Landlady’, Dahl shows how forgetfulness operates as a grotesque demonic
possession that ignites the fear of aging and threatens the social order and a sense of personhood. The following section points to the representations of dementia in the literature and in Dahl’s story from the lens of age studies rather than linking it to the gerontological and biomedical understandings or models of cognitive decline.

The Contemporary ‘Silent Killer’

Dementia has become one of the biggest challenges during the last decades: “more than twenty-six million people suffer worldwide [...] and by the year 2050 this number is expected to triple” (Zimmermann, 2017: 3). Dementia and similar progressive neurodegenerative conditions put significant limitations on people’s social participation, obstruct individuals from making meaningful decisions, and render them dependent. The declining cognitive capacities are also wedded to anxiety, loneliness, the loss of agency, social status, personhood, and attractiveness (Beard, 2016; Beard, Knauss, & Moyer, 2009; DeFalco, 2010; Falcus & Sako, 2019; Gillear & Higgs, 2017; Zimmermann, 2017, 2020). As Gillear and Higgs contend, dementia “represents a malignant forgetfulness that causes people to lose their sense of who they are” and their place in society (2017: 232). Similarly, DeFalco states that “dementia presents a most extreme instance of ruptured selfhood,” which may also lead others to see people with dementia as strange and frightening (2010: 14). Moreover, this gradual neurodegenerative condition signals approaching death – “regardless of their age of onset, patients usually have five to ten years between diagnosis and death” (Zimmermann, 2017: 3).

Many cultural and artistic expressions portray people living with dementia as nonpersons, for they no longer display rational thinking and lose their competencies and skills (Brody, 2003; Hennelly, Cooney, Houghton, & O’Shea, 2021). A well-functioning mind and memory are seen as important aspects of subjectivity, but in advanced stages of dementia it is assumed that a sense of personhood is lost (Brody, 2003). In fact, age-related forms of dementia have come to be seen as the ‘illness of stigma’ that strip people of their humanity (Zimmermann, 2017, 2020). Relatedly, Behuniak (2011) argues that in the scholarly and popular literature on dementia, both Alzheimer’s disease and people who are diagnosed are often portrayed as zombies – as already dead –, which evokes disgust, fear, and terror. Comparing people with dementia with zombies further reinforces negative images of aging, and excludes and dehumanizes older people. As Behuniak states, there is “the easy slippage between monsters and people” who live with dementia that generates “emotional responses of disgust and fear” (2011: 72). The ethical issue becomes even more poignant and frightening taking into account that ‘zombies’ are already ordinary people, just like us, before old-age dementia took over (Behuniak, 2011: 75). Additionally, Behuniak (2011) observes that the fear of reaching old age is not so much wedded to the fear of death but rather to the fear of losing oneself and one’s mind while still alive.

In Dahl’s narrative, the landlady conjures up both pity and an image of a cruel and wicked person that has no empathy, making her resemble a zombie or the ‘other’ that threatens the social order and instills revulsion. She is also positioned in the mysterious threshold between the rational mind and irrational subconsciousness that is slowing gaining ground in the form of dementia. The heroine constantly forgets the names of her guests and Billy Weaver’s surname. Therefore, she asks the boy to make sure that he has written his name in the guest book:

‘You did sign the book, didn’t you?’
‘Oh, yes.’
‘That’s good. Because later on, if I happen to forget what you were called, then I can always come down here and look it up. I still do that almost every day with Mr Mulholland and Mr… Mr…’ (Dahl, 2004: e18).

Soher argues that “writing down names helps the memory of the uncanny woman, but the written names might not be recalled at all as madness and monstrosity gain ground” (2011: 6). As he further observes, signing the book and putting one’s name is “the equivalent of a first step, the first graph, into the world of death” (Soher, 2011: 6–7). Forgetfulness is linked to crossing the limits of life and death, and brings us closer to the limits of humanity (Van Haegenborgh, 2015; Zeilig, 2013) and irrationality. DeFalco (2010) also contends that dementia is related to the grotesque, as it represents the strange and repressed otherness of older age, which calls to mind Freud’s idea of the uncanny.

