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Réorientation vers l'invisible: Une analyse de la vulnérabilité dans Three Things about Elsie de Joanna Cannon

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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'To age is to reveal vulnerability in the most
manifest of ways'
(GILSON 315).

- 1 Embodied life has traditionally been one of the clearest forms of manifestation of vulnerability, as the theories of Judith Butler, Bryan S. Turner or Alasdair Macintyre among others have demonstrated. In that attachment to physicality, vulnerability tends to be observed as particularly acute in the extremes of life, in childhood and old age. If Gilson's above statement is true, it strikes me now as particularly relevant through the prism of the sanitary crisis provoked by the Covid-19. In the current atmosphere, vulnerability appears to have been accentuated. As Butler contends, the crisis seems to have exposed 'the porous and interdependent character of our bodily and social lives' (Yancy 2020). In other words, vulnerability has become openly visible,

discussed, and materialised in how the risk of contagion, illness, death, and mourning have tinged all aspects of everyday life.

- 2 The pandemic has also laid bare how bodily vulnerability is radically unequal in its distribution (Butler 2004, 24). There have been higher infection rates in the humblest neighbourhoods and the homeless all over the world have suffered one of the most violent impacts of the coronavirus. However, one of the worst consequences has been the way the old have been misrepresented and treated during the pandemic. This has paved the way for the spreading of an ageist judgement all over the world, or as Sarah Fraser et al. put it: ‘the current crisis highlights a disturbing public discourse about ageing that questions the value of older adults’ lives and disregards their valuable contributions to society’ (Fraser 3).
- 3 From the vantage point of a social situation that has put vulnerability to the fore, I seek to turn to fiction to reconsider the mechanisms at work in the process of the old’s exclusion and invisibility. In what follows I discuss Joanna Cannon’s novel *Three Things About Elsie* (2018) in the light of Judith Butler’s conceptualisation of social vulnerability and mourning, as well as Guillaume Le Blanc’s conception of exclusion. I reflect on the blurry boundaries between life and death, illness and health, visibility and concealment, to see how vulnerability manifests in those in-between scenarios, dismantling their binary categories. By analysing the way vulnerability is portrayed in the novel, in terms of content and form, I want to demonstrate that Cannon’s piece is an example of a text that thematises and flaunts vulnerability (Ganteau 2015, 166), reorienting the reader towards a more ethical inclination for the ageing other.
- 4 *Three Things About Elsie* opens with what Jean-Michel Ganteau considers a recurrent trope in narratives of vulnerability (2015, 140): the image of the human body, curled up, lying down, waiting. The protagonist, Florence Claybourne, an eighty-four-year-old woman has had an accidental fall in her room of Cherry Tree, the home for the elderly where she lives. The narrative combines Florence’s thoughts as she lies on the floor with a series of events that took place the month before. The story of that month is told from three different points of view, Florence’s first-person narration, and two staff members’ accounts written in third person: Miss Ambrose’s, the home manager, and Handy Simon’s, who, as the name indicates, is the handyman of the home accommodation. Whereas most sections are simply introduced by the name of the character responsible for the focalisation of the narrative, the passages corresponding to Florence’s wait are introduced by a concrete hour that goes from 4.48 p.m. to 11:12 p.m., marking how time passes for Florence in her waiting and her helplessness, giving the impression that it is always too late, a feeling that looms large in the novel. In fact, the image of waiting, ‘the most effective expression of passivity, exposure and vulnerability’ (Ganteau 2015, 144), is present on almost every page, underlining the characters’ lack of agency. These sections are strongly attached to their projection towards a future that can only be imagined, not performed, as the narrative remains static in Florence’s present, creating temporal disarray that is reinforced when the narrative moves back and forth the previous month.
- 5 This disjointed temporality is aggravated in the first of Florence’s passages lying on the floor when after almost two pages explaining how she will be found, she addresses the reader saying: ‘Everything I’ve just told you is yet to happen. None of it is real . . . I’m lying on the sitting-room floor waiting to be found . . . I have all this time before they arrive, to work out what I am going to say. All this time to remember everything that

