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**Materiality and Female Ageing in Contemporary
British Fiction**

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Mediante la presente, **HAGO CONSTAR**

Que D^a María del Rocío González Torres es estudiante de doctorado del Programa de Doctorado “Lingüística, Literatura y Traducción”, con matrícula activa, y que ha realizado bajo mi dirección, la Tesis Doctoral titulada

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Revisado el presente trabajo estimo que reúne los requisitos establecidos según la normativa vigente. Por lo tanto, **AUTORIZO** la admisión a trámite y defensa pública de esta Tesis Doctoral para optar al grado de Doctor en la Universidad de Málaga.

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I want to finish these acknowledgments with a quote from *The Diaries of Jane Somers*: “Once I was so afraid of old age, of death, that I refused to let myself see old people in the streets – they did not exist for me. Now, I sit for hours in that ward and watch and marvel and wonder and admire” (245).

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1. INTRODUCTION

Demographic changes, over the last decades, have shifted the attention to the enlargement of ageing population, which currently outnumbers the younger one.

According to the Gary Cheung and Jane Casey,

The increase in the elderly population brings with it many challenges for nearly all sectors of the society, including labour and financial markets; demand for goods and services such as health services, housing, transportation and social protection; and changes in family structures and intergenerational relationships [2]. (216)

This change in population rates has provided a new scenario in which new age identities, as well as a new definition of old age, need to be reformulated and adapted to a prolongation of the lifespan into what can be named a fourth age. Disciplines such as architecture, art, medicine, psychology and humanities, among others, have already considered old age as a subject of study as a way of acknowledging the different needs and concerns of older people.

The traditional cultural and social representations of old age, where life possibilities decrease considerably as physical and cognitive changes become more apparent, are no longer valid since they are bonded to negative discourses which are far from representing the heterogeneity of the world population. Thus, the predominant idea that getting older is a process in which the self is slowly deprived from its youth and value has been now challenged as a biased approach to what old age and ageing processes really mean.

In this dissertation, my aim is to address the role of materiality in later life discourse, and to consider how this relation between old age and materiality, forged over the years, affects the construction and maintenance of the ageing self. Also, I will pay attention to the importance of reformulating ageing identities from a more profound and meaningful perspective in which the ageing self is embraced and not penalised for existing.

All human beings, sooner or later, confront the need to come to terms with their ageing self. However, as the self begins the journey into old age, issues such as love, desire, sex, or personal ambitions are regarded with anxiety when the ageing self realises there is limited time ahead. In this sense, current social and cultural discourses, regarding old age, still do not allow for guidance and understanding of the real changes and possibilities that are available for most of us. An example of this can be found in the difficulty to find information relating to old age outside decline and loss, which set menopause and later life as moments in life where the self is expected to begin a process of decline.

In everyday life, in general terms, the elder is often relegated to peripheral social roles as well as to a cultural and social marginalisation which perpetuates the elder's invisibility as a passive subject. However, all human beings share the same commonalities in terms of ageing processes and, in the end, all of us will have to go through ageing experiences, a greater or lesser extent, and confront ageism in the long run. There are, in fact, few references to ageing in which the person is presented as a source of inspiration for others not to fear and embrace their journey to later life. In this dissertation, I will discuss contemporary British women writers such as Pat Barker, Doris Lessing, Barbara Pym, and Penelope Lively, and I will take the endeavor to prove

how in the last decades new ageing identities have been emerging in fiction and in culture.

As mentioned previously, the upsurge of interest in ageing has reached many diverse areas of study due to its interdisciplinary nature, including the humanities. Therefore, there has been a proliferation of articles, films, and novels where old age or ageing are either central or important elements to the storyline. These fictional explorations of the topic not only make visible old age and ageing realities, but also contribute to set new ageing identities for the reader.

Although both men and women are victims of ageist discourses, as Susan Sontag states, “this society offers even fewer rewards for aging to women that it does to men. Being physically attractive counts much more in a woman’s life than in a man’s, but beauty, identified, as it is for women, with youthfulness, does not stand up well to age” (196). In this sense, rethinking about old age is a complex process in which both women and men are victims of ageing discourse differently, being women, as Sontag asserts, those who undergo a stronger marginalisation in both the private and the public sphere. In many ways, the role assigned to women is a continuation of their marginalisation in other areas. Unfortunately, ageism is a predominant discourse affecting the way in which physical and cognitive transformations of the self are perceived. As Margaret Morganroth Gullette ponders, human beings have been “aged by culture” (*Aged by Culture* 101), influencing people’s experiences of lifespan in negative ways, and shaping their beliefs into limiting visions of ageing. According to Beverly Lunsford, there is an excessive tolerance to hold negative judgment toward the elder or everything that is related to normal ageing processes rather than positive ones. In fact, Lunsford states that younger generations are driven to speak freely and without guilt about their preconceived ideas toward what old age really looks like for the elderly. In fact,

A classroom of young adults in a health professions course was asked what comes to mind when they think about older adults and aging. They answered, “being frail and sick,” “dementia,” “inability to do what one used to do.” In fact, each comment held a negative view of ageing and older adults. However, we have many older adults in the public eye that present a very different view of aging such as Nelson Mandela who was inaugurated President of the Republic of South Africa at the age of 76 and celebrated his 95th birthday in May. (Lunsford 41)

It could be argued that the emergence of the field of ageing studies, along with gender and cultural studies, and other disciplines, has opened the ground for the re-construction of definitions and approaches to old age. In this regard, I will focus not only on gender studies, cultural studies, or feminist theory, but also on the emerging field of material culture studies. Indeed, little attention has been given to the role that materiality has in the fictionalisation and construction of ageing identities, and my research aims at filling this existing gap in the field of ageing studies.

The starting point for the material contextualisation of the elder is the notion that the home and possessions are basic scaffolding in the understanding and portrayal of the elder, and that these underrepresented aspects are relevant in relation to old age. Today’s society is embedded into the predominant discourse of being through ownership, where, as Russell Belk posits, “a key to understanding what possessions mean is recognizing that, knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally, we regard our possessions as parts of ourselves” (“Extension Self” 139). This means that objects acquire a pivotal function in the owner’s life to the extent that materiality develops a life of its own.

Taking into consideration the interconnections that are forged between materiality and ageing, in the chapter devoted to the theoretical framework, I will

explore how the relationship that exists between people and objects, nowadays, has been influenced by a self-imposed need on the individual to express one's identity through material discourse, where spiritual values have been replaced by materialistic ones. As I will discuss in this chapter, the field of material studies is quite recent, although human beings' relation with objects date back to primitive civilisations, where objects have evolved from being instruments of survival and as part of cultural practices to more sophisticated utensils. Arguably, the irruption of capitalism has been detrimental in this transformation of objects into meaningful modes of communication and existence, where they act as elements that enhance, nurture or diminish the self. Among the multiple roles that object possess are the following: conveyors of meaning, status, identity, and materialisations of the past.

In this regard, the theoretical framework of this dissertation is interdisciplinary, since different fields of studies intersect, such as material culture studies, where I take into consideration Ian Woodward's work in the field of materiality, Bill Brown's approach to materiality from the perspective of Thing Theory, and how new critics in subject-object relation are addressing the result of such interaction in later life. Thus, I also explore Harold Proshansky's concept of place identity and Yi Fu Tuan's research into the transformation of empty space into meaningful constructions, so it can be seen the connection between routine and the use of someone's space over time as a basic component to forge emotional bonds with the home and its content, especially during old age, which is under study in this dissertation.

Crucially, I will develop how the field of material culture is transforming our culture into something material. I will draw the attention to how social and cultural aspects have slowly transformed daily life objects, firstly as functional objects, later on, as objects with economic value, and currently as basic scaffolding in the development

and transformation of the self. As I will explore later, through the use of material objects, people engage in what Daniel Miller refers to as “a process of socialization” (“Meaning of Things” 399), in which the person becomes an active member of society, where the self is visible and valuable in terms of his/her participation in the material discourse.

In order to delineate new patterns of behaviour, approaches such as Thing theory, coined by Bill Brown in 2003, have emerged in order to explore the complexity of materiality. In the case of Thing theory, there is an interest in comprehending the differences between objects and things and how a thing can be an object, but an object is not always a thing, as it is further discussed in this dissertation.

This interchangeable nature of objects denotes how the constant interaction between subject-object has contributed to providing objects with human traits through language, which affects the owner’s daily life as they are in constant interaction with them. Thus, as expressed by many theorists in the field of material culture studies as Bill Brown or Ian Woodward, when things are given a name, a process of humanisation of materiality begins, where self and object exposure develop over time an emotional bonding that extends the functional properties of objects into emotional ones.

If materiality is described as culture made material, it can also be considered how the world has transformed the human mind, and how what it is understood as private and public spaces is a materialisation of human beings’ need to exert control over raw spaces. In this sense, in this dissertation I will pay attention to objects that become dear possessions, and how the house, a possession itself, becomes a space inhabited by the self, which acquires relevant meanings and roles in the construction and maintenance of the self. In this sense, I will explore the construction of the meaning of home, and how with time and experience, as Yi Fu Tuan expresses, the self is able to “transform empty space into place” (6), and with due time and meaningful interaction

an emotional bonding is forged among the self and the dwelling place. Furthermore, I will consider how, although the attachment that exists between the self and the dwelling place begins early in childhood, it is in later life where it acquires a deeper symbolism, as the past is encapsulated in the preservation of possessions, which are perceived by the elder as a reliable materialisation of memory. Indeed, memory finds in objects an anchor to the past, and a mode of surviving and defying cognitive decline, where the self can cling to cherished objects as a way to hold to the past in tangible ways. The house becomes the territory where memory evocation occurs, and present and past are interconnected through the senses, especially touching and seeing.

In my approach to material culture in the field of literature, I will combine gender studies, feminist theory and cultural studies, to focus on the relationship between women and their homes and possessions in later stages of life. Although there are multiple commonalities between both men's and women's processes of ageing, differences persist and they make of later life a stage where women still undergo a major discrimination as compared to their male counterparts, from a cultural, social and political perspective, and especially from the point of view of materiality. As Gerard Rey A. Lico states, "the underrepresentation of women's body and experience in the spatial structures creates a possible setting for subordination and exploitation" (30), that still prevails nowadays. Thus, the use and production of space obey a patriarchal understanding of the world which reinforces the separation among women and men, where architecture is an example of how space has been distributed to comply with patriarchy and continue subduing women into restricted areas of society.

The ever-growing reliability of people to material things has posed a problem to most people across the lifespan, where some end up developing unhealthy patterns of behaviour, such as excessive accumulation or hoarding. Younger and older generations

share this overflow of material meaning in their houses, which impedes the owner and the visitor to distinguish significant objects from those that are not, and, in the future, it can become an issue when deciding what possessions to dispose of or pass on to significant others. Material legacy in later life, indeed, is an important aspect of ageing narratives, since a self too attached to material possessions has to come to terms with a corporeal death, sooner or later, and decisions, such as where to be buried or funeral arrangements, and what will happen with the continuation of the self through material legacy after death have to take place. In fact, the uncertainty surrounding ageing and death is often alleviated by literary representation. Thus, as Marta Cerezo Moreno and Nieves Pascual Soler argue, narratives “have a role to play in the apprenticeship of growing old: they relieve our fear of what we do not want to know, that is, the loss of others and our own death” (13). Following Paul Ricoeur, Cerezo and Pascual consider that narratives have a social function since they provide readers with new imaginaries. Hence, anxieties or uncertainties related to later stages of life in both spiritual and material matters can be reduced or responded in terms of material legacy, funeral arrangement, and farewell to dear ones as an example.

In the third chapter, after having explored some of the relevant theories that currently address the relation of people with materiality across the lifespan, especially in later life, I will delve into the concept of ageing, and develop how the meaning of it has evolved throughout the centuries: from Plato’s and Aristotle’s understanding of ageing as a moment of life, where the person acquires either wisdom and virtue through the passing of time, or a more pessimistic regard of the ageing person as someone whose body is weakened by time, through to more current conceptions of ageing in today’s society.

Among other ideas, I will explore how the critic Margaret Morganroth Gullette has influenced the field of ageing helping to establish a solid theoretical framework in ageing studies. Also, I will discuss the work of major feminist thinkers, and critics such as Simone de Beauvoir or Betty Friedan who have addressed ageing at the end of their career, acknowledging that, for them, it was a topic that was forever postponed, and how this recognition has benefited the visibility of ageing in public discourses. Indeed, feminism has, in the last years, become a great source of inspiration for new generations, since it began to approach women's voices from a more heterogeneous perspective, where later life and its concerns are regarded as an issue as important as those relating to younger generations. Indeed, ageism has sometimes instilled a personal refusal to accept time and ageing, even though the meaning of old age has fluctuated over the centuries between positive and negative associations with human beings' ageing nature.

Unfortunately, current perspectives on old age are embedded with a profound feeling of pessimism which no longer takes into consideration the benefits that might come with age, and it tends to limit ageing narratives. Gullette regards this phenomenon as the "progress-versus-decline" (*Aged by Culture* 24) narrative, where decline is the most accepted narrative to represent later life experiences taking for granted that "the human potential continues after young adulthood across many domains" (*Aged by Culture* 24), and it needs to be addressed in order to provide new ageing identity. In this sense, the emergence of ageing studies has brought about a major breakthrough in the crusade against the predominant ageist discourse of Western societies. The term "age studies" was "named only in 1993" (*Aged by Culture* 184), and, as Gullette has posited, among their main objectives "should be as quick to deal with "the life-course imaginaries" as "the youth imaginaries" or the "old age imaginaries". Age studies should be like the other socially informed humanities and narratively informed

social sciences in being historical and materialist as well as textually skillful, and as attuned as feminist theory to scientific discourse. An ideal field. (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 184)

Indeed, many disciplines have emerged in order to approach ageing, such as gerontology and its subfields, as in the case of narrative gerontology in which human beings' lived experience is transformed into a coherent narrative. Gary M. Kenyon and William L. Randall consider that "humans are fundamentally storytelling creatures" (333): this is perceived in narrative gerontology, in the fictional representation of ageing in literary characters.

Indeed, the impact on literature has been considerable. An example of this is analysed in chapter three as well with the emergence of Reifungsroman subgenre, a term coined by Barbara Frey Waxman in 1990, which derives from the Bildungsroman genre, originally focused on male young protagonists' journey of self-maturation. One of the main characteristics of this genre is that it is mostly written by "ageing women writers, active and ripening themselves" who "celebrate aging women in their fiction" (Waxman 12).

In my approach to fictional representation to women's experiences of ageing I will focus on their relationship with their material possessions, and on how the house and its content become "an extension of one's self" (Belk, "Extension Self" 157). Although the notion of extended self is "not limited to external objects and personal possessions, but also includes persons, places, and group of possessions as well as such possessions as body parts and vital organs" (Belk, "Extension Self" 140), I will consider how the self's identity is intertwined over time with the physical environment and, therefore, is regarded as a part of the self as if it were a body part. In fact, the space inhabited, filled with cherished possessions, is often portrayed in novels dealing with

old age and ageing as if they were inseparable. Objects in various ways connect the past with the present, functioning as material reinforcements of the narrative.

Then, I will begin my literary analyses with Pat Barker's *Union Street* (1982) and *The Century's Daughter* (1986), where the author is concerned with the strong attachment that is forged along the years between female character, the poor conditions of the house, as well as those of the neighborhood. Thus, the idea of a self, attached to the materiality of the home and possessions, will be explored. Secondly, I will engage with Doris Lessing's *The Diaries of Jane Somers* (1984) where Lessing narrates the friendship between middle-aged Jane Somers and ninety-year-old Maudie Fowler, and how this emotional bonding will bring about internal transformation for both characters, which is a prominent feature of the Reifungsroman genre, as I will develop later. The novel pays attention not only to the importance of meaningful relations between generations, but also it establishes the house as the main point of departure where the ageing self is fully expressed through materiality. Accumulation is relevant in Lessing's novel. However, in the next novel under study, Barbara Pym's *Quartet in Autumn* (1977), an excessive attachment to material possessions ends up in hoarding. And this is the reason why Pym's *Quartet in Autumn* is analysed following Lessing's novel, as Pym's text represents another stage in the depiction of accumulation and excessive attachment in old age. The novel delves into the life of four co-workers months prior to their retirement and afterwards. The characters of Marcia Ivory and Letty Crowe are analysed from the perspective of their different attitude to life after retirement and their relation to their house and possessions. Thus, whereas Letty considers retirement as a time where she can move to a cottage, and have more time to cultivate herself or travel, Marcia has used her house as a barrier from social interaction and dedicates herself to the daily arrangement of her domestic space. Lastly, I will discuss Penelope Lively's

approach to later life where she pays especial attention to the role of the house in various novels and memoirs in which she provides an account of how through the years the house remains a connector among generations and a place where traditions are preserved. In contradistinction to the aforementioned writers, Lively has written several novels where ageing is an important topic since not only does she delve into ageing through the interplay of fictional ageing protagonists and materiality, but also she reflects on her own fascination with objects as mediators of the past.

All the novels selected for analysis are connected through several topics related to the relationship that the ageing self establishes with materiality along the years. Therefore, I will consider whether or not this relation between self and materiality ends up in an emotional attachment to the house and possessions, as well as the way in which the past is reflected on the landscape of the household, and how decline and progress narratives are being reformulated in current ageing fiction, among other issues. Furthermore, the novels under consideration in this dissertation have been chosen following a thematic approach since all of them focus on how materiality and the ageing self are interrelated. Thus, Pat Barker features prominently as an author who dedicates a chapter to ageing in *Union Street* and, later on, she devotes a whole novel, *The Century's Daughter*, to ageing in relation with materiality. Barker's first novel is selected as an example of the way in which the theme of ageing and material culture was gaining more predominance in contemporary British fiction in the early eighties. Then, I will focus on Doris Lessing's *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* (the first novel of *The Diaries of Jane Somers*), which seems to grow out from the story of Alice Bell. This will be the case of Barker herself who, a couple of years later, will publish *The Century's Daughter*, where she continues to explore the world of elderly women with the character of Liza Wright. These three novels show the ageing self as inextricably

linked to materiality, and clearly, they shed light on the important role of the house and possessions in the process of coming to terms with the ageing self. All of them were published during the eighties and among all the topics they deal with there is an especial reference to the excessive accumulation that takes place in later life. Then, I will approach Barbara Pym's *Quartet in Autumn*, published in 1977. The novel can be seen as a follow-up to Lessing's ideas to excessive accumulation, attachment to home and possessions in the case of one of her ageing protagonists Marcia Ivory, and although it was published before the other novels, it deserves to be discussed in the light of the authors previously mentioned. Finally, I will discuss Penelope Lively's *The Photograph* (2003) and *How It All Began* (2011), where the novelist portrays the house and objects as elements that connect the ageing self with the past, which help the self to make the transition across later life. Despite the fact that this dissertation focuses on female ageing, in the novel *The Photograph* the main character is a man in his sixties, Glyn, who, through his wife's material memories, experiences a process of revisitation of the past. This novel is relevant because of Lively's approach to objects such as a photograph in the reformulation of ageing identities, a recurrent idea throughout this dissertation. Therefore, in all the novels there will be an intrinsic link between materiality and ageing, central to the author's narrative and description of the role of possessions in later life.

Consequently, in what follows, I will explore how during the lifespan, materiality has a crucial role in the development of individual identities, especially in later life where the ageing self, as it will be illustrated in the novels already mentioned, tends to depend on the house and possessions as anchors to life. Furthermore, I will aim to prove how the fictionalisation of ageing identities allows people to forge cross-generational bonding among them, and to build up new ageing identities where decline

will be replaced with more fluid and positive understanding of what old age really means.

In this dissertation I will use the eighth version of MLA format.

2. Material Culture, Home and Possessions in Later Life

In this chapter I will explore the relevance of material culture in daily life discourse, and how it influences the individual to feel the need to construct a material identity across the lifespan. There are multiple factors which have to be taken into consideration in order to comprehend the complex relation which is established between the self and the material world; especially, when the attachment occurs and the self is intertwined with its material belongings. In this sense, it can be observed how, over the last decades, there has been a growing interest in the analysis of the role of objects in different academic disciplines, being human-object interaction in daily life settings the primary focus of attention. Changes in consumption patterns have modified the way in which citizens, now regarded as potential consumers, interact with their material environment and the consequences of it in public and private spheres, especially in later life.

2.1. Materiality Studies

To think about materiality is to acknowledge the presence of objects and their multifaceted nature. Indeed, objects have become basic scaffoldings in our development throughout life stages and in the way in which people communicate with other members of the family, communities or cultural groups. Thus, the underlying message that material acquisition and accumulation have nowadays seems to reinforce the idea of being through having. Although this view has already been explored in the past, during the last decades there has been a resurgence of the long-lasting debate of having and

being. As Erich Fromm states, there is a tendency towards experiencing the world from a material perspective. Thus,

to have, so it would seem, is a normal function of our life; in order to live, we must have things. Moreover, we must have things in order to enjoy them. In a culture in which the supreme goal is to have – and to have more and more – and in which one can speak of someone as “being a worth a million dollars,” how can there be an alternative to having and being? (Fromm 13)

Indeed, materiality has replaced verbal language in multiple scenarios where through the use of certain brands, clothing or accessories people communicate without words relevant pieces of information about who they are or what status they might have. This is possible due to the wide recognition of material cues as conveyors of information among members of the same culture and the acknowledgement of certain objects as sources of power. Interestingly, objects need to be placed in the right cultural context in order to retain their value since other communities or group might have different objects to indicate high or low status.

Indeed, having and being not only express aspects of identity, preference or status but both can be considered as “two fundamental modes of experience, the respective strengths of which determine the differences between the characters of individuals and various types of social character” (Fromm 14). These modes of experience are unique processes that each individual establishes with their environment while having some common ground among the members of the same culture. In this scenario, people decide the value, price, and relevance of things. So, following the premise that people tend to communicate with other people through the act of buying, selling or exchanging, it would be possible to argue that “in the having mode of existence my relationship to the world is one of possession and owning, one in which I

want to make everybody and everything including myself, my property” (Fromm 21). Thus, in order to have, people need to consume, and in order to be, individuals have become dependent on material things to display the owner’s worthiness and identity. It seems that, without objects, our presence in the world lacks strength or visibility, since people are often what they have and what they have stands for themselves. Thus, possessions become materialisations of a self, longing for social and cultural recognition.

Because of this predominant use of objects as elements of crucial significance for our daily activity performance, it is pertinent to consider that people’s relation with the material environment is subjected to a process of constant negotiation across the life cycle. As Ian Woodward asserts:

Historical accounts of consumption practice (...) illustrate that consuming things is now — has been for at least quite some time — as much a sphere for establishing social difference and position, and constructing self-identity, that it is a practice of sustenance. It is circumspect to remember that the use of novel objects for the explicit purpose of demonstrating cultivated distinction or personal style is not the only reason for, or mode of, consumption. (113)

Consequently, in order to understand the field of material culture from a broader perspective, it is necessary to clarify the variety of terms that are attached to the concept of material culture. Today, there are many definitions of material culture, and they are “often used in conjunction with ‘things’, ‘objects’, ‘artefacts’, ‘goods’, ‘commodities’ and, more recently, ‘actants’. These terms (with the exception of the last) are, for most purposes, used interchangeably” (Woodward 15). In giving material realities a name, human beings prove their need for control and categorisation since language is used as an instrument that reduces the uncertainty of the unknown. If people are able to point

out a reality and name it, they are closer to construct a narrative toward that object, and answer questions such as what it is, or what functions does it have. As Yi-Fu Tuan expresses, in the early development of human beings the necessity for control is illustrated in children's relation with things and language. That is why, "as the child is able to speak with some fluency he wants to know the names of things. Things are not quite real until they acquire names and can be classified in some way" (Tuan 29). An example of this can be found in Emma Healey's novel *Elizabeth is Missing* (2014), where the writer reflects on the importance of language, especially the beneficial effects of written language for the ageing self to exercise some control over one's life decision and daily life routines. In this sense, the ageing Maud fights against her fragile memory by turning language into a material object she can carry around, helping her to remember: "There are bits of paper all over the house lying in piles or stuck up on different surfaces. Scribbled shopping lists and recipes, telephone numbers and appointments, notes about things that have already happened. My paper memory" (Healey 14).

In this line of thought, in order to make reference to the manifestation of the built environment, the term material culture emerged, which generally encompasses the materialisation of the human mind, that is to say, the distribution and ordering of our environment through the construction of built structures and human-made objects. Now the concept takes into account other aspects related with subject-object relation. As Helen Sheumaker and Shirley Teresa Wajda posit,

Material culture encompasses those things that have physical form and presence, whether an object you can hold in your hand; an environment in which you live, work, worship, or play; or an image of the landscape you captured with your digital camera as you traversed a pond or a mountain range. Material culture is,

then, culture made material—That is, it is the physical manifestation of human endeavor, of minds at work (and play), of social, economic, and political processes affecting all of us (xi).

As it has been mentioned above, objects have a multifaceted function and the realities that they point out are in constant evolution; therefore, the emergence of material culture studies addressed material culture from the perspective and influence of the upsurge of production and consumption of material goods and the consequences of it in social, cultural and political areas. Ian Woodward states that material culture studies “is a recent nomenclature that incorporated a range of scholarly inquiry into the uses and meanings of objects. It affords a multidisciplinary vantage point into human-object relations, where the contribution of anthropology, sociology, psychology, design and cultural studies are valued” (4). An example of this is found in disciplines such as the humanities where objects and the built environment considered not only for their decorative or functional role, but also because of the way in which they affect the development and portrayal of people, and their life course.

Victor Buchli agrees with Woodward’s approach of material culture as a concept that is too wide to be considered as a single field. The term was coined during the nineteenth century and “it was used as a way of gauging the degree of technical and social sophistication of a given group” (Buchli 3). Thus, the historical account of objects has been often related to the importance of preserving those material findings impregnated with the culture where they were created. Therefore, attached to materiality is the notion of the melancholy of interpreting and preserving the material traces of the past, which reinforces the role of objects to bond us with our distant and immediate past. In fact, objects per se do not attract much attention, as they have been always approached as connectors with past civilizations, and to help archaeologists to follow up human

evolution through the changes from rudimentary objects to more sophisticated ones, as well as to study the way in which societies have been affected by such changes. Therefore, as Woodward posits, the first analyses carried out in material culture were “generally [from a] non-western or, more specifically, non-European origin” (17), where researchers often used their material findings to illustrate the difference existing between Western cultural groups and non-Western ones to emphasise the notion that cultures outside our own were somehow inferior. This ethnocentric point of view reinforces the influence of material culture as an instrument to categorise and value human existence. Thus, “such displays of material culture performed a perverse educative role by demonstrating evolutionary staged and models of cultural development, and implicitly communicating the superiority of western culture” (Woodward 18).

In this sense, it remained clear that the results were influenced by the researchers’ viewpoint, which coupled with the difficulties of having a first-person account, increased the idea that the results were not faithful to a particular culture, but related to the researchers’ beliefs. Indeed, in order to comprehend an object, it is very important to provide information related to formal aspects such as material, form and properties, as well to purposes and symbolism to give an accurate contextualisation of that object. From an anthropological perspective, the right documentation of the artefact is essential in order to place objects in their context, and in their relevance: not doing so would bring about the loss of important pieces of the material puzzle that shapes human beings’ historical past. Therefore, as Andrew Viduka asserts, “without context, an object loses much of its interpretive value and can be considered a loose find. A loose find is any artefact that cannot be accurately placed in context” (13). Thus, this principle of accurate placing is also perceived in homes, which are decorated following the owners’

interest in disclosing information about themselves. In a way, museums replicate in a great scale what people do in smaller spaces with their personal possessions. If an object is not in the right place, or outside the owner's knowledge, the object can be considered the same as unidentified artefacts, a meaningless and decontextualised object.

Furthermore, material culture is a broad concept that no longer focuses its attention on studying and collecting objects to be later on exposed in museums fulfilling archaeologists' interests, but it has spread its scope in order to understand the multiple relations that exist between people, objects and culture. Daniel Miller has written extensively about materiality and about the field of consumption, and considers that culture should be understood as "the process through which human groups construct themselves and are socialized, [so] material culture becomes an aspect of objectification, consisting of the material forms taken by this cultural process" ("Meaning of Things" 399). Thus, in a culture where people need to interact with one another, objects function as elements which foster socialisation, but also they contribute to the objectification of a culture where materiality has become over-privileged.

Granted that the above statement seems to criticise the excessive role that materiality plays in our daily life, it is also true that materiality is key in our lives, through the act of exchanging, buying, or simply by displaying goods and artefacts. As Miller posits,

humanity is viewed as the product of its capacity to transform the material world in production, in the mirror of which we create ourselves. Capitalism is condemned above all for interrupting this virtuous cycle by which we create the objects that in turn create our understanding of who we can be. Instead commodities are fetishized and come to oppress those who made them.

(Materiality 2)

Objects seem to have stopped to serve us, as they have acquired other roles our Western culture seems to impose, thus leading people to actively participate in the flow of market economy, following its rules and values. This system of circulating goods has an impact upon the individual, whose need to fit into society clashes with what is really ‘valuable’ in life. To a certain extent, one’s value depends on the capacity to participate in the act of consumption: “poverty is defined as the critical limit to our ability to realise ourselves as persons, consequent upon a lack of commodities” (Miller, *Materiality 2*).

Importantly, industrialisation, its subsequent repercussion in societies and capitalism brought about the reconfiguration of class and production. This can be exemplified in the transformation of the fashion industry during the industrial revolution in the past, and the impact it had in the emergence of new social classes as the bourgeois. Carlo Poni posits that with the changes in mass production and the lowering of prices the gap between social classes was not represented in birth privileges, but in the power of acquisition, and economic means. Poni’s approach illustrates how traders made efforts to create fashion that was not intended to last but to be renovated in a seasonal manner. Therefore, being in fashion was slowly introduced in a society where only the nobility had access to such items. A consequence of this was to consider someone poor not because s/he lacked economic resources to provide shelter or nourishment to himself/herself or the family, but for the inability to be fashionable, and updated with the latest products in the market. Thus, this example of mass production in the fashion industries exemplified how,

A specific process is thus set in motion: a limitless and endless chase in which the social level of a given social group or class can be measured by the number of years it lags behind the fashion. This mechanism, in time, tends to restructure and confuse the traditional distinctions between social groups. Impoverished nobles

are unable to follow the changes in fashion in the same way that well-off merchants and tax farmers do. Fashion, in short, is a symptom, albeit and ambiguous one, of the slow passage from a society based on status to another based on wealth. (Poni 40)

Fashion was only one of the multiple items that was transformed into a commodity, proving how a commodity modified the way in which objects circulated and the kind of relation established between consumer and products. Bourgeois class had a significant impact on this new mode of trade and the consequences in redefining issues such as status, wealth and power outside the rigidity of social ranks, hitherto subject to birth conditions.

