**Last Love: the ‘double standard of ageing’ and women’s experience of gender and sexuality at mid-life**

**Introduction and background: aged by (gender) culture**

Women are “aged by culture”, to use the words of Margaret Morganroth Gullette (2004), in a number of ways: regulations concerning what they can or can’t wear, how they should look, what they should do, and so on. However, there are no norms more powerful perhaps, and having more impact on women’s sense of identity, than those that concern their sexuality and their place in the sexual regime. The double-standard of ageing holds that middle-aged men are at the height of their sexual attractiveness and value in the sexual regime, possessing a different kind of sexual appeal to that of their youthful selves, admittedly, but possibly one more potent (because more likely to be associated with authority, power and money). The new potency is demonstrated by the motif of men taking a new female partner later in life who is considerably his junior. UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson and former US President Donald Trump offer public examples of this. By contrast, the double standard of ageing (Sontag, 1972) holds that middle-aged women are no longer perceived as sexual objects and therefore are ‘invisible’, discounted by the male gaze. Older women with younger partners are often ridiculed in the press – Madonna an obvious example; French President Macron and his wife have also had their relationship subject to much scepticism - because the man must be with her for reasons of self-interest, or else there is something ‘wrong’ with him, perhaps immaturity or needing a mother-figure, so the popular line goes. Indeed, in a way that works exactly counter to that of masculine rejuvenation via the love affair (Paloge, 2007), of demonstrating his power and status, as well as affirming his masculinity, in this paper I explore one way in which this ‘double standard of ageing discourse’ is deployed for women through the medium of the perceived ‘last love’ or ‘last affair’. This is a frequently occurring trope, or motif, according to which women in fiction and memoir see themselves, and are encouraged to see themselves, in terms of one last vivid blossoming of sexuality before the dropping of the curtain on youth and the sexuality that, for women, is associated with youth. Unlike other studies which have mostly sought to examine whether the double standard retains its relevance as a concept, or to suggest its deficiencies in capturing intersectional differences and so on, my aim here is to analyse the mechanics of the double-standard itself. That is, I aim to explore how it works as a “social fact” in the Durkheimian sense, meaning a social reality rather than a biological or psychological reality, including ‘collective representations’ and norms (see Durkheim, 1895). The social fact of the double-standard of ageing works specifically to enforce a gendered deficit in ageing with the result, thereby, of bolstering a masculine advantage deep into late middle-age and beyond.

In the first section, below, I look more closely at the double-standard of ageing as it was presented within Susan Sontag’s 1972 paper and after that I explore how, as a concept, it has been scrutinised and developed in more recent years.

**The double-standard of ageing**

Susan Sontag coined the term ‘double-standard of ageing’ in a 1972 popular commentary wherein she described the way that women are deemed to lose their beauty and sexual attractiveness much sooner than are men. She saw this, furthermore, as a distinct weapon wielded by men in the patriarchal sex war, an aspect of men’s domination and women’s oppression within that system. That women internalise this standard and apply it to considerations both of their own bodies and to those of other women indicates the strength of its power as a weapon. She further identified a number of aspects to this double-standard. The first focuses on ageing as compared to actually being old, identifying the former as a social and subjectively-felt crisis, as compared to the latter’s objective fact (albeit one contestably composed of elements of both chronology and biology and increasingly variable on an individual level). Ageing as a *social process* begins very early in the life course for women and lingers for much of her life course, or as Sontag puts it, “it is diffused over most of a woman’s life” (p. 32). Sontag emphasises that ageing is ideological and social, writing: “Ageing is much more a social judgement than a biological eventuality” (p. 31). This is what she means when she writes that it is a ‘crisis of the imagination rather than of “real life”’ (p. 32) and as such, as a discourse, it limits the way women feel able to imagine their lives, and assess their possibilities, including projecting themselves into the future.

The second aspect includes aesthetics, appearance and sexual attractiveness as a form of gendered oppression. Sontag notes the way in which older women are deemed to embody the antithesis of sexual and aesthetic attractiveness, noting: “The standard of beauty in a woman of any age is how far she retains, or how she manages to simulate, the appearance of youth” (p. 36). This means, she says, that from a very young age, women’s aim, in terms of self-presentation, is a conservative one of preserving their very youthful looks, rather than embracing change, an attitude which has powerful psycho-social consequences. Women cannot, unlike men who have both a boyish and a manly or mature template of attractiveness, anticipate a second model of mature beauty, for female beauty and desirability as qualities are judged by the standard of youth alone. Moreover, qualities associated with maturity, such as experience, workplace success, and power, work to undermine, not enhance, a woman’s attractiveness. This translates directly into the sexual realm where, Sontag writes, “Women become sexually ineligible much earlier than men do… Thus, for most women, ageing means a humiliating process of gradual sexual disqualification’ (p. 31).

The third aspect in the construction of the double-standard of ageing is women’s internalisation of this standard, to which I have already referred. Sontag notes: “That old women are repulsive is one of the most profound aesthetic and erotic feelings in our culture. Women share it as much as men do” (p. 36), which engenders in women an ambivalent relationship to our own bodies. As a result of all of the above, women feel shame about their age from an early age and are inclined to hide it.

Fifty years since this influential publication first appeared, an extensive literature suggests that it remains both influential and, most importantly, relevant to women’s experiences. Indeed, much research attests to the continued saliency of both the concept and its role in an ongoing edifice of gender power and oppression (for example, Bordini and Sperb, 2013; Hurd Clarke, 2002). In an example from life-writing, in *Mid-life Ex-Wife* by Stella Grey, a 2016 memoir of a 50-something woman’s experience of online dating that arose out of a column for *The (UK) Guardian* newspaper, Stella discusses the male and youthful gaze through which older men survey same-age women. Mid-life women, one male dater tells her, are seen as “dilapidated and angry”, whilst “it’s different for men” (p. 79). Save for the technology, this could have occurred just as likely in 1972 as 2016.

