

OLDER WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION
Characterization and Archetypes

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Older Women In Contemporary Fiction: Characterization and Archetypes

Judi Dench fascinates me. Actually, most artistic portrayals of older women, whether in the movies, on television, the stage, or in fiction fascinate me. So do studies of archetypes such as Clarissa Pinkola Estes's book, *Women Who Run With the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*. The novel I'm currently working on features four older female characters that I am striving to portray with depth and complexity. Combining these interests, I want to use this paper to explore how older women are being represented in contemporary fiction. Are these representations archetypal, as Estes claims, and if so, do they match the models she discusses in her book? Are these portrayals effective? And apart from archetypes all together, what are the advantages or disadvantages for a writer in featuring older female characters? Lastly, what can I learn from all of this that will be relevant to my own writing?

I began a search by asking friends, classmates, and my graduate mentor for recommendations of novels published after 1990 and containing older females. With the belief that finding enough novels would be difficult, I dropped the prototype of Judi Dench—who was born in 1934 and is seventy-two years old—and defined older women as women fifty and older.

My first surprise came in finding an abundance of novels fitting these criteria, far more than I could read for this project.

In her book, Clarissa Pinkola Estes, Ph.D., and Jungian Analyst, writes: “The symbol of the Old Woman is one of the most widespread archetypal personifications in the world” (28). She goes on to say that there is “lingering evidence” of these archetypes in

our images and in our stories and literature. Estes's assertion led me to my first question: Are older women being portrayed, as she maintains, in archetypal ways?

Before any discussion of archetypes can begin, I think it is important to note that though I am using Estes's models, versus Jung's, it is my understanding that archetypes, though culturally different in the way they dress and where they happen to live, be that in a cave, the desert, or a deep, dark forest, they are inherently the same in terms of how they behave, the creative roles they play in the unconscious, and their civilizing influences on the conscious. I've read little of Jung's own writing, but I enjoyed Estes's book and found the concepts both easy to understand and captivating reading.

The first archetype Estes explores in *Women Who Run With the Wolves* is Baba Yaga, "the old wild hag." Baba Yaga lives in a dark forest. Her clothing is primitive, and she doesn't concern herself either with how she dresses, her hairy body, or her long, cracked nails. I found several examples of her in the novels I read, and I think for good reason. As a character, old Baba Yaga has a lot to offer fiction. She is the one who catches our attention by first appearing out of step, but in the end she proves to be the one with the courage to stare down evil and walk victorious. Baba Yaga is never a victim, doesn't bake cookies for the children on her block, and doesn't care who approves or disapproves of her. She breaks molds. She's disobedient in a good way. She concerns herself with life/death issues, but is not performing conventional acts of women's charity, delivering babies and nursing the dying. In Estes's story of Baba Yaga, "the one who dares and who creates and who destroys" (113), the old woman heals the young girl who comes to her, sending the fearful, psychically under-developed child back into the world with a fiery skull. All these qualities make Baba Yaga vitally interesting, and by tapping into the features of an

archetype like her—a character that already resides in the subconscious of readers—a writer can make quick inroads to characterization with very little description.

Leslie Marmon Silko does exactly that in *Almanac of the Dead*. She gives nearly all of Baba Yaga’s attributes to her three old women. The first line in “Book One” of the novel—an extensive work taking ten years to write and covering nearly 800 pages—reads: “The old woman stands at the stove stirring the simmering brown liquid with great concentration” (19). In one sentence, Silko takes us into the archetype of the witch. In referring to an “old woman,” but reserving her name and any physical traits until later, all of which would individualize her, the reader’s mind immediately goes to the unconscious for a picture. That picture is completed with the next phrase, “stirring the simmering brown liquid.” With the addition of a cauldron, the mind settles on the idea of a witch. Silko needs to give little else in the way of descriptive information. Each reader conjures her own picture—a picture already formulated and alive with a hundred unconscious associations in the bargain: everything from size, to colors, sounds and smells. Through the rest of the first chapter, Silko gives no other physical descriptions of the women, except to say they are sixty.