happened' (Cannon 2–3; emphasis added). Thus, from very early in the narrative, unreliability and memory fragmentation combine with the passing of time, underlining the vulnerability of both text and protagonist. From this point, the reader is also positioned from the beginning as an active observer of Florence's decay, who is almost invited to accompany her and bear witness as time passes for her and as she tries to remember the story. This provokes a feeling of anxious complicity as the possibility of Florence's dying unattended becomes more and more feasible as the narrative moves in what could be understood as an 'elegy to come' (Ganteau 2015, 154).

- 6 This type of narrative corresponds to what Ganteau defines as a narrative written in 'vulnerable form': a text that both shows and performs the vulnerability it thematises (Ganteau 2014, 97). Using various narrative strategies that provoke contradiction or misunderstanding in the reader, the text recalls the experience of trauma. In this case, I would add that the narrative helps to mirror the functioning of senile memory, combining past and present events, making use of repetition, memory gaps, ellipsis, as well as fusing both real and imagined worlds. This is one example of how the text risks readers' rejection and exposes its own vulnerability.
- 7 There are of course other more evident forms of vulnerability, for instance, the representation of physical vulnerability looms large in the text. Florence waits because she is physically dependant on others to stand up and recover from the fall. Her source of vulnerability is thus, firstly physical. The condition of human embodiment linked to vulnerability has been widely explored by many authors and it is often acknowledged as a unifying aspect of being human, but also, as a determinant characteristic of how a person sees oneself and relates to others. For Bryan S. Turner, for example, vulnerability is intrinsically connected to the body, precisely because of its unavoidable relation to ageing, disability, and ultimately death (Turner 2006, 29). For him, 'who we are is a social process that is always constructed in terms of a particular experience of embodiment' (27). For Judith Butler, the body directly implies vulnerability as a site of exposure and dependence to others, as the body is to her, ultimately, 'a social phenomenon' (2009, 33). However, Butler also states that human physical vulnerability is radically differently distributed across the globe (2004, 32). Cannon's novel shows an example of how physical vulnerability is significantly aggravated in old age. As Florence's old body compromises her autonomy and makes her more dependent on others to carry out actions as quotidian as standing up, eat or shower, her experience of the world is directly influenced by her physicality. This makes her more vulnerable to others' decisions, actions, and possible exploitation. Her body is her own and at the same time, it does not belong to her more than it does to her carers.
- 8 Florence's physical vulnerability also manifests as a site of invisibilisation. Her appearance as an old woman places her into the wider category of "the old", which has direct consequences in the social fabric that renders the elderly unremarkable and invisible. Her reflection in the mirror sometimes surprises her. She thinks: 'I looked in the mirror and wonder how long I'd looked this old' (Cannon 98), and later she does not even recognise her face anymore (Cannon 182). This image of the old woman in front of the mirror reflecting on her ageing process, her past and present is a common trope of gerontological fiction (Arias 4–5) and serves here as a metaphor for the passing of time that becomes materialised in the ageing body. We infer this not only from Florence's experience but also from Miss Ambrose, who is somewhere between her late thirties and mid-forties and already struggling with her reflection in a compact mirror (Cannon

38–39) moving “between denial and acceptance” of her incipient ageing process (Cannon 40–42). This works once more as a reminder of how the passing of time, physical decay and vulnerability are common to all.