As claimed by Arjun Appadurai, objects under the regime of capitalism became “objects with economic value” (“Politics of Value” 3) which are “product[s] intended principally for exchange, and that such products emerge, by definition, in the institutional, psychological, and economic conditions of capitalism” (Appadurai, “Politics of Value” 6). Following this line of thought, these objects with economic value depend on the market where they are, so their status as commodities might change once there are placed outside the influence of market demands and lose their meaning and value. Materiality is always dependent on culture and society for them to provide a minor or major role in individual, social or cultural settings. Furthermore, when objects prove their capacity in acquiring new identities as those of commodities or goods, they help the owner and the seller acquire new modes of communication in our society.

However, in our globalised era, mass production is sometimes perceived with suspicion, since the excessive desire of having might lead to such an accumulation of objects that material culture language and symbolism become irrelevant in the great scheme of things. By participating in material language, consumers based their choices

or preferences depending on the information those objects convey: identity, aesthetic prestige or preference. In a way, the reason behind our purchases seems to be communicate with others. Nevertheless, an excessive accumulation of objects does not foster meaningful communication. In this line, Ian Woodward considers that this excessive production of objects leads to a sort of “psychological and emotional harm to citizen” (85) where creativity is curtailed by the duplication and distribution of the same artefacts. This ends up reinforcing a feeling of material alienation that limits the self into fixed categories of self-expression.

Then, since the emergence of material culture studies the attempt to understand materiality has encountered the difficulty to approach a subject that is in constant evolution. As Bill Brown puts: “if these objects are tired, they are tired of our perpetual reconstitution of them as objects of our desire and of our affection. They are tired of our longing. They are tired of us” (“Thing Theory” 15). Brown refers to objects as having an emotional side, which proves to be as tired as human beings are, regarding this ongoing renegotiation of meaning and identities. The fact is that people hold tight to possessions, and it is difficult to ascertain whether people are choosing their possessions, or our possessions are choosing us.

Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood shed light onto the current trends of consumption and take heed of the unpredictability of the consumption market where objects suit potential customers’ materialistic need. Then, how do ordinary objects become transformed into articles of necessity in some settings? This can be addressed from numerous approaches, not only the field of material culture, but also from a psychological point of view. As Douglas and Isherwood posit,

An interesting and central problem is how to spot a new necessity in advance of the signal from price movements and ownership levels. Goods arrive in the shops

today: some of them will become tomorrow's necessities. What is the direction and power that selects among the modern luxuries and procured that shift in status, so that from being first unknown, then known but dispensable, some goods become indispensable? (69)

From the perspective of material culture studies objects are regarded as essential tools in the reconstruction of people's identities, because of the relevance and intensity of the relationship individuals keep with their belongings in their life course. We feel the need to possess and acquire products, and in so doing individuals are led to believe that our lives can improve through material possession. In this sense, objects become the materialisation of an emotion because of the belief that, through the acquisition of one object, one's life will be greatly improved. According to Herbert Marcuse, there are two different kind of needs, false and true ones, and which can be either imposed or self-imposed. Thus, Marcuse considers that false urges could be defined as

those which are superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice (7), [and in contrast], there are the true needs which encompass those values that are vital ones – nourishment, clothing, lodging at the attainable level of culture. (8)

Indeed, objects perform fundamental roles that could be associated with Herbert's idea of basic needs for the individual, particularly those objects that contribute to our welfare and survival. On the contrary, false needs are related to the products that have been manipulated by globalisation, are involved in mass production values and, ultimately, intend to cause a feeling of unfulfillment. This is one of the fundamental reasons why the world of objects is so fascinating and intriguing.

Some critics consider that there is an emotional side of objects due to their origin as material proofs of human mind, and that a study of objects reveals crucial differences between them. In this sense, in 2001 the American Professor of Cultural Studies Bill Brown coined the term “Thing Theory”, whose aim is to provide an in-depth analysis of the different qualities and properties of objects and things, which in popular thinking they seem to refer to the same reality, but they are indeed different in nature.

Originally the philosopher Martin Heidegger had already explored the distinction between thing and object. In fact, Heidegger is considered the father of this sub-field within the field of material studies. Following Bill Brown:

If thing theory sounds like an oxymoron, then, it may not be because things reside in some balmy elsewhere beyond theory but because things lie both at hand and somewhere outside the theoretical field, beyond a certain limit, as a recognizable yet illegible remainder or as the entifiable that is unspecifiable. Things lie beyond the grid of intelligibility the way mere things lie outside the grid of museal exhibition, outside the order of objects. If this is why things appear in the name of relief from ideas (what’s encountered as opposed to what’s thought), it is also why the Thing becomes the most compelling name for that enigma that can only be encircled and which the object (by its presence) necessarily negates. (5)

As a matter of fact, the term ‘thing’ inspires different interpretations, but its complexity hinders any possible concrete definition, as suggested by many critics. Heidegger’s work is noteworthy, because in his writings he states that, in order to approach the nature of the thing, it is essential to know beforehand what people know about it. Basically, the term ‘thing’ is used not only to point out material realities, but also abstract ones that might concern one individual in a particular time. This proves that things have a twofold nature, visible and invisible, finished or unfinished, which underlines a reality that exists

beyond its ability to fulfil a certain function. Thus, “the term ‘thing’ is both narrower and a broader sense” (Heidegger, “The Thing” 5). Drawing on this distinction, Heidegger highlights how a thing is separated into two different spheres: the sphere of the tangible and perceivable by human senses, and the sphere of the intangible. In this line of thought, it should be noted that “narrower” refers to those realities that “can be touched, reached, or seen...” (Heidegger, “The Thing” 6), and that “broader” indicates “the ‘thing’ is every affair or transaction, something that is in this or that condition, the things that happen in the world –occurrences, events” (Heidegger, “The Thing” 6). Furthermore, Heidegger quotes Immanuel Kant in relation to what a thing is, and also considered that things are not just tangible or intangible realities, but also a “thing-in-itself” (Heidegger, “The Thing” 6), and “thing-for-us” (Heidegger, “The Thing” 6). That is to say, for Kant things are realities that are subjected to be experienced by people as a table, a chair or a mirror, but also things can be included into the category of *thing-for-us* or a *thing-in-itself* where humans have no tangible way of approaching this reality and it only exists in the abstract conceptualisation of our imagination. Kant set the example of “Gott” as a thing-in-itself, and, in this sense, it is considered a thing that lacks a form, an image, but it refers to something that exists among certain religions across the world. Then, Donald Preziosi further suggests that when people use the word ‘thing’, it includes glasses, rocks, wood, food or plants, but also abstract ideas or beliefs such as death or afterlife. However, one of the important premises in Thing theory is that everything is a thing, but not everything is an object, though both are used indiscriminately to refer to same entities in popular culture. In an attempt to define what is a thing, Heidegger develops three different kinds of things that can be differentiated, which illustrates the complexity of the term: firstly, “a thing in the sense of being present-at-hand: a rock, a piece of wood” (“The Thing” 6); secondly, “thing in the sense

in which it means whatever is named but which includes also plans, decisions, reflections, loyalties, actions, historical things” (“The Thing” 6); and thirdly, “all these and anything else that is a something (ein. etwas) and not nothing” (“The Thing” 6).

This philosophical approach to the notion “thing” confirmed the richness of the term and the multiple realities that it represents. Drawing on Heidegger, Bill Brown pays attention to the thingness of the thing, a concept already explored in said philosopher. Brown goes on to suggest that, “we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested however momentarily” (“Thing Theory” 4).

So, when the perception of the thing itself is not based on its function, but on its nature, this is the moment when it is possible to be aware of the thingness of the thing. Also, this is culture-specific in the sense that “the perception of things” (Brown, “Thing Theory” 9) is dependent on the values a society placed on them; this way, a thing might be full of value and meaning for a particular society, whereas for others it might not. Furthermore, Donald Preziosi considers that in the work of Heidegger there is an emphasis on this topic, as “there seems to be a need to discover the thingly character of the thing” (Preziosi, *Art of History* 286), and what the truth is behind the realities of the things. In this sense, James Dodd illustrates this point by using the example of light in order to clarify what a thingness of a thing really is. Thus,

Could light as a thing, as a given being, be presented in such a way that its thingness nor this or that characteristic, modality, or determination, but its being as a thing – were the overriding point of interest? The task would not be to emphasize the materiality of light, or its naturalness, or its functionality. The question is not how light as light could be the theme, as in the work of an architect

like Steven Holl, or its careful arrangement in medieval architecture, but instead its thingness, that which makes light a thing. (Dodd 124)

To a certain extent, this example reinforces the idea, suggested by Kant and developed by Bill Brown that lights are *thing-for-us* or a *thing-in-itself*, being the quality of thingness of a thing embedded in the status of thing-in-itself. In other words, light is presented beyond functionality, form or status, which accounts for a deeper meaning than the one attributed to objects. In this line of thought, despite the differences existing between objects and things, both terms are addressed to point out a table, for example, as something, therefore a thing, whereas objects are limited in what they represent, since objects can be regarded as products of the human mind. Accordingly, in Thing Theory, as well as in material culture studies, researchers affirm that by establishing close links with things, people are inclined to humanise them in their daily interaction, thus providing them with life and purpose. This intense relationship between subject-thing leads to the blurring of boundaries between things like a rock, a leaf, or a piece of wood, and individuals, particularly when individuals bestow those things a special meaning i.e. the moment of discovery, or an emotional connection of another sort. The bonds maintained between possessor/possession facilitate the emergence of the thing as an entity of its own, as it comes alive with a need for others to tell its story, its biography.

Ian Woodward focuses on this idea from the point of view of objects, but it can be applied to things as well, since both make reference to the same realities, being things enriched with a broader meaning. In his view, “thing suggest[s] an inanimate or inert quality, requiring that actors bring things to life through imagination or physical activity” (Woodward 15), whereas objects are regarded as tangible realities that “can enter into and out of sphere of commoditisation, so that an object that is now a

commodity might not always remain a commodity due to its incorporation into private or ritual worlds of individuals, families and cultures” (Woodward 15).

Therefore, Woodward considers that being material things dynamic entities, which have moved around since their first creation, first as human-made objects and, later on, as the result of more sophisticated ways of production, it is apt to consider that material things develop their own narrative. In contrast to W.H.R Rivers who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, posited the idea that objects could only develop a biography by means of an ownership principle, Arjun Appadurai proposes that any object might have multiple biographies and stories, worth narrating. Seen in this light, if “we accept that every person has many biographies — psychological, professional, political, familial, economic and so forth— each of which selects some aspects of the life history and discards others” (“The Politics of Value” 68), objects can be considered as having a life, adapted to their material nature, as well as to the different social and personal settings to which they are exposed. Furthermore, in taking into account the relation between objects and people, one individual can have access to relevant information regarding financial, social, familiar, or personal matters. Hence, there exists a certain similarity between objects and people, since telling stories, of people and objects alike, is not monolithic, but diverse. Generally speaking, all kinds of questions are formulated in order to know as much as possible about where, when, and why that item was bought, since when it was first acquired, or whether it belonged to someone dear to us. There are indeed multiple conversations in which things are the protagonists, and stories that revolve around them, and around our emotional connection with them. Among the examples provided by Appadurai is the biography of a random car in Africa:

The car also offers several possible social biographies: one biography may concentrate on its place in the owner – family’s economy, another may relate the

history of its ownership to the society's class structure, and a third may focus on its role in the sociology of the family's kin relations, such as loosening family ties in America or strengthening them in Africa. But all such biographies – economic, technical, social – may or may not be culturally informed. What would make a biography cultural is not what it deals with, but how and from what perspective. (“Politics of Value” 68)

This idea of things having a biography is based on multiple aspects, being one of the most outstanding human beings' constant processes of narrative construction of the self. Things are benefitted from this relation in the sense that they not only acquire a biography, but with time they come to life and have their own identity, mostly in domestic environments where people are more prone to endow objects with meaning. According to Maiko Tsutsumi, materiality represents a source of knowledge which provides information about the reasons why people interact the way they do with their physical environment. In other words, “a theory of things comes to embody meanings and experiences – a theory of things – it may help us provide better insight into the nature of the human relationship to material things” (Tsutsumi 12). Thus, the field of material studies covers not only an interest in comprehending the processes in which things begin to convey meaning and perform specific roles in our culture and societies, but also as to how objects and things end up being regarded as social beings.

In this sense, Arjun Appadurai departs from the notion that humans need to “provide ‘personal’ touches to objects, ‘singular’ features to what are obviously commodities, and magical aspects to what are fully marketized experiences” (“Thing itself” 18). Clearly, possessions are not only dear to us because they belong to us, but also because they give material sense to our existence, thus engaging in a mutual recognition of existence. As Bill Brown posits, “these days, you can read books on the

pencil, the zipper, the toilet, the bananas, the chair, the potato, the bowler hat. These days, history can unabashedly begin with things and with senses by which we apprehend them” (Brown, “Thing Theory” 3). This gives material things a meaningful role in people’s lives where they develop their own narrative.

Language, as it has been stated previously, is a powerful ally in the forging of emotional attachment to things, so what brings us closer to objects is to look up to them and to be able to address them as entities in an act of recognition. According to Brown, it was already in the Anglo-Saxon period when this process of “incorporation of verbal identities” (*Things* 73) began. Over time language has constantly adapted to the emergence of new material realities, providing linguistic identity to those emerging material scenarios. Such is the major role of language in the development of subject-object emotional attachment. What Bruno Latour poses as regards human beings, who “are always prisoners of language” (227), can be perfectly applied to things. Thus, by giving a name to something, its identity is limited to be one thing and nothing else. Furthermore, this identity is subject to change since society and culture are in a constant process of renegotiating identity meaning. This has happened with one particular object: gloves. Following Bill Brown, their meaning has evolved through time: back in the Renaissance, gloves had a manifold function depending on the possessor. Servants would use it to protect their hands from inclement weather as well as from hard labour, whereas aristocrats used gloves mainly for aesthetic purposes. This has changed over time, as stated above. Thus, when reading material culture it is important to pay attention to both past and present background of the object under analysis. As Appadurai asserts, most of the time the biography of the object is “obscure[d]” (“Thing Itself” 19) and this obscurity can only be clarified by taking into consideration aspects such as the moment the person decided to buy the object, the way in which it was used, the location of the

object was, as well as whether the interaction with the object influenced the owner over time. So, an object ends up having a biography of its own that, in family environments for example, is worth being narrated or passed on to other generations.

Sharon Schembri, Bill Merrilees and Stine Kristiansen argue that the biographical component of possessions manifests a need for the person to be visible through materiality. Consequently, “the incorporation of objects into self and self into objects” (624) occurs, so when people make reference to an object, individuals are embedded into that object and all the way around. This notion of a self, embedded in possessions, has been explored in the field of material culture recently, especially, in the field of material consumption which considers the multiple ways in which one’s self establishes links with consumer culture. As Schembri Merrilees and Kristiansen posit, individuals are not only beginning to extend their presence in the environment, but also “demonstrating the notion that consumer identity is not necessarily a consistent monologic narrative, but rather offers many contradictory interpretative standpoints that consumers combine and adapt to create and define the self” (625). This leads us to the field of ownership and identity that underlines the ways in which the self is influenced by an ongoing relation with material cultures from a life cycle perspective, focusing on the gradual attachment of the self to the material world. In this sense, in order to understand the role of materiality in later life, it is crucial to overview the current theories that reflect upon how an object becomes a possession, and how a possession becomes an extension of the self.

2.2. Materiality and the Subject

The increasing interest in the emotional side of material culture and the effects that it has on individuals at different levels of the self has become a predominant subject of

research in the last years. The attention is diversified in the numerous ways in which people interact with materiality, bearing in mind that every person develops a unique mode of communication with their physical environment and that attachment can or cannot take place. When attachment is established, the interest lies in the categorisation of materiality as an extension of the self. Thus, for many researchers in the field of material culture, the relation that consumers establish with their belongings is a reflection of how much the self is influenced by discourses of material value. In fact, Western culture promotes the idea of keeping up with new technological devices, brands, or aesthetic trends, among others, in order to keep the self in the latest fashion.

As Russell Belk posits, taking into consideration

the relationship between possessions and sense of self...it is based not only on the premise that this relationship is of importance to understanding consumer behaviour, but also on the premise that understanding the extended self will help us to learn how consumer behaviour contributes to our broader existence as human beings. (“Extension Self” 139)

Apparently, many of these items appear in our lives under the premise of bettering or improving our lives, as if happiness could be quantifiable and dependent on the amount of possessions one is able to have or accumulate. In this sense, culture is to be understood as a dynamic exchange of norms and values, which are passed on from one generation to the next. Possessing has become a way to ascertain someone’s value in society, hence the need of social recognition through the act of having. Then, materiality and possessions reformulate one’s identity as they become basic scaffolding of the self and not only quantifiers of status or accomplishments. Thus, as Belk states “defining ourselves by our possessions can contribute to feelings of well-being as well as feelings of emptiness and vulnerability if we believe that we are nothing more than what we

own” (“Are We What We Own?” 77). This reinforces the role of possessions in the construction of the self, as well as that of a material understanding of the world.

When Belk approaches the relation between the self and the material world, he reflects upon the idea of possessions being used as extensions of the self. Indeed, it remains clear that the self and possessions are inextricably linked, on the basis of the relevance that materiality and home possessions have acquired. The extended self, following Russell Belk, is a complex cultural construction that not only takes into consideration the world of objects, but also people and places, basically because “the notion of extended self is a superficial masculine and Western metaphor comprising not only that which is seen as “me” (the self), but also that which is seen as “mine” (“Extended Self” 140).

Arguably, little attention is given to these objects, and when the attention is drawn to them is to enhance their functionality or aesthetic properties omitting other important roles i.e. providers of emotional comfort in the construction and support of the self. This is due to the fact that both the owner and the object develop a reciprocal relationship, and with the passing of time objects’ prior function is altered in order to fulfil the emotional needs of the self. For example, brands can illustrate this idea since the acquisition of certain items might contribute to the social enhancement of the self as well as the developing of a sense of exclusivity over those who might not have access to that item. Then, the self is transformed when it participates in material discourse and, in it, objects acquire functions as sources of pride, self-esteem, and self-recognition, among others.

In this regard, a connection between the self and certain possessions might lead to the blurring of boundaries between the two, to the extent that any alteration or deterioration in the possession might be considered a devaluation of the self, because

certain possessions “allow us to convince ourselves (and perhaps others) that we can be a different person than we would be without them” (Belk, “Extended Self” 145). Thus, through having, the self seems to corroborate its position in the world as if it could be considered another object longing for validation and attention; in other words, possessions are viewed as indicators of the position human beings occupy in the world. According to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, “the self is a fragile construction of the mind” (22), and it can be rooted in this fragility that the self looks for identity and comfort in the material world. This sense of comfort is only found in objects where the self is able to exert control since the feeling of mastering an object helps the self to develop ownership so as to regard that object as an extension of the self. In Belk’s terms, “in claiming that something is “mine,” the person also comes to believe that the object is “me” (“Extended Self” 140-141). The identification, deriving from the interaction between the owner and object, can be seen in the multiple roles that objects display in terms of intensifying or diminishing the self. If an object is mine and it also represents me, it is not unusual to appreciate, among the functions of objects, their ability to signify status, and thus, the self is modified through the interaction, acquisition, or use of material indicators of social categorisation.

In order for an object to embody these properties there are many factors that need to be taken into consideration, such as its rarity, the monetary value or its antiquity, among others. In this way, when the object is rare, it might help to draw the attention, curiosity or envy of others, which ends up giving visibility to the self as the owner of such a unique piece, since through exclusiveness the self receives a major recognition. Among these exclusive items are found vintage fashion, or discontinued articles such as dresses, a pair of glasses or jewellery passed on to generations, or limited editions.

As it can be observed, one of the intentions of surrounding ourselves with certain objects might lie in a distinction principle, that is to say, an intrinsic need to stand out from the rest, and reaffirm one's worthiness in detriment of others. Therefore, objects differentiate or integrate people by their absence or presence in daily life discourse. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg distinguish three levels of representation of the self through possessions: the social, the personal and the cosmic, thus,

objects serve a process of differentiation, separating the owner from the social context, emphasising his or her individuality. Or they might represent dimensions of similarity between the owner and others: shared descent, religion, ethnic origin, or lifestyle. In this instance, the object symbolically expresses the integration of the owner with his or her social context. (39)

Be that as it may, people somehow cling to possessions as if mind and body could find refuge in them to overcome the sense of one's fragility. As stated above, Russell Belk develops the premise that objects become extensions of the self which define and represent the owner. Indeed, through the act of ownership people develop a deeper sense of control over the environment. This is something that not only occurs with material realities, but also encompasses abstract entities such as ideas, beliefs, values, or territory. Furthermore, the feeling of ownership is indispensable in order to construct meaningful relations with things and transform meaningless objects into meaningful ones. Basically, one of the most important requirements that possessions might fulfil is to allow the owner to "exercise power or control over them, just as we might control an arm or a leg" (Belk, "Extended Self" 140). Therefore, attachment is the result of the owner's success in mastering possessions, which ends up considering a possession as an extended part of the self. Therefore, as Belk suggests, losing a possession might cause a terrible feeling of having lost an intrinsic part of ourselves.

Daphna Oyserman, Kristen Elmore, and George Smith maintain that in order to have a stable identity it is necessary to know oneself, so the self can be used as “an important perceptual, motivational and self-regulatory tool” (69). Identity is not fixed over time but it is constantly affected and influenced by external and internal factors. These factors may vary through the life cycle as the individual becomes enmeshed in the process of figuring it out who s/he is and how s/he wants to project the self in the material world. This process can be conscious or unconscious because people are not always aware of the way in which materiality affects our life and how individuals represent themselves, but when awareness occurs, it can definitely be a powerful tool to construct or reinforce our sense of identity. In fact, making sense of oneself is more complex than it might seem. For example, when using external elements such as clothing, bags, appliances, or cars, people build up an identity that needs artefacts to be maintained over time: “Self and identity are predicted to influence what people are motivated to do, how they think and make sense of themselves and others, the actions they take, and their feelings and ability to control or regulate themselves” (Oyserman et al 70). To a certain extent, the subject-object relation begins with an intention for self-expression, but it ends up in a bonding where both need one another to exist.

Taking into consideration the way in which this bonding is formed, Russell Belk focuses on the initial stages of human development in order to comprehend how the inclusion of objects determines the future projection of identity towards the object. In this line, culture and upbringing can be considered a revealing factor since “developmental evidence suggests that the identification with our things begins quite early in life when as an infant we learn to distinguish self from environment and them from others who may envy our possessions” (Miller, *Consumption and its Consequences*, 84). Socialisation is key to the development of the self, but it cannot be

taken for granted that socialisation only occurs with other people—it takes place in relationship with objects as well. Mastering and control over them turn out to be important scaffolding in the construction of healthy stable relations. As maintained by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg, people constantly invest energy and time in relationships, projects, and goals, for example. When this “psychic energy” (9) is invested in something physical or abstract (relationships), something will get impregnated with our energy in this constant search for self-definition. The longer individuals spend paying attention to a task, object, or goal in life, the more a part of the self is left behind. Therefore, being deprived of that “goal” might cause a sense of failure: “[a]n individual cannot become a person if he or she is unable to cultivate his or her goals, and therefore the shape that the self will take” (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg 9).

In order to shape the self, the person needs to decide which goals are to be acquired, what values will compose the core of his/her personality, or in which ways the person can find activities, things that better represent the self. The lack of knowledge about oneself is a symptom of a weak personality that would predispose the self to endeavours which will not fulfil life purposes. Once goals are set, the focus of attention can be directed in a coherent direction. This allows participation and engagement of the self in pleasurable activities, and the selection of the right objects which better fulfil aspects of self-recognition and support identity. However, as the self progresses into different stages of life, objects acquire other functions that, instead of supporting the self, might bring conflict and unsettling emotions. This is due to the capacity of objects to connect both past and present. In this sense, many times the self is in conflict with material things that bring memories of the past; especially when objects are related to people who have been part of our past. In these situations, the way the self finds to

eradicate the conflict is to dispose of the object regardless the strong connection it might have been in the past. Therefore, to a certain extent, possessions are always at the expense of the owner's changes in life, or of his/her perception. In fact, "things contribute to the cultivation of the self when they help create order in consciousness at the levels of the person, community, and patterns of natural order" (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg 16). When this balance is modified, the object can become an obstacle for "self-continuity" (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg 23).

In the act of constructing a personal narrative, the person needs to be able to rely on their environment to find support on bringing memories back. Memories live in the material world and allow the person to remember rather than forget what has been lived. In this sense, objects that allow self-continuity and a coherent representation of the self prove to be beneficial psychologically. This can be found in objects which provide the feeling of linkage with one's past and ancestors. Furthermore, according to Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg, among the multiple benefits of the psychological side of objects it can be

firstly, by demonstrating the owner's power, vital erotic energy, and place in the social hierarchy. Secondly, objects reveal the continuity of the self through time, by providing foci of involvement in the present, mementos and souvenirs of the past, and signposts to future goals. Third, objects give concrete evidence of one's place in a social network as symbols (literally, the joining together) of valued relationships. (23)

Emotional connectedness, then, bonds us with our things. In this line, Annemarie Money argues that "objects act as markers or bearers of other people, to preserve the memory of that person and also maintain the cherished connection that once existed in a physical sense" (368). The reliability of material evidence reinforces the bonding with the object

as they are valuable to give veracity to the narrative of one's self. It is indeed in this physical transformation of lived experience that cognitive decline can be counteracted because memory has been captured into an object.

In addition, it is up to the owner to decide how and where to display objects and how much of the self the owner wants to be revealed to outsiders. Therefore, possessions do not only perform aesthetic purposes within our homes, but also “interpersonal roles” (Money 371); these roles both favour the communication between the subject and the object, and facilitate exchange of information with other members of the family. The self finds in the object a material witness to the past and through the act of touching and manipulating the object, the self is secured, and thus, the past is safe. When the self is projected onto the object, objects develop their own narrative, so what it was before a meaningless inert object, it comes alive. Ian Woodward maintains that the way in which people make reference to possessions reflects how much of their lives is embedded in the narrative of the object. Woodward emphasises that “objects are polysemic” (161) and as much as the owner attaches meaning to the object, it can be interpreted from many perspectives that sometimes objects escape the control of the owner. Once a certain level of emotional attachment with an object is developed, by sharing its narrative, people allow other people to participate in the process of construction of the object's own narrative. A cherished possession exists for other people as long as they have been recipients of the story and have learnt to appreciate the process of bonding that has occurred throughout time. Objects are indeed meaningful links to past experience.

In this respect, globalisation and mass production of items reduce considerably the uniqueness of our acquisitions but encourage the person to look for ways that may allow individualisation. Markets have taken into consideration this and have focused on

the production of things that can contribute to the idea of constructing a differentiated self. Danielle Todd argues that through consumerism people assume their role as agents in the design of their extended self. By making decisions over our purchases a person is able to somehow “mov[es] from one area of society to another independent of circumstances of birth, gender, or race” (49). Thus, objects receive the power to change the way people look and treat others, so the act of consuming is followed by its effect on social and personal self-categorisation.

In terms of gender, the market already contributes to increase the gap between women and men by creating products which foster segregation. Furthermore, it could be suggested that material representation is gender-biased, since during the process of creation, production and distribution the target group is not consumers in general, but specific members of groups or communities based on an exhaustive analysis of what makes us different and what means help increase high-profit selling. Thus class, ethnicity, and sexuality are aspects which often fulfil market interest.

In this line of thought, gender represents a set of socially sanctioned norms which determine not only how people behave or interact with others, but also our preferences in the consumer market. As Lydia Martens considers, almost all of our consumer behaviours comply with cultural constructions of gender stereotypes where women “enjoying shopping and being style managers of their homes...” (106) and “men, on the other hand, are portrayed as abhorring shopping and avoiding the shopping mall” (106). With the advent of feminism consumer behaviour was analysed, taking into consideration the influence that a gender-based culture has in the development of our self and the construction of identities as women and men. As Martens points out, the inclusion of gender in the analyses of consumer discourse is essential in order to understand that both men and women buy, accumulate, and interact differently with

material discourse. To put it differently, possessions contribute to the understanding of widespread ideas about women's and men's gender positions in today's culture.

As much as feminism has contributed to give voice to the discrimination that exists in our societies and the danger of patriarchal societies, "unlike other domains of social life [...] feminist scholars have not been hammering on the door of consumer behaviour scholarship to argue for the inclusion of gender into the research agenda, and it has thus been easy for gender to be ignored in mainstream consumer behaviour" (Martens 107).

Indeed, studies reveal that men and women look for comfort and emotional benefit in different objects. Men look for independence, power and mastering over one's environment, and they find this in functional objects where toys are designed to foster the use of physical strength or problem-solving skills. According to Helga Dittmar, "men tend towards a more independent form of identity construction and expression "aimed at separateness from others, autonomy and being able to do things" ("To Have Is to Be?" 46).

In this sense, objects carry cultural and social beliefs, and they are used as instruments to exert power and instil values on citizens. Gender is inextricably tied to material discourse as it helps spread and reinforce the idea that men are inclined to prove power and control, and women are expected to nurture the self by cultivating their role as caregivers, protectors, mothers, and daughters. Thus, women develop an "interdependent identity (concerned with embeddedness in close personal relationships)" (Dittmar, "To Have Is to Be?" 46). Interestingly, both genders are subject to the same buying processes which may emerge from the feeling of lacking something in their lives, conditioned by a society that lures the individual to find in possessions emotional nurturance and stability. This occurs today, basically, because, as Joan Kron

states, in certain cultures “possessions speak a language we all understand, and we pay close attention to the inflections, vernacular, and exclamations” (115). In a way, much information about us is conveyed through our possessions, and through our house, also a possession. Now it is time to pay attention to the way in which the space is inhabited and constructed in meaningful ways, facilitating constant exchange of information between people.