According to Freud, the feeling of uncanniness (”unheimlich”) refers to something unfamiliar and fearful, but, at the same time, something already known but hidden deep inside us. It is related to a sense of being at odds with ourselves and trespassing the boundaries between familiar and unknown spaces. Uncanniness also represents the fragmented duality of mind that destabilizes one’s personhood and identity. It becomes a frightening position of the unstable and disoriented self that is wandering between the past and the present. Constant forgetting, as DeFalco explains, is linked to the uncanny obliviousness: “we do not know what we have forgotten [...], yet we know that we have forgotten” (2010: 56). The landlady’s dementia and her shifting, ruptured, and contradictory thoughts disturb her sense of personhood that is destabilized by the familiar and yet unknown process of aging and loneliness. DeFalco also argues that the uncanny feeling is closely bound to a sense of otherness and temporality that haunts the declining body, which reminds us of our mortality and impermanence. Aging and older age provide “fertile ground for explorations of the uncanniness of self since the inexorability of time challenges any belief in a consistent and stable self” (DeFalco, 2010: 9). As DeFalco succinctly puts it, getting older “is an experience of, or more often a confrontation with, the uncanniness that is always within us; old age simply represents a new awareness of pre-existing strangeness” (2010: 12) that manifests itself through the oddness of temporal human existence.

Dahl’s depiction of the lonely eerie lady that shows signs of dementia signals negative notions of forgetfulness, and shows how cultural narratives and popular culture reinforce and disseminate the images of dementia as a horror narrative, often embodied in the female figure. In her study of dementia and care in Canadian fiction from a cultural and historical perspective, Goldman argues that “fiction, more than medicine, is responsible for shaping our concepts of disease” (2017: 3). As the scholar explains, metaphors, symbols, and rhetorical techniques used in cultural narratives influence popular and scientific models and understandings of aging and disease, and shape our social imaginaries about cognitive decline. Goldman (2017) also points out that dementia narratives have shifted from the solace-offering elegiac modes of storytelling of the 19th century into apocalyptic narratives that portray dementia through horror stories that often feature monstrous otherness, and position age-related illnesses as immoral, evil, and dreadful. Moreover, dementia, which was socially acceptable as a natural part of aging, has been replaced with its construction as pathology in clinical and biomedical terms, and, thus, called for research and pharmaceutical interventions (Zeilig, 2013). As Zeilig states, “the term dementia has itself become a metaphor for wider social ills” (2013: 258). Additionally, dementia has often been in juxtaposition with the female disease of insanity or hysteria, which again shows that aging and age-related illnesses are gendered and socially constructed. This ‘master illness,’ as Goldman (2017) calls it, resembles a gothic monster or a zombie (Behuniak, 2011) that disrupts the social order and individual identity, which, in Dahl’s narrative, is exemplified in the character of the landlady.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that when Dahl published his work in 1960, popular cultural discourse, based on age-related bedside-scientific research, already started linking growing older and dementia with the images of loss, degeneration, and decline. Since research was mainly focused on fears about the aging population and increasing old-age poverty in the milieu of the welfare state and post-war prosperity, older adults come to be viewed negatively and denied their individuality (Zimmermann, 2020). Sociocultural constructs and the language of medical science alter our perceptions of later life, which are later echoed in wider cultural stories, literature, and our everyday actions (Zeilig,
2013: 260). Such notions might also have influenced Dahl’s depiction of aging and age-related cognitive decline as fearful, grotesque, and uncanny. However, while dementia disempowers the female protagonist by slowly taking away her rational thinking, she gains temporal and imaginary authority by turning to evil acts that make her resemble the witch who rebels against societal expectations and norms. The Witch: Revenge, Sexuality, and Eternal Youth

The eerie ending to Dahl’s work can be read as women’s revenge on sexism, ageism, dominant master discourses, and societal expectations. In reality, these themes are common in the author’s other short stories, such as ‘Lamb to the Slaughter’ (1954) or ‘The Way up to Heaven’ (1960). By killing a young man, the landlady seems to rebel against the gendered narrative of decline (Gullette, 2004) and double marginalization, which further exclude and ignore older women’s voices and their participation in society. Through the merciless and monstrous act of murder she might have been looking not only for revenge, but also for more visibility, which had been denied to her as a nameless aging woman. Juxtaposed with the witch, the lady represents socially excluded individuals and outcasts that live on the fringes of society. In fact, the heroines is doubly marginalized because she is a woman who is growing older and lives with dementia. As Zeilig contends, “to be both older and mentally ill is to be doubly marginalized. An older person with dementia is at the extreme edge of mainstream society, which remains stubbornly youth oriented’” (2013: 162). Driven by a feeling of anger, loneliness, and impotence, the heroine uses violence as a means to make herself more powerful and visible, and threatens the status quo. The use of horror elements in the story also allows for the archetypical witch figure to re-emerge freely and demonstrate her power and skills. In fact, it is common in horror literature to portray the figure of a witch, which, in popular culture and folklore, represents malevolent forces, the murder of children and young adults, and the use of poison and potions to kill or curse people (Hutton, 2017).