- 9 Physical vulnerability, irregularly distributed in Butler’s terms, also serves as an indicator of the (dis)-connection between one’s perception of one’s own body and how others may see it. In the book, this difference is noticeably portrayed through the way younger characters observe the old. For instance, Simon makes several reflections on this line: ‘I don’t know how you tell them apart . . . there’s so many of them, and they all look the same’ (Cannon 39), or: ‘They were creatures of habit, the elderly. They frequented the *same* rooms, and ate the *same* meals at the *same* times. They watched the world from an *identical* view each day, and had the *same* conversations in the *same* corridors with the *same* people’ (Cannon 150, emphasis added). This view of the old as emotionally and physically alike ‘unless you’re concentrating’ (Cannon 295) contrasts with Florence’s observations when, being aware of how others see the old, she thinks: ‘People have the idea that old people always get along with each other, that everyone swims in the same direction like a shoal of fish’ (Cannon 300). These and many other examples from the book show how often old people are transformed into a homogeneous category. The reinforcement of the idea of similarity among the old through the repetition of words such as “identical” or “same” facilitates their objectification, they become the *other*, different from *us*, and therefore, easier to dehumanise and exclude.
- 10 Following Le Blanc, we could call them “outcasts”, in the sense that an old person is seen as ‘a human being, but not quite like the others’ (19, translation mine). This simplistic view of the old results in a fruitful way to implement certain physical social measures that would not be acceptable for those considered as fully capable human beings. For instance, they are given a particular space in the city that they must inhabit. Care homes for the old are spaces where they can be treated and looked after, but they also become the only space they are allowed to occupy. There their exclusion from the rest of society is made evident but also acceptable. In the novel, this is shown by how excursions outside the residence are rejected or judged with care and must be always supervised by either a member of the staff or by a non-resident relative. The reflection on the care homes for the old is perhaps one of Florence’s sharpest observations in the novel:
- It is called sheltered accommodation, but I’d never quite been able to work out what it was we were being sheltered from. The world was still out there. It crept in through the newspapers and the television. It slid between the cracks of other people’s conversation and sang out from their mobile telephones. We were the ones hidden away, collected up and ushered out of sight, and I often wondered if it was actually the world that was being sheltered from us. (Cannon 17–18)
- 11 This physical separation of the old from “the real world” reinforces the social boundaries between *they* and *us*, those inside and those outside (Le Blanc 26), the private where they are concealed and the public space that is negated to them. This also establishes clear social norms regarding what old people can and cannot do, how they are valued, and how others feel entitled to treat them.
- 12 In the novel, Joanna Cannon portrays the tendency to patronise, infantilise, silence, or directly ignore the old as effective mechanisms for their marginalisation. For example, Florence is used to being ignored when she speaks, to not being taken seriously (Cannon 5). She observes that most people forget that old people ‘are waiting for a

reply' (Cannon 133) because very often conversations finish right after an old person has asked or commented something. In the book, when other people talk to the elderly, they usually raise their voice unnecessarily or appropriate the first-person plural, even if they just refer to the old. They use phrases like: 'We don't always know what we are doing, do we?' (Cannon 6), or 'as we get older, we lose the ability to judge what's best for us' (Cannon 8). This patronising discourse can be read as a way of exploiting the other's vulnerability: by appropriating their voices, carers and younger people can make decisions for the old and contribute to their objectification as non-autonomous, capable, or agentic others. As Le Blanc reflects, speaking or acting in the name of others implies that the other can only exist through someone else's representation, that is, if I speak in the name of the other, do I completely deny the other's possibility to act or to speak for him/herself? (88–90, translation mine). As Butler suggests in *Excitable Speech* (1997), the way we are addressed by others, the way language is used for or against someone, affects the constitution of the subject and his/her possibilities for social existence (2). Thus, the way the old are addressed has a relevant impact on the role they can play in today's societies and whether their voices can be heard.