Having said that, Sontag’s paper has undergone significant reappraisal and conceptual redevelopment over the years. It has, for example, been refined and developed to take into consideration the multiple dimensions encompassed in the term “intersectionality” (Calasanti and Slevin, 2013) which acknowledges that whilst a gendered double-standard exists, not all women (and not all men) are impacted in the same way. Other studies have suggested that the negative focus of the double standard – effectively a misery perspective (Krekula, 2007) - is one that finds disadvantage to be inherent. Different lenses, such as focusing on strength, energy and well-being, for example, can uncover a more positive female experience, as compared to that of men. Whilst these observations are true, nevertheless many of them do not adhere to Sontag’s conceptualising of the double standard, which is about *ageing* (often from fairly early in the life course) rather than of *being old* and furthermore frames ageing as a social practice rather than a biological or chronological event. The double standard shapes both how women view themselves and their value as ageing women and beyond; deeply impacting their approach towards the life course and its possibilities, at all stages and ages, for example, impressing upon them the ‘reality’ of a time deficit as compared to men (Pickard, 2020).

As well as acknowledging the above points about the need to make the double standard of ageing more nuanced and sensitive to heterogeneity among women, there are other ways in which the double standard is more complex in current society than when Sontag wrote. The added complexity I am referring to is that connected with the contemporary gender contract, and the social and political position of women in society more generally. Whilst women have entered many domains that were formerly the province of men, and have expectations to succeed in that realm, ‘femininity’ remains an important aspect of gender identity and is an important component of the presentation of the successful working woman (McRobbie, 2009). Here, youth and vulnerability make a woman more desirable than their opposite qualities, in direct contrast to men. As Lynn Segal notes: “Older women, even when powerful and rich, especially when powerful and rich, lack a parallel sexual allure” (2017: 179). More generally, there has been an increase in the weight placed on ‘aesthetic values in society’ (Åberg et al, 2020: 1; Widdows, 2018) related to both consumerism and on individualistic notions of success involving working on the self. With that, there is a more contrived form of sexual objectification, in the Foucauldian sense, in which it is the sexual subject that polices herself, through judging herself through the framework of the male gaze (Gill, 2009). Importantly, it is no longer the case, as Sontag wrote, that “women rarely feel anxious about their age because they haven’t succeeded at something” (p. 30). On the contrary, today women still feel vulnerable about their perceived loss of beauty and sexuality but they also feel anxious about ageing from reasons relating to self-actualisation and life and career success in a way that was not so marked in previous times. Indeed because of the premium placed on beauty and attractiveness *as an aspect of success*, a perceived lack of the former can undermine success itself.

Notably, in a way that has grown apace since Sontag wrote, the double standard of ageing both impacts on, and works through, intimacy and sexuality especially. Intimacy involves vulnerability, being a need which cannot be willed or achieved, but only hoped for, and as such it can be actively withheld as a weapon in gender struggles, for example older men’s choice of younger women can be perceived both positively (as an attraction to younger women) and negatively, in terms of a desire to undermine their age peers who may be competing successfully with them at work (Gullette, 1997). The sexual revolution and ensuing cultural change, including feminism, that permits freedom in the ending of marriages and long-term relationships has also freed up men to leave their wives in mid-life and here Segal, writing as both an older woman and a sociologist of sex, believes: “It is the obstinacy of sexual desire and its all too familiar search for objects and recognition that I have seen, and felt, placing older women in jeopardy” (2017: 194).

More generally, the work of Margaret Morganroth Gullette has developed Sontag’s writing in a way more relevant both to the spirit of the original paper and to my paper. In two books in particular, 1997’s *Declining to Decline* and 2004’s *Aged by Culture*, Gullette explores and identifies the “master narrative of decline” associated with moving through the life course, which impacts on women sooner and more damagingly than on men. Feelings of despair, and loss of value are learnt via such tropes as anticipatory fear of mid-life ageing, nostalgia, shame and sorrow about mid-life losses, including sexuality. As such, the double-standard of ageing, which crystallises all of these, and through which filter such feelings are naturalised, renders them decidedly harder to critique and resist.

**Aims and Methodology**

For all these reasons, this paper takes a somewhat different tack in regard to the ‘double standard’ concept than other gerontological research. Instead of exploring its continued saliency, or seeking to develop its conceptual sophistication, or alternatively to highlight shortcomings, my focus here is on examining how it works, in terms of the mechanisms through which it continues to shape women’s perception of their own ageing and their future as older women. In particular, I explore how representations of female desire and desirability - via the ‘late’ or ‘last’ love affair - function as a mode through which women see, and come to experience themselves, as ageing in all its negative dimensions, their lives ‘closing down’ to the possibilities that remain open both to younger women and to men of their own age. Because it is social and ideological, moreover, it is a mechanism accepted as ‘natural’ to mid-life women in particular, something that ultimately they cannot resist. The paper also adds something to the literature on sexuality in later life (e.g; DeLamater, 2012; Fileborn et al, 2015, Gott and Hinchcliff, 2003; Tetley et al, 2018) by looking at its role in terms of the double standard of ageing and specifically how it is bound up with discourses on ageing and decline.