Crystallized during the Early Modern period in Europe, the image of the witch continues to embody the eeriness of the unknown, fearful, or unreasonable. Actually, representations of dementia in literature sometimes link it to witchcraft and supernatural acts because both the phenomenology of dementia and magical powers relate to danger and irrationality (Zeilig, 2013). Witches have a distinguished history in western memory, which grants them a special position in society that evokes respect mingled with fear (Greer, 1991). Moreover, the witch very often functions as a scapegoat in society at a time when a sound explanation to strange phenomena or occurrences cannot be given, which makes her the ‘other’ or the outsider. The fact that witches do not adhere to any of the institutionalized religions also positions them in a category of rebels who reject prevailing moral codes and conventional standards, and go against established rules and regulations. However, the witch also continues to denote an ambiguous and conflicting character that not only subverts the status quo and challenges misogynist symbols, but also proves problematic for feminism and age studies. It is not clear whether the witch figure empowers (older) women or hints at patriarchal fears about female power (Berenstein, 1990; Germaine Buckley, 2019). As Germaine Buckley argues, “[w]itches as monstrous older women harbouor an unnatural desire for power is one facet of a Western ideology that situates women as outsiders to power’ that has been represented as illegitimate and excluding since classical antiquity (2019: 29).

The identification of the lady with the witch figure also points to sexual transgressions, primal desires, and a relationship with evil forces or the Devil, as documented in many treatises on witchcraft and witch-hunts, such as the Malles Maleficarum (1486). Even if the sexual desire of the landlady is not explicit, the readers can find subtle hints that suggest that she indulges in necrophilic practices once she has successfully performed the art of taxidermy (and witchcraft) upon her young innocent victims. The heroine states that she is always prepared to meet young charming men and greet them with pleasure: But I’m always ready. Everything is always ready day and night in this house just on the off-chance that an acceptable young gentleman will come along. And it is such a pleasure, my dear, such a very great pleasure when now and again I open the door and I see someone standing there who is just exactly right (Dahl, 2004: e13).

Although it may be argued that the identification of the landlady with the witch may point to female freedom and emancipation from the desired reproductive function aimed at demographic growth and social development, the heroine does not deny her sexual urges. Although she is freed from the male gaze imbued with sexual desire (Greer, 1991), she manifests her sexuality through the macabre and grotesque treatment of Billy Weaver’s dead body, which may be read as suppressed desires of the ‘other’ who is alienated from the outside world. As Renehan states, horror elements offer a space on which to project “gratification and abreaction of tabooed desire, the simultaneous fracture and reinforcement of social, sexual and moral codes” (2013: e42). Her red fingernails also symbolize sexuality and, thus, challenge the idea of asexual older women, which is in line with the discourse of active of successful aging that stresses the importance of sex and sexuality in later life (Berdychevsky & Nimrod, 2017; Walz, 2002). The landlady’s desire to disrupt the social order and defy male dominance might also stem from a misogynistic portrayal of post-menopausal women as no longer attractive and sexually appealing, which leads one to think they are frustrated. Although, in recent decades, new shifts in understanding female sexuality and sex have contributed to perceiving the menopause in a more positive light (Sandberg, 2015), the eerie depiction of the landlady points to disrespectful identifications of post-menopausal women with old witches. In Dahl’s narrative, the image of a sexual older woman does not contribute to counteracting gerontophobia, but further highlights ageism and stigma inherent in the grotesque embodiment of the ‘crazy old lady’ or a hag. In fact, the origin of the word ’hag’ (Old English) signifies a witch, sorceress, enchantress or a repulsive older woman, which reinforces the idea of fear of the power of older women and also links it to the zombie image or the ‘living dead’. It is also worth mentioning that Dahl’s fiction and his use of unprecedented sexual violence has frequently been described as misogynist, especially prominent in his short story collection Switch Bitch that features unadulterated pornographic fantasies and cruelty against women (Glendinning, 1974; Mehm, 2013). Actually, the very title of this collection reveals sexist overtones, and four of the stories in Switch Bitch were originally published in Playboy between 1965 and 1974. However, even though sexist violence and macabre elements are common in many of Dahl’s works, in ‘The Landlady’ these aspects are twisted. It is the aging woman who uses cruelty against innocent young men for her own pleasure and perverse sexual fantasies. Sohier (2011) points out that the inclusion of horror elements in the tale hinge on the Freudian idea of a death instinct in human behavior, and states that the death-drive and life-drive complement each other. In fact, the scholar argues that “the death instinct constitutes the drive par excellence” as it underlines “all the other drives that are subsumed under the word ‘Eros”’ (Sohier, 2011: 2, emphasis in original). According to Freud, human sexuality is closely linked to the destructive power and eroticism that is expressed in sexual fantasies and dreams that may signal emotional disorders, neuroses, and inner conflicts. Dahl’s tale shows that some secreted sexual desires might be frightening and manifest themselves in the strangest ways, such as taxidermy and the subtly implied necrophilic acts. The use of the macabre and horror in the story, hence, allows further exploration of different scenarios surrounding the complexities of human sexuality that, contrary to the popular belief, do not decline with age, but acquire new forms of expression (Stonikaitė, 2017).