- 13 The process of silencing the old is repeated several times in the novel. Florence describes the elderly at the care home as 'rows of silent people, with silent pasts, waiting to be listened to' (Cannon 128). Silence is associated with their loneliness 'There is also a particularly significant episode in the novel in this line: while most of the old are playing bingo in a common room, outside members of the staff try to make a resident called Dora leave the residence to go to Greenbank, another sheltered accommodation for more dependent old people 'where people waited for God in numbered rooms, shouting out for the past' (Cannon 15).¹ Dora tries to resist by shouting, but her voice, which distracts the old who are playing and makes the staff uncomfortable, is completely silenced by closing the window and making it as if nothing had happened. 'Dora was silenced now. A tiny, grey figure, standing in the middle of a car park, still packed with shouting and despair, except no one could hear any more' (Cannon 32).
- 14 Dora's experience serves as a foreshadowing of what may happen to Florence. She goes through a similar process one month before her fall, when Miss Ambrose warns her with a month's probation. After that time, if her behaviour does not improve, she will be physically and mentally re-evaluated to be sent to Greenbank as well. Florence's month is then strongly marked by her fear to be further excluded and isolated, which again reinforces her already vulnerable and isolated self, because 'the action of exclusion begins long before the fact of exclusion itself because the possibility of being expelled is a dreaded possibility' (Le Blanc 55, translation mine). The fear of being sent to Greenbank articulates Florence's behaviour: she must force herself to be somebody she is not: doing things she does not want to do and remaining silent just to avoid being expelled from the centre that is now her home. Fear of loss, which dominates the whole text combines with fear of losing one's sense of self.
- 15 Miss Ambrose's warning can seem a bit disproportionate to the reader, as the sections presented through Florence's point of view are charged with relevant and acute observations, humour, details, and a well-articulated discourse in general terms. This aggravates the feeling of urgency that the text provokes, and again, the risk of falling into misunderstanding or rejection. However, it should also be mentioned that as said above, unreliability is clear from the beginning: Florence's forgetfulness, her lack of

patience, repetition of events, her tendency to divagate (Cannon 31) or to think that hallucinations are normal in old people (Cannon 21) also point at a senile mind. All these faults are alleviated by Elsie, Florence's lifelong friend and main support in her daily life. 'There are three things you should know about Elsie, and the first thing is that she's my best friend' (Cannon 9), she says. Elsie is nearly all the time with Florence, they share meals, she accompanies her to her doctor's appointments, calms her, encourages her to remember, to behave better, to socialise, and be happy, because the second thing about Elsie is that 'she always knows what to say to make me [Florence] feel better' (Cannon 47). Florence does not remember the third, but the title of the novel keeps reminding us that there is a gap to be filled.

- 16 Elsie becomes her main support when Florence's psychological vulnerability is accentuated. This occurs at the beginning of the probation time when a new resident arrives. She is sure he is not Gabriel Price as he claims, but a dangerous man from her past called Ronnie Butler who was supposed to be dead years ago. His arrival awakes Florence's traumatic blurry memories and his mere presence terrifies her, in other words, she experiences the belatedness of a traumatic effect she cannot quite name (Caruth 92). The new resident becomes a ghostly presence for Florence, a terrifying figure from the past, from the world of the dead, whose origins she cannot trace back, as she does not quite remember what happened, and yet, she cannot avoid a constant uncanny feeling of being under threat. We later discover Florence is right, however, Florence's intuition of the truth is insignificant at that point, because she has acquired 'the social certainty that her voice has become an inaudible voice' (Le Blanc 121, translation mine). There is no point in telling others and risking being thought mental and sent to Greenback because 'nobody ever believes' her anyway (Cannon 214). Then Florence, Elsie and Jack, another resident, try to uncover the truth about Ronnie Butler on their own. Here the text risks another failure because the novel gets involved in an almost amateur detective plot falling into some clichés of mystery stories: a group of friends finally solving a badly closed case in their neighbourhood behaving like children (lying, stealing keys, accessing hidden documents, looking for clues, etc.). These combine with the use of many cliff-hangers at the end of sections and the sometimes too opportune gaps in Florence's memory to maintain the suspense, a set of stereotypes that do not turn out to be completely credible in comparison to the atmosphere created in the rest of the novel and the characters' construction.
- 17 As the events unfold and memories are revealed, the reader discovers the third thing about Elsie: that she died 60 years ago in a fire intentionally started by Ronnie Butler. The spectrality that had been a theme throughout the novel in the form of changing identities, several attempts to talk with the dead, premonitions, and encounters with the afterlife through objects, culminates when a character is revealed to be a ghost.² This means that all the moments of the narrative where Elsie and Florence talked, walked or danced together, for the external observer, are to be attributed to just Florence doing all on her own, which makes us think that this was also the main reason for putting her on probation, as Elsie is invisible in the most literal sense, only visible to Florence. The text risks vulnerability once more, as the big plot twist may be guessed before its revelation. An attentive reading of the novel shows that even if Florence describes tactile encounters with her, all of Elsie's interventions in conversations were only answered by Florence. However, this can pass unnoticed in a first reading because many of Florence's interventions are equally ignored. Thus, Elsie's invisibility is narratively possible because of Florence and Elsie's positions as outcasts. They are both