In this paper, I explore how this trope of the mid-life ‘last love affair’ recurs in women’s literature, memoir and fiction, and I focus on the nuanced elements of the trope of the mid-life woman who enters into a last love affair, feeling somehow this is her ‘last chance’. This might, *inter alia*, encompass a desire to avoid the fate of her mother and with the declining beauty of her friends as sexual *memento mori*, and possibly with the reminder that her husband or partner has taken a younger lover or wife. It might alternatively or additionally involve a feeling that there is some kind of authentic self-expression or creative freedom that can be accessed through a sexual relationship for one ‘last time’. It might also be perceived as a way of escaping or defying old age or holding it off for the time being. There is often a suggestion of danger glinting through this theme, a warning that such an expression of sexual agency at this time in the life course is destructive and potentially disastrous to the structure of one’s life and one’s relationships. As with depictions of all women’s sexuality throughout the life course, moreover, this includes an intimation that it, and she, as a sexual agent, is out of control. The presence, or anticipation of, menopause also plays a role in configuring the psycho-social elements of this event. Whatever the variants, however, careful scrutiny reveals two things present across most of these accounts as rites of passage. Firstly, there is a more obvious sense of impending loss, or more accurately a sense of passing through a transition and losing one’s place in the sexual/gender regime. Secondly, the onset of illumination stimulates trenchant criticism of the gender system. This latter voice grows louder with time and age but is still muffled in terms of mainstream society by hegemonic discourse surrounding the double-standard of ageing (Banner, 1993; Krekula, 2007) which overlays it with a carapace of female loss, lack and bitterness.

Regardless of the specificities of the individual plot, my broader aim is to demonstrate how the experience of the last love affair serves as a heuristic, through which women ‘learn’ what the sexual double-standard of ageing is and how it works, as well as what their own response to it should be. As a powerful late life rite of passage, I suggest that it serves as a bridge that ‘divides’ women’s lives into two stages: sexual (youthful) and post-sexual (older/old), a means to convey her from one stage of her life to another. To demonstrate this, I will draw on a range of novels and memoirs written by women both in contemporary and earlier times. This includes literature and life writing written over the past ten years by Sandra Tsing Loh, Robin Rinaldi, Viv Albertine and Stella Grey, novels by Louise Doughty, Helen Walsh and Jane Allison, as well as literature that is several decades old by Doris Lessing. Although the novel by Lessing was published in the 1970s references to it recur through the more recent texts, serving as inspiration, touchstone and comparator. In terms of the contemporary writers, across the sample, they write from a variety of class positions and two of the writers are women of colour (Loh and Walsh). The contemporary books were published in the past ten years and were selected for their prominence in the sense of being reviewed by major newspapers – including *The Sunday Times*, *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*. One of them (*Apple Tree Yard* by Louise Doughty) was made into a TV adaptation, starring Emily Watson and Ben Chaplin, creating quite a stir (with many reviews in national quality and popular newspapers as well as many below the line comments by readers). I also here note my own positionality as a woman in my fifties who is both a social gerontologist and one who is an avid ‘reader’ of such fiction and life writing for personal, as well as professional, reasons. As such I exactly fit the profile of the readership at which these books are aimed but at the same time I would say that this in itself carries particular merit. Gullette has pointed out[[1]](#endnote-1) that age studies is one of the few body-based disciplines in which those people about whom we write (including older women) make up a minority of researchers in the field (unlike gender and race studies for instance). Therefore, and in that these books have actively impacted on me and other women my age, I do not see it as problematic that I have found these books in my ‘real life’ (of which my scholarly life is an important, but not separate, part) rather than through, for example, entering search terms in google scholar or other specialised databases. Other writers I could have drawn on here include Rosamond Lehmann, Anita Brooker, Toni Morrison, Faye Weldon, Margaret Drabble and many others, but I have had to limit my choices in such a short article.

I approach these texts as a sociologist mining them for the light they shed on social practices together with the ideological approaches to older women’s sexuality, and because they are useful too in revealing the lesser-known aspects of ageing women’s lives, such as empowerment and pleasure, which are lived alongside the dominant narratives of decline, but often unseen in the latter’s shadow. Since most texts are either straightforward memoir or autobiographically infused fiction this seems particularly appropriate, although obviously this lived material is ‘turned’ into a story, subsequently reflecting what it is acceptable and even possible for mid-life women to articulate at this point in history. To me, the sensitive, often paradoxical, material this generates is hard to capture in sociology’s more traditional empirical methodologies – the interview or observation – and is best found in literature which, as Avery Gordon points out, for the social scientist, “often teaches us, through imaginative design, what we need to know but cannot quite get access to with our given rules of method and modes and modes of apprehension” (2008:25).

The purpose in using both older and contemporary writing of this kind by women is to demonstrate that the double-standard of ageing is still apposite in describing women’s experiences today, which in turn indicates that, despite the manifold changes in the gender regime, there is an enduring strata of inequality that remains as a bedrock, beneath the legal and political advances. It also suggests that ‘age’ is one way in which such inequality is able to endure, presenting itself, as it does, as something natural and irrevocable. The themes I discuss in the next section were selected as being both particularly striking and recurrent throughout the books, into which the complexities and vast differences in plot and detail can be folded. These comprise: (i) viewing the possibility of a sexual relationship at this point in their life as a ‘last chance’; (ii) accepting and normalising ageing through a reflection on appearance and the experience of friends and relatives; (iii) viewing this ‘last love affair’ as a rite of passage, a mode in which women move from a more youthful stage in their lives to a post-sexual and distinctly older stage; (iv) ‘looking back’ in which one affirms one’s place as both an older and post-sexual woman. The first two themes are negative predicated on loss and nostalgia; the third is positive and the fourth ambiguous, with a mix of nostalgia and growth, loss and gain. Finally (v) I will describe how the ‘last love affair’, where it succeeds, can also provide a positive context in which to age powerfully as women. Moreover, the positive themes also have the capacity to challenge our views of gender and sexuality, highlighting the oppressive power that sexual relationships still contain for women of all ages, but also suggesting more feminist ways of ‘doing love’.