Almanac is a novel of weight and substance, and for Silko to begin with this image is telling and skillful. The novel deals with some of society’s darkest issues and by beginning with a Baba Yaga, Silko immediately establishes that dark mood. The old woman at the stove and her twin-sister Lecha elect to face these societal evils head-on. Silko needed to establish early that the two women have otherworldly courage and otherworldly dealings. Like Baba Yaga, each sister brandishes her own fiery skull: Zeta, the woman stirring that pot, dyeing her clothes black so that she can’t be seen in the dark,

communicates with snakes, and Lecha locates murder victims. They work against the “Destroyers,” humans “attracted to and excited by death and the sight of blood and suffering” (475).

As mentioned, Baba Yaga lives in a “dark forest.” She inhabits a region that could be anywhere so long as the space is a realm outsiders and initiates are weary of entering. Silko uses even this aspect of Baba Yaga in the twins. Their “dark forest” is a harsh desert ranch: inaccessible land and further protected by dogs, electric gates, and guards with automatic weapons. Developmental psychologist Bruno Bettelheim in *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* tells us that in our legends and myths, dark forests and hidden lands represent places where we come to face our own fears and weaknesses. “The near-impenetrable forest in which we get lost symbolize[s] the dark, hidden, near-impenetrable world of our unconscious” (94). Silko’s inclusion of that aspect of the archetype continues to draw us in, and as readers, we are about to face hard and uncomfortable truths about the society of which we are all a part.

While remote and fearful lands mean one thing to outsiders, to Baba Yaga, living at a physical distance from society represents her ability to find psychic nourishment in her own company and in her own work. Separated from society, she doesn’t suffer the normal emotional highs and lows in reaction to day-to-day interactions with others. (Think Georgia O’Keefe who for years lived at her Ghost Ranch in order to dedicate herself to her painting.)

As much as archetypes can do for literature, one of the things this paper has shown me is that archetypes do not show development. Silko’s twins are fixed in their good qualities—albeit they break the laws of every white-cop. This fixity is important for a

writer to consider. Eudora Welty—another grand old dame—writes in her book, *The Eye of the Story*, about the need for characters to show change and struggle. “How clear it is from the start,” she wrote, “that identity—self-identity—is hard to seize, hard to claim, and hard to hold on to” (52). Watching this struggle in characters, one that gives hope to our own struggles, is part of why we read and why literature has the potential to carry us through our own dark times.

But instead of archetypes being faced with difficult personal challenges where the outcome is hard-fought and uncertain, as are our best fictional characters, archetypes are not fighting interior forces. Like Super Heroes, they do not have what they would consider faults. Even a dark archetype is fixed in her lack of redeeming qualities and in her not desiring change, leading to her being a static, one-dimensional character. As readers of fiction, we want to participate in the process of a character’s change. Whether that change is growth or bitter failure, it is change and this gives a novel much of its forward movement.

In the same vein, if readers are so aware of archetypes that they can fill in the blanks without the writer, they aren’t being offered something new. As much texture as archetypes give a story, the line between archetype and stereotype is dangerously thin. Readers want to meet original characters, never the expected. Also, if a protagonist is dealing with a stereotypical character, she is dealing with the stereotypical qualities that character possesses. If the reader knows a Hannibal too well, she also knows what must be done to stop Hannibal. So that facing a clichéd character makes the protagonist’s efforts seem as clichéd and the protagonist less challenged and ultimately less original.

In considering the effectiveness of an archetype, it is also important to consider whether or not that character is a secondary character. In secondary characters less development is necessary. However, even a secondary character, in order to be successful, usually needs to experience some challenge that results in some measure of change.

Why then, if Silko's twins are static, do they work so well? I think it has to do in part with the novel's ending. The twins are archetypal in their efforts, but their work isn't successful. They don't save the world. They hold the belief at the end that the twin brothers will come, but there is no resolution, and in this reader's estimation, the twins fail their task. Silko gave them impossible tasks, intentionally leaving society's evils in the laps of her readers.