The macabre and slightly humorous culmination of the story is also a tale of a desire for immortality, longevity, and rejuvenescence. Actually, many fairy tales reiterate youthful beauty and its value, and an older woman is often characterized as an evil and selfish witch that is obsessed
with stopping the ravages of time. The resemblance of the landlady with the archetypical image of the witch not only points to her desire for eternal youth, but also signals the bodily decay, deformation, sagging, and vulnerability that comes with age. As women grow older, they become more invisible and desexualized; however, aging becomes more visible on their bodies and, especially, their faces (Bordo, 2003; Furman, 2013; Hurd-Clarke, 2011; Hurd-Clarke & Bennett, 2015; Öberg, 2003; Stonickaitė, 2020; Woodward, 1991). The fact that the female protagonist remains nameless in the story further reinforces the invisibility of older women and the idea of the eerie otherness of later life (DeFalco, 2010; Woodward, 1991).

In the story, the landlady scrutinizes youthful Billy Weaver’s body and is excited about its perfection: “her blue eyes travelled slowly all the way down the length of Billy’s body, to his feet, and then up again” (Dahl, 2004: e13). She is constantly keeping an eye on the boy to ensure that she captures his flawless beauty in order to perform the sadistic act of taxidermy and, in so doing, to keep the young man’s impecability forever: “Billy knew that she was looking at him. Her body was half-turned towards him, and he could feel her eyes resting on his face, watching him over the rim of her teacup” (Dahl, 2004: e16–17). Billy Weaver becomes the sexualized object of desire whose body is scrutinized and subject to transgressive violence leading to macabre death, after which his stuffed corpse will be used for visual delectation of the landlady (Mehmi, 2014). In fact, all three victims are young men in the prime of their lives: “they were extraordinarily handsome, both of them, I can promise you that. They were tall and young and handsome, my dear, just exactly like you” (Dahl, 2004: e15). The landlady thinks that seventeen is the most marvelous age for it is positioned on the threshold of becoming eighteen, which officially marks the stepping into adulthood and the loss of innocence:

‘Seventeen!’ she cried. ‘Oh, it’s the perfect age! Mr. Mulholland was also seventeen. But I think he was a trifle shorter than you are, in fact I’m sure he was, and his teeth weren’t quite so white. You have the most beautiful teeth, Mr. Weaver, did you know that?’ (Dahl, 2004: e17).

Although one of her three victims, Mr. Temple, was older, he still preserved youthful beauty, softness, and handsomeness: ‘Mr Temple, of course, was a little older,’ she said […]. ‘He was actually twenty-eight. And yet I never would have guessed it if he hadn’t told me, never in my whole life. There wasn’t a blemish on his body.’ ‘A what?’ Billy said. ‘His skin was just like a baby’s’ (Dahl, 2004: e17).

Sohier suggests that “a desire for the perfection of the skin, the fascination of the body” is closely linked to “a desire for whiteness, the whiteness of teeth and, in the same breath, with an insistent apprehension of age and aging” (2011: 9). The fact that the landlady “performs taxidermy not only on her pets but also on unwary young men, makes her into an uncanny woman, a figure of death, a representation of the death-drive” (Sohier, 2011: 2). Although, by stuffing Billy Weaver’s body, the lady champions the eternal beauty and youthful innocence that cannot be found in older age, her sinister acts are not empowering as they manifest irrationality, insanity, and the decline that comes with age.