unheard, both invisible in society: ‘we do not hear them, we do not want to see them anymore. They can only exist as ghosts’ (Le Blanc 18, translation mine). They are used to be rejected, ignored, outside of what is socially acceptable. They are the other, and as Butler claims, ‘the derealization of the “Other” means that it is neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral’ (2004, 33–34). It is in this spectrality that vulnerability becomes clearly manifested, dismantling tensions between binaries that seemed opposite. Especially in how all main characters seem on the verge of being and not being: Florence’s struggling on the floor, ‘waiting for someone to notice I’m not here anymore’ (Cannon 2), Elsie’s non-absence after death, Ronnie Butler’s survival, and even Miss Ambrose’s and Handy Simon’s desires for becoming something else that could make a difference in the world as they realise they are starting to get old. All of them seem about to be transformed, portraying how life and survival are intrinsically connected in vulnerability (Le Blanc 49). This raises the question of whether there is any difference between being dead or alive if you have no voice and if you are invisible to others, and also problematises the differentiation between illness and sanity if both are part of life and both compose who one is.

- 18 This novel shows that the boundaries between these binaries are not quite clear. Instead, Florence is aligned with the idea of ‘health in illness’ that Havi Carel develops in her book *Illness: The Cry of the Flesh* (2008), where she tackles illness from both a personal and a sociological viewpoint. For Carel, in the same way that episodes of illness can happen in a healthy life, health can occur during illness (95). In this sense, illness should not be exclusively understood as a negative interruption in one’s healthy life, but as a ‘part of continuum within health, so that our experience of it will be as diverse as our experiences of health or of life in general’ (Carel 99). As Carel explains, the problem is that an episode of illness is more normalised in a healthy life, whereas recognising health in illness tends to be more complicated once a person is reduced to her categorisation as ill. Nonetheless, this dismantling of the dichotomy of health and illness is clear in the novel when we observe that Florence’s senile mind, ill to the point of having hallucinations, is perfectly articulated when it comes to uncover the truth about the new resident or to describe the isolating feeling the old suffer in sheltered accommodation. With Florence, we find the potential that a vulnerable person holds in illness. This representation of ageing or illness helps to see them as not necessarily disarming and disempowering experiences, but simply as another different, personal part of life.
- 19 Something similar occurs in the novel with the dichotomy between life and death. In the book, old people’s deaths are portrayed as part of their daily routine. When residents die in the sheltered accommodation, their rooms are quickly emptied, and they are substituted by another person. This creates in the observer a feeling of replaceability, of the old being ‘a supernumerary element which we do not know what to do with and which must therefore, at best, be made invisible’ (Le Blanc 19, translation mine). There is a very telling scene in this line in the novel when Florence (and Elsie) observe how the staff empty the room of a woman who has just died. They can barely remember that her name started with the letter B: ‘Brenda, I think. Or it might have been Barbara. Or perhaps Betty’ (Cannon 13), because identities are easily mixed and forgotten. Florence observes how all the objects that meant something to this woman are now being thrown into the container: ‘It was so quickly disposed of, so easily dismantled. A small existence, disappeared. There was nothing left to say she’d even been here. Everything remained exactly as it was before’ (Cannon 13). This