Silko has a third older female character, Yoeme, whose beliefs never change either—though her body certainly does. Part of the fun of this novel—if there is anything close to fun in this grave work—is that Yoeme can't be changed. She has the same determination on her deathbed as she had in leaving her husband and children decades earlier. Silko never relents concerning Yoeme's dark mystery, showing us a woman “so old and shrunken she had to lie in a child's hospital crib” (582). But even in that state, Yoeme remains the archetype of Baba Yaga, and is as “alert and cunning as she had ever been . . . her eyes still flashed with mischief,” and she laughs loudly, the witch's cackle, and relishes her advanced age, opening her lips to lick “her tongue across yellow pegs of teeth” (582). Yoeme's age, both in terms of that wonderful descriptive image and in the fact that she lived long enough to have witnessed a list of horrors: the near extinction of her people, their bodies hung in trees to dry over the seasons like leaves, and Indian children

used as target practice, works for Silko. Still, no novel can have much proportionally in the way of static characters, even static secondary characters.

Anita Diamant, in *The Last Days of Dogtown*, also uses established images of Baba Yaga to pull her readers into the character of Tammy. Diamant's witch takes her attributes from a more recent, Christianized model. Estes explains:

Like the word *wild*, the word *witch* has come to be understood as a pejorative, but long ago it was an appellation given to both old and young women healers, the word *witch* deriving from the word *wit*, meaning wise . . . before cultures carrying the one-God-only religious image began to overwhelm the older pantheistic cultures. . . ." (96)

Tammy is a "spiteful old horror," who lives in rags and has been reduced to groveling for coins from passers-by who hope to avoid one of her hexes. She lives on the outskirts of Dogtown and her house is as "bare as any in Dogtown: a bed and a table, a few chairs and a stool, a row of pegs for a wardrobe" (153). Tammy is also "toothless, breathless, and lame" though "outrage was still strong" in her. The descriptions of Tammy are vivid and alive with a forbidden quality that makes us pay attention. Again, as readers, we are immediately drawn in. I think we are so drawn into archetypal characters because we recognize aspects of ourselves, however easy they are to dislike and foreign they seem. Eudora Welty in *The Eye of the Story* says characters "connect us with the vastness of our secret life, which is endlessly explorable" (90). How much more endlessly explorable these characters are when they are archetypes.

Not all Diamant's older female characters fit the model of the pejorative witch. Easter and Judy are both older characters and the flip side of Tammy. They do serve

others, though not by brandishing Baba Yaga's fiery skull. They are the "good mothers" who nurse the needy. They never leave the traditional role of the older woman as caregiver. They are witnesses to birth and death, but are neither creators nor destroyers, and they have none of the real life-death power of Baba Yaga or Silko's twins and Yoeme. Because Easter and Judy fit so well into traditional female roles, as characters they have much less dark mystery. I think this makes them less surprising, less interesting, and with less to teach the reader about the human condition.

Judy temporarily separates herself from the "obedient female" role when she falls in love with a black man, Cornelius, and takes him to her bed. In doing so, she plays with the archetypal, claiming her own sexuality, but she doesn't have the courage to maintain this. When Cornelius leaves for months at a time, she doesn't dare ask—even as a gray-haired lady—where he goes when he leaves. Nor does she honor her own emotional health enough to ask him to stay. Her biggest concern is hiding their relationship from her neighbors in and around Dogtown. Unlike Baba Yaga, she doesn't have the courage to stare down public opinion with a fiery skull. Over time, she loses the courage even to admit her own truth: her love for him.

There are many reasons aside from archetypes why older women work so well in contemporary fiction and one of the best reasons enriches Judy's character. When she comes to a realization about herself at the end of the novel and experiences a reversal, the time left in which to reap the benefits of her new understanding has passed. In oldest age, as Cornelius is dying in a poor house, Judy goes to him and brings him back to her home. But it is only now, when he will live for less than twenty-four hours that she is true to her feelings and crawls in bed beside the dying man, "not giv[ing] a tinker's damn" if her

“good name was lost” (252-253). When Judy has this late-life reckoning, and the years cannot be returned to her, and she realizes she gave up any hope of happiness, the reader can’t help but feel her loss. Her gained awareness is bitter sweet. Conclusions in novels like this that feature older characters who can’t regain what’s been lost, rewrite and complicate stereotypical endings that are usually affirmative.