1. **Seizing the last chance**

In this section, I present examples of the ‘last chance’ – how it feels and what it means and represents to women in mid-life. In the examples I will present below, this includes awareness of both endings and beginnings, it expresses a sense of dissatisfaction or limits with certain aspects of life, and also represents freedom. Here is how Sandra Tsing Loh describes it in her 2014 memoir, *The Madwoman in the Volvo:* her time aged 46 when she had a huge late-blooming desire for one more love affair, which longing comes upon her while she is at the Burning Man festival:

How interesting that it had turned out that at forty-six I wasn’t entirely done. There was one last man on earth I truly wanted to sleep with. In a moment, perhaps, this desire would be gone, forgotten, and on Sunday the temple with its dead letters and wedding dresses, would be burned. Then Monday would be Monday. Tuesday would be Tuesday. Life would continue as usual because my youth was over (pp. 32-3).

She begins this affair and through the book she describes it as a kind of raging against the ending of youth expressed through the craziness of first love: ”My Y and I exploded into a second adolescence. We were like pirates. We smoked, drank, cursed and met in hotel rooms. It was a fast adrenaline rush all the time... Mr Y was love, Mr Y was life, Mr Y was magic” (p. 33). Reliving the exhilaration of youth is an unsurprising thrill when, as Sontag notes, society confers “emotional privileges” upon youth, including its association with positive and desirable elements such as “energy, restless mobility, appetite” (p. 30).

In terms of the last chance, there are two elements particularly relevant to the female life course. The first concerns fertility. Robin Rinaldi, embarking on a search for last love in her early 40s, nevertheless at 42, wishes so much she was ten years younger, for fertility, she feels, is a marker of two phases of life – one containing potentiality, the other loss:

I’d have given anything to be thirty-two again, with ten years of healthy eggs left in my womb, for in my mind, regardless of child-bearing, that biological marker formed the dividing line between the first half of life, when every moment thrilled with potential, and the second half, when even the best moments harboured a seed of loss (p. 143).

This way of looking at the body imbues women’s assessment of the life course with a deep sense of decline and, as such, is very much associated with the biological clock discourse.

A second involves a sense of gender injustice of which an interesting example is that of *Apple Tree Yard* by Louise Doughty. The female protagonist of this fictional thriller, Dr Yvonne Carmichael, who is about a decade older than both Loh and Rinaldi, being in her early fifties, describes her very contemporary reasons for embarking on this last love affair which are, indeed, multi-layered. They comprise an urge to escape the relentless linear movement of age and time, but also to escape the responsibilities of a serious career (she is a well-respected scientist). The impulse is freighted by a sense of loss and nostalgia for the quotidian losses that accompany this period of life such as the end of intimacy in a long marriage, a feeling of losing her place in the sexual regime as well as of losing out as her daughter comes of age in what she imagines are better circumstances for women. It mostly, however, constitutes the attempt at an escape from the grinding pressures that ‘having it all’ impose on her and which means she has less time and freedom than her husband, another academic. It is a release from the dispositions she has cultivated in ‘having it all’ – the self-discipline, sacrifice, delayed gratification, that she seeks in a mid-life affair, the regulated and disciplined time, that mean “my time was considered to belong to our family unit unless I signalled that I wanted out. His time was considered to belong to himself and his work unless I demanded that he opt in” (2014: 119). As she explained, she “fell out of love” with her own “competence” – which had come to feel like a form of entrapment (p. 409). It is as if this is the last attempt to escape from a life that is both that of a liberated woman and yet curiously not at all free. In Doughty’s thriller, the theme of danger is particularly pronounced because the affair is presented as transgressive in ways that are both liberating but also destructive as it turns out that the consequences of this last fling include the downfall of her career and the ruination of her reputation, as she stands trial with her lover for murder (although she can be seen very much as the victim in this arc). The underlying message is that female sexual agency, especially when fired by a sense of gender injustice, carries risks and dangers perhaps particularly so in later life (a message that reverberates through popular movies, underpinning Billy Wilder’s 1950 movie *Sunset Boulevard* as much as Woody Allen’s *Wonder Wheel*, released in 2017).

1. **Internalising the double standard**

Women’s narratives also reveal how the lived experience of passing through the ‘last love affair’ is one way in which the double standard of ageing shapes women’s interpretation of the trajectory of their lives, and view of past and future, their bodies and themselves. This is aided through comparison with older and younger generations, as well as with peers. My first example here is that of Helen Walsh’s 2014 novel, *The Lemon Grove*, which depicts the double standard of ageing as being ‘learnt’ by intergenerational comparison. Indeed, this comparison is made all the more piercing in that the love affair of her protagonist, Jen, is conducted with her teenage (step)daughter’s boyfriend. First contemplating her own marriage alongside her daughter’s new relationship, she sees herself in terms only of loss, decline and regret. So Jen looks back and regrets all the sexual experiences she forewent when she was young:

If only someone older and wiser had told *her*. Told her that, after a certain point in a woman’s life, her past becomes open to re-evaluation. Once her flesh grows soft; once she gets married and has kids; once her allure dims; once that woman ceases to be a proposition, nobody cares *what you were*, anyway. Nobody remembers. You exist to others only in relation to *what you became* – your husband, your kids, your job (p. 105).