2.3. Home and Space

In this section I will deal with the house, our physical environment, as an important possession. Yi Fu Tuan considers that human beings’ inherent need for territoriality is fundamental in order to understand how and why the self makes distinctions between oneself and others, between private and public, between personal and social. This is illustrated in the way in which raw space is shaped into a construction of symbols codifying the environment into concrete forms of social and cultural symbolism. This helps the self to acquire certainty when facing the unknown providing, at the same time, order, coherence, and a sense of belonging among people.

In many ways, the house is the main point of reference of the self, since it finds in the place inhabited a sense of direction and a geographical identity essential for the development of a coherent self. As Tuan ponders, when moving to an unknown location, the person’s first reaction is to get to know the surroundings so at the beginning “a neighbourhood is at first a confusion of images to the new resident; it is blurred space “out there”. Learning to know the neighbourhood requires the identification of significant localities, such as street corners and architectural landmarks” (19). In this sense, through the physical manipulation of the space into concrete forms, people not only protect themselves from inclement weather, or from wild animals, but they acquire

a perspective over the environment which reinforces their sense of mastery over it. This is similar to what happens with our houses, as people delimit their territory from others and, through daily interaction and experience, an emotional bond is established. As D. Rowles and Habid Chaudhury state “home provides the physical and social context of life experience, burrows itself into the material reality of memories, and provides an axial core for our imagination” (Rowles and Chaudhury 3). Seen in this light, the house is central in the understanding of our relation with the material world as not only provides shelter, but it also offers a place where the self stores, keeps, and maintains most of their dear possessions. Tuan considers that there are multiple ways in which the house becomes a relevant place in the way in which the self participates in material discourses, and this is rooted in early stages of individual development. Thus, parents or primary caretakers are the main reference figures that the infant needs in order for him/her to develop a stable sense of self. So, “the first environment an infant explores is his parent. The first permanent and independent object he recognises is perhaps another person. While things appear and continue to exist only insofar as he attends to them” (Rowles and Chaudhury 22). This slow process of recognition of one’s physical presence in the world takes place as the child is able to distinguish himself/herself from extended relatives. When the child begins to crawl and explore the world under the surveillance of an adult, a sense of distance, certainty or uncertainty is created. Thus, a child “soon walks to a purpose: he starts from a home base, heads toward the object desire, and returns to the starting point by a different route” (Tuan 25-26).

Therefore, the house is considered a space where the self can negotiate its identity and express freely from social and personal constraints. As a result of this, most people develop a feeling of attachment to their place that influences the way in which the self develops. As Hashem Hashemnezhad, Ali Akbar Heidari, and Parisa

Mohammad Hoseini posit, in order to understand this process of bonding with the house, when it occurs, it is important to approach cognitive, behavioural, and emotional components. In other words,

Cognitive aspects of the interaction are led to spatial perception and during that, people know the environmental elements and use them to navigate their way. Behavioural aspects of the interaction are mentioned to activities and functional relationship between people and environment. Emotional interaction with place points to satisfaction and attachment to place (Altman and Low 1992). This relevance can be so strong that create a tie between individual and components.

(6)

Interestingly, there is a strong connection between daily routine and attachment. Hence, washing dishes, cleaning the room, cooking, or gardening are activities that bond us with our places in meaningful ways. The frequent navigation of one's personal space ends up in an unconscious memorisation of room distribution, colour, distance, or shape which foster belonging and attachment with domestic space. Home can be considered an object which operates at a complex level of meaning, as it often becomes the foreground of subject-object physical and emotional interrelation at public and private scale. In the study of materiality, the house plays a relevant role as one of the strongest sources of self-esteem, identity, and value for the self. This occurs, mainly, because it contains and keeps what is dear to us and, at the same time, it is a valuable possession itself.

After the publication of major works in the field of "place" and "space" theory, such as Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1957), the eighties witness a renewed interest in the intersection between the self and the physical environment. Researchers in the field of psychology, geography, architecture, decoration, or phenomenology

distinguish between different types of relation with our places which affect the identity of their inhabitants. These relations can vary from place attachment, through place dependence, to place identity. According to Lee Cuba and David M. Hummon, place identity emerges when the person attains a level of attachment in which the self identifies with the location, that is to say, “an interpretation of self that uses environmental meaning to symbolise or situate identity. Like other forms of identity, place identity answers the question- who am I? – By encountering- where am I? Or where do I belong?” (112). Along with Cuba and Hummon, other researchers differ from this terminology and further this approach to the development of sense of place. In this sense, when referring to the house, Shmuel Shamai considers that there are different stages a person can undergo as s/he interrelates to the dwelling place. Thus, “having a sense of place [would] consist of three phases. The first phase is belonging to a place, the middle phase is attachment to a place, and the highest phase is commitment to a place” (349). These phases go from having a low or zero sense of place to progressive awareness of our location that leads to “knowledge of being located to a place”, “belonging to a place”, “attachment to place”, “identifying with the place goals”, “involvement in a place” and the last one, as claimed by Shamai, “sacrifice for a place” (349). The differences between each stage vary in the personal commitment of the person with the place s/he inhabits; it is always dependent on the owner’s investment of time to create an emotional and physical bonding with the house as well as what kind of memories are associated with that place which can prevent or not that attachment from happening. When a sense of place acquires its deepest phase for Shamai, “sacrifice for a place” (349), it makes reference to a process where the person is unable to detach the self from the house and “would sacrifice of important attributes and values such as prosperity, freedom, or, in the most extreme situation, life itself” (Shamai 349) in order

to stay in place. Sacrifice for a place has a strong emotional component where the house becomes an important element for survival and independence often threatened by deterioration in health.

In this regard, Harold M. Proshansky, Abbe K Fabian, and Robert Kaminoff consider that the development of such a deep level of attachment as sacrifice for a place involves might rely on the achievement of “environmental competence” (72) over the years. Thus, with ill health, mobility is reduced in such a way that the environment reflects impairment, which becomes prevalent in the performance of our daily activities. Environmental competence is a skill developed through years of navigating one’s domestic space, which allows the person to maintain independence while they can still move around. Thus, this mastery of one’s space is an element that could be integrated in a stage which implies higher levels of attachment, since it fosters a strong bonding in cases where physical and mental decline takes place.

James Krasner considers that “gerontologists who study place attachment among the elderly address the complex relationships between self, space and habit when elders identify with their homes” (210). And in the case of strong commitment to place this feeling of remaining at home at all costs is the result of a constant negotiation of the ageing self with the domestic space in order to remain at their homes. Furthermore,

the interchange between memory and environment is always at work in the home, but it is particularly apparent, and particularly critical, in the homes of the elderly. Because elderly people tend to lean more heavily on their home environment, and because they are often forced between leaving this memory-laden space behind or becoming debilitated by caring for it, these metaphorical dynamics assume crucial, and often painful, significance for them. (210-211)

Therefore, the ageing self struggles to remain at home despite health decline, and in many ways, when environmental competence is reduced by impairment, a gradual process of physical retreat and “environmental centralization” (215) take place. When this occurs, domestic space is shrunk considerably and, in some cases, people are obliged to “establish a central location, such as the kitchen table or living room sofa, and cease to utilise more peripheral rooms of the house” (Krasner 215).

Then, people tend to cherish their homes in daily conversation as they make constant references to them in terms of distribution, size, decoration, or location, which is used in order to highlight the person’s social prestige, identity, or value to others. Not only do people occupy their domestic space, but also their homes define who they are. Indeed, social and cultural standards are materialised through the act of having, and in the example of the house, even if it is not a portable possession, it is perceived as having the capacity to lower or raise the self. However, there is much to learn in terms of the use and meaning of our relationship with our houses and possessions.

In this line of thought, as explored before, having and being is the predominant discourse in Western cultures and, as a consequence, the self shapes its space with material things in order to give a sense and purpose to its material expression to the world. In turn, the house is a concrete and abstract reality where the self uses its distribution in order to fill the space with material symbols which underline one’s purposes and life goals. In this sense, Krasner, Shamai, and Proshansky agree that the body and the house tend to blur their boundaries and become assimilated, so the more the self is gaining material visibility, the stronger the connection with the house and its possessions will be, as well as the transformation of the space into a landscape of symbolism. Thus, the house is not just a place to be filled with things and possessions but basic scaffolding in the formation and sustainability of the self.

Be that as it may, sense of place, place identity, or place attachment to the house do not always occur. In this line, Mary Douglas makes reference to the occasions on which the house is perceived as a disruptive element in the construction of a coherent self and how it fosters detachment and exclusion, that is to say, she underlines the variability in which the house is the centre of conflict where the self seems to be unable to identify and create a feeling of belonging. Douglas considers that “the tyranny of the home” (30) exists for those who fail to create a space where sharing and trust prevail. An example can be found in children who, due to parental norms in the use and distribution of the house, end up shrinking their process of attachment to their homes as sources of geographical identification, since they struggle to negotiate their identity in a space they consider as foreign to them. In fact, as Douglas asserts, the house is a “fragile system, easy to subvert” (52) where rules can be obeyed or not, depending on the agreeability among the members of the family, and where peace can only be obtained if there is a common feeling of belonging.

If parents decide over the way in which space is arranged at a small scale, on a large scale, architecture can be considered an instrument at service of those power structures which have been designed as to how space is to be used by others. Taking into consideration the strong influence of materiality, Susana Torre considers that it is crucial to look at consumer patterns, as well as material realities, as elements which fulfil gender differences. Indeed, most of our neighbourhoods, cities, and buildings reflect men’s understanding of spaces and architecture where patriarchy has prevailed throughout history. Unfortunately, women have been long ignored as producers of space, but rather relegated as simple users of a biased conception of where and how space should be used. As Torre posits, it is complicated to appreciate at what levels women have been discriminated in terms of urban space, and in which ways the rise of

feminism has contributed to rethink and reformulate old conceptions of appropriate or inappropriate space for women. Mainly,

it is difficult to see the current individual and collective struggle of women to transform urban environments as anything of cultural significance, or to re-evaluate the enduring influence of traditional female enclaves originated in the premodern city. Many of these enclaves continue to serve their traditional functional and social roles, like the public washing basins in major Indian cities or the markets in African villages... (Torre 140)

Crucially, Jane Rendell observes that the growing body of literature that addresses women's issues is contributing to comprehend the role of architecture in the way our gender identity is daily performed. Thus,

The most pervasive representation of gendered space is the paradigm of the 'separate spheres', an oppositional and a hierarchical system consisting of a dominant public male realm of production (the city) and a subordinate private female one of reproduction (The home). The origins of this ideology that divides city from home, public from private, production from reproduction, and men from women are both patriarchal and capitalist. (Rendell 103)

Therefore, architecture and especially the house encapsulate the traditional roles of women in their ability to fulfil biological function. Along with Jane Rendell and Susana Torre, Jana Nakhil also takes heed of architecture as an instrument to spread gender segregation as she considers that all of us contributed to its perpetuation until very recently. In fact,

the experience of walking in/using public spaces, uncovers a male/female spatial identity, which is intrinsically apparent in the mainstream production of space, a

practice which – we argue – proves itself to be oppressive, homogenizing, and reductive. (Nakhal 16)

Thus, most designs are testimonies of internal conceptions about how the division of space should be performed agreeing with the architect and, in most of the cases, fulfil patriarchal standards. In this sense, there is a gendering of space rooted in “the intentional acts of architectural design according to the sex of the architect, or whether it is produced through the interpretative lens of architectural criticism, history, and theory” (Nakhal 101). Furthermore, Gerard Rey A. Lico also goes along with Nakhal’s conception of Western design as the result of the predominance and ingrained feeling of masculinity and the consequences in the gendered division of spaces. This ends up restricting the self and encapsulating the self with architectural social and cultural expectations. Thus, in the case of women, patriarchal roots of most of our built environment have led to,

[t]he underrepresentation of women’s body and experience in the spatial structures creates a possible setting for subordination and exploitation. This spatial marginalization of women in the architectural appropriation of space sustains the unquestioned operation of patriarchal power in the process of framing human activities, movement, bodily practice, and gendered relations (Lico 30).

It could be argued that space has been used as a political, cultural, and social instrument to isolate women from the public sphere and maintain them in the areas of the quotidian. In this sense, the house, as analysed previously, is considered a territory where women are thought to feel a special connection rather than men. If women are expected to fulfil their reproductive role as mothers, the house is regarded as the place par excellence for them. The house becomes then the main locus of women, especially the figure of the mother as the main source of protection and nurturance.

Such is the connection established between the house and the female gender that in many analyses, a correlation between the house and the female body predominates as if they were an extension of one another. Areas, such as the kitchen, have been assigned to women as if they belong to it from the moment they are born and at which they would feel at ease. Challenging these preconceived ideas has been arduous work for feminists who, in the last decades, have taken up the task to re-evaluate architectural discourse and especially the conception of the house from the prism of gender.

There are indeed few architectural constructions in which the female voice has been taken into consideration as a producer and not as a user of that space. Thus, the experience of the architectural landscape is designed to express a biased conception of reality fostering inequality. This arbitrary use of space in terms of gender is illustrated in the field of decoration. As Deborah Cohen posits, much has changed since Robert Kerr's wrote *The Gentleman's House* in 1865. The book written to please a masculine audience aimed to extend men's authority and moral standards to the decoration of their houses which illustrates how decoration is nothing more than a cultural construction. Back then men's use of decoration was in order to "safeguard the righteousness of their households" (Cohen 158), and women had little to say about those matters. Today things are more complicated since "the gendering of architecture is not straightforwardly visible since the values and ideologies architecture embodies claim universal status and are normally taken as gender-free" (Lico 31). It is indeed important to keep exploring new alternatives to disassociate cultural assumptions of women's and men's use of space. Indeed, "anthropologists have also argued that space is materially and culturally produced, and architecture is here taken to be one of many culturally produced artefacts" (Rendell 102). Clearly, this re-evaluation of the architecture that forms the city, our villages, or our houses poses a challenge.

Doreen Massey considers that part of this understanding of material environment and consumption in terms of gender segregation is not only based on a history which has silenced women, but it can be traced back to the nineteenth century, and the disruption of capitalism which modified the production and distribution of goods, but most importantly, it supposed a threat “for the maintenance of male dominance” (119). This is because at that time men were the breadwinners outside the home, whose work was often based on their physical strength and “paid jobs for women in these areas were few. Domestic service for the younger girls; for married women poorly paid and haphazard work such as laundry, decorating or child care” (Massey 193).

Thus, the house has been a place where women have been relegated to a secondary role since they were not considered owners of that territory, ruled by men. Rita Felski argues that home spaces should be approached from a perspective of everyday life, and particularly in fields such as the humanities where contemporary women writers explore the experiences of women’s lives in daily life. Since for Felski, “[e]veryday life is the most self-evident, yet the most puzzling of ideas. It is a key concept in other scholarly fields, part of a growing interest in micro-analysis and history from below” (77).

Indeed, for some writers the quotidian is associated with the stillness of the self where it seems that nothing of great interest happens. As Adrienne Rich maintains,

Some ideas are not really new but keep having to be affirmed from the ground up, over and over. One of these is the apparently idea that women are as intrinsically human as men, that neither women nor men are merely the enlargement of a contact sheet of genetic encoding, biological givens. Experience shapes us; randomness shapes us, the stars and weather, our own accommodations and rebellions, above all, the social order around us. (xv)

In a way, the house could be compared to a battleground, or to a place where control is gained rather than bestowed. Therefore, the approach to the dynamics of space from a gender perspective is essential to fully grasp the multiple ways in which the self is developed through the use and arrangement of possessions.

2.4. Home and Possessions in Later Life

As seen before, the house is often regarded as the place where everyday life occurs and a context where material evidence of our public and private experiences is stored and preserved. As people engage in domestic life, processes of buying, arranging, organising, keeping or disposing of things affect the self. Indeed, material attachment is a slow process where the house occupies a central role, mainly, because it functions as the container of our material experienced in the world, as well as a place where the self finds shelter and emotional nurturance.

In this sense, Clare Cooper Marcus approaches the symbolism of the house and the ways in which the house has gained an important role as far as material discourse is concerned. Furthermore, Marcus argues that not only the house itself conveys a lot of information about the self, but also the process of looking and choosing a house shows the way in which the self is projected in material discourse. Thus, if a person is looking for a place whether for social status, a place to settle down, or just a temporary location, the house is meant to function as a tool to achieve personal and social goals within the material context.

When discussing the symbolism of the house, it is important to note that the house allows self-expression in terms of assimilation or distinction. Therefore, the house is often used as an instrument for self-expression through the arrangement and

decoration of possessions. As time passes, not only domestic space is filled with furniture, heirlooms and cherished possessions, but a strong emotional bonding is likely to happen. When it takes place, the house becomes the epicentre of daily life and family memories, where the past is stored and captured. Material things not only transform empty space into a landscape of meaning, but it helps the self to maintain a sense of connection with the past and the present, as well as to point towards orientation to the future. Meltem Türe and Güliz Ger consider that, besides remembering, heirlooms not only keep the connectivity among families across generations, but they also function as “identity anchors, sources of rootedness and embodiments of family identity” (Türe and Güliz 1). In this sense, the value of the object does not lie in its economic value on the market but on subjective criteria. As an example, in some cultures mothers still rely on dowry as a way of assembling material things with a deep emotional component where family tradition can be passed on to future generations. As Marcus maintains, “we have all had the experience of visiting new friends in their home and becoming aware of some facet of their values made manifest by the environment – be it the books on their shelves, art (or the lack of it) on the walls, the degree to which the house is open or closed to the view of visitors, and so on” (7).

Indeed, the house can be arranged in an ambivalent manner. Thus, someone’s space can have an evident absence of objects, a moderate or an excessive display, depending on the kind of information the self aims to reveal to visitors. However, as Marcus reflects, not all the information is controlled by the self since there are always inner feelings and fears which the owner might express unknowingly. Thereby, people seem to leave traces of conflicts and desires on their interaction with possessions where “objects, like people, come in and out of our lives and awareness, not in some random,

meaningless pattern ordained by fate, but in a clearly patterned framework that sets the stage for greater and greater self-understanding” (Marcus 8).

The current emergence of TV programmes (and on streaming service providers) updating viewers on how to keep their homes in style is relevant in giving visibility to how much our homes mean in the representation of the self, thus the underlying meaning of a change in furniture, appliances or decoration could be interpreted as a need of the self for renovation. Thus, when people submerge in processes of refurbishment, it might mean that the person is actually replacing a former self with a new one, allowing new changes in life discourse to affect self-representation. As Ian Woodward poses, people are constantly ascribing meaning to objects outside their functional properties. Thus, from a semiotic perspective, objects function “as signs referring to something other than themselves” (Woodward 57), constantly subject to the need for self-actualisation.

Therefore, from a developmental approach every stage of life has a determinant role in the way the person interacts with the house and its possessions. Firstly, two events occur in the early stages of one’s life: the separation of the newborn from their parents’ room, and the discovery of the outside world where the child learns to delimit the house in two different spaces; private and public, open and close. As time goes by, the adolescent begins to use the room as a way of manifesting their identity and a place where symbols of the self can be stored and protected. Thus, “posters fixed to the bedroom wall, photos displayed, clothes left in disarray– all may make a statement to parents: This is who I am! I am my own person, even if I ‘am not quite sure yet what that is” (Marcus 10).

Indeed, by developing feelings of ownership with our possessions and our territory individuals delimit the territory where our privacy begins and ends. Having a room of one’s own means that objects, placed beyond the threshold of our room, are for

a private use. However, the house does not always become a place where identity is supported and maintained over time; it can be perceived as a hostile space where security and shelter are absent, as mentioned previously. Therefore, following Marcus, the parental house leaves a significant imprint on one's life: "leaving your parental home is a critical life – transition in terms of expressing who you are via the form, location, decoration, and state of order of the place where you live" (Marcus 161).

Clearly, the house becomes influenced by life events such as marriage, divorce, personal relations and work, and this is so because the house is the reflection of our most intimate feelings and it helps the self to find a way of communicating through material and spatial distribution. Indeed, most objects are subjected to be disposed if they fail to identify the current state of mind of the self or they are not useful anymore. Thus, objects permanence in the house is linked to whether they stabilise or destabilise the self. In this line of thought, Elizabeth Edwards considers that the house is arranged in meaningful ways where "the spatial dynamics of objects" (226) is relevant in order to grasp the effect those objects have on their owner's life. Furthermore, when possessions are displayed in the domestic space, they always fulfil the owner's criteria and sense of jurisdiction over the house by deciding when, how, and why an object should be here and not there. In other words, objects fulfil a purpose and their location, the spatial distribution given to objects, is significant as misplacement or objects placed outside their right context, which will end up in the loss of value for the owner, is to be avoided: "the way consumer objects acquire their cultural meaning is within local settings, where participants confer objects a social life through offering active, creative accounts, or narratives. It is stories and narratives that hold an object together, giving it cultural meaning" (Woodward 152). Hence, spatial distribution gives visibility or invisibility to

the objects which play several roles, depending on the owner's intention. As David S. Kirk and Abigail Sellen consider,

when we do start to take things seriously it becomes evident that objects are polysemous. The kinds of sentimental artifacts found in homes have variously been described as evocative objects [Turkle 2007], biographical objects [Hoskins 1998], and sacred objects [Belk et al 1989] (and such categorical distinctions are rarely mutually exclusive). (10:3)

In this sense, the polysemy of objects transforms the house in a sacred place where the self needs to be protected from damage or robbery. Memory is essential to understand this, ultimately because evocative, biographical or cherished objects keep people connected to life and give them a sense of direction. Basically, the self needs to feel how past, present, and future are connected in the construction of a coherent and meaningful story.

In one's life course, not only does the person engage in retrospective looks into the past but there is also a change in the person's relation with objects, directing one's preference towards those that fulfil an evocative function. Also, in some cases, the house and its content may end up replacing social and personal relations where the self relies more in materiality than in personal relations. Marcus calls this process of replacing social interaction with the house and its possessions as "domocentrism" (80) where, in many aspects, the house is utilised as a barrier to protect the self from the outside.

People who engage in this kind of relation with their homes strongly commit to their place. In fact, ideas involving social activities or family gatherings are often declined in order to remain at home and this affects the quality and quantity of contact with friends or family members. Thus, "their dwelling and its contents have become such compelling psychological defences that they appear to interfere with interpersonal

relations and with a deeper connection to a person's transpersonal or spiritual self" (Marcus 81). This deep connection with the house is a complex one that can lie in the need of the self to avoid personal harm by protecting themselves in the intimacy of their homes or by a continuous use of domestic space where processes of collecting, accumulating or hoarding intensify the feeling of belonging.

As mentioned before, the way in which the house is decorated over time, or the space is filled with material things, influences the self and favours attachment. According to Joan Kron, when referring to the house, it is important to take into account how the self evolves from collecting to accumulation or, in extreme cases, into hoarding, which is a symbol of a dysfunction in the way people interact with the material environment. Therefore, from a gradual perspective, Kron considers that the process of collecting "involves gathering, discrimination, making decisions— "I want this not that"— and a strong sense of ownership" (193). This fuels the individual's consumer practices, acquiring things randomly in a slow process where accumulation will finally take over the domestic space. Crucially, James Krasner considers that people's excessive reliability on things and their functions to act as identity bearers or to evoke memories significantly triggers accumulation. This results in an overstuffed and shrunken space, which impedes the person to move around or clean at ease. Indeed, accumulation is frequent in a consumer culture where the boundaries of having and being are so intertwined that the self ends up being dominated by an excessive need for self-representation through materiality.

Following Krasner, the house provides a fit example of how the boundaries of being and having blur and where "a bodily identification with their environment" (211) takes place. This phenomenon is called amalgamation, and is described by Graham D. Rowles as, "[a] sense of physical insideness, of being almost physiologically melded

into the environment, results from an intimacy with its physical configuration stemming from the rhythm and routine of using the space over many years” (qtd. in Krasner 211). All of this reinforces a strong identification with the place inhabited and the role of material things as supporters of such identification. Over time, the bonding and the excessive dependence on material things take place when accumulation becomes an issue, thus cluttering one’s space and the owner’s identity is scattered indiscriminately over meaningless and meaningful possessions.

Clare Cooper Marcus discusses several reasons conducive to excessive accumulation, and among them is, in her view, the fear of losing one’s job. This is the case of Claudia, who is interviewed by Marcus in trying to understand the dynamics behind accumulation, as well as the role played by the person’s biography/past. In this case, Claudia, who experienced war and a time of shortage, states that,

I grew up in a time of shortages. In wartime England, many food stuff were rationed, as were clothes, coal for the fireplace, gasoline for cars, even feed for domestic chickens and rabbits. During those years, my elder brother and I would venture forth on weekends in the fall and winter to scavenge for firewood. We always found plenty to load onto our wagon, haul home, and stack neatly in the cellar of our house. (84)

As proved in the above-mentioned passage, this case of excessive accumulation reveals not only the memories of past material shortage, but also the fear of re-experiencing it again. Then, this fear, based upon memories of deprivation, reinforces certain patterns of material behaviour easily leading into a dysfunctional relation with possessions. Thus, when accumulation persists over time, it is frequent to find the onset of mental illnesses such as hoarding; in fact, it might be complicated to delimit when accumulation develops into hoarding. This can be due to the fact that, before 1993, hoarding was not

even considered a mental disorder. As maintained by Randy O. Frost, Gail Steketee, and Kamala A. I. Greene, hoarding “refers to the acquisition of, and failure to discard, large numbers of possessions that have little use or value” (Frost et al 323), but people tend to associate this unhealthy relation with material things with extreme cases where people live under precarious situations lacking hygiene, and the space is reduced significantly without an apparent reason, as it is the case of houses where excessive things create an overloaded landscape.

When space is saturated by things, one of the main reasons behind this is related to the emotional component of objects. As Frost et al emphasise, in the case of hoarders many of them find it difficult to make decisions at categorising objects as necessary or unnecessary ones because they fear to lose a part of themselves, and to make an irreparable mistake in the discarding process. In this line, Christian Jarrett views this material behaviour as common in Western cultures where materiality is privileged over the self and personal relationships, to the extent that being without having becomes pointless. Hence, it can be maintained that current society is centred towards materiality, and it fails to reformulate current discourses of materiality because, as Jarret observes, materialism is not bad per se, and “it depends on people’s buying motives. To the extent that acquisitions are motivated by intrinsic goals such as affiliation, belonging, pride and self-reward” (Jarret 561).

Then, the relation that exists between material things and people is a complex one, existing multiple elements that need to be taken into consideration in order to understand the reasons behind the privileging of material values over non-material ones. Indeed, the emotional attachment with our possessions allows the self to feel secure and free from social and cultural constraints. In many ways the house is regarded as a haven, a starting point for individuals to build up their own sense of self, where objects are

fundamental not only in relation to the past, but also in association with the present and the future. Also, objects develop their own narrative and a life of their own when individuals need to make sense of time and experience in a way in which the self can find meaning and purpose. In fact, as Donald E. Polkinghorne maintains, “individuals construct private and personal stories linking diverse events of their lives into unified and understandable wholes. These are stories about the self. They are the basis of personal identity and self-understanding and they provide answers to the question “who am I?” (136).

The need of knowing one’s identity throughout the lifespan is deeply connected to material possessions because what people have is an extension of the way in which they have managed to participate actively or passively in acts of buying and having. Hence, the absence or presence of things in someone’s life determines the individual’s narrative and the different responses it elicits. Life is not a coherent sequence of events, but people attempt to make sense of life experience through organisation and organic coherence. Objects become key elements in narrative accounts as they are fundamental in providing a verifiable account of the past in contradistinction to the subjective interpretation of situations and conflicts. Polkinghorne considers that when individuals engage in a process of introspection or retrospection, life is analysed in terms of chronological and lived time. Consequently, “our experience is a construction that results from the interaction of cognitive organizing processes with cues emanating from our external perceptual senses, internal bodily sensations, and cognitive memories” (135). To a certain extent, due to their timeless nature objects are used for narrative construction allowing the self to organise both thinking and experience in abstract and concrete ways.

It remains clear that the house is a place where the self finds nurturance and protection from outside disruptions. It preserves not only the person from uncertainty, but it also helps the person to use the domestic space the best way. Furthermore, it allows for connection and interaction between past and present, and it is a perfect scenario for processes of remembering where the person attempts to look into the past, either immediate or distant, and it helps order thoughts and events for a better understanding of a given situation.

Ursula M. Staudinger discusses three important processes to be distinguished when people initiate a process of looking at life in retrospective: life review, reminiscence, and autobiographical memory. In terms of life review processes, it was Robert N. Butler who coined the term in 1963 while he was working at the National Institute of Health in the United States and observed a group of older people having frequent conversations where they either attempted to make sense of their past decisions, to understand their former selves, or to bring to the present the memory of a loved one. Later on, Butler published an extended research piece on old people's uses of memory and how what he called 'life review' had a therapeutic nature which allowed the person to prepare for an uncertain future, and to come to terms with an unsettling past. As Susan Bluck and Linda J. Levine maintain, "the process of life review, according to Butler, is to make unconscious material conscious through reminiscence so that it can be integrated into the current conscious life story" (189). In this process, the person can contemplate life from a certain distance and s/he is able to acquire a different meaning of their past, where past mistakes can either be accepted and allow the person to come to terms with life, or on the contrary, can strengthen the feeling of personal failure as the person realises that the past is filled with irreparable mistakes. In this sense, time has an important role in helping people realise that our time is limited, and that we are

all doomed to die. Later life is perceived as a moment of confronting death, where our future seems to be shortened. Knowing that physical and mental decline can occur any moment, the person initiates a journey of self-discovery. Indeed, human beings sometimes activate a process that allows them to distance themselves from their past, and to reinterpret past decisions from a more mature stance—this facilitates the construction of a more coherent life narrative. Therefore, over the years, when looking at life in retrospective, a revised interpretation of the past might emerge where events that were once perceived as obstacles can be seen as necessary steps towards self-fulfilment in the present, or the person can be provided with lost pieces of information that alters the way in which the story is interpreted.

The ego psychologist Erik Erikson approached human development from a series of crises that take place in early stages of individual development and continue across the life cycle reaching later life. In fact, Erikson was one of the first psychologists who challenged the idea of personality as something fixed over time and suggested that individual growth is constant over lifespan, and that it depends on our ability to get over difficulties and learn from it. As Simon Hearn, Gary Saulnier, Janet Strayer, Margarete Glenham, Ray Koopman, and James E. Marcia maintain that Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development makes special reference to the individual's coming to terms with one's past. Thus, "in the life review process proposed by Erikson, one seeks to balance life successes and disappointments and to reach a compassionate, philosophical comprehension of the whole" (Hearn et al 2). Life successes are included in what Erikson called *integrity*, and disappointments in what Erikson called *despair*. Integrity would represent the person's ability to look back into one's past and accepts the ins and outs of his/her life, account for the gains, and develop a feeling of an integrated self despite past conflicts. Erikson suggests that for some people this retrospective

assessment of one's past is filled with grief and regrets. Therefore, "despairing persons are depressed about disappointments, failures and missed chances in life" (Hearn et al 2). To certain extent, it is difficult to find people who would fall exclusively into integrity or despair categories in later life. In many aspects, it could be stated that integrity is an idealistic approach to life review which suggests that, at the end, everyone should attempt to make amends with the past, and accept the person as s/he stands in present time.