Diamant’s cast of older female characters, the good and the bad, hang onto relic-like lives, watching their numbers dwindle in Dogtown, never imagining life outside of their narrow confines. They are fascinating characters in the way that they live and rationalize their existences. They are keepers of a dying patriarchal order, but not keepers of an order as old as the archetype of Baba Yaga.

Sue Monk Kidd tells the story not just of older women, but older, black women in her novel, *The Secret Life of Bees*. There too, we see characters with Baba Yaga qualities. Rosealeen is a strong woman, and because readers enjoy associating with the strong and the good and the successful, she’s a great character. The physical features that give her Baba Yaga’s customary unattractiveness are her way of carrying a jug and spitting her tobacco juice into it and her being so fat her stomach sits in her lap. She’s not concerned about her appearance, only her comfort, and lives in large muumuus. These facts speak instantly of someone who guards her instinctual freedom, boldly refusing to curry to public opinion. Her fiery torch is her temper and her unflappable courage even in the face of life-threatening danger. She brandishes her torch against the racism she experiences, fighting for her dignity after being called fat and a “nigger.” She faces three white men and has the courage to commit what the sheriff calls an “assault” by pouring her jug of tobacco spit onto the men’s shoe tops—one of which she knows is “the meanest hater of colored people

anywhere” (240). Even after being arrested, taken to jail in handcuffs, and beaten again, Rosealeen doesn’t bow down to her accusers.

Her character is instructive on a couple of levels. Not only is the extent to which archetypes are represented important for the writer to recognize, it is also informative to see how as writers we can take a standard such as Baba Yaga, fashion aspects of characterization that suit our novel’s needs, and create characters that appear brand new—even as they stir unconscious associations.

A second archetype in the work of Estes is La Loba, an old and strange woman who gathers bones from the desert. La Loba differs from Baba Yaga in that she is circumspect and not working outwardly, not carrying that fiery torch. Her function is to walk over the desert floor at night and gather the bones of dead animals, preserving “especially what is in danger of being lost to the world” (27). La Loba is an archaeologist who brings things back to life, but in doing so, changes their natures. Estes says of La Loba that she “shows us what can go right for a soul” and her story is always a “resurrection story” (28). As a pre-Christianized witch, she is wise and effective. La Loba, Estes tells us, “is the mythical voice who knows the past and our ancient history and keeps it recorded in our stories” (34).

A good example of La Loba can also be found in *The Secret Life of Bees*. This time the character’s name is August. Though August’s age isn’t given, the novel’s main character, a young girl named Lily, sees August as a woman with a “face corrugated with a thousand carmel wrinkles and her hair looking flour-dusted” (71-72). August is the matriarch of her family, which time has reduced to just two younger sisters, one of whom is old enough to have hair like “a little gray, curlicue swim cap pulled tight over her scalp” (68).

Like La Loba, August is a resurrection archetype. She too has collected and sung over old bones: the possessions of the protagonist's mother, the masthead of an old ship named "Our Lady of Chains," stories about the Black Madonna, and the tales of survival and redemption that matter so much to the young Lily. As a resurrection archetype, August also helps Lily heal by having preserved bits of Lily's mother's past: objects and stories she gives to Lily.

In the example of August, Kidd has fashioned La Loba into a black woman whose life has been spent in the South. As readers, we don't need a list of the near-constant prejudices she has suffered. She was a maid, and most readers know the conditions under which blacks were forced to live through the first three-fourths of the twentieth century. One of the rich aspects of August and her band of sisters, and this has more to do with older women making rich characters than with archetypes, is the peace they have found within themselves despite their long years of suffering from prejudice. When the ladies gather to celebrate, when their voices are caught up in rejoicing and their minds ought to be furthest from their memories, the suffering they have seen and endured shows itself in their passionate, even desperate singing and dancing. In their having to make their jubilations so big, we see that the heartache they are trying to mask is even bigger. This acquisition of peace, despite reality, is rarely seen in younger characters and even less rarely believed when attempted.