Not only is this a gynophobic judgement that the female protagonist has internalised but worse, as Sontag writes: ‘The time at which [women] start being disqualified as sexually attractive persons is just when they have grown up sexually’ (p. 33) namely when women’s sexual agency is most developed. But, embarking on a relationship with the teenage boy does not increase Jen’s confidence and, on the contrary, after each of their encounters there follows intense critical scrutiny of her body:

She locks herself in the bathroom and strips and stands in front of the mirror and stares at herself with a hatred she hasn’t felt since her acne years. The way her strap lines dig into her comfortable shoulders; her unruly pubic hair; her striated breasts – full enough but old, useless; that vein in her calf, starting to become raised and prominent; her stout arms, thick from all those years of lifting old folk in and out of their baths; their beds. Dark crescents beneath her eyes; lines all around them, like knife-cuts…An old woman, yes; she is old. Such a cruel trick of nature, she thinks, to age her body faster than it has aged her mind (p. 187).

In another kind of comparison, other women look ahead to the sexual careers of their mothers as if to a very much feared and reviled fate. Jane Allison writes about this in her 2016 autobiographical novel *Nine Island.* Following a divorce, the protagonist, ‘J’, reviews the history of her love life with a jaundiced eye. Yet, mulling over the idea of giving up on sexual love altogether she finds she is not yet ready to do so: romantic longing still pierces her and she is still caught in the nets of gendered expectation, which is to say of waiting and hoping to be ‘chosen’ as a sexual partner (Leccardi and Rampazi, 1997). When she reconnects with a former boyfriend, who causes her much heartbreak, for the second time, she returns to this idea of turning her back on romantic love and the associated state of gendered expectation. Feeling acute loss, she becomes reflexive: “But give up on *what*, exactly, I have to ask myself. Has it not been decades of comical disaster? Should be good to give up on disaster” (p. 4), she reflects. Still, a factor working against such potential liberation, and keeping her tied to the treadmill of unsatisfactory sexual relationships, is that she enters mid-life frankly terrified of sharing her mother’s fate, she whose supply of lovers has dwindled relentlessly during the years. “She is a lady who’s sailed the seas of love, all the way from Australia,” J observes. “She’s had a long career in men, trailing me along through husbands, then boyfriend… until finally the seas dried up and she landed alone” (2016: 4). Consoling J after the heartbreak ex-boyfriend, (‘Sir Gold’), her mother decides to give J the benefit of her experience: “Well, she said, placing her spotted hand on mine. Well, well. Maybe, darling, you should give up on all that. Maybe it’s just *time*” (p. 5).

Later, counting the days since she last had sex, J gleans from her mother another grimly unwelcome warning of things to come in the so-called spectre of vaginal atrophy. Her mother had been at the gynaecologist’s “and when he stepped outside she quickly swivelled her chart:  *vaginal atrophy* in his blue ink” (p. 47). This phrase and concept holds a particular dread and resonance for mid-life women. It is, of course, bound up with menopause discourse meaning that understanding of one’s position in the gender regime is infused with medical meanings that give decline an anatomical basis. The fear of ‘the end’ keeps women invested in ‘romance’ for as long as they can even though they may have real reservations and resistances towards it as well as towards the male privilege it enshrines.

1. **Last Love as a rite of passage**

Whilst male-perspective novels and memoir often contribute to the decrease in status of older women, if only because of the (socially legitimated) midlife search for a younger partner, feminist novels or the autobiographical perspectives of powerful and self-assured women suggest that there is something empowering and liberating beyond youthful gender roles and for which the last love affair very often serves as a rite of passage. Kate Brown in Doris Lessing’s 1973 *The Summer Before the Dark* is the classic example of this and remains both pertinent and instructive to women today, as noted, with its themes continuing to reverberate in contemporary texts, so I will spend longer detailing it. Unlike rites of passage in more traditional societies, these are very individualistic, with little known or understood in advance by women and very little shared directly between generations. Indeed, women’s literature itself may serve as the best guide for many women in this regard (e.g. see Jane Shilling, 2011). We can remind ourselves here of the insights of Raymond Williams who, in describing the emergence of a new structure of feeling notes: “All that escapes [us]. is grasped… as the personal: this, here, now, alive, active subjective.” The structure of feeling defines not only “a social experience that is still in *proces*s*,*” but also social experiences that are often not “recognised as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating” (1977: 128-132).

Kate Brown is shoved rudely out of her comfort zone when her children are all on the point of, or have already, left home, and no longer need her. She has a difficult relationship with the youngest, whom feels she smothers him, and who has departed for a spell abroad: it is an abrupt ejection from her mothering role. Also, there is an end to the housewifely role she has played for twenty-five years; her Professor husband has left for the US for a semester, leaving her behind: besides, he is fond of affairs with younger women and, disappointed and somewhat bruised by this, she has long lost respect for him. None of the children will be at the home that summer, meaning that the family home that has provided her with a role and meaning now stands empty.