Ricca Edmondson maintains that for Erikson there were three capacities that the person should obtain in order to acquire integrity: the capacity to integrate the past experiences in the makeup of one's life without falling into an intense feeling of remorse; the confidence in the value of who someone is; and the acceptance of mortality as a part of her/his existence in the world. Then, "people who have internalised such knowledge are likely to be older because it takes time to work through the experiences necessary to do so; the learning involved is not merely cognitive but requires effort by the entire personality" (Edmondson 344). When life review is conducted by younger generations, it has a healing impact on the young as they see death as far ahead in their lives, but this does not mean that they cannot come to terms with life at any moment. Thus, the elder has the pressure of a shortened future and immediacy of death, which triggers a journey that in some people produces a severe state of depression, dissatisfaction, and discontent.

Both Robert N. Butler and Erik Erikson consider that people should immerse in processes of past re-examination, motivated by the immediacy of death in the case of Butler, or as a part of a life cycle development, following Erikson. However, not every person has a tendency to look back into the past to make meaning out of lived experience. Hearn et al came to the conclusion that people at later life could fall into

non-exploratory or pseudo-integrated categories, if they fail to engage in self-examination, and have an overall feeling of contentment. Non-exploratory people were traditionally considered those who lack the trait of introspection and, in general terms, did not attempt to look back into one's past searching for responses to their current situation. Then, pseudo-integrated people proved to be "excessively coherent [in their] self-presentations from lack of self-awareness, unwillingness to examine problems, or from the wish to appear successfully" (Hearn et al 3). According to Hearn et al, the life review process does not necessarily imply a process of self-awareness of one's mistakes and successes, but a possibility to reformulate the past in satisfying ways that can prove to others and oneself that his/her life was worthy or meaningfully lived. This leads the self to select certain moments and skip others in order to minimise a sense of failure for the sake of a satisfactory narrative.

In this sense, the role of objects cannot be ignored when dealing with processes of coming to terms with the past. The past is dynamic and allows a constant revisitation and reinterpretation; thus, life changes might alter the way in which a specific moment of life is seen with the passing of time and from a different standpoint. As the self ventures in life and accumulates experience, the person undergoes an ongoing process of self-transformation that can modify the role, value and permanence of objects. As stated by Marcus previously, "objects, like people, come in and out of our lives" (8), so, trip souvenirs, honeymoon heirlooms, or pictures are, as well as the past, subject to be reinterpreted, maintained or disposed if they fail to function in the narrative of the self, which in most cases is always open to change. Mark Freeman states that memory is "subservient to the narrative" (58), and arguably, objects are subservient as well to the narrative of the owner, so they are visualised as dispensable or not in accordance of how much of a self they are displaying. Memory uses objects as a source of balance and, in

a sense, objects need to fulfil the function of either connecting the present and the past, or at least stabilising the self. Therefore, by looking into the past objects, there are elements whose role is transitional if they no longer fulfil the requirements of the self for representation. Furthermore, as Ursula M. Staudinger posits, “it is important to acknowledge the diachronic function of life review. It is by thinking back over our past that we extend our existence into the past; and certainly by thinking into the future, as it is the case when doing life planning we extend ourselves beyond the present into the future” (603).

If death proximity is the main trigger of life review processes, here lies one of the main differences between life review and reminiscence or autobiographical memory. Following Bluck and Levine, reminiscence signals a process of personal reviving of the past, therapeutic technique or “a potential tool for addressing many late-life-ills” (185). Therefore, reminiscence should not be confused with life review: by engaging in life review processes the person intends to explain and make sense of his/her life reflecting upon past decisions, as well as the paths that were and were not trodden, whereas reminiscence is a reconstruction of past moments.

Along with reminiscence processes, life review is considered an instrument of great importance for the person to resolve life conflicts in order to come to terms with death. This act is both unconscious and conscious and it helps the self not to wander between the past and the present without a clear delimitation of the meaning of its life. Indeed, through life review processes, the self aims at interpreting and analysing the past. Objects are important elements because they are embedded with lived experience. The encounter of material objects throughout our daily navigation of the space inhabited triggers, in most of the cases, moments of abstraction that connect the present with a specific event in the past. In other words, our possessions open up material

communication. Thus, “some of the positive results of a life review can be the righting of old wrongs, making up with enemies, coming to accept mortality, and gaining a sense of serenity, pride in accomplishments, and a feeling of having done one’s best” (Butler 602). Therefore, with this moment of amendment, the person can decide how to live his/her remaining time, or what to do with the material legacy such as heirlooms, family objects, furniture, or pictures that have been accumulated over the years.

The concept of legacy is vital in the field of material studies as it lies behind some of the major reasons why things are kept even though they neither decorate the house nor fulfil any function other than occupying space. The idea of remaining through our possessions may elucidate how materiality becomes indispensable in life, since time is limited but, through possessions, the self can preserve its continuity. Therefore, in order to come to terms with the temporalities of the body it is necessary to come to terms with material possessions before death or before cognitive impairment occurs.

David J. Ekerdt holds the notion that a large number of objects can be taken as “a material convoy across the life course” (2), comprising all the things which have been acquired throughout the lifespan. However, a conflict arises when relocation or moving houses takes place due to retirement, divorce or a similar event and the individual realises that s/he has been storing too many things. In those cases, the owner has to make a decision between inseparable possessions and those which have a more transient role, which might favour disposal or distribution of those possessions to other members of the family. Sometimes this distinction is clear, but most of the time the line is blurred. According to Ekerdt, emotional attachment impedes throwing away things, but it reinforces a desire to relocate them to new places where things can still carry out a utilitarian role or at least can be preserved.

Over the years there has been a tendency to think that older people are more reluctant than younger generations to divest their possessions, something that is biased as it can be proved in the extensive bulk of literature that addresses the field of materiality across the lifespan. Indeed, during later stages of life “there usually comes a time –or rather, times– when most elders begin to deal with their possessions, in part by passing things along to other people” (Ekerdt 35). So, when this moment of distribution of possession occurs, the person has begun a process of coming to terms with his/her material self and has started pondering about the way in which s/he wants to be remembered after death. Furthermore, this situation gives the person a sense of control over their possessions and a meaningful perspective of how much of his/her physical presence will be a part of their dear ones as a connector between the past and the future generations. Also, this is the moment when the possessor decides to distribute his/her possessions by means of gift giving, sales or donations.

John L. Lastovicka and Karen V. Fernández examine the multiple processes in which people engage in terms of disposition rituals and reinforce the idea of possessions as a prolongation of the self. Thus, “when consumers sell such possessions, they symbolically divest extensions of themselves. Because that, which is sold by consumers, often has meaning beyond any cash earned” (813). In fact, when owners finally realise that it is important to let their possessions go through this material distribution, a reconfiguration of a new self takes place. Mainly, because possessions have a major role in the configuration of identity over time, so,

some former selves, before transitions, are desirable, and those selves are recalled fondly. Other former selves– such as being unhappily married– are negatively charged and beg to be forgotten. And the vessels and private meanings of those

negatively valence former selves are eagerly disposed to assist the transition to a more positive future self. (Lastovicka and Fernández 816)

In this regard, Catherine A. Roster claimed that through letting go some of our belongings due to personal circumstances, people participate in a process of ensuring a “safe passage” (2) of cherished possessions. In many ways, people are obliged to adapt to unforeseeable disruptive changes. Indeed, life itself is a constant process of reformulating one’s identity, family relations, or goals. In this sense, as much as a person has to readapt to changes, our possessions undertake the same process. For the most part, divestment rituals involve to “relinquish possession of the object, abdicated responsibility and control over it, and symbolically severed emotional and psychological ties associated with ownership of the object” (426).

Ekerdt, Luborsky, and Lysack relate people’s attachment to their possessions to an internal need to secure, preserve and protect the materialisation of the self in those belongings:

Certain strategies to accomplish safe passage, such as high price-barriers at sales to make sure that the item finds an appreciative buyer, and the exchange of stories by giver and receiver (or seller and buyer), one telling the object’s history and the other relaying plans for the thing. When the owner appears to appreciate the value and significance of the thing, safe passage seems assured. (2)

Therefore, safe passage is not only a ritual to secure possessions with a utilitarian or symbolic function in the future, but it enhances the interplay between the self and its belongings. One of the reasons why people develop close relationships with objects lies in their ability to allow the self to reconnect with the past and revisit events that are remembered through the physical interaction with heirlooms, furniture, and things. Sensing objects propel visiting the past through memories.

The house is, thus, a place and a tool for this negotiation of meanings. Not only does it foster the interchange of information between objects and people, but it also becomes what is called a “wisdom environment”, according to Gary M. Kenyon (31), that, in its material form, can provide the self with an environment where material objects are at service of the narrative. Significantly, the storyteller can point out certain objects that are relevant to the anecdotes or story s/he narrates, and that were given by relatives or friends, thus strengthening the linkage between people. Nonetheless, the house is a territory where the self is constantly exposed to revisit the past by the encountering of possessions that, as seen previously, are important items to know who people are, and connect them with other past identities. Thus, while cleaning, arranging things in our houses, or disposing or distributing our possessions, people’s attention is directed to the past, and mostly, unknowingly, as it could be just as a consequence of having constructed a domestic place where life is condensed in objects. Indeed, as Mark Freeman maintains, objects can be stored in the house without the owner’s awareness that a part of their life is being deposited in that object. Thus, the use of the object as a connector with our past is discovered later in time, when one individual aims at bringing the past back to life. Then, “we are being who are caught up in the present, blinded by its apparent light, lured by the very proximity of things. The tragic result is that we are often late, too late, in seeing, in realizing, in understanding” (Freeman 60).

In this line, Gary M. Kenyon refers to the wisdom achieved by both the storyteller and the recipient of the story when both participate in a life narrative. Not only the elder, but also younger generations can benefit from these exchanges of information that take place in specific moments of life, as it is the case of later life. This is due to the beneficial consequences of life review processes which, as mentioned previously, function as a therapeutic tool in the reconfiguration of the past into a

narrative, thus allowing the self to come to terms with limited time. In this sense, objects give visual and powerful elements to the story told, as the listener is transported back to a past unknown for him/her where the mental reconstruction of the narration is supported by materiality. An example could be found in the perusal of personal letters or photographs that the listener can touch and/or read, which provides material proof of what is being told. Thus, the teller expresses through life review processes the narration of lifetime that is worth being listened to, and that it has been preserved in objects.

Crucially, then, “storytelling and story listening are not just things we do occasionally, rather they constitute the process by which we create and discover our personal identity as human beings” (Kenyon 30). In this process of listening, there is a moment of reciprocal transformation for both listener and storyteller, as they realise that there is uniqueness in the way human lives conceptualise and tell one’s life. In fact, “we will find that no two views of what is true, no two life stories, are ever exactly the same” (Kenyon 30), which in the end gives the sensation that narratives are the result of an incomplete account of one’s experience, since our stories are intertwined with those of others, which fill out missing bits or important pieces of information.

The experience of time and the use of memories do not allow for an exact representation of our biographical past, so our stories are only a compendium of moments that back up our idea of old and present selves. Kenyon argues that in some aspects people are the story that they tell the world, and in later life, it is in these moments of wisdom where acceptance and liberation take place. As seen in these processes of recapitulation of past experiences, the person that tells the story needs the complicity of the listener to be willing to learn and help the storyteller to carry on the process of examining the past. However, the gap between generations or mental illnesses sometimes becomes a barrier for life review processes because the listener is

unable to relate to the story, or alternatively, s/he finds it uninteresting or disbelieves it when storytellers suffer from illnesses such as dementia or Alzheimer. As Kenyon maintains, “a patient does not become the disease, but remains a unique person with an illness story embedded in an entire life story” (30), and despite the illness, it is important to listen to what the person has to tell. In this sense, Ricca Edmondson considers that when people are aware of the benefits of listening, “a wisdom moment” (352) occurs and both people become liberated from age constraints, thus becoming two beings who care for one another. Indeed, Edmondson claims that wisdom “is often claimed to increase with age in those capable of developing it, simply because experiences take a long time to be collected and assimilated” (352).

All in all, later life is a crucial moment of life where the ageing self not only dwells but finds in his/her house a strong source of identification and support in order to come to terms with the ageing self. Through material traces of the past, the house becomes a place where memory is often evoked and in the intimacy of the house life narrative is secured in stages where the elder finds his/her mobility decreased considerably. There are many disciplines such as architecture, demography, or psychology which focus on the elder at social and cultural levels, but in this dissertation the focus is placed on the way in which material memory is used as a tool to connect the self with the past and help the ageing self to come to terms with former identities. This increasing interest in ageing is not new, but the enlargement in ageing population has motivated more critical attention, as happens with humanities and as proved by the emergence of disciplines such as ageing studies. Therefore, it is important to delve into the conception of old age, the understanding of what it means to be old, and the impact it has had on a wide variety of academic fields, especially the humanities.

In what follows I will discuss two different approaches to account for the ageing experience: narrative gerontology and Reifungsroman. In them, old age is a central topic, amplified by the fact that ageing scholars have become aware of their coming to age. My particular interest lies in the work of contemporary British novelists who engage with women's experiences of ageing, as I will develop in the following chapters.



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3. Female Ageing, Narrative Gerontology and Reifungsroman

This chapter draws on the critical development of the concept of ageing in order to illustrate the ongoing dialectic between understanding ageing as positive or as negative, as well as the evolution of gerontology as the basis for a theoretical framework. In this line, I will discuss the ways in which ageing has turned into an academic concern in recent years, although the ageing processes have always been discussed by philosophers, critics and professionals alike, both in public and private, since Antiquity. Therefore, it is crucial to pay attention to the development of the topic from philosophy to other disciplines, probing the notion of ageing and/in the humanities today.

3.1. Ageing: Definitions and Contexts

Recently, old age and ageing have received a growing attention as a topic, which has been long discussed in political, cultural and social discourse but that it still needs to be reformulated to embrace all human beings' diversity. Indeed, ageing is an intrinsic element of the human experience, and it should not be surprising that it was already a subject of inquiry for various Greek and Roman early philosophers. Thus, a present understanding of ageing would be incomplete without due attention to its early understanding in philosophical thought. For example, in Plato's *Republic* 380 B.C (a version translated by Melissa Lane in 2007), Plato embraces the idea of the aged as a source of wisdom, experience, and prudence. In his view, all these virtues make citizens suitable to occupy high positions in society, despite the fact that it was not age which was loaded with virtue, but, rather, a life lived with balance and decorum. In contrast to this vision of old age, Aristotle's *Rhetoric* 350 B.C depicted the coming of age and the aged

themselves as an accumulation of misfortune. As claimed by Aristotle, old people in their last phase of life were useless in society because the passing of time would corrupt them and turn them into selfish and cynical individuals. This dualistic vision of ageing, as an illness or as a source of wisdom, has been persistent in literature, philosophy, medicine and other forms of art since early times and until now.

In their interpretation of early thought, Andrea Grignolio and Claudio Franceschi state that the contrasting takes on ageing are rooted in the separation of body and soul. While Plato founded his philosophy in the abstract essence of the spirit of things, Aristotle focused on the materiality of existence and the intrinsic relationship between essence and form. It was in the body that Aristotle foresees that “senescence was itself an illness, the image of the aged body as a lamp in which life-fuel has run out” (1). Therefore, to Aristotle, the body was exposed to corruption, sin, and deterioration and due to its close relation to the soul, these would affect the soul as well.

One of the first books addressed to old age was Marcus Tullius Cicero’s *Cato Maior de Senectute Liber* (44 A.C). Cicero recollects most of the Greek and Roman legacy through a dialogue between octogenarian Cato and the young Scipio and Laelius. Cicero offers four dominant arguments to annihilate the idea of decline and decrepitude. As Plato stated in the *Republic*, Cicero, through the character of Cato, will pay special attention to develop virtue through all the stages of life as a means to have access to wisdom in old age. Cato agrees that old age brings a physical decline, but through a life of contentment and moderation, this can be avoided. As regards passion, Cicero acknowledges old age as a stage of life where a person can liberate himself from some pernicious habits: “Para que comprendáis que si no podemos rechazar la lujuria, ni con la razón, ni con la sabiduría, se ha de estar inmensamente agradecidos a la vejez que se encarga de que no gocemos de lo que no nos conviene” (Cicerón, *Sobre la vejez* 19). The

last argument discussed by Scipio, Laelius, and Cato is the proximity of old age to death. As Cato states: “quieran los dioses que lleguéis a ella, y que la podáis experimentar y comprobar por vosotros mismos” (Cicerón, *Sobre la vejez* 35), as those who have lived their life intensely and meaningfully will approach death without fear. Furthering the contrasting arguments on the significance of ageing, Fernando Lolas Stepke asserts, in the prologue to Rosario Delicado Méndez’s translation of Cicero into the Spanish language, one of the many translations that have been done recently, that “como apología de la vejez, logró el libro su propósito. Pero como la vejez misma, es una apología de doble faz. Aquello que celebra puede ser objeto de preocupación” (Cicerón, *Sobre la vejez* 4).

As seen in the work of Plato, Aristotle and, later on, in the work of Cicero, old age has been under discussion throughout the centuries in an attempt to ease the anxiety towards the inevitable changes of time. Centuries have passed but the conceptualisation of old age continues to have a dualistic nature. For example, Maurice Charney, in *Wrinkled Deep in Time* (2009), states that Shakespeare’s literary production is an example of this double vision of old age:

Many of the old men and women in Shakespeare’s works are foolish in their intemperance and in their claim not to have changed from what they were in the past – in other words, in their refusal to acknowledge the ravages of time. Some are reverting to second childhood, like King Lear, or senility, like Polonius. But there is also a positive sense that with the accumulation of experience come wisdom and fortitude. (2)

In more recent approaches, there has been an added scientific effort to expand early philosophical understanding of old age. As a result, old age has been a subject of speculative debate in fields like medicine, biology and politics.

A seminal contribution to the study of old age comes in 1903 when the Russian biologist Ilya Ilich Metchnikoff coined the term *gerontology*. Metchnikoff defined this approach to ageing as “the study of human ageing, which draws from many scientific disciplines such as sociology, economy, biology, psychology, and epidemiology” (1). Metchnikoff devoted his entire life to the study of natural science and was known at that time by his attempts to prevent old age. He published several articles, and two major works: *The Nature of Man: Studies in Optimistic Philosophy* (1903) and *The Prolongation of Life: Optimistic Studies* (1908). Stephen Katz considers that Metchnikoff “helped to launch gerontology not only as a science of ageing, but one inspiring by a discourse of optimism –in particular, optimism that the pathological ravages of the aging process could be contested, and even eliminated” (Katz 1). Metchnikoff’s optimism towards ageing is fundamental in defining current approaches to ageing.

Although gerontology as a term was coined in 1903, it did not become a scientific discipline until the creation of The National Institute of Health (NIH) founded in the United States in 1940. After some years, the members of the NIH realised that a specific unit to senescence was essential in order to appropriately meet every citizen’s needs. So, in 1974, they created the National Institute of Aging to address multiple factors affecting old age from a medical, psychological and social standpoint. The process in founding the Institute reveals that promoting ageing as a subject of study required numerous efforts despite the long recognition of the subject as an intrinsic matter for human experience. However, Hyung Wook Park states that “the making of the gerontology program in the NIH cannot be properly understood without appreciating the role of the Baltimore City Hospitals, which provided NIH gerontologists with both laboratory space and *clinical material*” (50; emphasis original). In turn, The Baltimore City Hospital (BCH) in 1973 was commissioned to “abate the public nuisance” (53) of those citizens that lacked health

insurance and posed a problem to the maintenance of social welfare. Then, it looked like an advancement on the acceptance of ageing as a relevant social subject: the hospital was divided into two major groups; the first group was the BCH and it focused on providing care and protection to the old and the sick, and the second group's central mission was to reduce the possibility of social unrest within the indigent, alcoholics or insane. This institution underwent multiple variations during the following years, but, as Park states, "the Baltimore Almshouse remained responsible for the city's impoverished and sick people, many of whom were aged and chronically ill" (54) for many years. Medical innovation in the treatment of contagious diseases and discoveries in immunology system placed the BCH as important headquarters to continue scientific research. Gradually, economic and social changes fostered the BCH to assist people in need, receiving new patients directly affected by the economic Great Depression in 1929. According to Park, "this supposed a change in the conception of people labelled as social burden to be regarded as *clinical material*" (54; emphasis original) that helped enormously in the diagnosis, treatment and understanding of pathologies in old age.

As time went by, the hospital started to receive public funding facilitating the investigation of infectious and contagious diseases in old age. Women were excluded at first in the field of gerontology, and most of the studies carried out had not informed consent of the participants; whom "were often chosen among the socially vulnerable, such as orphans, prisoners, and people of colour" (Park 62). This stimulated the debate of whether doctors have the right to conduct studies without considering ethical responsibility, and it fostered new laws in order to protect the patient from illegal practices.

With the creation of the Gerontology Society and the *Journal of Gerontology* in 1945, gerontology became formally a scientific discipline. The vast number of

publications related to the subject of ageing have encompassed multiple areas of knowledge. Ariela Lowenstein states that in 1985 R. D. Bramwell proposed that “Gerontology fulfils the criteria for a field of study to become a discipline” (139). Firstly, the principal criterion is to have an “all-pervading theme” (130) that in gerontology is the study of how ageing processes affect humans in physical, biological, psychological and social facets. Secondly, new methods of inquiry need to be developed to address ageing. For this purpose, gerontologists elaborated research practices that include “phenomenological criteria and qualitative and quantitative methods” (Lowenstein 130). Thirdly, researchers in the field were clustered in a self-instructive community that was represented in the foundation of the Gerontological Society of America or the International Association of Gerontology established in 1945 and 1974 respectively. The fourth criterion proposed by Bramwell deals with publications on the field, which “should develop a tradition of intellectual activity” (Lowenstein 130). In the case of gerontology, publications increased enormously with the arrival of new journals, committees of research, and specialised publications to address old age in its multidisciplinary nature. Lastly, any discipline must “consist of a body of fundamental knowledge based with a distinctive philosophical perspective and its own terminology (Lowenstein 130).

Prior to the emergence of gerontology as an academic discipline, researchers in the field of ageing studies lacked theoretical background. Therefore, other disciplines provided the tools to analyse the phenomena of the coming of age. For example, Vern L. Bengtson, Elisabeth O. Burgess, and Tonya M. Parrot consider that research on ageing studies needs to develop a theoretical framework that is based on the work of gerontologists. However, “much recent research in gerontology appears to have disinherited theory. In their quest to examine aspects of individual and social aging, researchers have been quick to provide facts but slow to integrate them within a larger

explanatory framework” (72). Nonetheless, the importance of developing a consistent framework that relies on facts and empirical research is not particular to ageing studies; rather, it is a crucial element in any academic discipline. To review the theoretical background pertaining to gerontology, Bengtson et al. analysed articles published in major journals of social gerontology between 1990 and 1994. A total of 645 articles were meticulously examined, and the results confirmed that many of the articles published “included no mention of any previous or current theoretical framework in the sociology of aging as they discussed the interpretation or explanation of their findings” (73), which proved the existing gap in the scientific study of old age.

To comprehend the historical development of the theoretical emergence of the study of human ageing, three periods of time need to be taken into consideration. Firstly, from 1949 and 1969, as Bengtson illustrates, four theories related to social ageing emerged within the scope of gerontology: activity theory, disengagement theory, modernisation theory, and subculture theory. The second theoretical approach dated from 1970 to 1985, and it included continuity theory, social breakdown/competence theory, age stratification, and political economy of ageing. Thirdly, from the late 1980s on, gerontologists continued reformulating existence theories and adapting new theories to explain how society changed its micro-social and macro-social structures.

Despite these attempts at establishing a sustained theoretical framework for the study of human ageing, current trends in medicine, society, and politics have posed new challenges to gerontology; indeed, the constant preoccupation to attend the specific needs of old patients motivated the emergence of geriatrics in 1909. The physician Ignatz Leo Nascher aimed to diversify medicine into a new sub-discipline that focused only on old people. Nascher published *Geriatrics: The Diseases of Old Age and Their Treatment* in 1914 and postulated how old age should not be synonymous with disease. Certainly, he

observed how Aristotelian doctrines, stemming from the comparison of old age with illness, still prevailed in the early twentieth century and refused the homogenisation of ageing patients. Nascher has been fundamental for understanding the economic and social factors as elements of distress within ageing.

Any discipline has to respond to three interrelated factors: need, recognition of the need, and acting upon the need. In the case of gerontology nowadays, there is a need to understand the effects of globalisation on social relations. Furthermore, Janet M. Wilmoth and Kenneth F. Ferraro agree on the fact that many disciplines converge in gerontology to appropriately address human ageing. Its complexity makes necessary the contribution of psychologists, sociologists, economists, demographers, anthropologists, and researchers in biomedical sciences, among others. This demonstrates that old age is based on multiple factors that are interdependent; for example, life satisfaction affects health, and health is influenced by economic and personal stability. As Wilmoth and Ferraro maintain:

The knowledge generated about informal caregiving by the disciplines concerned with the social aspects of aging spills over into areas that are primarily focused on the physical aspects of aging and age-related public policy. This flow of ideas among academic disciplines provides rich insight into informal caregiving. It also contributes to our general understanding of aging and the development of gerontology as a field. (10)

To a certain extent, gerontology brings to light the need to address old age from a comprehensive perspective and make scholars from other disciplines to specialise in later stages from a more plural standpoint. Some of these factors have to do with other forms of social categorisation, such as gender, class, or race, which has been often neglected.

In terms of gender, gerontology as a science initially regarded human ageing as a homogenous process that affects the population in general. As an example, little research was done in order to address citizens' diversity regarding their gender, ethnic group, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. As stated previously, Hyung Wook Park manifests how initially studies carried out in North America, both in the Baltimore City Hospital and through the National Institute of Health program, excluded women from their experiments. The absence of interest in women's ageing bodies separately from men's bodies was first attributed to anatomical conceptions of both men and women in Western societies, where "the male body was traditionally considered the standard type in Western medicine and science, while the female body was deemed its inferior variant or an incommensurably distinct opposite" (Park 63).

In addition, even though some attention was given to how old age affected the active population in society, the target group entirely consisted of men. Seemingly, for the scientific community conducting research on ageing at that time the main aim was to "convince government administrators, particularly those within the U.S Public Health Service, of the importance of fundamental research on aging should not be neglected" (Park 70). Moreover, Colette V. Browne asserts that, despite the numerous advancements in women's rights in the last decade, "it was not until 1978 that the National Institute of Aging's Baltimore longitudinal study included women in its sample in the study of normative aging, and only in 1981 did the White House Conference on Aging have a special committee on women's issues" (Browne 15).

Stephen Katz also reflects on the absence of the study of women's bodies during the early years of gerontological research outside North America and Britain, where research was mainly conducted. Concretely, Katz pays attention to a particular institution: Salpêtrière in Paris (France), a public hospital that gathered for the most part "destitute

women and prostitutes” (115) from the mid-sixteenth century and which also served as a prison. Along the years the institution continued growing, and in 1798 the first medical facility appeared. In contrast with the National Institute of Health, women were not excluded from medical experimentation. However, this was mainly true because the hospital’s community was constituted by female patients, and most of them of older age. Therefore, they served as clinical material in order to shed light on old age pathologies. Jean-Martin Charcot, who was to become an influential neurologist, worked at the Salpêtrière and published in 1881 her work titled *Clinical Lectures on the Diseases of Old Age*. The purpose of this book was to inform the reader on the main pathologies that occur in old age. In his studies, Charcot “compare[d] the aged to children and adults, but here the pathological aged figure is female and the normal adult figure is male” (Katz 120). Comparing the female body with the pathologies of old age reinforced the idea of how misrepresented women’s bodies have been through ample periods of time as Katz illustrates, “given that Charcot based his research on the ‘senile period of life’ of women, it is ironic that Gerontological knowledge as it has developed throughout the first three-quarters of the century in particular, has worked to silence, regulate, and negate women’s bodies” (Katz 123).

Despite early advancements in attempting to understand ageing in its various social and ontological manifestations, gerontology still had to confront many challenges in terms of human ageing. In fact, capitalism has fuelled mass consumption and production patterns in Western cultures, and the gap between low-income and high-income citizens has broadened in the last 50 years. In turn, these social changes have greatly affected elder sectors of society. Kathrin Komp and Marja Aartsen analyse how Europe will have a fourth of its population by 2050 over the age of 65. As a result, a reduced number of younger citizens will have to work to maintain the older ones.

Therefore, establishments will have to adapt their services and facilities to senior citizens. This poses a new challenge to new generations that perceive old age as a threat.

Therefore, the field of gerontology in the last decade has spread greatly in other subfields that attempt to enrich and explore ageing from different perspectives. Julia Twigg and Wendy Martin maintain how in the last twenty years strong emphasis has been placed on how gerontology has adapted not only to new advances in medicine, social sciences, and biology, but also to culture and its effects in the construction of life narratives (1-15). Following Roberta Maierhofer, “if identity is defined by both continuity and change over a life course, the importance is to not only narrate one’s live, but also interpret these narrations in an ongoing process of dialogue” (xiv). In fact, culture is a source of identity and self-categorisation for most human beings, where individuals adapt to their environment.

New shifts in demography and new patterns of consumption have also influenced human ageing experience and their cultural narratives about them. In this line, Brian Worsfold argues that ageing is an experience that, although shared by all human beings, is dependent on the individual’s uniqueness. Therefore, “approaches to gerontology must focus on the microcosm, that is, focus not on society, the nation or even the community at large, but on the individual and the human and social context of the individual” (xix). In this sense, a subfield in the field of gerontology, cultural gerontology, has attracted renewed attention over the last years. Indeed, cultural gerontology encompasses theories and approaches dealing with identity and subjectivity, as well as with the body and embodiment. As Julia Twigg and Wendy Martin posit, cultural gerontology “has brought new interest in the politics of identity with an explosion of work around “race,” gender, sexuality, and disability” (3) by including age into those issues. Although human beings

are subject to mortality and the ravages of time, human nature cannot be fully understood unless ageing is considered alongside ethnicity, sexuality or gender.