easiness with which the old are erased from life and memory without leaving a trace behind aggravates their vulnerable position in life. If the old disappear from memory and physical space, what is left of them? The finitude of life that is a clear quality of vulnerability, especially manifested in illness (Maillard 163), becomes evident. Florence, observing this scene, reflects on whether she will be considered to have done any difference in the world, to be able to be remembered by anyone (Cannon 13–14).

20 This leads to reflect on the importance of mourning, of witnessing the value of the lives of those vulnerable, invisible, forgotten others and being able to provide a farewell for them. After seeing the previous scene, Florence also wonders who will mourn for her, who will remember her once she is no longer alive (Cannon 13). In the book, residents' funerals pass quickly (Cannon 314) and Florence and Elsie point that only a few people usually attend to them because 'most of the guest list have already pipped you to the post' (Cannon 13). Under this comical relief lies the reminder of how lack of mourning is carried out in these places where the old are usually forgotten. Lack of mourning implies a lack of grief for those who are gone. According to Butler, this occurs because there are lives that are considered as 'less grievable', their lives 'more lose-able' than the rest (2009, 31), especially in the face of illness or death.

21 This irremediably resonates with the current crisis. Lack of hospital beds has forced sanitary personnel to decide whose life is given preference, often taking age as a decisive factor. In Spain, as well as in France and other countries, mortality figures in nursing homes were not publicly reported during the first wave of the pandemic, despite being one of the focal points of contagion and death. This has created the underlying idea that older lives are less valuable than those of younger people. This crisis has depersonalised the death of people, transforming lives into figures that were daily updated, with no time to undergo the mourning mass deaths require, especially when funerals as we culturally understand them were not even allowed. For Butler, this pandemic has put to the fore the importance of public mourning:

We are returned to the household as the site for mourning, deprived of the public gathering in which such losses are marked and registered and shared . . . A purely private form of mourning is possible but cannot assuage the cry that wants the world to bear witness to the loss. (Yancy 2020)

22 In this light, the whole book can be understood as Florence's private melancholic way of dealing with the pain of loss. As social beings, vulnerability manifests when we lose somebody we love and mourning is imposed upon us (Butler 2004, 19). To Butler, successful mourning cannot be clearly defined, but it surely has to do with the way one accepts somebody's loss, and especially, one accepts that that loss will forever transform who one is without that person (Butler 2004, 21). We know from the last pages of the novel that Florence has never been fully able to accept neither Elsie's death nor the person she is without her: 'I can't imagine how I would have coped without her all these years' (Cannon 444) she thinks while lying on the floor. For Miss Ambrose's external eye 'Elsie is just a little piece of Florence. The only part of her left that hasn't become confused' (Cannon 441). In the end, we understand that Florence's inability to heal that wound comes from her traumatic feeling of guilt for not having been able to save Elsie's life together with the secret that she has been in love with Elsie since they met. She can only accept that when at the end of her wait, in that in-between state, she can hear Elsie's forgiveness, the song they always danced together, and right after, she finds a brooch on the floor she does not remember to have bought, but which meant something very special for her and Elsie: 'A fossil wood. Thousands of years'

worth of existence The Victorians wore it as part of bereavement. As remembrance of their loss Perhaps it helped them to accept the loss' (Cannon 389). This object represents again a means of communication between the worlds of the dead and the living, as well as the song, the certainty that 'Elsie found me again after all' (Cannon 452). Her visions stop, her wait ends, the clock pauses. She rejects Simon's help when he finally notices something is not right, and we observe how Florence embraces death in all the possible calmness and lucidity. After all, it is Elsie who Florence had been waiting for all the time and she feels it is her who rescues her from the floor.