Conclusions

Roald Dahl’s work has not been approached from the lens of age studies – one of the aims of this article was to fill this research gap. In the short story ‘The Landlady,’ female aging is presented as a source of horror and grotesqueness. And yet, the very use of horror in the light of literary age studies helps expose the often silenced and tabooed aspects of female aging and the overarching fears of older age. In his depiction of the female character, Dahl shows different clichés about aging women, such as witches, hags, crones, or women gone mad. The lady’s resemblance to the witch further reinforces the notion of aging women as evil and threatening the social order and patriarchal domain. In the tale, the landlady challenges the image of a gentle godmother or a grandmother, which may be read as her revenge against caregiving and family duties that are often imposed on older women. Through the performance of taxidermy the aging heroine also gains power over youth and preserves her male victims’ youthfulness. The landlady is not an absolute outsider or scapegoat; however, her portrayal as an evil and rebellious aging woman does not grant her enough agency beyond rebellion, thus hindering the production of a counter-narrative to the master narrative of decline (Gullette, 2004). Although she is given a voice to share her desires and vulnerability, ageism and sexism continue to be inherent in the grotesque embodiment of the crazy murderer in a lonely house. Her macabre acts display the problematic and controversial image of a witch or the ‘other,’ which is deeply rooted in many cultural representations of older women. The fact that the landlady goes unpunished for her unprecedented and anxiety-ridden cruelty and necrophiliac fantasies further justifies misogynist views towards women, especially older women.

In Dahl’s horror tale, the landlady not only suffers from social isolation and loneliness, but she also manifests the signs of dementia, which is often regarded as one of the biggest contemporary fears of aging. Dementia, as represented in the story, reminds us of the temporality of human existence that is at odds with the imaginary impressions of permanence and the strange feeling of uncanniness that disturbs one’s sense of identity and brings back the primitive and ghostly images of the past. The fact that the heroine lives with dementia also makes her similar to a zombie or a female monster that poses danger to others and disturbs cultural norms and the status quo (Behuniak, 2011). Additionally, her loss of memory signals the loss of power as it takes away her control, personhood, and autonomy. Dahl’s characterization of the landlady perpetuates the sociocultural construction of dementia and further reinforces some of the stereotypical images of older women as ostracized ‘others’. The disrupting image of the witch or zombie might also refer to the threatening ‘silver / aging tsunami,’ an offensive metaphor used to describe the late 20th century demographic phenomenon (Barusch, 2013). Relating dementia and old age to an image of ‘doomsday demography’, which commonly appears in popular culture, reminds us of the urgent need to reconsider the notions of aging in contemporary society, and bring about more positive and realistic perspectives of older age.

The article has also aimed to convey that the horror genre, sometimes considered inferior in comparison to more realistic and mimetic texts (Drout, 2006; Fabrizi, 2018), can serve as a tool to further explore individual and societal complexities and desires. Gothic and macabre elements help evoke deeper emotions that can lead to more critical readings of popular narratives and reveal how they shape our visions of the world and our identities (Ostenson, 2018). As Mehmi argues, “Dahl’s short story has gained its success because it functions cathartically as a deadening of pride, revenge, incestuous desire and rebellion and also as a social reconfiguration of being” (2014: 34). The use of horror allows for a safer exploration of our fears and anxieties, brings to light unvoiced, marginalized, and repressed individuals, and helps critically approach conventional truths by revealing societal and individual struggles (Brock-Servais, 2018; Clemens, 1999; Ostenson, 2018). A closer analysis of how horror elements interact with gender relationships and the representations of aging in popular writings would enrich not only gerontological scholarship, but also feminist, horror, fantasy, age, queer studies, and beyond.

Ultimately, the article has attempted to show that a critical examination of how the images of older adults are created within popular culture is important in order not to reproduce age-related stereotypes, which may further exclude, denigrate, and marginalize older people (Goldman, 2017). Henneberg, for instance, proposes writing texts that are “in active opposition to received patterns of ageism” and include more realistic portrayals of older age (2010: 132, 133). Literature,
popular cultural expressions, and the arts are powerful tools and extensions of sociocultural developments and individual stories that need to be told, shared, and heard in order to enable different narratives of growing up and growing older alike. As Marshall states, analyses of literary texts help readers “appreciate the ways in which the critical concepts of age studies are applicable to their own experiences and scholarship” (2015: 4–5). More positive representations of older people are important because the stories we tell create the social imagery of older age and influence the ways we understand the life course. Offering alternative images about growing older and cognitive decline is also crucial because dementia will continue to be the greatest contemporary fear of old age. As Zimmermann reminds us, it “may remain so for several more decades, given that a complete understanding of its causes continues to be elusive and its treatment therefore only symptom-based and, currently, of limited efficacy” (2017: 130). Examining popular texts from the age-studies perspective can help dislodge many stereotypical notions of aging and create other stories in which older women are given more roles besides the witch, the crazy old lady, or the caring and loving grandmother. It is hoped that more literary analyses of aging will contribute to gerontological thinking and extend our understanding of older age by broadening the opportunities for advanced interdisciplinary dialogue.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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