Also, Twigg and Martin discuss the utmost rejection against the relevance of the body and embodiment when treating the case of social gerontology. Mainly, scholars in the field of gerontology perceived that focusing on the body would suppose a setback. Indeed, many gerontologists considered the notion of old age as “socially rather than physiologically constituted” (3) as a major advancement in the field. According to many critics, the focus on cultural aspects of ageing is a distraction from the main concerns of gerontology, which to them should not address issues of culture and human subjectivity and embodiment. However, there is a need to measure the impact of culture on daily life issues that also affect gerontological research, such as the study of poverty patterns, where culture has a direct impact.

Then, cultural gerontology has undertaken the challenge of approaching the multiple ways in which the ageing body is subdued to culture. This is the case of current trends that, subtly, exhort individuals to assume the responsibility of ageing well. Therefore, people are burdened with the idea of constructing a healthy self which will lead to a fit old self in the last stage of the life course. This means falling into the trap of actively engaging in activities, or the consumption of products that slow down the natural process of ageing. Roberta Maierhofer states that, in the 1980s, several scholars pertaining to the field of cultural studies realised the importance of bringing new issues to the fore in relation to ageing. One of them is expressed above, and it is based on the benefits of an interdisciplinary approach in order to carry out an in-depth study of ageing and that of the social models of ageing that are produced and dominate contemporary social narratives.

In this sense, narratives, both fictional and autobiographical, contribute to the analysis of the portrayal of the life course under the lens of ageing studies. As Maierhofer states, and despite the fact that the fictionalisation of ageing is not taken as seriously as other disciplines of study, “the aspect of fictionality, especially, has to be given centre attention as part of the narrative turn” (xv). In the humanities, the new changes in society have shifted the attention to ageing, and in recent decades the emergence of ageing in various cultural manifestations, such as literature, cinema, art, painting, theatre, and music, among others, has become more prevalent.

Ageing studies depart from the discipline of gerontology, and they aim to deconstruct theoretical, social and political assumptions towards old age and ageing processes. In her analysis of the dominant discourse in current Western culture, Judith Kegan Gardiner claims that there exists a stigmatisation of natural ageing processes, which involves a self-recognition of ageing cues as symbols of personal and social decline. As Gardiner states, ageing studies need to reformulate people’s visions towards the old in order to embrace the life course from a broader perspective that allows wholeness.

Arguably, age has become central to culture studies due to new patterns in population that have diversified sciences in specific areas that can address this phenomenon. Margaret Morganroth Gullette poses the idea that “we are aged more by culture than by chromosomes” (*Aged by Culture* 101). In her view, there is a need to approach new conceptualisations of old age, as well as to ascertain the impact of cultural expectations on our own views of ageing. Indeed, social sciences, medicine, and politics are often based on preconceived ideas of old age as a stage of life that is filled with grief and decline. In order to do this, age critics are providing new insights of how culture actually shapes our perceptions of the elder. According to Gullette, “age and aging have

been overnaturalized” (*Aged by Culture* 102) and this has led to narratives of decline, which take for granted cognitive and mental impairment in later life, but in fact they can occur at any age. In fact, as Gullette explains, the work of scholars in the field of medicine and biology has sometimes proved to be detrimental in raising awareness of our ageist prejudices. In the 1980s “we witness in rapid succession the rewriting of old age as a medical problem, the invention of paediatrics, gerontology, geriatrics, adolescence, the middle years [...]” (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 179). This highlights the importance of rethinking age from a more social and cultural perspective; in so doing, it will be clear that there is an excessive attachment to decline discourses when referring to age.

For example, much attention has been given to groups according to what age category they belong to. This categorisation of human beings in terms of chronological time considers that age is neutral per se, and that it lacks signification. Indeed, “lacking consciousness-raising (through cultural critique, age autobiography, an antidecline movement)” (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 180) would only reaffirm ideologies of decline without resistance. Therefore, this field of studies still needs to build up solid foundations that can challenge constraining beliefs about time and human beings. In order to achieve this goal, Gullette suggests the interrelation between cultural studies and gerontology where age can be theorised and understood as a human construction.

Critical gerontology and cultural studies share ideas and values that fit them to understand age ideology, and they supply complementary tools for confronting it. Influenced by feminist, poststructuralist, multicultural, and left theories, both fields share a commitment to examining cultural practices, economic conditions, and public policy from the point of view of their involvements with power. (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 183)

Age ideology needs to be re-considered and to offer more appropriate definitions, thus providing realistic representations of ageing processes. Only through a body of literature bearing in mind cultural aspects can we account for faithful representations of ageing process. In fact, the lifespan is no longer representative of life experience, but it is still useful to draw a line between people drawing on chronological time. Therefore, this approach in the humanities contribute to replacing old ageing identities that longer represent many citizens with fresher ageing identities. Indeed, “belonging to an age category is now supposed to predict attribute, styles (or even more sharply, “cultures”), group interests, values, even feelings. Some people adjust almost instantaneously to match or say they match” (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 180). The writer Doris Lessing in an interview with Billy Gray stated that old age was a matter of expectations. Thus, “if you think you are old at fifty you will suddenly begin to move, act and think as someone old” (87). In Lessing’s view, age was a cultural indicator, an idea shared by Gullette. An example of this can be found in how each country in the European Union understands age retirement differently, and even though some of them coincide, the age criteria are diverse.

In fact, there is a need for age studies to approach “the life course imaginaries” (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 184) where old age has been given a role that no longer represents the self, but, rather, obscures it. Besides, one of the main objectives that should be on the agenda of this recent field of studies is to weaken speculation, and to question “the stories we have heard, received or rejected, renegotiated and retold” (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 184) about middle years, the elder and later stages of life. Children learn from an early age to fear their bodies, they visualise the elder around them and soon they learn that much of their narrative is filled with grief. As they venture into adolescence, they look at the future with a sense of urgency, knowing that decline is inevitable.

When Robert N. Butler coined the word *ageism* in 1969, few could have thought that our ways of approaching the elder were reflecting a culture that polarises society in good and bad, following chronological time. In his collection *Ageism: Stereotyping and Prejudice against Older Persons* (2002), Todd D. Nelson challenges the reader to ponder on the nature of their ideas towards ageing processes and the elder, proving that many preconceived ideas have been the fulcrum of our belief system. Then, ageism, as a term, encompasses all the negative stereotypes that make up our views towards the old and the young. Indeed, “anytime one assumes that a group shares a common behavioural or personality characteristic, they are engaging in stereotyping. All stereotypes are incorrect by their very nature because they erroneously assume a homogeneity that simply does not exist” (Nelson 38). Nelson develops how this current view of old people as a burden for social and political welfare is not the result of young people’s lack of judgment, but a progressive disjunction between active and passive sectors in society that have a great impact on economic resources, and future affordability to social and political policies. There has been a change in our views towards the elder, from being sources of wisdom, mediators between generations, and symbols of our traditions to a completely negative view in which social invisibility is imposed.

Erdman B. Palmore considers that ageism as a form of discrimination towards a specific group of our society could be compared with other forms of social inequality such as racism or sexism. Therefore, just as, “racism became a burning issue in the 19th century and was attacked by the abolitionist and civil rights movements. Sexism became a burning issue in this century and was attacked by the suffer age and equal rights movements. Ageism [can be considered] the third great “ism” of our society” (Palmore 4). Thus, ageism, understood as marginalisation and social discrimination of the elder, today still prevalent in culture, is to be replaced with a new understanding of the ageing

processes. Therefore, with the help of ageing studies and drawing on a solid theoretical framework, combining interdisciplinary approaches, a fresher ageist conceptualisation will radically change contemporary perceptions, cultural prejudices, and misconceptions, about the elder. In so doing, ageism will be eradicated from our daily life discourses. Nelson points out two fundamental events that favoured the implementation of negative prejudices towards the elder population: firstly, one was the invention of the printing press that suppresses the elder as the main source of information, and, secondly, the “industrial revolution, [that] required families to be more mobile, and able to adapt to changes in the market quickly, and older persons living in an extended family structure were often ejected by the younger relatives in favour of increasing the mobility of the family” (Nelson 38). Those changes contributed to the sense of decline that the elder people experience, when being old is no longer associated with the wisdom of experience, but deterioration.

It is noteworthy that age critics such as Margaret Morganroth Gullette, Kathleen Woodward, Stephen Katz, and Robert N. Butler, among others, have underlined that, in the last few years, Western culture focuses too much on the immediacy of death in later life, and forgets the fact that decline and death are not dependent on age patterns. Granted that human beings are aware that death is inevitable and inescapable, it is also true that one’s life in terms of quality and productivity will not decrease necessarily with time, but with our lack of adaptability to life events. Age studies are providing resources to help citizens, students, and politicians to develop self-awareness about ageism policies, the role of the media, and newspapers when it comes to perpetuating ageism in our culture. This is not only having a negative impact on the elder that ends up feeling a self-imposed shame towards their ageing bodies, but it condemns all of us to silence and invisibility.

Also, Nelson makes reference to Terror Management Theory, proposed by Pyszczynski, Greenberg, Solomon, Arndt, & Shmel (2004), which points out how the elder is a constant reminder to younger generations of the misfortunes ahead in later stages of life. As Nelson suggests, most of the time people “believe that we aren’t really expressing negative stereotypes or prejudice, but merely expressing true statements about older people when we utter our stereotypes. We also take our cues from society as to the acceptability and benign nature of our ‘truths’ about ageing” (Nelson 40).

Clearly, ageing studies help us address all the issues regarding ageing from the perspective of culture and society, which can shed light on new forms of representing old people in our societies. In this line, Susan L. Flinders considers that another challenge that ageing studies are facing is the influence of culture into ageing discourses. Mainly, “much of our culture has placed value on the able-bodied over the physically challenged or disabled which each of us internalises or takes in along with our individual experience, thus forming certain related attitudes and beliefs” (Flinders 262). This could explain the rejection of younger citizens and middle-aged citizens to fear the elder as a reminder of the ravages of time on the body. As far as leisure activities are concerned, there is a general assumption about age and the body, so activities are offered separately depending on the age group, thus reinforcing differences rather than similarities.

In addition, gender is “...is a life issue, bound up with our bodies in time, sex, love, and story” (Norris 62), and this implies that it is necessary to “make feminist literary interpretation responsive to life” (Norris 62). To make sense of the body is to make sense of our age, as a process that is shared by all of us since birth. In this endeavour age should be discussed in the classroom, according to Norris. In fact, including age would help “students to take on various perspectives, to move their thinking beyond their immediate selves, and possibly then experience their own partiality” (66) as they accept life as a

continuous process of adaptation through time and experience. If ageing studies have failed in raising people's awareness about the discrimination of the elder, it is time to turn to education and the classroom where younger generations could have access to new notions related to old age and ageing. This way, classrooms could be a place ripe for discussion, in order to challenge old-fashioned ideas. This is where literary texts play an important role, as in reading them, one "might be better able to explain subjectivity in a way that liberates people from the stranglehold of a body-shaped menu of identity, without neglecting the physical conditions of subjective experience" (Norris 70). In a classroom it is possible to foster personal and social insights toward ageing issues. One aspect that should be dealt with in the classroom is the importance of language also in relation to ageing: "language builds subjectivity, how a word easily swallows all the presentness of a full life, and how a brief phrase can draw blinding lines" (Norris 69). To include aspects closely related to ageing, such as discrimination, prejudices or terms usually associated with old age, in the curricula might open the door for future changes to take place in society.

Ageing studies aim to re-consider the ways in which ageing has been understood as the product of our anxieties towards death, change and the uncertainty of time. This needs drastic changes, drawing on a solid theoretical framework that includes interdisciplinary approaches from many areas of studies. In particular, the humanities have proved to be crucial in the fight against ageist discourses, especially through the publication of literary texts that address this subject. As Hannah Zeilig states, "the story of a life as told by the person who has lived it, although composed using the imagination and in some ways "fictional", necessarily bears some relationship to reality as experienced by the storyteller" (21).

3.2. The Literature of Ageing

Literature is an effective tool to deconstruct the cultural construction of ageing, and to make us realise that our beliefs about the process of ageing in later life are based on assumptions. Later life is often accepted as a decline moment where the self begins a quick process of cognitive and physical deterioration, where growth and self-fulfilment are no longer relevant. If in the past fiction neglected ageing, and as a pedagogical source, it has not been until the last decades that a new reconsideration of the humanities in the study of old age emerged, now fictional texts and stories importantly address “the interplay of individual agency with social structure” (Zeilig 30), and can be used as instruments to raise age consciousness. This is illustrated in the Bildungsroman, which can be misused to spread ageist discourses since self-growth or self-discovery is limited to age parameters. The novels belonging to this type of fiction reinforce the idea that second chances are possible only for those who face adversities early in life, but they exclude those placed halfway in their life course, or in later life.

The definition of Bildungsroman is dated back to the beginning of the twentieth century, but it would not become widely used until Wilhelm Meister wrote his book *Poetry and Experience* (1907). This new type was characterised by a reader’s exploration of the character’s life from childhood to adulthood, in which the protagonist would face multiple challenges that would finally lead to a process of personal development. The protagonist was, in most of the cases, a male character who underwent a series of difficult events that would lead to maturity at a young age.

The Bildungsroman as a novel of growth delved into the possibilities of young people to take advantage of life possibilities despite early mistakes in childhood, so they could change and redeem themselves in their early adulthood. In this sense, G.M.A

Christy poses that “the genre focuses on the ideas about the societal impact, psychology and morality of the personality of the main character of the novel in relation to the society. It is about the process of maturation of the protagonist” (Christy 1237). As mentioned above, one of the main characteristics associated with the Bildungsroman is the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist. The possibility for the protagonist to approach life from an instructive perspective, where the protagonist goes through unsettling circumstances, family and personal setbacks, modifies and re-interprets the notion of personal failure into a more positive feature. By observing the character’s inner turmoil, the path taken by the character towards goodness provides the novel with in-depth explorations of the protagonist’s psychology. Thus, the reader can observe that out of difficult circumstances the protagonist faces new choices that allow growth and change. Moreover, this genre emphasises on how achieving maturity and a life purpose is a gradual process that takes time and effort as the protagonist overcomes unfavourable circumstances early in life. This process of self-discovery and self-growth is observed from childhood to adulthood, which allows the reader to develop a feeling of empathy with the protagonist. In addition, the reader is aware that the protagonist needs to initiate a process of development and transformation, which will take place outside the familiar setting. Thus, this physical journey can be compared to a psychological journey where the person needs to face social, political and personal injustices. On many occasions, the protagonist becomes disenchanted with the unfairness in life, although he is able to come to terms with the unsettling realities, and finally will come to terms with it.

A fundamental element of the Bildungsroman genre is attached to the protagonist’s exposure to new ideas, places and people that will function as mentors. This fact introduces the notion of education as key for personal transformation. Hence, transformation and redemption are connected throughout the novel, as the protagonists

engage in a journey of self-growth where past mistakes become the scaffolding of a new future. The reader witnesses this learning process, and develops a feeling of understanding toward the protagonists by knowing that, given the few possibilities and outlets the characters have since their birth, they have taken the most of life opportunities in order to find redemption and become a better version of themselves. Furthermore, the past becomes a source of inspiration used as fuel to personal achievement. According to Carol Lazzaro-Weiss, “the originators of the Bildungsroman were interested in problems of representation, the relationship of the individual to the group, and questions of subjectivity, which they saw in social as well as aesthetic terms” (21).

Crucially, the predominance of male protagonists in detriment of female ones has reinforced the patriarchal structure of society. There were few novels that fell into the category of the Bildungsroman with women as major roles. In the case of Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations* (1860-1861), female characters are associated with the opposite idea of growth, applicable not only to Estella, but also to Miss Havisham, a spinster that despite her age is still obsessed with taking revenge on men. Being left unmarried at the altar by her fiancé, Miss Havisham brings Estella up to carry out her revenge on her behalf, and in so doing, she condemns Estella to be as a heartless, manipulating woman. As far as the protagonist is concerned, Pip succeeds in breaking free from social constraints, whereas Estella, having suffered from Miss Havisham’s pernicious influence, is unable to do so.

Feminist scholars have argued that it is legitimate for women to recover a genre, the Bildungsroman, that was too oriented to discuss and represent men’s experiences, and their processes of growth and change. In their view, the Bildungsroman perpetuated a marginalisation of women’s voice and an excessive objectification of women by reducing their possibilities to initiate journeys of self-growth and transformation. As Laura Sue

Fuderer states, “until the rise of the feminist criticism, the Bildungsroman was traditionally regarded as the novel of the development of a young man” (1). Therefore, from the 1970s onwards, many feminist critics have attempted to look for novels where women were the protagonists and could fit into the Bildungsroman genre. This process has helped to redefine this genre outside the patriarchal spectrum, by giving visibility to women’s growth, within the literary field, as active and not as passive subjects. In addition, a female version of the Bildungsroman has helped portray other approaches to life, associated with women’s concerns such as marriage, love, motherhood, and adventure.

Among the books that addressed the subject of the Bildungsroman genre is Jerome Hamilton Buckley’s *Seasons of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Goethe to Santaya* (1974). It is noticeable that the main characteristics of the Bildungsroman presented in Buckley’s work, in terms of self-growth and self-fulfilment, are difficult to apply to women due to the gender-based constraints at that time. Thus, the phases of individual development need to be approached within the context of social conceptions of gender. For example, when the major achievement for women was to choose whom to marry in the past, it is difficult to portray women as self-fulfilling protagonists. Also, the possibilities for them to have access to education or to abandon their parents in order to pursue a new life on their own were scarce, without the supervision or submission to a male figure. That was a territory that needed to be recovered through social activism, and the field of literature was an important source of inspiration as women remained invisible. Furthermore, as Lorna Ellis’s states, in the Bildungsroman genre when referring to women as protagonists, they “begin as self-assured young women who question their subordinate place in society, but the endings find them less active, less assertive, and reintegrated into society through marriage” (16), as in the case of Jane Austen’s *Pride*

and *Prejudice* (1813) where Ellis considers that Elizabeth Bennet “by the end of the novel has lost [her] volubility and frankness” (16).

In this line, Charlotte Goodman has convincingly argued that the plot in this adaptation of the Bildungsroman is circular and there is always a contrast between women’s and men’s experience of life as they grow old, showing how the world is divided into cultural experiences that are gender-specific. In this sense, in Goodman’s terms, childhood is the age where both characters “coexist as equals” (30) and with the passing of time, it is patent that how society and culture “dramatize the separation of the male and the female” (30). As Goodman posits, the male protagonist’s journey to self-fulfilment is evident, whereas the female protagonist is left behind in what it could be considered a point of no return until both protagonists are reunited in the end in what Goodman reads as a “reaffirmation of the childhood world in which the male and the female protagonist were undivided” (31). Gender counternarrative is an element that sheds light on the representation of women’s identity in novels of formation. Such a comparison enriches the understanding of the cultural forces that shape women’s subjective experience. In turn, women writers who delved in women’s processes of self-fulfilment outside social norms often have to confront the idea of women as victims of generational cycle and provide images of women whose intellect challenges the norm; obviously these novels revise the original Bildungsroman. Therefore, in George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), the reader would observe that the phases of individual development are reversed towards childhood as the age of innocence where both women and men can find an equality that disappears as they venture in adolescence. In Eliot’s novel, Maggie confronts marriage with indecision as she is unsure whether to choose Stephen Guest or Philip Wakem. Both suitors represent two different paths in life, even though this decision is never made since Maggie dies with her brother in the flood. This has been interpreted as

a way of liberating female protagonists from the constraints of marriage, always visualised as a destination, and may reinforce the idea of counternarratives as a powerful source of inspiration to describe women's scarce possibilities as contrasted to those of men. Be that as it may be, over the years the Bildungsroman has been associated with men's stages of development and male traits have been used to curtail women's possibilities in a novel of development.

In keeping with this idea, Carol Lazzaro-Weiss explores how in “nineteenth-and early twentieth-century women novelists had represented the suppression and defeat of female autonomy, creativity, and maturity by patriarchal gender norms” (Weiss 17). Interestingly, one suppression was, in fact, women writers' lack of interest in exploring life after the middle years, and when that occurred, they privileged moments of decline and loss rather than progress and growth. Margaret Morganroth Gullette considers that the fear of decline drives the reader's attention to novels in which the possibility to redeem oneself is possible, by amending past mistakes or, in the case of women, by choosing the right husband. However, the Bildungsroman would not provide a sense of self-fulfilment when the character, in this case a woman, has already passed her youth, and with a family of her own. Longing for personal growth, change or adventure would have been unacceptable as a possible feature for the original Bildungsroman. Therefore, the process of self-growth has been strongly attached to not only patriarchal structures, but also closely linked to ageism. In other words, the counternarrative of Bildungsroman presents female characters whose ultimate liberation is to perish in what is considered a second childhood.

The Bildungsroman deserves further exploration from a wider perspective of life cycle that encompasses not only the final stages, but also the moment of self-awareness. In this line, Gullette argues that “it says quite a lot about our culture that any defence need

to be written. The value of the midlife Bildungsroman as a genre should be obvious, if only because it helps to reconstruct our ideas of the reality and potentiality of the maligned middle years of life” (Gullette, *Safe at Last* 146). Furthermore, there is a certain inclination to fall into discourses of pessimism that are quickly accepted by most people when reaching the age of retirement or when menopause arrives. Those two aspects, biological clock and cultural clock, need to be reconceptualised by means of fictional explorations of topics such as love, sex and desire during those years in which the person is stigmatised with a decrease in libido and life expectations. Importantly, falling into the discourse of ageism without resistance should be avoided, so writing is a powerful tool against ageism. Indeed, this is a cultural and social battle that we must fight in order to escape from a belief in pessimist discourses as a valid form of perceiving and judging reality. So, “pessimism claims to have on its side disciplines beyond philosophy – history, for example, seen as the record of evil that people have done to one another, and psychoanalysis, insofar as it is the record of internalized harms that cannot be undone” (Gullette, *Safe at Last* 140). The self, and especially the ageing self, is left immersed into a constant belief that time will slowly take away all its virtues and all that is dear to the individual. However, stories fictionalise life and shed light on the realities of the household where ageing women have always been confined. It is in the domesticity of their daily lives where their hopes and longings are defeated by pessimistic discourses. Thus, as Gullette states,

For narration, which needs the illusion of change, pessimism invented the plot of decline – simple, formulaic, and exercise in subtraction. Its proliferation has been astounding – in novels, film noir, the detective story, and slice of life and minimalistic fiction. It has even invaded the Bildungsroman of youth. All of them rely on an alleged “truth”: that the passing of time always, and inevitably, involves

irreversible decay. Where personal time is concerned, ageing is the enemy. (*Safe at Last* 150)

Indeed, Gullette claims that there are some public responses to ageing fiction i.e. some readers expect decline narratives and look forward to the deterioration of the ageing character as the plot begins. In the case of middle-year narratives, the plot begins where the Bildungsroman has left off, and so the middle-aged protagonists need to confront life changes in order to come to terms with their fears and anxieties. It could be argued that the body was presented as the Achilles heel for many writers who thought that a realistic portrayal of a women's process of maturation ended in the middle years, in the shadows of a body consumed by the passing of time. Tobias Boes states that

much of this has changed within the past few years, however. The rise of feminist, post-colonial and minority studies during the 1980s and 90s led to an expansion of the traditional Bildungsroman definitions; the genre was broadened to include coming-of-age narratives that bear only cursory resemblance to nineteenth-century European models. (Boes 231)

In his view, the Bildungsroman has evolved in the last decades in order to fulfil the needs of a world that differs greatly in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, and age parameters. Gullette advocates for the need to focus on midlife narrative, but the nature of ageing can be addressed in any stage of life. This current visibility of women coming of age in fiction, politics, and media is the result of decades of women's struggles to give visibility to their social and cultural constraints. In this process of awareness, the feminist movement has been instrumental in achieving equality, visibility and rights. In fact, women's fight for education has made an enormous impact on replacing old ideas with revolutionary ones that consider women as free-will beings capable to function outside their biological attributes.

It is noteworthy that there has been a strong transformation from the early feminist to the feminist belonging to second- and third-wave feminism. Early and second-wave feminism focused their attention on young women, leaving aside along the way the struggles that women confront as they begin to experience time in their bodies, and their relegation to a secondary role in society. If the Bildungsroman novel was attacked because of its lack of pluralism, in a way the same applies to feminism and its conflicting relationship with ageing issues. Feminism thrived with well-known works such as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1991), Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970), Gloria Steinem's *Revolution from Within* (1992), or Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1997). However, they failed to comprehend women's life from a broader perspective, mainly by negating later life as they did not tackle women ageing outside culture and social norms.

The second-wave feminist protests against women's inequalities hid an ingrained feeling of segregation between those of them who did not fit into the racial, ethnical, social and financial background of the founders of the movement. As well as women's plurality was taken for granted at the beginning, issues related to ageing women did not attract attention as yet. Therefore, ageism was associated with normal lifespan and decline discourses, so other issues were prioritised before the social construction of ageing. Colette V. Browne contemplated how women reached later life, as the victims of social and political policies consisting of "unequal pay, segregated employment opportunities, unmet health and social needs, continued sexual harassment and assault, and assignment to unpaid caregiving duties" (Browne 7). For most of them, women's right to vote, access to education, and equality in the workforce were major achievements that would completely change younger women's lives. But there was another relevant aspect in

women's lives: ageing. The ageing population was still marginalised and made invisible to the extent that only through time would the situation change by actively confronting age.

An example of this can be seen in the work of two major feminists, philosophers and writers: Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan. Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is considered a fundamental reading in feminist literature; published in 1949, at the time Beauvoir published *The Second Sex* feminism had already started to bond women together. However, Beauvoir considered that the lack of unification among them throughout history was difficult to overcome. To her, women had failed to realise the need to fight back together instead of standing up individually. So, women have “live[d] dispersed among the males, attached through residence, housework, economic condition, and social standing to certain men – fathers or husbands – more firmly than they are to other women” (Beauvoir, *Second Sex* 78). Hence, feminism offered most women an opportunity to get together in order to discuss their commonalities and look at the future with the hope of a change for future generations. Their meetings provided them with a space where their personal stories about motherhood, marriage and other issues, that remained buried in their routines, could be shared.

Barbara A. Arrighi goes along with Beauvoir's idea of women's lack of unity across time, and explored the concept of otherness found in the *Second Sex*, a term mentioned for the first time in Emmanuel Levinas's essay *Time and the Other* (1987). Arrighi considers otherness “a fundamental category of human thought” (76), that functions as a structure that separates and bonds individuals according to different criteria. For example, it is not common to find oneself regarded as a “‘the other’ outside family, friends or community settings”. As Arrighi poses, “no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself” (76). In the case of women, they

have always fulfilled the role of the other, and in many aspects, this has perpetuated their invisibility across time and space. Indeed, the world, as a space, has been constructed in accordance to the male perspective relegating women to be secondary actors. Consequently, for many centuries, and still in some parts of the world nowadays, a woman is “defined and differentiated with reference to man and not with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other” (Arrighi 76). Thus, the consideration of women as the other has reinforced their subjugated condition to patriarchal norms, which is rooted in biological differences and imposed on them through time.

As regards ageing, *The Second Sex* (1997) delves into ageing from the perspective of a narrative of decline. Beauvoir puts forward the idea that most women do not come to terms with their changing self and feel unprepared for ageing, living with the fear of looking themselves at the mirror to realise that their youth has already vanished. In this sense, with time, most of them start to anguish about the irretrievable nature of the past, and to consider ageing as a series of losses. As claimed by Beauvoir, ageing is devastating, especially for women, and in contrast to men,

whereas man grows old gradually, woman is suddenly deprived of her femininity; she is still relatively young when she loses the erotic attractiveness and the fertility which, in the view of society and in her own, provide the justification of her existence and her opportunity for happiness. With no future, she still has about one half of her adult life to live. (Beauvoir, *Second Sex* 587)

When Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex* at the age of forty-one, it might be glimpsed that ageing was already a concern for her she did not explore in depth in her writing. In fact, Beauvoir’s approach to ageing was similar to that of an enemy one cannot escape from, but rather submit. However, as time passed by, the author felt the need to address ageing

not as a peripheral topic in her writing but as an extremely relevant one. Therefore, at the age of sixty-three, Simone de Beauvoir wrote *The Coming of Age* (1970). However, her vision was permeated with pessimistic and decline approaches.

Interestingly, de Beauvoir takes into consideration the relevance of materiality in the life of the elder, and reflects upon the strong identification between the elder and their possessions and how through this interaction a feeling of dependence towards their memorabilia is established in order to find a meaning and purpose to their existence. Beauvoir's notion has been already explored in chapter two, and it underlines the idea that human beings express their identity through their material environment, so being and having become two dependent realities and a strong source of identification for the individual.

According to de Beauvoir, ageing is a stage of life where few possibilities are available for the person. Even though there are some testimonies of people who despite their age have achieved success in later life, those are cases that for her represent a minority, in relation to the vast number of ageing population around the world. In addition, she argues that old people seem to be predisposed to routines and habits that can provide them with a sense of security. In this respect, the bonding with the house and material possessions is a result of this long for security, which would explain, according to de Beauvoir, the reasons behind the elder attachment toward their material possessions. In fact, "because of habit he knows who he is. It protects him from his generalized anxieties by assuring him that tomorrow will be a repetition of today" (*Coming of Age* 469). In other words, routine is a basic element in the process of attachment to our material environment. In this sense, routine and the subsequent attachment to daily life possessions favoured the idea that the best place for our elders was their home, as a space where they could feel safe, and rekindle their past by their interaction with their heirlooms.

If de Beauvoir's work is considered an important scaffolding in the feminist movement, and in the work of ageing studies for her own account of old age in an interdisciplinary perspectives, the work of Betty Friedan deserves some consideration as she also wrote about old age at a time when there were not any texts dealing with this topic. Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was fundamental in bonding women together again, and to continue their fight for equality, and against their daily life oppressions. Published in 1963, this book was crucial for second-wave feminism, and it explored cultural and biological beliefs such as the prevailing ideas of women's predisposition to motherhood, marriage and household tasks. Furthermore, she gave a step forward in the deconstruction of stereotypes around the female body, and that not only men, but also women had assumed as core traits of women's identity: house as a destination, and motherhood as the vehicle to a happier and fulfilled life.