- 23 Florence dies with the certainty that she has 'led a quite extraordinary life' (Cannon 453). Her ultimate success lies in having lived loving somebody and extending kindness to all around her. Even from her vulnerable position, she always shows small acts of attentiveness towards others, which make them feel better (Cannon 173, 431) and even have the power to change entire lives. These acts are called "long seconds" in the novel, 'when you catch the clock, holding on to a second so it lasts just a fraction longer than it should. When the world gives you just a little bit more time to make the right decision' (Cannon 49). These long seconds are used in the novel to expose the interdependence of human lives: Florence offers a seat on a bus to a girl with a twisted ankle and thanks to that she meets Elsie. The girl meets her future husband on that bus and they turn to be Simon's parents. Simon's father becomes the fireman that saves Elsie's entire family (except her) from the fire. Elsie's father serves in the war with Jack, the latter uses his "long second" to avoid the first's desertion and Elsie's father later saves Jack's life. These almost impossible coincidences, combined with a rather fast resolution in extremis in the last pages are close to melodramatic strategies that again point at the risk-taking narrative choices the text exposes itself to, as the melodramatic turn tends to open the text to potential mawkishness (Ganteau 2015, 152). However, this helps to underline the power of ethical choices towards others, how we are both in need and in the position to provide care at different moments of life and how lives are constantly vulnerable and interconnected. The fact that these opportunities to act ethically are called "long seconds" signals how in the ethical encounter with others lies the only way to stop the accelerated time and the feeling of anxiety that dominates the novel.
- 24 What Cannon's novel does is to provide a new prism to observe human vulnerability in general, and especially in old age. Erinn Gilson's opening quotation is true, but many nuances to it are offered in this novel. The image of vulnerability fostered in the text is that of an in-between state that heralds a change, and as such, is at least a potentially positive condition that only becomes negative if exploited by others. Physical vulnerability becomes acute in old age, associated with illness or in the form of dependence on others. The bodily fragility that permeates the text reminds all characters of their finitude and ageing process. At the same time, this is used to determine physical separations and establish social norms that allow dehumanisation of the ageing other, provoking further marginalisation. This makes us forget the value and uniqueness of each individual, turning the old into mere parts of a homogeneous othered group that is easily excluded from normal social interactions.
- 25 Psychological vulnerability is strongly attached to traumatic awakening, senile memory, fear of loss, and the use of language. The novel shows how the effects of belatedness aggravate psychological stability and connects the subject to fear and

melancholia. Using patronising and infantilised language, as well as stealing the elderly's voices by speaking in their name contribute to their exclusion and their silence. Systematically silencing the old reinforces the belief that what they have to say is not valuable to society and ends by making the old assume that their voices cannot and will not be heard or taken seriously in either way. This novel shows how this way to proceed is well established in contemporary societies.

- 26 In the novel, we can observe how vulnerability challenges the dichotomy of fundamental living states and how it acts as a thread that interconnects all humanity. Florence's waiting position, hovering between life and death, her voluntary death, or the revelation that Elsie passed away even though she is completely alive for Florence make the reader see death, life, and survival as parts of a continuum that is more permeable in old age than in any other period of life. In the same way, showing a constant interdependence allows for a reading of humanity as interconnected. In this context, the ethical inclination towards the other is easily endorsed.
- 27 Cannon's novel not only shows vulnerability but also performs it, taking risks that may interfere with the readers' attention, expectations, and comprehension of the story. From the title, from which you may expect to read a story about a protagonist called Elsie and not Florence, passing from the unreliability of the main narrator, her too convenient memory gaps, the disjointed time, the detective plot, the presence of the spectral or the final melodramatic turn. The novel may require a second reading to be able to fill the gaps with the information that is only fully known at the end. In this way, the narrative exposes itself as a vulnerable text once again.
- 28 The mechanisms by which vulnerability in the old is exploited lead to the othering of the old and their labelling as excluded members of society. They become invisible, their lives replaceable, their stories unheard, their pasts forgotten, their deaths unmourned. In these vulnerable times (Hirsh), more openly vulnerable than ever, we may have to go back to recognise vulnerability as a source of humanisation and potential and identify and expose the way it is exploited. As Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau claim, 'natural (including human) vulnerability implies solidarity in the face of illness and death' (16). In the circumstances caused by Covid-19, when illness and death are more present than ever in our lives, novels like the analysed in these pages remind us of the value of the most vulnerable. This novel also underlines the importance of public mourning as a way of registering, remembering, and bearing witness to the lives of others. Only by identifying how we contribute to the invisibilisation of others can we make them visible and give them a voice. Novels like Joanna Cannon's facilitate the task by reminding us that we are all vulnerable (Cannon 301), (inter-)dependent and calling for our ethical inclination towards others. From that ethical position, all lives, regardless of how old, invisible, small, or quotidian they may have been, have something of extraordinary, and deserve our respect, recognition, and memory.