Examples of La Loba could go on and on. She's there in the form of a creek in Sandra Cisneros's novel, *Woman Hollering Creek*. She is there in Linda Hogan's novel, *Solar Storms*, when the character Bush literally does walk the land and hunt for animal bones and glue the creatures back together. She is also there in Nuala O'Faolain's, *my*

dream of you [sic]. In that novel, her name is Mrs. Leech, a name that suggests something small and unattractive, as well as an annelid worm often used medicinally for drawing out poisons. Seventy-year old Mrs. Leech wears her hair pulled back into a “cottage loaf” and at times the hair escaping around her red cap looks like Einstein’s hair: undoubtedly a reference to her wisdom. (Estes would like that, connecting witch-like images with wisdom.) Mrs. Leech works in the archives of an old library. As an archivist, she dedicates herself, just as does La Loba, to that which is in danger of being lost. The bones she works with are the stories of the deceased, especially those approximately two million under privileged Irish who died in Ireland’s potato famine in the 1840’s. She gathers their histories through a myriad of avenues: oral stories, scraps of old legal texts, newspaper clippings, and even by walking the ruins of Irish villages destroyed by wealthy landlords during that time.

Estes is absolutely correct in saying Old Women archetypes are one of the most widespread in the world; they are everywhere in contemporary fiction. However, in every novel I read, they functioned as secondary characters. In only two of the novels I read were older females not archetypes and functioned as main characters. That in itself is interesting and worth noting. To discuss the first of these, I return to Nuala O’Faolain’s *my dream of you*. O’Faolain features a protagonist named Kathleen who turns fifty early in the story—just managing to make my cut. Kathleen has always been an attractive woman and prided herself on her ability to lure men into sexual encounters, often within a few hours of meeting them. But reaching fifty has filled her with fear about how much longer she will still be considered sexually attractive. She has one white pubic hair and sees that hair as an augury of the end.

my dream of you is a journey of Kathleen's self-discovery, a coming of old-age story. As a teenager she left her seriously dysfunctional family as soon as she finished high school. She moved to England and eventually became a travel writer. Thirty years later, and with both parents dead, Kathleen returns home to Ireland to do research with the archivist, Mrs. Leech. Through the course of the novel, Kathleen is forced to admit that the sex life she fears losing hasn't been anything more than loveless one-night stands. The passion she wants so desperately to preserve consists of giving herself to men she often doesn't even find attractive. She realizes that the meaningless relationships she insisted on, never letting herself fall in love with one man, were simply an effective way to keep from having to look at herself. Her pattern of cutting short social evenings and taking a man to the nearest motel came about because "lying down for [men] was the only way to tell [them] absolutely nothing about myself" (39). The panic her fiftieth birthday ignites isn't from having to say good-bye to a great sex life, but admitting the above truth: she's reached fifty and never had one. Also, she realizes that if she intends to remain a social being, even if not a wildly sexual being, she must quit hiding from herself and accept her past.

Kathleen's internal conflicts, and the growth she experiences, make her a rich character. She has real motives, feeling, and frailties, which highlight the human condition. In her, there is plenty to identify with: fear of losing her appearance, fear of facing an uncertain future, and fear of being alone. But sexual and emotional conflicts aren't exclusive to older women. What then are the advantages of having her fifty, rather than a woman questioning her sexuality at thirty or even twenty?

Though Kathleen's issue isn't age, as much as self-loathing and denial, she at first thinks it is age—reflected in the one white public hair. O'Faolain needed a fifty-year-old

woman for several reasons. She needed a woman going through a transition, a woman on the cusp between two lives. Jean Bolen, M.D. in her book, *Goddesses in Older Women*, tells us that “changes in your body are often accompanied by self-consciousness, when worries about being attractive and concerns about the next stage of life begin to surface” (xxiv). The changes in Kathleen’s body back her into a wall of self-reckoning, but when the gates open, she finds out more about herself than she’d imagined lurked inside: fifty years of denial.