These concerns excluded ageing women from the public discourse, addressing only the impact of the Industrial Revolution and the slow transformation of manual tasks into automatic ones in the daily life of middle-aged women, the fight for equal rights in all spheres, and the right to have equal pay. According to Friedan, for most women, after the first feminist movement, the only way for women to feel complete was to find a husband, to have children, to clean their houses efficiently and to find pleasure in domestic chores, while at the same time, "they were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents. They learn that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights..." (*Mystique* 13). Nonetheless, it was the decision to give up their life-long dreams for domesticity that became oppressive in their daily life. Frustration pervaded middle-aged women who, despite of having their own family and material comfort, shared what

Friedan referred to as “the problem that has no name” (Friedan, *Mystique* 13), with common symptoms in all the women she interviewed:

I’ve tried everything women are supposed to do – hobbies, gardening, pickling, canning, being very social with my neighbours, joining committees, running P.T.A [Parent- Teacher Association] teas. I can do it all, and I like it, but it doesn’t leave you anything to think about- any feeling of who you are. I never had any career ambitions. All I wanted was to get married and have four children. I love kids and Bob and my home. There’s no problem you can even put a name to. But I am desperate. I begin to feel I have no personality. I’m server of food and a putter-on of pants and a bedmaker, somebody who can be called on when you want something. But who am I? (*Mystique* 19)

Friedan was accused of representing women as a whole group and of not taking into consideration the interplay of factors such as race, ethnicity and social status in *The Feminine Mystique*. Indeed, second-wave feminism focused on women’s reproductive stages of life taking for granted the life cycle in general, and later life, in particular. And as many critics noted, Friedan paid attention to a specific group of women, following her position a white middle-class woman. As time went by, Friedan, as well as Beauvoir, began a process of personal awareness of her ageing self, as she confessed that it took her time to accept that she was herself ageing. So, “the problems of age didn’t interest [her], personally or politically. Reading the paper, [she] skipped stories about nursing home scandals. In the women’s movement, age didn’t seem to count; we all felt young” (Friedan, *Fountain of Age* xvi), a rejection she will overcome with time and acceptance of her bodily transformation into an aged person. This initial refusal could be rooted in the conception of ageing as the end of opportunities. Indeed, as much as the male gaze has been criticised because of its objectification of women, there is a hidden

dissatisfaction in the thought of being invisible to the other, not in terms of desire, but as becoming the other, the physical evidence of what time can do with our body and how much our ageing identity can unsettle the individual.

In this sense, for most women the “face is an emblem, an icon, a flag. How she arranges her hair, the type of makeup she uses, the quality of her complexion -all these are signs, not of what she is “really” like, but of how she asks to be treated by others, especially men. They establish her status as an ‘object’” (Sontag 35). Notwithstanding this, ageism is intimately related to the cult of the body and it is the first sign of social rejection to the aged attached to their roles of caregivers, wives, widows, mothers and daughters reinforced by “the lack of responsive policies” (Browne 35). Interestingly, radical feminism has often manifested how women’s source of oppression is inherent to their capacity to give birth. This is followed by a lifetime of nurture and protection of their offspring, not to mention the care for their elder that is often associated with women rather than men. Today, women need to enter the job market in order to provide welfare to their family, while being “penalized when leaving the work force by the zero years that are added to their benefit computation period; the wage gap between men and women that continues to exist” (Browne 137). This lack of economic support to women’s years of caregiving has drastic consequences at old age because “pensions are based on men’s work patterns, with no credit given to the childbearing and caregiving years when unemployed” (Browne 137). Thus, it is necessary to bear in mind that socioeconomic and marital status, education, ethnic groups, and cultural backgrounds influence in how women face their coming of age.

Therefore, Friedan decided to portray her experiencing of old age and social and cultural representation of it in *The Fountain of Age* (1993), which was published when she was seventy-one years old and it discussed old age and ageing in the States. Friedan

admits that there is a resistance from younger generations to engage in activities or academic programmes that focus on the analyses or reflections about the elder. She illustrates this describing a seminar with young students of medicine. Friedan soon realised that most participants were reluctant to discuss ageing from a humanistic perspective or to imagine themselves at later life. Indeed, their approach seemed to be inseparable from their medical standpoint in which the subject of study is always the other, and any kind of perspective that presents the possibility of no longer being young and fit was avoided. Furthermore, during that seminar Friedan suggested thinking about ageing from a productive way and her students not only rejected the proposed idea, but also contemplated it as an unnatural thing since later life is about enjoying spare time and peaceful after a life of work. This brings up the question the way ageing is dealt with in our educational systems, or whether or not (social) media draw young and older generations apart. Thus,

Assuming old age as a set of losses that time imposed on every human being, for most feminist activists the focus of attention was given on those realities that were subjected to be improved or changed. Was it possible to challenge old age and its ideas of decline when we could observe the inconveniences of being old? Indeed, there are many questions that need to be discussed and explored in academia as “what do we actually experience as we go through the society’s views, how much is self-imposed? What do we see when we look at age in its own terms? What do we see when we look at vital women and men who neither deny age nor wallow in its victim state but continue to develop and grow?” (Friedan, *Fountain of Age* xxxi)

In turn, Kathleen M. Woodward takes Friedan’s work as starting point and she analyses the representation of ageing in Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970), and its sequel *The Whole Woman* (1999), to then compare them to Friedan’s publication. One of

the conclusions that Woodward arrives at is that, despite their ideas towards old age and ageing, they all undergo processes of self-awareness about ageism and the realisation of the mechanism in which ageist thinking is unconsciously incorporated into our belief system. As far as Greer is concerned, Woodward observes how Greer realises feminism had lost strength over the years, and how new changes in technology, medicine, education were bringing new issues to the fore. Therefore, as Woodward posits, when Greer decides to write *The Whole Woman* in 1999, she is convinced that there is a need to raise her voice once again in favour of the feminist cause. Thus, Greer “writes about a multitude of feminist issues ranging from beauty, sexuality, and work to reproductive technology, hormone replacement therapy, and the global feminization of poverty” (Woodward, “Against Wisdom” 186). However, it is not after some years that ageing becomes a central topic in Greer’s vision of ageing, even though in her approach she does not advocate for self-fulfilment or a possibility to embrace women’s ageing self, but rather a personal belief that after the arrival of menopause and during later life, women “should cultivate their own gardens in a spirit of tranquillity” (Woodward, “Against Wisdom” 187). In this sense, Greer’s association of old age with tranquillity could be interpreted as an ageist approach to later life where wisdom and peace are attributes bestowed automatically as ageing characteristics.

It is true that “reading through the slowly growing body of what is coming to be known as “age studies,” the critical examination and theorisation of age as a marker of identity, one repeatedly encounters a well-founded complaint: no one wants to talk about aging” (Henneberg 106). Friedan realises that ageing is an enemy that, as patriarchy, is rooted in human beings’ fear of death and dying. Indeed, if patriarchy is considered an enemy that dominates the public and private discourse, ageism is also another threat that looms at ease in our culture and society without a firm response. For most young and

middle-aged individuals it is easy to fall into the trap of ageism and believe that ageing processes are the beginning of our personal and social decline, and only by engaging in active life, or the use of cosmetic or aesthetic surgery the person will stop the process of becoming the other, the aged, the forgotten. And this is notably perceived in the case of the female body, one of the most oppressive realities women face over their lifespan, mainly, because body discourses are influenced by the exaltation of youth in all its forms.

As argued previously, there has always been fear of decline as people approach later stages of life. Concealing those fears towards the passing of time and ignoring our future selves has been a predominant strategy to alleviate the pain of ageing. As Gloria Steinem illustrates in her non-fictional book *Doing Sixty and Seventy* (2006), confronting her ageing nature was a complex process but it was finally therapeutic. In fact, as she herself narrates, accepting her age was the first part to understand how ageing was limiting women's freedom and self-acceptance. For example, when Steinem turned 40, she decided to reveal her age in public, and thus to avoid the feeling of guilt imposed by society when someone is already in their middle age. Indeed, concealing one's age has been a pervasive act for many people, especially women, who fear the condemnatory gaze of the other.

Steinem goes along with Susan Sontag's conception of time as an enemy that threatens women more than men. So, "after thirty-five, any mention of women's age carries with it the reminder that one is probably closer to the end of one's life than to the beginning" (Sontag 29). Chronological time seems to be the dominant force in our approach to life, where people count years with fear. and they do not celebrate the experience of the joy of being alive. Sontag has commented on this: "there is a double standard about aging that denounces women with special severity. Society is much more permissive about aging in men, as it is more tolerant of the sexual infidelities of husbands.

Men are ““allowed” to age, without penalty, in several ways that women are not” (Sontag 31).

In many ways, the perception of time as well as the perception of life experience is different from one individual to another. If feminism is regarded as an umbrella concept where women are regarded as unique individuals with their own backgrounds, the field of ageing has welcomed the narrative of many feminists that despite their race, ethnicity, social class or sexual orientation wanted to express their personal accounts about their process of self-awareness. So, there has been a proliferation of writers who, feminist or not, are willing to confront age as an issue that should no longer be postponed. This is the case of Barbara MacDonald and Cynthia Rich who voice the experience of time and identity from their perspective as lesbians. They manifest as many other writers that their early concerns were women’s sexual repression, equal pay, the right to vote, the fight against patriarchy or sexual violence, among others, but not necessarily issues related to age. To MacDonald, being lesbian was to be categorised as the “other”. However, this otherness was intensified when she got older. Being old was to be a different kind of “other”, as she confessed: “Again I lived with the never-knowing when people turn away from me, not because they had identified me as lesbian, since I was no longer a sexual being, but because they had identified me as old” (MacDonald and Rich 5). Ageing is immediately associated with loss of sexual interest or attraction, which is part of age ideology. The common idea was to publicly admit their disregard of life from a wider spectrum where ageing could have come into scene and have initiated this fight against ageism long ago. As MacDonald and Rich sustain, the protagonist did not know back in her youth that older women were “the poorest of the poor” (10) nor did she think that:

I myself was ageing, was always aging, and that only powerful force could have kept me from confronting so obvious fact, or kept me –from self-interest alone –

from working to change the social and economic realities of older women. That ageism is part of the air Both Barbara and I have breathed since we are born, and that is unthinkable that women should continue to be indifferent to the meaning of whole lives, until we are old ourselves”. (MacDonald and Rich 12)

In *Look Me in the Eye*, both Cynthia Rich and Barbara MacDonald express their opinion towards the concept of ageing and review the lack of age perspective in the feminist movement. As lesbian women, their account is one of anger for being politically and socially discriminated at many levels of the self. In the same line, Andrew King, Kathryn Almack, Yiu-Tung Suen and Sue Wetswood suggest that “heteronormativity will have particular significance for older LGBT adults who grew up in a more hostile, homophobic, biphobic and transphobic era than might currently be the case” (3). Thus, it is of great relevance to further explore in the future the way in which diversity affects processes of ageing. To a certain extent, ageing is like a journey in which different roadmaps are used to guide the person in the process of adapting to a future ageing self. Jones delves into the term ‘queer’ “to include all non-heterosexual people and all people whose gender identity does not match well with the gender they were ascribed at birth, or is not simple ‘male’ or ‘female’” (Jones 23). In terms of ageing, their processes are unexplored or few “older queer people are rarely available as role models for younger queer people” (Jones 23). Among the examples that illustrate ageing outside the gender binary perspective, Barbara MacDonald and Cynthia Rich’s work is an important step forward in the analysis of queer representation of ageing and in public discourses. In *Look Me in the Eye*, the reader finds a detailed description of MacDonald’s physical perception of herself in the mirror. She scans every part of her body: shrunk in size, grey hair, wrinkles, deep lines, changes in the pitch of her voice, and spots of ageing. When she takes a closer look to observe her ageing body, her account is one of losses. She

perceives her body as disconnected from herself. “I see my arm with the skin hanging loosely from my forearm and cannot believe that it is really my own. It seems disconnected from me; it is someone else’s, it is the arm of an old woman” (MacDonald and Rich 14). Not only does she face discrimination for her sexual orientation, and because of her physical appearance, but also she notices how spaces are used to spread gender discrimination and, how difficult it is for her to find places where she is not looked upon because of her age. Thus, it seems that older women should no longer have leisure time or have interests outside their familiar and social roles. They are relegated to a cultural script that diminishes their potential, distorts the self and reduces their presence in the world. As Macdonald states, all her life she wanted to have a different body, probably to fit into social and cultural standards, however, in the end, she realises that she has long occupied the same body, almost sixty-five years, and “it is a good body, it is mine” (MacDonald and Rich 21).

Both MacDonald and Rich feel that the women’s movement needs to gain momentum and stand up for the elder, recognising its heterogeneity, and the need to provide ageing with a plurality in which future generations can find their identity, queer or not, represented. An example of this is found in an episode, when MacDonald attended the ‘Take Back the Night’ march back in the late 1970s. While participating to defend women’s vulnerability to men’s violence, one of the organisers approached Macdonald and said: “if you think you can’t keep up, you should go to the head of the march” (28). She comments on this and argues that her age should have been of no concern to anyone except her; in her opinion that person’s view was as offensive and discriminating as the ones they were denouncing against patriarchy during the march.

For Kathleen Woodward the above-mentioned episode encapsulates the complexity of ageing processes, and the difficulties in portraying ageing from a

perspective that escapes pessimistic views of the elder. Slow, frail, ill or weak are some of the adjectives associated with the old and they also symbolise how relevant are stories such as the one told by MacDonald in order to fight back ageism in daily life and attitudes. In Woodward's view, the person who commented on MacDonald's age was a young person, unaware of the internal struggles of ageing in our society, as individuals and a collective group, but this does not change the fact that his comment had devastating effects on MacDonald, who acknowledged that:

Although much of what happened to me in the march is resolved for me, I am still angry at the ageism in the women's movement. I am angry at what does to me and at what it must be doing to many other women of my age. It also makes me distrustful of the movement itself, as it seems to me that such ageism, entrenched in the minds of the women of this second wave, must be some indication of the degree to which we have all internalized male values". (MacDonald and Rich 36)

During the last decades there has been a proliferation of texts which intend to address a wide range of readers whose interests are different from younger generations. Feminists' own coming of age has led them to write about ageing and to fill the gap of narratives about ageing. Their work has been decisive to give voice to age from the perspective of women, and to challenge the existing negative discourse of the ageing body. Interestingly, Gullette considers that culture exerts an influence upon people's attitudes and prejudices toward the body, especially the female body, therefore, "whatever happens in the body, and even if nothing happens in the body, ageing is a narrative. Each of us tells her own story. But most of us lack an adequate backstory. Not only my own physiology and my personal life experience but societal influences determine my age autobiography" (Gullette, *Agewise* 5)

Seen in this light, ageing, from a woman's perspective, contributes to identify the struggles most women undergo when they lose their youth and began a process of social stigmatisation. As mentioned before, language is one of the main sources of pain inflicted in people's processes of ageing, which is manifested in ageism discourses. Language should be used as a tool for reconciliation instead of a weapon to penalise old age and ageing processes. Indeed, languages have a vocabulary with terms such as infirmed, inactive, enfeebled, decrepit, or impaired that illustrate the difficulties of ageing in our culture and societies:

Interesting research has found that even people with very positive attitudes toward the elderly often seem to speak to older adults in very different ways from how they communicate with their peers. One type of speech, called "overaccommodation," entails the younger person becoming overly polite, speaking louder and slower, exaggerating their intonation, and talking in simple sentences (Giles, Fox, Harwood, & Williams, qtd. in Nelson 41)

It is true that illnesses feature prominently as central topics in ageing fiction, arthrosis and arthritis, which lead to reduced mobility, or cognitive illnesses, such as dementia and Alzheimer, appear as basic elements of the narrative of the elder. These narratives favour decline as it is difficult to look at physical and mental impairment as a progressive decline that can happen at any age and not the result of being old. To put it differently, one could argue that one individual does not develop arthrosis when s/he is sixty, but it is a consequence of a slow process that takes place over the years, probably early in his/her youth. Besides, the elder cannot be observed as a homogenised group: there are narratives of decline and narratives of progress where the ageing person is far from being physical or mentally impaired. In this line, ageing fiction and novels that portray the life of middle-aged people are essential to renegotiate readers' obsolete ideas of what one can feel or do

in later life. Thus, making decline as the central plot of an ageing story should be questioned rather than accepted.

Gullette gives a personal account of how her life changed dramatically when she was diagnosed with osteoarthritis. In her view, culture has itself given age a diagnosis of decline, and unfortunately there are no discourses, ageing narratives, that can help people to make the transition from healthy active life to a life with ordinary pain. In fact, “what no one talks about convincingly, even in the many recent discourses on terminal illnesses, is how your identity tries to change when your body changes” (Gullette, *Declining to Decline* 44). Indeed, if a person is becoming socially old, it is easier to construct an identity that reinforces preconceived cultural assumptions towards the body than a person who will determine an ageing identity based on how s/he really feels. “Pain or absence of pain dominates the mind” (Gullette, *Declining to Decline* 49) and in many cases the mind is dominated to think in terms of decline, so information is used in order to confirm that ageing always leads to physical and cognitive decline. However, in some cases, some people experience ageing as another stage of life in which they are free from pain, frailty and they still have hope. In this sense, in the field of medicine, “doctors believe they are telling facts. Instead, they possess their tiny factoids, as well as their age and social conditioning, and also – most important of all – their private inclinations to tell progress or decline stories in relation to the patient before them” (Gullette, *Declining to Decline* 50). Age theory needs to be aware of how most people are trapped in a wrong definition of what old age is about, and the consequences of ageing. Therefore, a coherent age identity has to emerge in order to help individuals come to terms with their own experience of ageing. To a certain extent, age identity is a complex term that encompasses an ongoing process of accumulating lived experience. Gullette considers that “age identity comprehends each person’s collection of “information” about age and aging in

general and stories about their own age and aging in particular” (*Aged by Culture* 15). And that is ingrained for most of us in a cultural script of decline forces that imposed on us a feeling of being trapped in decline.

Gullette sustains that her process of constructing an age identity after the middle age was somehow complex, mainly, because she had to accept the diagnosis of arthritis and all the implication that it would have in their everyday life activities, and the reduction of mobility that would come out with the passing of time. For her to age was to know that the pain she was suffering would not be temporary but permanent. Assimilating arthritis as part of her ageing identity was devastating. However, she soon realised that she was being a victim of pessimistic discourses, and that her diagnosis should not be limiting her present or her future. What Gullette intends with her personal story is to alert to the fact that it is up to the individual to decide what kind of ageing narrative s/he wants to develop in his/her life. She does not prescribe what old age is, but she rather encourages the reader to ponder on the circumstances around such a negative medical diagnosis. To a certain extent, one might consider that there is nothing positive about knowing that in the future the person would face reduced mobility, but the important thing is to begin to question if it is not just giving up too soon.

In this respect, Bildungsroman novels offer an opportunity to raise age consciousness to challenge prevailing notions about ageing, which are predominantly pessimistic. Thus, Gullette advocates for a change of paradigm which would overturn self-imposed pity inferred by cultural ageism:

The personal psychological issue is what to do with an acknowledged loss, a daily degree of pain, a potential for acute distress. A given and named condition is not thereby your condition. Your condition is your reaction, your living with your

changed body, and the new state you and it make together. It's really a narrative issue: how do I want to fit this into my life story. (*Declining to Decline* 45)

To accept that our attitudes about physical decline are learned and imposed by culture is a decisive step, since only through the field of ageing studies biased views about the ageing process will be eradicated. Indeed, it is important to consider what our parents' discourse about sickness, wrinkles, later life was, and in which ways it has shaped our vision of ageing, and whether it has finally been adopted as a natural way of thinking. When illnesses occur at early stages of life, a feeling of impotency is latent. The refusal to accept that someone young can be affected by a terminal disease or be diagnosed with a chronic illness defies our idea of a normal life cycle. However, when that situation takes place later in life, life changes dramatically, and those changes are assumed as consequences of time: age has finally made its appearance, and decline is ahead.

As mentioned previously, illness discourses are learned "before a child learns how to speak. As with many things we acquire, then, maternal mediation sets the tone of our experience" (Gullette, *Declining to Decline* 45). Age decline is passed on from one generation to the next as a legacy, sometimes unknowingly, and this has an impact on the ability to cope with ageing changes. Certainly, people still lack coping strategies to comprehend and adapt themselves across the lifespan. Barbara MacDonald and Cynthia Rich consider that either maternal or parental talk can be hurtful for the adult to be, if the main lesson is to enjoy life while they are young, and consequently to be afraid of time. In fact, in the early years of feminism, some women found that re-educating themselves was a hard process as "it takes the mothers hours each night to undo the unliberated ideas that the grandmothers have instilled during the day. Though it is by no means necessarily so, years of experience can also be years of brainwashing" (MacDonald and Rich 99).

It is indeed difficult to liberate the self from all the social and cultural constraints that individuals are exposed from birth. In this respect, disciplines such as gerontology have developed a critical approach to ageing called narrative gerontology. The book market is filled with autobiographies, memoirs, biographies or fiction nurturing the reader with the insights of ageing experience, and the possibilities to comprehend the other in terms of psychological, physical and cultural insights. William L. Randall and Gary M. Kenyon refer to this new literary interest in human processes of ageing as narrative gerontology, a discipline that “focuses on the subjective dimensions of personal development in later life” (333) and brings ageing issues to the public eye for discussion and self-reflection.

3.3. Narrative Gerontology and Reifungsroman

In this section I aim to explore a sub-field of gerontology named narrative gerontology which covers how people construct and make sense of lived experience, in contradistinction to the fictionalisation of ageing. Gary M. Kenyon and William L. Randall states that narrative gerontology

is intended as a heuristic for the study of aging. Its purpose, as see it, is to emphasize and coordinate a particular set of insights about both the aging process itself and how we investigate it. As the word “narrative implies, its main agenda for gerontological theory, research, and practice is to explore the entailments of the metaphor of “life as story”. (1)

Furthermore, in the study of human accounting for experience, there is always a basic element that bonds us together, and that is that “humans are fundamentally storytelling creatures. They are narrative beings, biographical as much as, for example, biological in

essence” (Kenyon and Randall 333). In many ways, human beings are constantly connecting events so that a coherent narrative can be created in order to make them feel that their lives had purpose and meaning. This process of reconfiguring one’s life story emerges from the need to deal with the past in order to create a coherent narrative where life events make sense. As claimed by Hannah Zeilig, “the use of narrative in gerontology and by those who have recourse to literary representations of “age” and “ageing” have become increasingly recognised as lending important insights to gerontological knowledge” (8). However, one of the main difficulties in this recollection of someone’s past experiences when they are poured into a biography, autobiography or memoir lies in the fact that the person has to decide whether to tell the truth and reveal information that might be hurtful for loved ones, or that would change the way other people perceive him/her. In this sense, fiction really allows for a bonding between reader and character since the narrative is constructed in the territory of the imaginary. For many gerontologists the fact that the story is based on creative thinking and not real experience was undervalued by disciplines as gerontology which relies on proved facts in the study of old age. Thus, narrative gerontology is considered as a more trustworthy instrument to raise age consciousness in certain fields of knowledge where people can appreciate the benefits to construct one’s own life narrative. Hence,

Narrative gerontology as a tool for teaching relies on the recognition that life can be thought of as an actively constructed text that must be part fiction. Just as the stories in novels are made up so we “make ourselves up” when we relate the substance of our lives. Therefore, the act of reading lives is similar to the act of reading novels or “fictions”. Both endeavours rely upon our interpretative abilities and are full of subjectivity” (Zeilig 12).

Narrative allows for the recipients of the story the possibility to experience cultural and social change. Thus, the more an individual is exposed to realities that are unknown/foreign to him/her, the more likely the person will develop empathy and a more understanding self. Among some of the elements that are discussed in narrative gerontology is the importance of how the individual constructs ageing identities through time; in other words, how the person perceives himself/herself, and how others perceive him/her in terms of cultural, social and personal aspects. Furthermore, narrative gerontology deepens in “three intertwining dimensions of aging that are of increasing importance to gerontologists; the temporal, the poetical, and the spiritual” (Randall and Kenyon 334). In referring to the temporal dimension, Randall and Kenyon pay attention to how an individual is influenced by time in cognitive and physical aspects. Personal time is different from chronological time, and in the field of fiction past and present coexist and intertwine. Indeed, human beings are constantly making sense of their experience and are processing information, which creates a wealth of knowledge that makes up their autobiography and keeps the past secured. Thus, personal experience is stored within our understanding of time as something linear and structured. In this sense, “human time, we could say, is essential narrative time, or *storytime*. Where clock time epitomises objective time, *storytime* epitomises subjective time, the time of our lives” (Randall and Kenyon 334; emphasis original). This can explain why at later life there is a common rejection of the ageing body because it cannot reflect the inner feeling of the person who would act or dress differently if cultural and social norms did not dictate how to fit in our ageing self.

In narrative gerontology, the focus is on how people produce and process meaning, so that in later life they attempt to construct a kind of collage of anecdotes, episodes that can guarantee the veracity of who they think they had been, or the veracity

of a particular story. Additionally, narrative gerontologists strive to see how time is perceived in later life, and how a person who was future-oriented, or present-oriented suddenly engages in a past-oriented attitude. In this sense, Randall and Kenyon consider that human narrative could be summarised into three phases: “the *pre-mythic*” that encompasses the early stages of human development, “*the mythic*”, that would last until adulthood, and “the *post-mythic*”, which is a the state of mind of most people who become aware of their ageing self and the limited time that is ahead of them” (337). The last dimension is related to the old conception that getting older would provide the person with a wiser self. However, this idea is biased, and it reinforces a strong ageism. Good judgement is not acquired with time, and time is the main force that transforms our body throughout our lifespan. Our capacity to build our identity is based on principles and our ability to act upon those principles is not determined by time, but by our capacity to learn from our mistakes. Thus, in later life this moment of life review leads the person to a moment of self-forgiveness, and self-acceptance of a past that might be full of failures.

From the point of view of identity, the self goes through the states of pre-myth, myth and post-myth adapting to circumstances and acquiring a sense of purpose towards a certain goal which can be spiritual, professional or family oriented among other possibilities. Comparing narrative gerontology to the field of literature, in both fields the “self-as author” (Randall and Kenyon 338) and the writer hold the main responsibility for the construction of the narrative, but whereas in narrative gerontology the self develops a biography xor story based on facts, in fiction the self is a product of the writer’s imagination. According to Sarah Falcus, “[i]t is fair to say that narrative gerontology is not a clear-cut field, but an area that draws on many methodological and disciplinary knowledges, including literary studies” (“Literature and Ageing” 57), whereas Reifungsroman emerges as a response to the misrepresentation of ageing characters in

fiction. The latter attempts to liberate the self from the decline and stagnation that is associated with later life through the writer's creativity to reimagining that life. Furthermore, novels included in *Reifungsroman* have particularly distinctive characteristics, namely self-growth and self-fulfilment in later life, which become paradigmatic in ageing fiction.

Admittedly, Jeannette King considers that “it is hard to avoid the feeling that old people are a burden, in spite of all the ‘good news’ stories about the numbers of people in the ‘Third Age’, joining the University of the Third Age, and spending the ‘grey pound’ on adventurous holidays and pursuits” (King xii). The narrative of the ageing self from perspectives of growth or ripening has opened up a new path to explore concepts and ideas associated with human ageing from a literary standpoint. Feminism played an important part in discussing novels in which the protagonists were mature. In this sense, the year 1970 is regarded as a watershed as a great many texts, novels and articles on old age and its concerns came out. More particularly, several novels focused on plots about women coming of age. In this sense, the first step was to give an accurate account of women's coming of age where issues such as the marginalisation of the elder, ageist discourse, love and desire could be explored in depth, and without fear. As Carmen García Navarro posits,

El anciano representa en numerosas ocasiones una obligación de la que los demás tienen que hacerse cargo. Pero no suscita, o lo hace raramente, la admiración de la sociedad que lo rodea, porque se rechaza o se repudia desde el olor a viejo a la curva de su espalda, los ritmos a que el cuerpo se ve sometido – distintos al ritmo raramente infalible de la juventud – o la rutina de los tratamientos médicos y farmacológicos. Todo ello en un mundo en el que el anciano vive una realidad rayana en la marginación sutilmente disfrazada de bienestar familiar y social. (163)

Therefore, a new sub-genre, a new type of narrative featuring the processes of ageing and old age from a perspective of change and growth, appeared. These narratives strove to replace negative assumptions, commonly held towards old age and later life, with a more open and fluid views. Barbara Frey Waxman's *From the Hearth to the Open Road* (1990) is fundamental in the scaffolding of narratives of growth or ripening, or, in other words, what Waxman coined as Reifungsroman. These texts delve into old age and ageing from a perspective of self-fulfilment and opportunity where, despite limited time, the self succeeds in coming to terms with the time lived, and the time remaining. In what follows, I will analyse how this sub-genre, Reifungsroman, explores the fictionalisation of old age and ageing experience outside social and cultural expectations of decline and loss. As seen before, narrative gerontology in contradistinction to Reifungsroman genre delves into the analyses of individual real accounts of old age and ageing where, according to Gary M. Kenyon and William L. Randall, all "human beings are to be understood as fundamentally storytellers and storylisteners" (1). Then, gerontologist has the challenge to investigate "questions of how people of different ages, cohorts, genders, and cultures "story", and therefore life, time...and of how they story death as well" (4). In a way, both narrative gerontology and Reifungsroman share a common concern: to provide a more nuanced experience of how individuals makes sense of the passing of time.

Waxman states that in Reifungsroman novels there is a predominant representation of women's ageing processes, since apparently male writers do not seem much interested in approaching ageing from a perspective of self-growth. Then, in Reifungsroman most of the novels are written by women and have women as protagonists of the journeys toward wholeness; in Waxman's words: "it is because older women have been greater victims of ageism in a sexist and youth-oriented culture, fueling the anger of

women writers. On the other hand, aging women writers, active and ripening themselves, may reflect themselves as they celebrate aging women in their fiction” (Waxman 12).