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ENDNOTES

1. It is worth observing how care homes are again defined in this and the previous quote as places where people wait for either attention or death. The idea of waiting that is constant in the text extends to time, places, and people. Care homes are here portrayed as hopeless places where the old are left at the mercy of their own vulnerability, going back to Jean-Michel Ganteau's idea of how vulnerability is portrayed in characters who wait (GANTEAU 2015, 140).

2. In the novel, Simon's mother and Gypsy Rosa, a medium, explain how the dead communicate through objects or sounds when a person they left behind in life is going through a particular difficult of solitary moment 'to show that you're not alone' (CANNON 332). Simon is sure his mother is communicating with him through a crisp packet, Ronnie Butler moves objects in Florence's room that are somehow connected to memory, the past, or the act of observation (an elephant, or a pair of binoculars, for instance) to frighten Florence and pretend the dead are communicating with her.

ABSTRACTS

This article approaches the notion of vulnerability in the context of ageing. Amid the current sanitary crisis, vulnerability seems to have become more evident than ever. The crisis has challenged the way we approach vulnerability, illness, or death, and also, how we treat and look after the old. In this article, I suggest analysing how vulnerability is manifested in ageing and which are the mechanisms used to invisibilise the old in contemporary societies by reading Joanna Cannon's novel *Three Things about Elsie* (2018). In the midst of a pandemic that has brought to the fore new discourses of ageism across the world and that has pointed at the old as the most vulnerable group in our societies, this novel gives voice to one of them, giving them value and calling for a reconsideration of the ways we can empathise with and care for the old.

Cet article aborde la notion de la vulnérabilité dans le contexte du vieillissement. Dans la situation de crise sanitaire actuelle, la vulnérabilité semble être plus évidente que jamais. La crise a remis en question la façon dont nous abordons la vulnérabilité, la maladie ou la mort, et ainsi que, la façon dont nous traitons et prenons soin des personnes âgées. Dans cet article, je propose d'analyser comment la vulnérabilité se manifeste dans le vieillissement et quels sont les mécanismes utilisés pour invisibiliser les personnes âgées dans les sociétés contemporaines en lisant le roman de Joanna Cannon, *Three Things about Elsie* (2018). Au milieu d'une pandémie qui a mis en évidence des nouveaux discours sur l'âgisme dans le monde entier et qui a désigné les personnes âgées comme le groupe le plus vulnérable de nos sociétés, ce roman donne la parole à l'une d'entre elles, en lui donnant de la valeur et en appelant à une reconsidération des moyens de nous identifier aux personnes âgées et de prendre soin d'elles.

INDEX

Mots-clés: vulnérabilité, vieillissement, maladie, Cannon (Joanna), Butler (Judith), Le Blanc (Guillaume), deuil, invisibilité, exclu, réorientation

Keywords: vulnerability, ageing, illness, Cannon (Joanna), Butler (Judith), Le Blanc (Guillaume), mourning, invisibility, excluded, reorientation

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