Eudora Welty, who studied people and knew them well, believed that “the revelation that pierces a character’s mind and heart and shows him his life or his death comes . . . in retrospect . . . at the moment of vanishing hope” (32). Welty goes on to say that these times lead to “subjective worlds of hallucination, obsession, fever, guilt” (32). Welty could have been writing about Kathleen, whose decades of living give her much more time in which to have erred and compounded those errors. The errors Kathleen views in “retrospect,” at the point of “vanishing hope,” are decidedly replete with obsession and guilt. All of which makes for good fiction. So often our most unforgettable characters are not those who have conquered the outside world, but those who have defeated the demons within themselves.

Like Judy, Kathleen has lost the entirety of her youth and considering that waste is excruciating to her. As readers, we also feel the emotional weight of that regret. Her remorse as a result of reflecting on those years is demonstrated in her actions, and all of this keeps her from being archetypal.

It is Kathleen’s acceptance of her ruined past that makes the end of the novel so powerful. It is her dark “subjective worlds” that carry her to her reversal and development.

When for the first time in her life she falls in love and believes that at her age she may never have another chance at it, reaching a decision to turn down the lover's offer to become his mistress is that much harder. She does change and accept being alone, living with herself and her truth, rather than waiting for the weekend visits when he can get away from his wife. When she does, the reader, like Kathleen, can't hope she will meet Prince Charming in the sequel. If he's there, he has a growing paunch, maybe health issues, and they won't be having a child together. She gains only self-esteem in refusing the lover. And while she is heart-broken over not getting the man, her maturity promises that self-possession is better.

Powerful fiction makes readers feel. Joy or grief or wonder, it makes them feel something, gives them the sense of being alive in a way they aren't outside of the novel. A character who has grown as much as Kathleen, and yet remains in an irreversible place, is a character I feel for and suppose that others do as well.

Another novel featuring women over fifty as protagonists is Toni Morrison's *Love*. Morrison, who has won both a Pulitzer Prize and the Nobel Prize in Literature, gives an excellent portrayal of two women in their mid sixties. In telling her stories, Morrison uses another facet of characterization reserved for older characters: their lengthy history. I don't mean just a character's lengthy personal history, as in Kathleen's sleeping with men, but also a lengthy national-political history. In Morrison's famous novel, *Beloved*, the character Sethe has escaped slavery. In *Love*, the "Cosey women," as they are called, experienced the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's and the murder of Martin Luther King. In weaving these events into the histories of these characters, Morrison creates an unsettling backdrop and adds a tone of uncertainty. By showing the lingering effects of

these events on the aging Cosey women today, Morrison tells a story that is both historical and contemporary.

The younger the character, naturally the less back-story they have, which is why I found Morrison's older characters in this novel more interesting than the younger characters. Romen is fourteen and having his first sexual experience with an older girl who has spent time in a detention center. Though, as a reader, I hope for the best for Romen, he's not also carrying the weight of a compelling history. His parents are both in the service and so he's come to live with his grandparents, and while finding acceptance in a new group of teenagers is often hard, his conflicts feel superficial in comparison to those of the Cosey women. Whether or not Romen makes friends at his new school, we know he will return to his old life with his parents, or in a few years he will graduate. Ultimately, he's going to survive.

Young Romen's relationship with the old Cosey women and his grandparents, however, allows Morrison to give the novel models of cross-generational bonding. These interactions add a unique dynamic and a reason for featuring older characters. In cross-generational narratives the youth and the old serve as contrasts to each other in their beliefs, clothing, props, language, and yet there is usually an unconditional love that transcends it all. People in the same age bracket, even if they deny the fact, are constantly comparing themselves. And the reader will participate even if the characters don't: Who wears the smallest pants, has the larger career, the cutest mate?