In this regard, women writers use their narrative to provide their female characters with new life chances, and in so doing they are allowed to explore and liberate themselves from fears and anxieties imposed on aged bodies. This brings about a new fictional take on women’s ageing processes:

Over the last two decades fiction writers like Doris Lessing, Joan Barfoot, Margaret Laurence, and Margaret Atwood, among others, have shown a profound interest in portraying ageing women who, whilst trying to cope with their unreliable bodies, reflect on their past and establish links with younger generations. (Arias, “Moments of Ageing” 3)

As stated above, Reifungsroman novels share a common set of characteristics that defy cultural pessimism, and ageist conceptions of the middle age and, more precisely, those of later life. Alex Hobbs pays special attention to the use of first-person narration, as it gives the ageing person a privileged position to uncover the realities of ageing, those known, and those unknown: “[t]he structure often includes meditations on the past, particularly turning points or life changing decisions that have preyed on their minds since” (Hobbs 109). Accepting is perceived as basic scaffolding to Reifungsroman novels, as only through acceptance a deeper sense of life can be grasped.

Hobbs goes on to consider that multiple issues allow the individual to initiate this journey of self-discovery, and self-acceptance of his/her ageing nature. One of them is the feeling of implied or real loss: the death of a spouse, a loved one, the loss of physical and mental vitality, the fear of dying or just the awareness of limited time. Life is indeed a journey that the individual starts early in life with an optimism that declines as time passes by. This lack of enthusiasm as the self approaches later life nurtures from the

invisibility imposed on the ageing self; then, these narratives deconstruct the anxieties and ageist thinking that predominates in Western cultures in a way in which readers undergo a similar process of transformation. In this sense, the reader as the characters “through deconstructing their egos, the protagonists [...] relinquish their social power and position and refocus their attention on a less structured, naturalistic existence. As a result, old age need not necessarily mean disengagement but reengagement” (Hobbs 110) which is an important step towards wholeness and integration. As illustrated before, the ageing protagonists of the Reifunsgroman novels undergo similar journeys to self-growth and reconciliation. Taking into consideration that the characters under analysis are women, there is a strong emphasis on the way in which these women experience social and cultural constraints due to their reproductive nature, as well as the oppression of daily life routine. There are several traits and characteristics, and in what follows I will discuss them in detail.

Firstly, there is an exploration of the ageing body in its physical and cognitive context. Secondly, there are material elements, such as the mirror, which are used as elements that allow the self to confront the marks of ageing in their bodies and initiate a process of coming to terms with old age. Thirdly, as the individual interacts with the mirror or with material memories of the past, the ageing self begins a journey to the past in order to accept one’s past decisions. In order to achieve this, the person engages in life review processes which have therapeutic effects on the fragmented self. Furthermore, with life review processes, the novelists create a space for communication that allows cross-generational bonding and wisdom moments among them. Other characteristics found in the genre are mother-daughter conflicts, the deconstruction of ageist thinking, love, sex and desire in later life and the idea of mortality among others.

Firstly, the description of the female body in these novels is often associated with decline. The self is aware of how wrinkles, thinning hair or skin flaccidity have transformed the individual into a stranger, difficult to recognise or accept. The complexity of the ageing body lies in the fact that the emphasis is placed on the physical representation of the individual, but indeed the ageing body is the subject of multiple interpretations, including biased notions, and stereotypes. In this sense, Jeannette King considers old people's daily life situation is unfortunately built upon "negative assumptions about older women being impoverished (no central heating, apparently) and depending for company upon incontinent cats, the demeaning adjective 'little', and the inevitable association with witches make this description gratuitously offensive in a totally unthinking way" (King xiv). The invisibility that pervades the ageing body is replaced with visibility, and finally confronted in these novels. Moreover, the ageist discourse imposed on the body is deconstructed, exposing the ways in which culture and society condemn the slow transformation of the body into different ageing selves. In fact, as seen in many novels, the ageing body causes anxiety towards later life that makes it all the process a traumatic experience.

This fear toward the body is not based exclusively on physical changes, but it is also associated with the fear of physical and cognitive decline. Hence, illnesses such as dementia or Alzheimer are narrated in the privacy of the characters' homes. Fiction explores this preoccupation and reflects upon how the character gradually loses control over the direction and purpose of his/her life and the narrative becomes incoherent and repetitive. Somehow, in the fictionalisation of these mental illnesses, writers reinforce the ageist association of illness with old age. However, new scientific findings posit that gradual deterioration of brain cells are not restricted or result from old age exclusively, and that, in some cases, can be diagnosed even before the middle age. Christopher J.

Poulosa et al state that in the case of dementia “it is estimated that more than 46 million people are currently living with the condition worldwide, with that number expected to almost triple by 2050” (451). If old people need to be more visible, when mental impairment occurs, the voice of the elder finds in fiction an instrument to give voice to their fragmented, frail and unreliable memories. Furthermore, fiction helps explore the way in which others such as family members, friends or doctors face the diagnoses and evolution of these illnesses in these novels. For example, Trezza Azzopardi *Remember Me* (2004) and Emma Healey’s *Elizabeth is Missing* (2014) can be regarded as key texts in discussing and describing the psychological and physical perspective of people who suffer from cognitive impairment, to what extent the individual faces those changes, and the elder is still capable of making their own decisions. Such an approach to these illnesses fosters empathy and understanding:

Family caregivers play an essential role in the care and support of older people living with dementia. Although the experiences of caring for a loved one can be positive, caregiving may also be associated with significant costs—for example, caregiver burden, stress, depression, anxiety, poor health, social isolation, and financial hardship [66, 67]. This has led to family caregivers being recognised as “invisible second patients” [67], highlighting the importance of also assessing and addressing the needs of the caregiver, and not just the care recipient [66]. (Poulosa et al 455)

Secondly, most writers use the metaphor of the mirror to continue their exploration of how the self comes to terms with the ageing body, and how it faces social and cultural stigmatisation. Thus, through self-mirror encounters, these Reifungsroman novels create a moment of physical confrontation with how the ageing person perceives himself/herself in relation to the image reflected in the mirror; feeling young inside, the mirror triggers

in the self a profound feeling of uneasiness and discomfort. What is reflected in the mirror cannot be glossed over, and although the body still longs for love and desire, the person needs to initiate a journey of reconciliation between past selves and present self. In terms of sexual desire in later life, novels such as Doris Lessing's *Love, Again* (1996) portrays how despite an aged body, and once the risk of pregnancy fades away, the person still feels passion, love and desire and is capable of eliciting those feelings in men. The protagonists, therefore, begin a journey of self-discovery to learn to trust their ageing bodies. For examples, in the above-mentioned novel, the protagonist, Sarah Durham, thinks about love in terms of decline, considering that at her age it is unlikely that she would fall in love again. According to Johanna Larsson, "Sarah considers that the cruelty of nature is that the outside ages while the inside stays the same as she was a young girl. This theme of the external decline around the character's unchanged personalities is a feeling that seems to be shared by all the old" (12). Thus, both the character and the reader understand that most of our preconceptions about the possibilities or incapacities to love or have sex after a certain age are part of a cultural script that needs revision.

Going back to the relevance of the mirror in Reifungsroman, Kathleen Woodward observes that this object is a recurrent element as a trigger of past memories and a connector between past and present selves. Woodward reinterprets Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage and delves into the different stages that the self is confronted the moment in which the individual projects its image onto the mirror. As time goes by, the mirror becomes an element of gradual mistrust and disappointment, as it seems to fail to represent the image of a younger self, the real way as how the self feels internally. This produces a disassociation between body and soul every time the individual interacts with the physical reflection. Judith Kegan Gardiner further analyses Woodward's approach to the relation that the ageing self establishes with the mirror and argues that it affects the

self at multiple levels. Thus, when most ageing people engage in a visual interaction with the mirror, the mirror no longer functions as an object of reflection, but instead it acquires an added significance as a mediator between the past, the present, and the future. This psychological unrest that produces our reflection in the mirror is explored in Reifungsroman novels in which the characters need to accept the image that is projected. Hence,

the aged person feels whole, unified, and congruent with the past self but sees in the mirror a reflection of wrinkles and decline. Thus in old age, the whole is felt to be inside, not outside, the subject. The aged increasingly separate what they feel to be their “real selves” from their bodies, and their own old age thus seems alien and “uncanny” to them. (Gardiner 998)

This moment of confronting our image in the mirror is referred by Rosario Arias as “moments of ageing” (Arias 4), resulting in a person’s recognition of their own physical change across the years and the latent variability with its younger self. The fear of the image of the self in the mirror produces two processes in the person: rejection or acceptance. Mostly, this ambivalence in the response is based on the difficulty to “relate to the face that the mirror reflects, a face that is disconnected from one’s sense of self, and alien image” (Arias, “Moments of Ageing” 5). Arias introduces the concept of “changing shell” (5) as a crucial step towards the reconciliation with our past selves in later stages of life. As it has been often posited by age critics, people’s main concern when they come to terms with their process of ageing is to assimilate their physical change as permanent. The mirror gives back a process of changing shells, and it does not offer an image of the former version of the self. This way, Reifungsroman provides the reader with an opportunity to reflect on the traces of time in our mind and our bodies through their fictionalisation. Therefore, these novels delve into how women gradually begin to

assume their ageing bodies and the futility of hiding or refusing the marks of time in their bodies. Indeed, the fear toward the ageing body is not innate but rather learnt. Furthermore, love, sex, and desire in later life becomes relevant topics in this narrative of ripening since they deconstruct the idea that to age is to lose one's sexual desire or capacity to fall in love, but on the contrary, love and sex can take place at any moment of time with the same intensity as before.

As mentioned before, Reifungsroman novels construct a context where the self is obliged to initiate a journey of self-discovery either by the interaction with a mirror, material possessions or by means of an external event that makes the individual question about life, that facilitates the liberation of the self. In Virginia Tiger's words, almost all the characters share a "voyage physically, geographically, psychologically, and ... spiritually" (29). They illustrate that in this type of narrative middle age marks a point of departure and not of destination. In order to do this, another aspect featuring prominently in these novels is the concept of life review. I have previously addressed the notion of life review and how beneficial and therapeutic life review processes can be in coming to terms with the ageing self. Thus, exploring past relations through life review allows forgiveness and gives the self another chance to repair past damages. In this sense, when life review occurs, the self not only faces time, but, rather, it acquires a different notion of time. This is illustrated in Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori* (1959) where death focuses all the attention in the lives of the inhabitants of a care home. Spark's approach to death is dealt with an intriguing perspective since characters receive a mysterious phone call that reminds them that they must die. The novel urges the reader to take death as a reality that is unpredictable whose haunting presence pervades our existence, and not only that of the elder. Muriel Spark approaches old age as a process that depends on individual attitude,

as well as one's personality and capacity to adapt to life stages, as seen in the following extract from *Memento Mori*:

Miss Jean Taylor mused upon her condition and upon old age in general. Why do some people lose their memories, some their hearing? Why do some talk about their youth and others of their wills? She thought of Dame Lettie Coston who had all her senses intact and yet played a real will-game, attempting to keep the two nephews in suspense, enemies of each other. And Charmian...Poor Charmian, since her stroke. How muddle she was about most things, and yet perfectly sensible when she discussed the books she had written. (Spark 10)

Indeed, Muriel Spark expresses the idea of dying as something that should not be negated or postponed but rather accepted. So, as one of the characters affirms in the novel, life has to be lived to the fullest before it is too late: "if I had my life over again I should form the habit of nightly composing myself to thoughts of death" (Spark, *Memento Mori* 153).

In addition, these novels develop cross-generational bonding and, more often than not, a younger or middle-aged character functions as a connector between the elder and the past. This relation forged through the act of listening and caring for one another gives way, as a result, to another characteristic in Reifungsroman novels: wisdom moments which allow the ageing self to find someone willing to preserve and care to listen to their life stories, as they find rewarding to initiate a journey to unearth the past where both listener and teller experience growth.

Some conflicting relationships that the self has to confront in the re-imagination of the past are to do with failures of communication with relatives, especially with their mothers, children or husbands. Motherhood is revisited, and especially the mother-daughter relationships. In this sense, Waxman utilises Nancy Chodorow's psychoanalytic feminism in exploring the ambivalent mother-daughter relationship, which often leaves

in the ageing self a painful memory of a failed loving relation with the mother. Thus, life review and wisdom moments help reduce the haunting memories of not having had the prototype of a loving and caring mother. As developed by Chodorow and others, as soon as a baby is born, whether it is a boy or a girl, the mother brings them up differently according to gender expectations. In this regard, the identification that occurs between the mother and the son is not the same as the one between the mother and the daughter. Mother and daughter interaction, on many occasions, contributes to inherit obsolete traditions and values which have an impact upon the “daughter’s ego boundaries” (Waxman 12) fulfilling cultural and social stereotypes, less defined in the case of the son. In these relations where the mother instils in the daughter the scaffolding of societal norms in order to fit and have a normal life, the daughter becomes imprisoned in biased ideas of motherhood, marriage and daily life performances. This mother-daughter conflict is illustrated in novels such as Doris Lessing’s *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* (1983), Pat Barker’s *Union Street* (1982) and *Liza’s England* (1986), which will be under analysis in this dissertation.

Indeed, the idea of motherhood is idealised in contradistinction to that of spinsterhood, often associated with women’s failure to find a partner and have a family. In many ways, marriage is envisioned as a life goal, when in reality the married status is not fit for every woman. Kate Bolick ponders that, “whom to marry, and when will it happen – these two questions define every woman’s existence, regardless of where she was raised or what religion she does or doesn’t practice” (1). Bolick questions to what extent people are being conditioned to quest for love before they really know if that is what is truly needed or desired. This situation becomes aggravated as women age and they are forced to picture themselves living alone and unhappily in their houses. The image of spinsters, indeed, has often been associated with ugliness, and that is just another

stereotype that needs to be confronted. Ageing spinsters are not a different kind of ageing women. But, unfortunately, “the single woman is nearly always considered an anomaly, an aberration from the social order” (Bolick 15), and even more so when they reach old age. In Bolick’s view, women have been imposed limited thinking about love. Thus, a girl “may grow up to love women instead of men, or to decide she simply doesn’t believe in marriage. No matter. These dual contingencies govern her until they’re answered, even if the answers are nobody and never” (2). In this sense, narrative of decline is privileged when girls learn that, if they do not find a husband or partner, they will end up being spinsters. Indeed, language is filled with expressions that reinforce this idea that, just in due time, love will appear, and the woman will live happily ever after.

In this line, Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis argues that in fiction women have been associated with the quest for love leaving other paths unexplored, as it is the quest for self-fulfillment, self-acceptance or wholeness. The attention that has been given to romantic attachment has caused dysfunctional approaches for many women. As Perrakis suggests, this is due to cultural and social impositions that perceive women as incomplete outside their role as caregivers, wives and mothers. In privileging later stages of the life course, contemporary women’s fiction “illuminat[es] a new kind of midlife and older woman’s adventure, one that is spiritual in nature, enabling new ways of being and becoming, but open-ended and capable of great variation in practice” (Perrakis, *Adventures of the Spirit* 1). Focusing on the spiritual side of middle-aged women, or in later life, this type of novel does not neglect the body necessarily, but it is not particularly in the forefront of the narrative, which is something that should be scrutinised.

As mentioned in chapter two, Erik Erikson’s theory of individual development enhances the importance of developing a dynamic and fluid attitude towards life challenges. This brings about consequences for the ageing self, as well. Indeed, “the

survivor's growing ability to accept both past selves and past evolutionary stages of civilization brings to the fore the profound new acceptance of self and others that can characterize this stage" (Perrakis, *Adventures of the Spirit* 3). In this regard, this reformulation of ageing in contemporary fiction delimits cultural and social visions towards the elder as new ageing identities emerge free from decay, loss, and grief.

3.4. Reifungsroman and Materiality

Ageing narratives need to be taken into consideration for many reasons, not only for the impact of social and cultural impositions on the individual but for the role played by the environment where the self evolves. Today, possessions and the dwellings are used as personal identifiers. Arguably, the self goes through different life stages in accordance with his/her relationship with objects. When a person ages, a deteriorating process runs in parallel to that person's environment. And, as I explored in chapter two, the house is used as a metaphor to reflect the self, and one's processes of deterioration; clearly, possessions stand out as anchors of the past.

Reifungsroman novels provide a valuable source of information about the physical environment of the ageing person. Mostly, it is through the eyes of an outsider who cares for the elder that people get to see the house from the inside, as well as the distribution of the elder's possessions in different areas of the house. As Johan Elsner and Roger Cardinal indicate, "it ought to be obvious that the objects that occupy our daily lives are in fact the objects of a passion, that of a personal possession, whose quotient of invested affect is in no way inferior to that of any other variety of human passion" (7). When novelists depict the ageing person surrounded by his/her cherished possessions, a material

recognition of the person's existence outside their physical body takes place. In fact, human beings are being carried away by a materialistic culture that promotes the need to cling to objects for comfort, shelter, and identity. As explored in chapter two, people engage in material accumulation early in their lives, but it is only at later stages where the use of objects functions as a faithful witness of personal biography. Therefore, according to Elsner and Cardinal, objects can be defined in terms of their initial function, a chair as decoration, an object for someone to sit down or as material reminder of a dear person.

As developed before, materiality has an important role in the portrayal of the ageing characters in *Reifungsroman*. In this sense, objects trigger self-development when the fragmented self is able to reconcile with the past and accept his/her new ageing identity. It should be remembered that, following Butler, life review is a natural process that most people engage in during their lifetime, and where the mirror functions as a mediator between past and present. In it, the material reflection of the person causes inner turmoil which is only resolved as the person begins to accept past decisions or unresolved conflicts.

Many people distribute heirlooms and cherished possessions in specific places of the house. Thus, our house becomes a point of connection with our past and our present. As the person walks through the house, cleans or simply looks for things in a drawer or a closet, retrospection is possible in finding an object which contains a personal story. This is what happens in Rose Tremain's *The Cupboard* (1981). The novel deals with the role of heirlooms and the bond characters establish with them. In a conversation between the Erica, an 87-year-old woman and Ralph, a journalist interested in her story, Erica confessed that "possessions are our weakness" (52) and that one is attached to them, even if they are useless. If Muriel Spark delved into the topic of death as one grows older, Tremain privileges belongings and material traces of our past as she believes that they

play an important role. In Tremain's fiction the relation between Erica and her cupboard is so intense that she even wishes to be buried inside it, which could be read as Erica's longing to be again inside her mother's womb, and her need for nurturance, finally found in cherished objects and possessions.

I have mentioned the importance of cross-generational bonding in Reifungsroman. In Tremain's novel, Ralph, represents the younger generation who helps establish links with the older, and in so doing, both gain maturity and development. Cross-generational bonding is fundamental as the elder is open to come to terms with life by being exposed to self-reflection in contact with an outsider. To undertake a process of life review, from childhood to later life, is a journey that few people do willingly, as it is normally the proximity of an elder, a close relative or a friend, that propels us to consider the fleeting nature of life. Only do time and the willingness to listen allow the forging of meaningful bonds. As the protagonist in Tremain's novel admits, "talking about my life is very tiring, Ralph. But it's been awfully helpful, dear. I've often thought, my life needs tidying out like sometimes I tidy the cupboard and find things in it I never knew I had. And you hadn't arrived, I never would have done this, because I can't bear to do anything today; I can't bear to be" (*The Cupboard* 231).

There are similar characters to "Ralph", the interviewer or, rather, the recipient of the story being told, in the Reifungsroman genre. Their presence allows the elder to speak about the past as they engage in meaningful conversations where the young and the old connect. These wisdom moments occur in various forms, through storytelling, but also through the ageing person's possessions, which provide valuable information about the self and its physical condition. What Krasner called as "environmental centralization" (215) involves the elder's need for care and help by the outsider, but is just considered a normal symptom of age for the elder, who strives to remain in their homes despite reduced

mobility or the lack of supplies that can provide comfort, such as central heating or electricity, among others. Impoverishment happens when an ageing person does not have the economic means to maintain a household anymore, and s/he needs care from the outside.

In this dissertation ageing has been considered alongside materiality in the fields of material consumption, psychology, environmental psychology, architecture, among many others. In the following chapters I will discuss ageing fiction where female characters in later life develop emotional attachment to their possessions. To do so, I will examine the main characteristics and traits of the Reifungsroman genre, delineated before, within the scope of material culture and material memory. Undoubtedly, objects are crucial in the formulation of new ageing identities. As explored before, the age of retirement is used as a moment of progress or decline in ageing fiction. Critics like Jungmeen E. Kim and Phyllis Moen have observed that retirement is often seen as a “transition that is accompanied by psychological distress or as a time of continued, or even enhanced, subjective well-being” (83), thus affecting relevant decisions. Thus, when writers deal with the topic of material attachment, they portray the ageing person as willing to get rid of personal belongings, or alternatively, to cling to them. In Jane Green’s *The Beach House* (2008), Nan is clearly in favour of embracing a new life that can provide her with more stability. Then, when she considers selling a house that has always been in the family, she states that “even though I love this house. It is more important I have people I love around me. I fully intend to buy a little house on the beach somewhere, a tiny cosy cottage that I will make just as much of a home as Windermere has been. A place to start afresh. A place that doesn’t hold the memories” (354).

The opposite attitude is to be found in Margaret Laurence’s *The Stone Angel* (1964), where Hagar Shipley refuses to abandon her home. Therefore, “what Hagar adds

is the sense of personal history represented by the objects which surround her. Her description of the possessions that remain to her accounts for the specific resonance of each one in terms which are not substitute for identity but external emblems of its reality” (King 104). All of these characteristics shed light on the important role of our material possessions and our homes in our lives.

In this line of thought, material memory provides a perspective on the elder that gives sense to the material extension of the self and the space, as well as one’s personal use of time and experience. As discussed in chapter two, the more the self occupies a concrete space, the more likely an emotional attachment will result of such interaction. The novelists under analysis in the following chapters refer to the process of personal attachment of the ageing self with their home and possessions. This important relation between the self and their physical environment has not attracted much critical attention until recently. To the best of my knowledge, the house and its possessions have been understood as elements of decoration which contribute to the idea of deterioration that surrounds the ageing self. However, and as developed in this dissertation, both person and object are intertwined in processes of identification where the person becomes dependent on the object. Indeed, there are multiple ways in which the ageing self forges an attachment to materiality within the domesticity of their homes. Then, narratives of ageing unfold such bonding and negotiate new political and social strategies for the elder and their meaningful places. In many ways, these novels demonstrate that old age should no longer be ignored but confronted, so, the reader, as happens with the fictional characters that populate the novels, and interact with ageing protagonists, is ready to recognise the ageist discourse, prevalent today. In addition, readers become aware of the inefficiency of political and social policies, in this study on British fiction, which fail to

give sustainable solutions to their ageing population and protect them in cases of social and financial vulnerability.

In the following chapters, I will attempt to shed light on the relation of ageing women with their possessions in a selection of novels written by Pat Barker, Doris Lessing, Barbara Pym, and Penelope Lively. I will take into consideration how some of the characteristics of the *Reifungsroman* feature in most of the novels, and how this fact favours the elder's journey of self-discovery, his/her process towards accepting one's past, and a recognition of his/her material self.

All in all, I will strive to provide a contextualisation of the ageing self in an attempt to offer alternative readings into this topic, usually associated with physical and emotional deterioration, as well as decline. Admittedly, this analysis is carried out having a particular corpus with selected texts. I am fully aware that the readings that I will discuss next are by no means applicable to other groups, and that they may not be representative of the diversity to be found in today's Britain.

4. Pat Barker: Home, Possessions and Cross-Generational Bonding

In this chapter I will analyse Pat Barker's novels *Union Street* (1982) and *The Century's Daughter* (1986), renamed *Liza's England* afterwards, from a perspective of the house and its possessions. I will focus on the impact of material culture on the life of the elder protagonists of both novels: Alice Bell in *Union Street*, and Liza Wright in *Liza's England*, respectively, and how the house functions as a container of the owner's sense of self, as well as an anchor of their past as I have considered in chapter two.

There is a strong relation between people and materiality. Drawing on the multiple factors that may favour a strong or low attachment to things and possessions, Shmuel Shamai indicated how place and things matter, as mentioned in chapter two. Furthermore, our houses are symbols of power, family values, and status that provide us with security and influence our nature as cultural beings, that helps us fit in our communities, our neighbourhoods, and society in general. Indeed, the notion of home is recurrent in this dissertation as a point of reference to the world, a container of experiences, both material and spiritual, especially in the case of women who are often compared with the house for their capacity to provide shelter, nurturance, and emotional care.

Born in Thornaby-on-Tees in 1943, Pat Barker's life has been influenced by the experiences of lower-class Northern women who were facing the slow de-industrialisation of England and the acute poverty and lack of employment at that time. As Karin Westman states, Barker's life is one of liberation from the limited possibilities she was offered. In fact, Barker was brought up in a dysfunctional family who relied in government subsidies to survive, and where most girls ended up being victims of early pregnancy and marriage; her decision to attend the local library and her passion for

reading were fundamental for her to build up a different future. Then, out of the pleasures of reading, she earned a “scholarship to the London School of Economics and Political Science, where she chose a major in international history, specialising in diplomatic history” (Westman 9). Thus, she was given a second chance outside the family setting to pursue a different path in life.

As she has confessed in many interviews, her passion for reading and writing was discovered early in life as she wrote her first unpublished novel at the age of 11, where her childhood experiences provided her raw material. However, it was not until she enrolled in a course conducted by Angela Carpenter in 1979 that she decided to send again the manuscript of *Union Street*, after having been already rejected by several publishing companies. So, after reading it, Carpenter recommended that Barker send the manuscript to Virago press, well-known for its support of women writers. Clearly, she appreciated the quality of Barker’s work, and Barker’s valuable literary testimony of her childhood memories and the stories of those strong women she met in Yorkshire. After this crucial moment, Barker “began to write about the subject matter her life had made available to her: the stories of poor women working to bring up their families and to make a living under difficult conditions” (Mosely 7). Therefore, in Pat Barker’s early career there is a proliferation of novels that address her childhood and collect the experiences of women she had heard of, or that she had met. Thus, she published *Union Street* in 1982, and then, *Blow Your House Down* came out in 1984, *The Century’s Daughter* in 1986, and *The Man Who Wasn’t There* two years later.

For many critics such as Monteith, Barker’s fiction can be split “into two distinct periods – 1982 to 1991 and 1991 to the present – reinforced by the belief that her attention to gender shifts dramatically from women to men in these periods” (2). Interestingly, some critics expressed their reservations about Barker’s approach to men since her

childhood experiences and adolescence are surrounded by women's struggles to survive emotional and physical deprivation. Furthermore, the author has been often typecast as a feminist, which Barker always thought that, to a certain extent, the label was reductive. According to Sharon Monteith,

There are several reasons why Barker has been claimed as a feminist writer, and, in her early work, the emphasis on sexual politics is a clear feminist marker. Barker critiques those social institutions that confine young lives and elicit false expectations – marriage and work as well as the ideology of family as the building block of civilized society. (22)

Consequently, “comments in several interviews suggest that Barker's turn towards men and war was direct response to critics' comments about her previous novels” (Monteith 15). Indeed, Barker's early work has not received as much public acclaim as the publication of her *Regeneration* Trilogy, consisting of *Regeneration* (1991), *The Eye in the Door* (1993), and *The Ghost Road* (1995). Not only has this trilogy attracted readers from all around the world, but also it has been translated into several languages, unlike her early novels. Barker's interests stem from her grandfather's and her stepfather's war experience, and this helps her recreate England at that time, proving an exquisite and refine ability to connect with the internal struggles of those who witnessed, participated or died during the war. The author has published other novels in the last decades going back to issues related to war and the feminist's standpoint of certain period of history in her latest novel *The Silence of the Girls* (2018).

In this analysis it is crucial to delve into the connection established between Pat Barker's Northern background in a low-class family and her fictional exploration of the realities she witnessed. In this sense, most of her early novels are set in Northern England and include themes such as poverty, unemployment, child rape, and social and political

lack of protection to the vulnerable, among others. Women are central to her work as she focuses on women's generational cycle of oppression, dealing with daughters, wives and mothers, as well as with later life. Most of these characters are involved in abusive relations with husbands that are physically and emotionally absent from their marriage and in their role as caregivers.

As Merritt Mosely posits, Barker's novels allow readers to know the conditions that most Northern low-class women suffered during post-industrialised England, and observe how "women [were] more likely to have jobs than the men, though their jobs [were] poorly paid, degrading work in cake factories or chicken processing plants, as cleaners of pubs or richer women's homes or as prostitutes. Life [was] grim and fairly hopeless" (7). In this regard, Barker has always been concerned with vulnerable and marginalised people, especially women's experiences of social discrimination in her early career. In this sense, novels such as *Blow Your House Down* are a good example of Barker's compromise to denounce women's vulnerability, male dominance in political and social structures. Later on, she turned to giving voice to elder women, in the following two novels, *Union Street* (1982) and *The Century's Daughter* (1986), under analysis in this chapter.

Following Monteith, the recreation of situations of conflict or violence in fiction is usually controversial since in the attempt to speak up against the discrimination of a particular sector of society, the effect produced might be the opposite. Thus,

When choosing to depict violence against women, there are a number of problems that any writer faces. Graphic descriptions of brutality may alienate the reader, especially when the perpetrator's point of view is also conveyed and the reader risks identifying with his anger or lust for power. Identifying with the victim is equally

unsettling when the reader is powerless to intervene but is positioned as witness or voyeurs: the horror of the scene may fascinate as well as appall. (Monteith 24)

In the case of Barker's early work, she perfectly blends social and political changes during the 1970s in England and their impact on the lives of the female characters. In novels such as *Blow Your House Down*, Barker's commitment to the vulnerable and marginalised is clear as she uses fiction in order to give voice to "working-class characters and prostitutes like Jean and Brenda are lifted out of objectification and speechlessness and given back the humanity that society more generally denies them" (Monteith 9).

Along with Barker's interest in Northern low-class women's issues from her community, the author includes other topics such as the failure to communicate among individuals, homosexuality, domestic violence, rape, and the absence of men in the lives of women across different life stages. As Sharon Monteith rightly notes, the masculine presence in Barker's early novels enhances the vision of "disempowered patriarchs" (17), although they are not "uniformly demonized" (17) and are often perceived as a hindrance for women's self-fulfillment.

In general terms, Barker, as well as the novelists under analysis in this dissertation, addresses the fictional representation of ageing women or processes of ageing where the relation between the elder and the physical environment and his/her possessions come to the fore. Pat Barker slowly introduces the topic of old age in her first novel *Union Street* (1982) as a way of recognising the impact of later life on the community she was born in. Furthermore, Barker's interest in ageing has been often associated with her relation with her grandmother and step-grandfather who brought her up and struggled to make a living. In many ways, old age is a topic that becomes more relevant as the person approaches later life, or when an individual witnesses the ageing process through a relative or a friend, which opens his/her eyes to social discrimination and inequalities imposed on the aged,

as proved in the following novels under analysis, *Union Street* and *The Century's Daughter*.