Kate, who as a young bright girl had been ambitious enough to attend Oxford University where she studied languages, has spent the whole of her married life as a housewife and mother. But, during this summer when she is alone, she is offered a job as a translator and as she proves her skills, so this emboldens her. It is during an international conference that she meets a younger man with whom she has an affair. Whilst proving to be of slight importance to Kate in and of itself, the affair’s significance lies in the way it serves as a vehicle through which she can process the big life changes she is going through: specifically, the shift to another life stage with a new place in the gender system. She also catches a feverish illness from her beau – unspecified but possibly typhoid or something similar that causes a few weeks of acute sickness and debilitation – and this further precipitates a shift in her self-consciousness and embodied self-awareness. Kate, though caught in circumstances outside her control, is nevertheless always a conscious agent, making careful choices as she reaches each fork of the road; choices that embrace, rather than resist, change and that adopt a questing stance towards the future. Before Kate embarks on her affair with the young man (who is not much older than her oldest child) she feels herself to be “on the verge of middle-age … she had not chosen to enter the state” (p. 37). With the affair, there is a surge of agency, but the affair’s importance for Kate lies in its functioning as a launch pad into the new phase of life, a lever for change. It stimulates her to look back and review her whole life as a woman, and to see it as ‘a gigantic con-trick’ and herself as a “fatted white goose” (p. 89). But her “life as a woman” is done (and here she surely means: in the **Beauvoirian** sense, that of being the ‘second sex’). Furthermore, she realises that, after this summer, “the future would continue from where she had left off as a child” (p. 120). It seemed “as if she were just coming round from a spell of madness that had lasted all the years since that point in early adolescence when her nature had demanded she must get herself a man… until recently, when the drug had begun to wear off. All those years were now seeming like a betrayal of what she really was” (p. 121). Precipitated by the introspection that accompanies her illness, crucially it is the transformation of her appearance through that illness – a transformation which she can arrest, if she so chooses, by an overdue visit to a hairdresser most particularly to cover up her grey roots with the help of hair dye, but which she chooses instead to accept first tacitly then consciously and purposefully by growing out these grey roots – which is central to this shift in consciousness. Thereafter, she experiments with her walk and further with her appearance, putting on and taking off the feminine masquerade. From the age of 16 she had ‘looked into mirrors and seen what other people would judge her by. “But no more. Now, her purpose is recovering herself, “what she really is” (ibid), by leaving behind the role of living-for-others (a quintessentially ‘feminine’ approach) and becoming a person in her own right, self- rather than other-directed. She also ‘sees through’ the gender hierarchy, and her former role in it.

This experience recurs, with individual variants, in the literature by and about mid-life women up to the current time. Indeed, returning to the contemporary memoir by Sandra Tsing Loh, discussed briefly in terms of theme (i): hers is a variant in real life of Kate Brown’s, played out forty years later. Thus, following an arc which rises and falls via intense emotional experience - exhilaration followed by disenchantment - Loh detaches herself from the narrow conception of gender in which she had acquiesced for many years and lets go of the dream of heterosexual romance. But there are other elements of self-development that accompany this. For example, she has understood something of what is required for her to complete her individuation from her mother. After a painful journey, in which her relationship with Mr Y ends sadly, she finally has a keen insight at a barbecue with friends in which she notices that the menopausal women and the middle-aged men accommodate each other but no longer believe in the ‘life saver myths’ of heterosexuality: instead, she observes, there is a nice balance, a companionship, a more realistic idea of who one is:

The air is refreshingly free of sexual tension. No one gives a fuck about the big proscenium drama of heterosexuality anymore, no one believes that escape from life’s basic tedium will come in the corpus of another person. Staring unapologetically into the grill are the men of menopause, and clinking pinot grigio are the women of menopause: the un-dateables (2014:184).

Likewise, she now realises that her relationship with Mr Y was doomed because she saw him as her saviour, a parent-figure into whose body she could merge, and who would bring her story to closure. “I had thought he was the sunny island my shipwreck had landed on. I had thought he was the final safe harbour. I had thought he was this calm glowing orb hovering in a cloudless blue sky of unconditional love. I suppose I thought he was my mother, or at least the manifestation of the love of my mother, or perhaps her living ghost” (p. 195). She had in fact lost her mother to early dementia even before her actual death, and well before she was ready; it is interesting that she observes, in the whole “proscenium drama” of heterosexuality her own unresolved issues around relationality, individuation and the (often very prolonged) female search for the right balance between autonomy and connection. In such a way, she comes to a deep understanding of the issues she needs to resolve in order to grow up finally, to mature and thus to undergo a true individuation. Here, very clearly, is the last love affair as an instrument of real growth.

1. **The mid-life love affair as confirming old age**

This theme - be it a discourse or a rite of passage - is not a discrete and one-off event that neatly separates one phase of life from another, with clear expectations pertaining to each. Indeed, the desire for a ‘last love affair’ – inflected, as it is, with a narrative of decline, perceived lack of value and turning to the past – may recur at later points in the life course. In fact, it springs in such a way, entirely unexpectedly, on the protagonists of late novels by Doris Lessing and Marilyn French. Occurring in the lives of these sexagenarians, Sarah Durham and Hermione Beldame respectively, the (unrealised) possibility of a last love affair confirms them in ‘old age’ proper and serves to mark the boundary not of ageing but, as they see it, of old age, a stage separate from their youthful prime. Unfortunately, it can also do so within the “master narrative of decline” (Gullette, 2004) and even where women have embraced their maturity as empowerment, it can introduce a sense of regret and loss, sneaking up from behind, as it were.