Morrison's use of characters in their mid-sixties, rather than decades younger, allows her to give readers women who possess a wealth of distance from their earlier experiences: a space needed for the sculpting of fuller meanings. An event in a character's

life happens on one level with an immediate meaning and consequence. But over time, there is a sort of double-dipping: what the event meant when it happened and what it means now, years, even decades later. Often, the latter interpretation carries the fullest complexity. As an example: the two Cosey women were childhood friends until separated at age eleven when the wealthy grandfather of one bought the other from her impoverished family to be his child bride. Not long after the wedding, the granddaughter was sent away to school. She wasn't old enough to surmise the reasons why she was suddenly no longer welcome in the large home where she lived with her mother and grandfather and a staff of employees. She felt rejected at being sent away while the friend was suddenly the chosen one in Grandpa's eyes and even allowed to sleep and vacation with him. The impoverished child felt suddenly abandoned by the friend and her family. No one in the large household challenged the old man, the keeper of the purse, but they began to shun his bride. The lives of the two children were ruined. In the years since, they have been fighting, and now what happened at eleven means something entirely new to them. It is more than just the fact that they have come to understand sex, it is seeing how everything in their lives has unwound from those hurts, as if from a spool.

Welty's observations about characterization and how often the revelation that comes in retrospect carries the greater obsessions and guilt, applies as much to the Cosey women as to Kathleen. Realizing this encourages me to ask hypothetical questions of all my characters: *How might they see this event in twenty years? In sixty years?* I think the answers could change and deepen a scene.

Another aspect of good characterization is the depth of conflict that is maintained within the character. The deeper that conflict, the more facets it has, and the harder it is to

sort out, the more readers are shown the dichotomies in human nature and what it means to live in this complicated world. For the Cosey women, who share the large ancestral home, one woman living in the basement and the other in the third floor—as far apart as they can physically manage—their decades of misunderstanding have deepened and complicated until their emotions have become entrenched.

Earlier I mentioned the poignancy in seeing your errors when you haven't the time left to benefit from your newfound wisdom. The Cosey women finally communicate only as one dies in the arms of the other, one woman's already brittle body broken by a fall through the floor to the story below. With old characters, especially when one of them is sick, as in this novel, the author ups the ante. The body ensures a decline. No matter how much an older character changes emotionally, there is still the weight of how much has been lost and the inevitable near future of severe old age, if not death.

Thinking about the bodies of elderly women segues into thinking about the sheer fun of writing their physical descriptions. Heed, one of the Cosey women, has hands, “baby-smooth except for one scarred spot each one curved gently away from its partner—like fins” (28). Her body is a story. In the same way that Yoeme's body is a story. Remember Silko's haunting description of Yoeme with her “yellow pegs of teeth”? Yoeme carried in her body all the people she'd loved and all the murdered victims. Over time, her body grew nearly as shriveled as the hung bodies she associated with: those left to dry through a season.

Not just the body changes in older female characters. Young characters are usually caught up in physical activities, but at some age people become bored with the issues of the body, or admit defeat in the eternal quest for youth. When this happens, pursuits change

and often turn more spiritual. An elderly woman, circumscribed by her body, lives in a more subjective realm than her twenty-year-old sister. Her activities are more circumspect. This isn't always true, and the eighty-year-old pumping iron would be a story, but the trend is significant and leads to narratives of a different flavor. Visual appreciation grows as well as does desire for tactile sensation. Is this because our richest appreciation of beauty comes when we know our time to watch roses grow is short? I'm reminded of May Sarton's last journals when she knew she was dying and the pleasure she took from shadows and light and flowers. And I'm reminded of lines from her poem, "A Flower-Arranging Summer." "The white walls of this airy house assume/Flowers as natural and needed as friends/Time slides away, and how are we to taste it? (111). Janet Burroway tells us that in fiction only conflict is interesting. Flowers aren't conflict, but a person desperate to grasp a fading world is conflict.

Given all of these possibilities for rich fiction, why then are there so few older female protagonists? The reasons might be bound up in the considerations of why we read. Is it just escapism, or to learn about other people and cultures, or is it also a bit of voyeurism? Readers like to project themselves into beautiful heroes and heroines. They don't want to spend too much time contemplating mortality and witnessing characters that are forced to admit unfulfilled dreams when all possibility of ever attaining them is lost. These things challenge a writer in terms of keeping a novel active and readers interested. But Morrison achieves this quiet conflict in *Love*, and a glance at most any bookshelf would show many novels that have also achieved this mix. Looking at mine, I see on the first shelf: Virginia Woolf's, *Mrs. Dalloway*, Kazuo Ishiguro's, *The Remains of the Day*, William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*.

In my own fiction, I naturally hope to have my older female characters as fully fleshed out and rounded, as are the characters of all the authors mentioned in this paper. One of those characters, Grandma Teegan, chooses the time of her death in order to have that death coincide with the departure of an Orphan Train. Dying early in the story, she lingers as a ghost and still communicates with Glory, her young granddaughter. Something I'd not even considered before writing this paper is that my older female characters are secondary and even archetypal. I want Grandma Teegan—the year is 1898—to still hold to some of the Celtic philosophies she was raised with, but I'd not consciously thought, *archetype*. I now see a lot of similarities between Estes's archetypes and Grandma Teegan. This has brought Grandma Teegan into much clearer focus and expanded my thinking on the subject.

Grandma Teegan, I now see, is a life/death hag. In willing her own death, she is acting as a life/death force not just over her own life, but over Glory's as well. She ends what she believes is a downward spiral in tenement housing in a New York City slum and gives Glory a new life in the West. Like La Loba, she keeps the past alive by being a tender of stories and passing the old Irish myths on to Glory. In choosing the time of her death, Grandma Teegan is Druid enough to die without fear, but I want her decision to also be wrought with anguish. I'd like her mourning her own death, filled with regret for the life she's lived—I think ultimately all but archetypes wish they had done better in the past—and experiencing sorrow at having to leave Glory. I don't want her to be so strong she can shrug her shoulders at dying and slip off with no concern for her orphaned grandchild. She also needs to be human enough for Glory to grieve her passing. My portrayal of Grandma Teegan then must be balanced between the human with the mythical.

August in *The Secret Life of Bees* is a great model of a character with archetypal strength even as she struggles with her humanity.

Another female in my novel is Plum Cake, an aging prostitute and now a grossly overweight Madam. Bedridden, Plum Cake is intentionally eating herself to death. As she struggles, she takes peace in knowing the end is near. Though she's like Grandma Teegan in the sense that she's committing suicide, she's carrying out her death in a more bumbling way. She's quite different, too, in that her suicide is only to save herself. She doesn't have another's well-being in mind. I think now that she'd consider herself a La Loba as well, gathering herself up—all the wounded women she's been—into the great folds of her body and soon she'll have them all in a better place. While she would never think in terms of archetypes, she would think in terms of all the women she's been and taking the ladies home. That opens new and rich veins onto her personality.

The final two older female characters are Much and Sissy, women in their eighties who are very much bad witches. Before reading for this paper, I also hadn't been conscious that I'd created pejorative witches. How well they fit that model is stunning! They dress in dark clothes, wear caps over their hair, are more active at night, do their stealing and hording in the darkest hours, and they fit the physical description of a witch in that they are small, dark, and rat-like. Except for giving them warts, I've pretty well got them covered. Now that I've spent this time studying older women in fiction, I'm not considering changing Much and Sissy as I am considering making changes to Grandma Teegan and Plum Cake. In fact, I'm convinced more than ever that I've chosen the right road. I have discovered, however, that I don't need as much in the way of physical

description. I feel confident I can use a lighter touch and the reader will conjure her own picture: that personal, authoritative picture of a witch already in her subconscious.

One thing this paper has not done is quell my fascination with older women. I'm still interested in their changing, vital lives. Because not enough has been written about them, because the real can too easily be glossed over, even made archetypal, there is still much to write. I know if people haven't been interested in reading about the lives of older women, it is only because they haven't done much imaging in that direction. I understand. My son works in prairie restoration and on entering my first preserve with him, I supposed I'd be bored. But after some instruction on native and invasive species and on the aspects of controlled burns, I realized how much I'd never suspected. I know we look out over the lives of older women and see fall fields, everyone looking the same. But I think a writer's job is democratic; her work is to make all life fascinating. To deny the stories of older women, or to tell them untrue, is to say that women either don't have stories or those stories aren't worth writing. But if poetry is a compression of words, elderly women are a compression of life. That is worth writing about.

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