In Marilyn French’s 1996 novel, *My Summer with George*, Hermione, a woman in her sixties, spends the summer in question hankering after a possible love affair with George (slightly younger, in his mid-fifties, but with a distinct preference for much younger women). The feelings this elicits in Hermione result in a heartfelt reflection on her entire romantic career going back to youthful times. There is, for example, an interesting observation on the importance of ‘desire’ and its place in her life and an assessment of its connection with life stage. She reflects: “Before my mid-50s, I met attractive men with some regularity. I could count on meeting at least one every few months… a light regularly went on in me, indicating that I was sexually alive. I relished the feeling.” But, she notes: “This was no longer the case. Nowadays, not just months but years went by without my meeting a man who shimmered for me, who made the night brilliant” (p. 65). She reflects also on how she “missed” desire and this is why she values the prospect of a love affair, even if it is one that takes place mostly in her head: “This feeling was too rare, too precious nowadays for me to let it go, even if grasping it meant I would eventually suffer – indeed was suffering already” (p. 66).

The novel ends with Hermione expressing a great outpouring of loss, nostalgia and even grief: grief for herself, grief for her ejection from a world that only youthful woman are admitted to:

I do not know how to think about the fact that I may reach some great age, my face skeletal beneath the wrinkled folds of flesh pulled away from the bone, my eyes sunken into dark pockets of pain my walk tottering and unsure, my body a tattered coat upon a stick, and still be on the lookout, have an eye out for, be seeking always and ever a certain voice and eye, a certain look…. An invitation to the waltz...(p. 242-3).

Sarah Durham, protagonist of *Love, Again,* Doris Lessing’s version of the same unexpected-return-of-desire plot, is more acquiescent at least in the end of love. Indeed, as if it were an unpleasant addiction, over the course of the novel she weans herself off an awkward infatuation and accepts her later life stage in terms that grasp both its positive and negative dimensions. This achievement is not without enormous, and painful, struggle for her and it is also extremely nuanced as an experience. What she seems to be doing is accepting the end of love by forcing herself to ‘see’ the old woman in the mirror – the woman others see – as herself, to thereby internalise the view of her as past love, despite her amorous feelings for a (younger) man. But it is more than this in that it is also borne of a desire to return to the peaceful equanimity with which she begins this novel and which she associates with old age, which includes as a central element the fact that she had not fallen in love for some twenty years. The struggle is as much one concerned to burn away these youthful dispositions in terms of the gendered norms of heterosexuality as it is anything else. That is why, at the end of the story, when the struggle is over and she has vanquished these gendered dispositions, Lessing writes of her: “She has aged by ten years… her hair, which for so long remained like a smooth dulled metal, now has grey bands across the front. She has acquired that slow cautious look of the elderly, as if afraid of what they will see around the next corner” (p. 337). This transition has a body-based element, indeed, and, despite the ideological messages, and the social construction of ageing that is involved, there is also some material and experiential truth to this in terms of her positioning on the map of life.

1. **A happy beginning**

I have come across comparatively few stories telling of last flings that become enduring love, but two that do make clear how this last relationship can play a positive role in supporting and sustaining self-development beyond the gendered norms that characterise earlier life.

My first example is from the memoir by Robin Rinaldi and is drawn from the experience of a woman approaching 50. Towards the end of the book, she makes the decision to leave Scott, her partner of eighteen years, for Alden, her new lover. She has outgrown her partner, and more importantly, she has outgrown the version of herself that needed his care and protection. She is no longer the vulnerable and insecure young woman in need of his steady energy, and indeed that energy now felt constraining and unsatisfactory, both in its lack of passion and in the fact that it enabled her, likewise, to remain uncommitted and ambivalent; ‘ambivalence’ is, moreover, a state of mind, a suppressed agency and inability to think ahead associated with youthful femininity (Pickard, 2020). When making this decision, on the contrary, she is very aware of time, “thinking forward to the grave”, as she puts it (2015: 255) and being truly decisive for the first time ever. Upon leaving Scott, she also leaves behind many things associated with the last eighteen years of her life. Looking back on this, some few years later, she reflects: “Even though I knew that passion and safety don’t often commingle, I couldn’t give the desire up. On midlife’s stark stage of last chances, decisions must be made.” She goes on: “In choosing Alden, I had thought that I was tossing aside one for the other, but instead I got both – passion with him and security from a new, unexpected source: myself” (p. 286). But she is clear that this is not a “happy ending” – in the sense of that kind of relationship, perhaps involving motherhood and a focus on family life – that serves as a kind of closing down of an individual project. Her own vision of happiness, rather, involves something she describes as “wiser, less dependent on circumstance, and even in the midst of beloved others, unfolding inside a deepening solitude” (p. 284). A happy beginning then, perhaps, as a mature and agentic woman?

I take my second example from the memoirs of Alix Kates Shulman (1995; 2008), two memoirs to be precise, writing of her life at 50 and again at 75. For Shulman, her 50-something search for a new way of being a woman involved withdrawing from her old life and all it contained, including her marriage. But she took with her to the remote cabin in Maine, where she went seeking new values and maturity, a feeling of obsolescence, and a fear of being replaced by younger women (including in the arms of her soon to be ex-husband). After a long period of self-discovery, involving a recalibration of her relationship with space and time, with appetite and with embodiment, an old boyfriend returns, someone whom she last saw thirty-five years previously, and in him she finds a partner who supports and nurtures her reinvention. This relationship, moreover, possesses the unique ability to mix old and new, to see what she wishes to discard and what to retain from her old life. Of her new (old) beau, (also called Scott), she notes: “A connoisseur of age, he helps our past shine through the present like pentimento, the re-emergence on a canvas of an older design” (1995: 177). In the later memoir, written when she is in her mid-70s, she notes again that this new relationship was an opportunity to reassess and review her life, including the progress she’d made as a committed feminist all these years, in combining autonomy and interdependence, solitude and care. But with the change, there is also a strong element of continuity shining through that takes the sting out of ageing: “And the wrinkles and lapses of memory too had begun in our youth and accompanied us on every step of the way, along with our share of broken bones and progressive hair loss – all unremarkable, ubiquitous” (2008: 83). In this late relationship, for Shulman, sex, but not sensuality, was of far less importance; she describes it as being ‘more an adjunct, an ecstasy, a deepening, than the engine of our intimacy’ (p. 73), whilst cuddling, dancing, spending whole days watching movies in bed with ice cream, remained ever valuable. When Scott has an accident, and suffers brain damage, she cares for him, and the relationship helps her to face (his) mortality and (her) future of deep old age, with a sense of adventure and optimism, which, drawing from the writer Michael Ondaatje, she likens to “an open door you can’t see too far out of” (2008: 175). Thus, this relationship serves as the engine not just for a happy beginning but for many happy beginnings, stretching out into the foreseeable future, something that works directly counter to the dominant narrative of decline.

Surely, if the protagonists of Doris Lessing and Marilyn French’s lost late love novels had encountered such opportunities, their stories may have been rather different.

**Reflections and conclusion**

I have argued that the ‘last love affair’ motif is one of the ways in which women are aged by culture, sooner and more viciously, than are men. The paper has also suggested some ways in which the double standard works to age women culturally within the master narrative of decline, which includes: perceiving the mid-life affair as a ‘last chance’ to be youthful and feminine after which one acquiesces to ageing with all that this means in terms of status, value and expectations. The life writing and fiction written by the women I have drawn on here for illustrative purposes has also revealed the rich, complex and paradoxical nature of this trope, including as a means of oppression but also as a vehicle for radical change, greater agency and further ongoing self-development, whether it ultimately ‘works out’ in relationship terms or not.

My approach to the material has combined numerous diverse sources into five themes, drawing on many writers from past and present. An alternative approach, and one that would yield rich dividends, would be to explore these themes in the work of one or two writers, showing the impact of the double standard in its various thematic dimensions across several decades and stages, in a woman’s identity more broadly as well as in terms of her gendered and sexual self. The works of Marilyn French, Doris Lessing and Alix Kates Shulman all suggest themselves as good possibilities.

In her paper, Sontag suggests that an empowered response, or form of resistance, to the double standard would be to disobey convention, to embrace ageing and womanliness, over girlhood, and from a base of maturity, early in the life course, to reject any temptation to youthfulness, in the patriarchal sense. We can draw from contemporary life writing to add to these suggestions. In her 2018 memoir, Viv Albertine describes how she trained herself to find older men attractive noting: “I’d walk down Oxford Street looking at bald men and men with grey hair and paunches and say to myself, *He’s about my age, that’s the demographic that I should be looking at*” (p. 75). But at the same time she recognises that men do not undertake this kind of aesthetic resocialisation with respect to women of their own age. Perhaps, then, women should also cease to make this kind of effort? Another form of resistance would be to use the vantage point of later life from which to critique the patriarchal structures and conventions of heterosexuality in which younger women (and men) continue to experience themselves as sexual beings. For example, both Freudian and Weberian theories of gender and sexuality posit an incompatibility between “love” and “greatness”, with women being aligned with the former, both in their domestic and caring roles and in the relational dispositions (both, I stress, achieved through socialisation), and men the latter – and which in essence defines the structures of patriarchy itself. Furthermore, Weber notes that although patriarchal erotic love can serve to enchant the world, as well as countering the instrumentalisation of commodification of human relations, for women especially sexuality enables “the most intimate coercion of the soul” (1946: 348; quoted in Bologh, p. 160). Roslyn Wallach Bologh notes that within the terms of this patriarchal social order, “the subjectivity of the other must be rendered powerless, the other’s will conquered. After eliminating the other’s will and hence difference from self, the body alone remains as the only kind of difference that can be a possible object of desire” (2009: 174). An alternative, and feminist, view of eros and the erotic is then put forward by Bologh in terms of ‘erotic sociability’ found in friendships, in projects, in sensuous as well as intellectual enjoyment, placing the emphasis away from genital sexuality (whether hetero- or homosexual). However, it may be that women who are post-sexual in this sense are best placed to explore alternative erotic sociabilities (Bologh, 2009), whilst their writing and talking about them may then serve to challenge conventional sexualities at earlier phases in the life course, to queer sexuality, to put it differently, from the perspective of later life. Indeed, the two last relationships I described in this paper that ‘worked out’ encapsulate this feminist perspective, although it is by no means the case that a relationship is the only means to access such an experience. These latter stories, when proliferated, and circulated, can also serve to challenge the idea that older women are not desirable partners for intimacy with men, an aspect of the patriarchal order that feminism has done little, so far, to change, but which cannot, surely, be merely accepted (Segal, 2017). Of course, it has been observed that women may find sexual partners in other women, sometimes for the first time in later life. Segal again reflects: “It is by other women, rather than by men, that I more often feel myself desired nowadays” (2017: 208-9) and whilst that may be a happy experience for many, the need to challenge male judgements of older women’s gender and sexuality remains important for all women.

This paper also reminds us of the need to focus on ‘ageing’ as a social fact, an ideological practice and one that, working in a range of subtle and not-so-subtle ways, is yet a factor in the increasing material gender gap that widens with age. Finally, the fact that the double standard of ageing remains consistent in regulating women’s lives today as much perhaps as it did 50 years ago and more suggests both a gender inequality that has not gone away and one that works at least in part, and for the most part covertly, through age itself.

**Notes**

1. Margaret Morganroth Gullette made this observation during a symposium in the 2019 joint international conferences of the North American and European Network in Aging Studies hosted by the Trent Centre for Aging and Society

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1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)