4.1. *Union Street* (1982)

Barker's first novel, *Union Street*, received many awards after its publication in 1982, and it was adapted into a film entitled *Stanley and Iris* in 1990. The novel is set in the early seventies and intertwines the lives of seven women in a linear sequence from early age to later life as if every chapter could be regarded as a separate novel itself. I have selected this novel as an important text in the introduction of old age and ageing in British fiction. The novel's last chapter is devoted to the life of the elderly Alice Bell and the relation that it is established between her house and possessions. Thus, Barker's novels could be considered the beginning of British writers' interest in exploring both the ageing self and their material context.

Barker's novel delves into the notion that women's reproductive role traps them into early pregnancy, marriage and relations where they end up being the victims of physical and emotional abuse. All characters live in Union Street, a fictional location that Barker uses in order to portray how social and political instability in England during the early 1970s affected the life of these Northern women. Sharon Monteith sustains that what Barker depicts in *Union Street* is a "community in transition, located between an industrial past and a post-industrial future" (5) where women are the protagonists of these changes, and are depicted as survivors of the quotidian.

The novel begins with the story of Kelly Brown in her transition to adolescence, and it ends up with the ageing Alice Bell who lives in a derelict house where she is assisted from time to time by Iris King. Barker shows the ways in which characters like Kelly

Brown or Alice Bell can be connected through their developing processes, from innocence to maturity. Every story in *Union Street* gives voice to many of the women Barker knew or heard about during her childhood. In this sense, *Union Street* can be considered a step forward in the inclusion of women's lives from a non-discriminatory perspective where different voices are heard at different stages of the life cycle. As Sarah Falcus posits, women's invisibility has been a constant problem in public discourses. Therefore, ageing fiction "offer[s] the perspective of the ageing subject, disturbing the ageist gaze by exploring its effects and insisting on the complex emotional lives of the ageing characters, making their invisibility visible" (Falcus 5). This visibility is supported by writers who, like Barker, challenge old conceptions of ageing and approach women's realities in a diverse way.

This analysis focuses on the relation between the ageing self with the house and possessions in the last chapter of *Union Street*, where Barker explores chronologically the lives of Kelly Brown, Joanne Wilson, Lisa Goddard, Muriel Scaife, Iris King, Blonde Dinah and Alice Bell, an elderly woman. As discussed in chapter two, Clare Cooper Marcus considers that more attention should be paid to the house, since people's relations with houses reveal a lot of information about the attachment between self and space in the lifespan, and thus, it will be fundamental in a better understanding of how ageing identities are constructed. Therefore, "from childhood to old age our relationship to the physical environment or home goes through subtle shifts and changes, mirroring shifts of attention from outer accomplishments to deeper inner concerns" (Marcus 85). In other words, there is a constant negotiation between individuals and their domestic environment, a dynamic place where the boundaries between subject-object are often blurred.

In the novel, Barker is concerned with the story of Alice Bell, as much as with the dereliction of British houses and neighborhoods during the post-war period, and the impact it had on the last remaining inhabitants. In this regard, John Brannigan argues that the concepts of “Home” and “Street” are represented in *Union Street* as metaphors of the internal reconstruction that British society was undergoing after the Second World War. In this destruction that allows change the young and the old share both past and present events of the past of Britain, and, in the case of the elder, they share the strong attachment that exists between the houses under dereliction and their personal and collective memories. In fact,

The working-class homes of Union Street are falling apart, literally and metaphorically. Windows are boarded up, or partially boarded where panes have been smashed. The floors and stairs contain treacherous holes and gaps that disrupt the function of the home as a sanctuary. Chimney backs are broken, allowing the smoke from neighbouring houses to pour in. (Brannigan 5)

Brannigan states that from the point of view of materiality and the role of the house, in the first story, the ideal notion of the house is demystified, mainly, because the young Kelly Brown’s “sense of homeliness is severely disrupted in the course of the story” (6). Then, the space evolves into a more nurturing place the moment she is victim of rape and the house becomes a space where she can heal her wounds, sheltered from the outside. Initially, the idea of home is weakened at the beginning of the novel through Kelly Brown’s sense of uprooting and an apparent difficulty to connect with a home where she misses an absent father and a mother who fails to fulfil her role as a caring figure. Although the house is relevant for all the characters in *Union Street*, the overwhelming presence of the house is particularly highlighted in the portrayal of Kelly Brown and Alice

Bell, where early on the emotional connection, forged with the dwelling, is frail and unstable, whereas in later life a more meaningful connection is established.

In the case of Alice Bell, the decline in cognitive and motor skills makes her eligible to be relocated so she faces with anxiety a forced move into a workhouse. The monthly visits of the social services are perceived as a nuisance for the character who, despite living under poor conditions and being unable to provide for basic needs, is depicted as an independent, strong-minded, woman. In this sense, old age in *Union Street* gives a real contextualisation of many elders' daily life, but it refuses to fall into a narrative of pessimism and defeat. Quite the contrary, the character of Alice Bell despite being “the oldest of the street's inhabitants, has battled to stay out of the workhouse and continues to fight to retain her independence, outside the nursing home for the elderly that occupies the spot where the workhouse once stood” (Monteith 19). This reluctance to abandon her place is commonly found among some elders who manifest a strong identification with their home and possessions. Indeed, it is still complex to comprehend “what is behind these profound feelings about house and home? (Marcus 1) so the person feels the need to remain in a familiar space despite her deterioration in health.

Alice herself confesses that her current house was not her ideal home when she moved in many years ago, but with time she began to establish a special connection: “she was a bit depressed. She was used to better. Her last house had had a bathroom and an indoor lavatory, with a little strip of green out the back. She'd had a bay window in the front room, too. You take these things for granted till you haven't got them. The descent to Union Street was bitter” (Barker 234).

Barker does not offer any reasons behind Alice's refusal to leave a house that is not only dirty, but that lacks the basics such as electric heating and hot water, for example. Poverty in the elderly population is a topic ripe for discussion in the political arena and it

remains clear that this exerts an influence upon contemporary writers' perception of poverty and the elder. *Union Street* denounces the situation of old people in Britain during the 1970s, especially, in the case of women, who at that time were suffering discrimination in terms of pension benefits. Furthermore, the novel is marked by war, more particularly, by post-war conditions, in which scarcity, poverty, and uncertainty were prevalent.

Barker's detailed description of such situations may be perceived as disturbing, as seen in the following extract, where Alice's poverty and scarcity receive full attention:

Her thighs were folds of creased skin, hanging from the bone. Yet besides her on the bed was a black handbag with £100 inside. She had saved it out of her social security money: the 'pancrack' as she contemptuously called it. What she got was barely adequate for heating and food. To save out of it, as she was determined to do, meant hunger and cold. Though she didn't usually feel hungry: she had been depriving herself of food too long for that. (Barker, *Union Street*, 232)

As in the case of Alice Bell, many elderly people struggle to pay their bills nowadays, since they have to reduce their expenses; when they cannot provide for their basic needs, they must set priorities and decide either eating or keeping themselves warm. Alice Bell shows a strong preference to retain her house, so she is concerned to pay the rent and save for her funeral, which reinforces the relevance of securing a place during one's lifetime and, also, a place to be buried and to remain after death. Then, at the end of the novel, the character knows that "the death grant would not bury her. Inflation had made her small insurance policy useless. And there had to be a proper funeral, paid for out of her own money. Her self-respect, her dignity as a human being, required it. And so she had to save. And starve" (Barker, *Union Street* 233). For Alice, food deprivation is less hurtful than losing her house, her possessions. Barker describes Alice Bell often lying in her bed,

not due to physical impairment, or health deterioration, but as “her solution to the price of coal” (Barker, *Union Street*, 232) where newspapers function sometimes as blankets as they help her warm up her ageing body: “whenever she moved newspapers stirred and rustled all around her. The bed was full of them. She had read somewhere that newspapers were as good as blankets, and the house was cold” (231). This is a patent example of extreme poverty of an ageing person who prefers to remain hungry and penniless, but with a house on her own.

Alice’s reasons not to move out are behind all explanation for some, but it has been suggested that the relation established between owner and dwelling with the years is somehow unique and it might not be always understood. According to Krasner, “scholars who study the home life of the elderly typically argue for the value of remaining in the home because of the comfort and support familiar surroundings and objects provide” (211), among other reasons. It is true that in the process of constant renegotiation between the self and the dwelling, there are changes that take place both at a physical and psychological level. Marcus argues that human beings are constantly adapting to changes, as happened after the Great Depression, new emerging behaviours appeared that went along with people’s obsession to “keep, store, and reuse things” (Marcus 84).

In the case of Alice Bell, Barker narrates how her desire to remain at home triggers a gradual process of disengagement from society. In fact, Alice undergoes two processes of personal isolation: firstly, she isolates herself physically by spending more and more time in her house, never walking around the neighbourhood or doing daily activities such as shopping; and secondly, she detaches from social interaction by cutting off relationships with members of the community, friends or family.

In addition, Barker gives some insights into the sense of disgust towards the bodily marks of an aching and ageing person. In fact, the house functions as a barrier to avoid

ageist behaviours towards them. Thus, Alice “was ashamed of her poverty, and of the changes that sickness and pain had wrought in her appearance. She hardly knew her own reflection in the glass. And to meet other people, to present to them this transformed, deformed self, was more than she could bear” (Barker 236). Among the consequences of a gradual withdrawal from society and the development of new domestic behaviours is *domocentrism* (Marcus 80), something that it is defined in chapter two as the person’s tendency to turn to their houses as replacement for social interaction with the outside world: “in other words, their dwelling and its contents have become such compelling psychological defences that they appear to interfere with interpersonal relations and with a deeper connection to a person’s transpersonal or spiritual self” (Marcus 81). The house becomes their centre, their haven and their rock, as in the case of Alice Bell who refuses to leave her house despite its precarious situation, and everything that exists outside her home is perceived as a threat to the stability it confers. Alice’s domocentrism can be read as a replacement for “interpersonal relations” (81), as the only contact that she has with the external world is through Iris King, her only visitor and the only person that is welcome in Alice Bell’s territory. Indeed, the house is often an obstacle between people who fail to accept life’s setbacks and who cling to their houses to avoid future emotional difficulties. Then, the spatial and emotional dynamics between self and house spurs a new understanding of the elder’s reluctance to abandon their places.

Alice is distrustful of the British social services that in *Union Street* appear as a threat, and a nuisance. Thus, the visits of social services every six months fail to provide help for Alice, but,

only strengthened her determination to preserve her independence at all costs. To hang on to her house, to save up for her funeral, and never, never to ask them for a penny more than she was forced. She wasn’t going to live in a pauper’s coffin, and

she would never, while she had breath in her body, let them talk her into the Workhouse. (*Union Street 233*)

This government spaces for the elder are seen as an imposed territory that forces the person to abandon the familiarity of the household, an important part of their identity. In this line, Sarah Falcus considers that “institutionalisation can encourage the erasure of subjectivity” (6) which is a recurrent fear in ageing fiction. In fact, Harold M. Proshansky, Abbe K. Fabian and Robert Kaminoff recognise that in the construction of one’s identity, place identity theories need to be taken into consideration. As mentioned previously, “place-identity as a cognitive sub-structure of self-identity consists of an endless variety of cognitions related to the past, present, and anticipated physical settings that define and circumscribe the day-to-day existence of the person” (Proshansky et al 62). With time, the elder do not manifest a capacity to engage in new activities, which might build up new memories or experiences. Consequently, they develop a contemplative attitude and an internal appreciation for the past, a territory unexplored as yet, and full of possibilities.

Lately, ageing policies have started to consider the emotional benefits of allowing the elder in their houses, but still, this arises many controversies over when and how the elder are kept in their houses or when relocation is necessary. As Janine L. Wiles, Annette Leibing, Nancy Guberman, MSW, Jeanne Reeve, and Ruth E. S. Allen state, “ageing in place” (357) has become a relevant issue when discussing the resources available for people whose age conditions impede a normal performance of their daily tasks: “the overarching message around ageing in place was that older people wanted to have choices about their living arrangements and access to services and amenities” (360). In fact, ageing in place seems to be an alternative to extreme cases of attachment and it reminds society and family members of the importance to embrace ageing as a convergence point

where multiple factors intersect, including physical environment since possessions appear as containers of the owner's identity.

In an attempt to comprehend this phenomenon in later life where possessions become important elements within the household, Maria Vittoria Giuliani develops the notion that possessions can trigger an “orientation towards the past” (137) and help the self to re-structure lived experience across time. Crucially, in chapter two I mentioned how objects connect the self with the past; to put it differently, objects are embedded with the story of their owners. Arjun Appadurai considers “objects [as] having a social life” (“The Politics of Value” 15). In this sense, objects come to life through the interaction between person and thing. This has led to the belief that “persons and things are not radically distinct categories, and that the transaction that surround things are invested with the properties of social relations” (“The Politics of Value” 15). Seen in this light, materiality has an active role in the way in which the individual goes through life stages, where objects support the narrative of the self, giving the person a sense of purpose and orientation in life.

Therefore, the longer people are in contact with their possessions or spend time in their houses, the stronger the emotional bonding will be. Thus, Giuliani also suggests that the house is not only a container of memories, but she supports the place attachment hypothesis which reinforces the belief of “home [as] an object that enables the inhabitants to express his or her individuality” (140). Furthermore, Giuliani considers that throughout our lives, certain patterns of behaviour towards our houses are developed, sometimes unknowingly. Thus, the self occupies a space and feelings of belonging and emotional attachment will be established between the self and the space, which hinders a separation of the two, also perceived as a threat or a diminishing of the self. Then, “the feeling of attachment can be related to a set of behaviors – aimed at preserving the presence, vicinity

and accessibility of the object, in our case, at maintaining the continuity of the experience with the home” (Giuliani 134). This idea goes along with Russell Belk’s notion of material possessions as an extension of the self, to the extent of reaching such strong attachment that the owner’s identity and the physical environment end up in what James Krasner refers as amalgamation. In Barker’s novel, Alice has lived in different places throughout her life, but her relationship with the last house is very close. In fact, Alice’s house “over the years it had become a refuge. Finally, almost an extension of her own body” (234). Furthermore, as Krasner posits, the way in which the space is arranged allows the memory to operate in such a way that distances among objects are learnt by heart, which facilitate the elder’s mobility in the house space.

In this line of thought, the house becomes a landscape of meaning where objects fulfil multiple functions. For example, objects function as reminders of the person’s former selves. In this sense, the mirror possesses a direct and visual impact on the ageing self who, unable to escape from the image reflected in the mirror, has to initiate a process of coming to terms with their ageing process. This element has been already explored in chapter three as one of the main traits to be found in Reifungsroman, mostly present in fiction about ageing. Thus, for Alice Bell, “inside herself, she was still sixteen. She had all the passion, all the silliness. Still there behind the grey hair and wrinkled skin. Now the dislocation between what the mirror showed and what she knew herself to be, was absolute” (Barker, *Union Street* 255). The revelation of the real appearance of the ageing body in the mirror in contradistinction with the ideal self that wanders in the confines of the past is often perceived with sadness. However, in Reifungsroman objects such as mirrors trigger in the ageing self a journey of growth in order to achieve self-acceptance and reconciliation with one’s past.

In the case of Alice Bell there is a strong disassociation between body and self, as the characters are constantly engaging in routines that defy their frail health. Body and mind are separated as Alice attempts to carry out her daily routines, refusing to accept the truth about her body, a shell that is slowly failing to respond to her commands. Thus, her coal routine begins to be a threat to her health:

She sat up. There was no coal in the bucket or not much. Not enough anyway. That meant a trip across the yard. Probably several trips: she couldn't carry much at a time. So much for bloody politics. No, it was no use – she couldn't go. She only had a nightie on and a dressing gown, and the air outside was freezing. She would just have to make the best of it. (Barker, *Union Street* 242)

In fact, one of the days she goes to pick up the coal, her body finally collapses, disobeying the strength and power of her mind. So, Alice falls over on her way to get the coal. The fall represents the failure to defeat decline, so this even triggers mixed feelings in the character where the pain is not only physical, but emotional, as she has failed to mitigate the ravages of time. The scene is devastating, as the reader witnesses how Alice Bell lies on the floor unable to stand up on her own, or to utter words asking for help. Thus, she is sure that no matter how hard she tried to call for help, it would be pointless: “she would never be able to make them hear. Even if she could manage to shout. She wasn't sure she could. Her tongue seemed to be very big inside her mouth” (Barker, *Union Street* 244). One of the greatest fears associated with ageing is the loss of one's physical independence which reduces the possibilities to remain independent, and in control of their lives. The loss of beauty and youth is nothing compared to the realisation that one is no longer able to do simply things as walking, cleaning or cooking.

After the fall, Alice's son tries to convince her to be transferred to a convalescent home, but this suggestion is refused, “fearing that if she once agreed to enter a Home of

any kind they would find some way of keeping her there, or else transfer her to another Home” (Barker 246). As mentioned previously, issues such as relocation are complex and the person feels that the ideal situation is always to remain in place where the familiarity of the house is preferable to the distress of an unfamiliar space. Refusing medical intervention or care by social services, Barker sets the ageing Alice in the most extreme level of attachment, or what Shmuel Shamai called “sacrifice for a place” (350), already explained in chapter two. This is the strongest sense of place attachment in which the elder is even willing to die in order to avoid relocation. As John Brannigan states, for Alice “home is equated fully with self-identity, so that she conceives the attempt by social services to remove her from her home as equivalent both with rape and death” (11). In fact, after the fall, and due to a later stroke that reduces Alice’s speech ability and benumbed her right side, Alice will consider committing suicide at the end of the novel.

Before putting an end to her life, Alice carries out a goodbye ritual where she acknowledges the importance of dear possessions. Thus, “she begins to wander around the house, opening and shutting drawers, caressing each battered object that had accompanied her through life. Everything was steeped in memory. The smell of mothballs from the drawers where she stored her bed linen. The crack in the fireplace where she had dropped the iron” (Parker 260). The moment the character lets her material extension go, all the objects of the house reveal their role. Thus, memories of the past begin to overflow as the character wanders around the house while she conducts her ritual. The past is brought alive on the final pages of the chapter and the past and the present become fused. Among the things she remembers are memories of places she has lived in, visited, the glimpse of a faraway youth and her time as a feminist activist, a moment in which Barker acknowledges the important work of ordinary women in the fight for gender equality. What Alice Bell is experiencing through the conscious interaction of objects embedded

with personal meaning is to engage into processes of life review, another element belonging to Reifungsroman that is present in *Union Street*.

As explored before, through life review the elder initiates a process of unearthing the past in order to amend past mistakes. In the case of Alice, her memory of the past as a feminist leads her to confess to herself that “she didn’t regret the meetings, or the marches. She’d done all that again” (Parker 242). But on the contrary, when reevaluating her relation with her mother she attempts to look at the past in order to understand their relationship, and why she was such an unresponsive figure: “I judged her too harshly. Now I look back I see things more her way. She was a hard woman but she had enough to make her hard. Eighteen kids” (251). In fact, life review almost always brings about the idea of the elder struggling to accept the past to then embrace their ageing identities.

Another important characteristic of the Reifungsroman, also to be found in *Union Street*, is the cross-generational relation between the elder character Alice Bell with Iris King, as the young and the old engage in meaningful conversations where both listen and share their experience. The introduction of younger characters in ageing fictions mainly functions as a supporter of life review processes as well, since the outsider becomes someone willing to listen to the ageing person who often engages in these processes alone. Then, Iris King “came in far oftener than she was officially supposed to do, even calling in late at night to make sure that all was well” (Barker 236) and in these conversations Alice narrates her past as Iris keeps her updated with all the external transformation Britain has undergone lately, so through Iris, “Alice [is] bonded into the street in a way she had never been before” (Barker 236). In many ways, Alice remains a solid trace of the past, a faithful remainder of what was like to live in a place where many houses, which now are scheduled for demolition, were the home of many people who have already died

Following Ricca Edmondson, during these conversations the teller and the listener become participants in *wisdom moments* that allow a self-transformation and self-growth in different directions: the elder comes to terms with the past and prepares for the limited time ahead; and the young confronts his/her own fears toward ageing and mortality. As Edmondson posits, “human ageing has repeatedly been associated with the development of wisdom, and that it has been regarded as an accretion of knowledge, tacit or explicit, about how to respond to other people, to oneself, and to profound problems of human existence” (Edmondson 339). However, the notion of wisdom is manifold, and it should not be bestowed to the elder for the fact of being old, but to those who have made the most of their time, be they young or old. Therefore, Iris has much to offer to Alice, and both learn a lot from these wisdom moments that take place within the intimacy of the household. As Iris witnesses Alice Bell’s processes of life review, both characters develop empathy towards one another. In fact, wisdom moments are used as an instrument of reconciliation, which provides a different perspective on what life is like. This process of reevaluation continues until the very day of Alice’s suicide, where the character still attempts to find comfort in the memory of her mother in order to let go the judgments of her childhood, and remembers her mother’s last words, forty years ago: “you always thought I didn’t care as much about you as I did the rest. But, you know, I did” (Barker 261). This final moment of reconciliation with a hurtful past is similar to the process of material dispossession the character undergoes, as she wanders around the house caressing every dear possession. Thus, the self at the end of the novel comes to terms with ageing by being disposed of the material and personal traumas accumulated in her life.

4.2. *The Century's Daughter* (1986)

In this section I will analyse Pat Barker's second novel *The Century's Daughter*, renamed *Liza's England* ten years later, where the writer continues her interest in women's experiences in later life. The novel delves into the life of the octogenarian Liza Wright and the social worker Stephen who, on her visits to convince her of the need to be relocated, will forge a meaningful relation with time. Moreover, Barker will further explore the role of the house and its possessions, four years after the publication of *Union Street*.

The novel follows up how the life of the octogenarian Liza Wright is being disrupted by the visit of Stephen, as she is the "sole remaining inhabitant of a street scheduled for demolition" (Barker 11). This novel bears similarities with the last chapter of *Union Street* devoted to the life of Alice Bell, since Liza Wright and Alice Bell have a significant relation with their home and possessions as they struggle to remain at their place despite the poor conditions of their dwelling. In this sense, John Brannigan argues that,

Both women serve to contrast the present, near-derelict condition of their streets, with memories of vibrant, persistent communities. Both women bear the scars of working-class labour and the struggle for survival against war, poverty, and loss, and both articulate a clearer sense of working-class community than appears to be available to their younger neighbors. (57)

As mentioned previously, the house is used as a metaphor of their owner where both are subjects and victims of the ravages of time. Barker's approach to the lives of lower-class Northern women brings up important questions about the elder that might raise age consciousness. As Gullette posits, fiction plays a fundamental part in the

reformulation of ageing identities, and to give visibility to their daily life struggles.

Thus,

if “blackness” has been changing in the white imagination (and the black), if “woman” is now changing in the male imagination (and the black), if “woman” is now changing in the male imagination (and the female), then “midlife aging,” and indeed “aging” altogether, can begin to change in the imaginations of all of us.

(Aged by Culture 78)

Along with Gullette, Sarah Falcus also makes clear that the main function of ageing fiction is not only to challenge cultural pessimism and the prevalent idea of decline associated with old age and the elder, but also to offer a common space for discussion where old conceptions about this topic can be defied. Therefore, the reader of these novels might begin to question whether they have unconsciously accepted that nothing good can come from later life except death and decline. However, there is still a predominant belief that these narratives are subjected to cultural pessimism. So, as Falcus states, “in these novels, ageing characters are clearly at the mercy of cultural constructions of aged bodies and identities...where they are treated as infirm, incapable and passive and, in many cases, read into silence” (3), something that is changing recently in fiction over the last decades.

In this sense, Barker’s representation of old age within the privacy of the house contributes to this reconstruction and re-exploration of ageing identities where the writer continues to explore, as in her previous novel, *Union Street*, the concept of ageing in place, a concept defined and discussed in detail in chapter two. Thus, Amanda Davies and Amity James consider that, “when referring to the concept defined, ageing is placed as a new approach to elderly housing, where older people remain in their homes as they grow old, rather than move into institutional care, is the preferred strategy of many

governments for socially, economically and physically supporting a healthy ageing population (James, 2009)” (111).

This notion of valuing the elder’s need to remain at home has been the result of years of research where fiction has had an important role in depicting the emotional intertwining that occurs between space and self’s identity. Therefore, the novel unfolds the relation that is forged between Stephen, a social worker, who is sent to the house of an elderly woman, Liza Wright, in order to convince her of the urgency to move to sheltered accommodation. Stephen will continue visiting Liza and a friendship will be established through the passing of time. At first, the interaction between the two characters tends to be cold and unsympathetic, which underlines the way in which social services sometimes regard old people as problems to be solved.

At the beginning of the novel, Stephen’s mission to convince Liza of the need for relocation fails, and only with time does he finally understand why someone would like to remain in a place as filthy and deteriorated as Liza’s house. As much as he tries to persuade her of the benefits to be relocated, Liza is determined to remain at her place at all costs. Stephen begins convincing Liza of “the advantages of centrally heated maisonettes” (Barker 3), but he fails to change Liza’s opinion:

Stephen pays special attention to the condition of the house and the neighborhood provides the reader with a detailed description of Liza’s situation. Thus, Stephen turned to look at the other houses in the row. All their windows were boarded up, but here and there he could see a board hanging loose, where somebody had succeeded in breaking in. Some of the houses were used by drunks, others by teenage gangs sniffing glue. He wondered whether Liza knew and hoped she didn’t. Surely to God they could get her out of here without having to frighten her. (7).

Stephen's concern about Liza's situation is based on reasons that go from her safety to her comfort, since the heating or other appliances do not function properly. In many ways, Stephen's descriptions of Liza's physical environment highlight how the house does not longer fulfil its role of shelter and protection, and he disregards the importance to age in a familiar context, "Stephen looked round the kitchen. It had been dark when he passed through it to get the coal, and he hadn't seen, then, how inadequate it was. One tap. Cold water, and when he turned it on there was such a juddering and shaking of ancient pipes that lumps of plaster fell off the wall and landed in the sink" (Barker 19).

As Clare Cooper Marcus suggests, those responsible for the policies that look for the relocation of the elder should continue exploring new alternatives to those elders who have a high attachment to their homes and refuse to abandon them, a pattern of behaviour that is not followed necessarily by every single ageing person, or with the same intensity, but mostly individuals develop a special bonding with their house and possessions. Arguably, it is interesting to question whether those in charge of housing policies do not "know that when you can't control what goes on in a space, when you don't feel responsible for the care and decorating of a space, you don't feel at home?" (Marcus 39). Indeed, houses allow owners to develop a sense of continuity, essential to find comfort and peace. As it has been developed in previous chapters, daily interaction with possessions and the continuous navigation of one's space create and reinforce the bonding between the person and the house. To a certain extent, the idea of owning one's space is not only based on cultural expectations, but it is also a reflection of people longing for internal stability. In this sense, the character of Stephen will gradually begin to acknowledge and appreciate Liza's emotional attachment to her environment,

something that is not based on comfort but on the emotional nurturance that the house signifies for the person.

This moment of appreciation appears as Liza and Stephen engage in meaningful conversations, where wisdom moments can take place, a characteristic of Reifungsroman genre that also features in *Union Street*, and that fosters self-growth in listener and teller. Following Ricca Edmondson,

an interesting approach to the notion of wisdom is found in the ego psychologist Erik Erikson whose developmental account of the life course pointed to three capacities: for integrating one's life experiences, for confidence in the value of one's own personality, and for accepting death as life's culmination while identifying with humankind as a whole. (334)

As mentioned in chapter two, Erikson is one of the first psychologists to advocate for human beings' capacity of growth and maturation throughout the life course. Then, in later life or in the final stage, according to Erikson's theory of development integrity versus despair, the ageing self is regarded as a subject able to initiate processes of self-growth and fulfillment. Therefore, these wisdom moments that are included in Reifungsroman illustrate how not only the young but also the old can benefit from active and meaningful conversations, and that at any point of time anyone can set off on a journey to self-discovery.

This Reifungsroman element was also integrated in the plot of *Union Street*, but the character of Iris King is more likely to be compared to a passive listener, so wisdom moments are not fully developed between Iris and Alice. However, in the case of Stephen, the reader can witness a turning point in the character of Stephen due to wisdom moments. In fact, despite the generation gap, he is willing to appreciate Liza's storytelling. Then, Stephen begins to visit Liza more frequently, and what it was initially

just another case to be resolved and filed, ends up in a friendship, as the third-person narrator emphasises: “telling the story of her birth had animated her: her cheeks had flushed to the same hectic colour as her shawl; and suddenly, in Stephen’s eyes, she ceased to be a case, a social problem, a stubborn, possibly senile old lady, and became instead what she had called herself: the century’s daughter” (Barker 6).

As mentioned above, the listener provides emotional support when those moments happen since the elder is often depicted in isolation engaging in a repetitive evocation of life events on their own, with no one to hold on to, someone who would indicate that their life narratives matter. In this sense, Liza finds in Stephen a good recipient of the story of her life, like an anchor to life after death. As Gary M. Kenyon expresses, “the process of storytelling and story listening take on a spiritual quality in the sense that our stories express what is meaningful (or meaningless) to us in life” (30), thus, in this act of truthful conversation where someone is passing on traditions and relinquishes cherished heirlooms, there must be a willingness of the receiver to appreciate both the story and the role of that object for family continuity. In this case, Barker does not take into consideration blood relations, and she establishes this connection between Liza and a stranger such as Stephen. Mark Rawlinson states that in *Liza’s England* a different kind of textual engagement is observed, as the action is developed through dialogue, whereas in novels such as *Union Street* or *Blow Your House Down* dialogue is seldom used. Indeed,

The significance of the interview as a means of provoking a plurality of narrative points of view should be evident. Most characteristically in Barker’s writing, it is a counterweight to the verbal and conceptual intelligence, and the pattern making, of the third-person narrator, a means of granting a degree of independence to the character’s world views. (46)

In addition, through wisdom moments and meaningful conversations there is another important element in Reifungsroman novels: life review. Indeed, life review processes, or processes of unearthing one's past in order to amend past mistakes, feature prominently in ageing narratives. As explored in chapter two, material objects can be considered powerful tools as they are a conduit to the past, but remembrances are also triggered when the ageing self finds someone willing to listen to his/her story. Time greatly influences the awareness of the proximity of death and the need to come to terms with one's past, so an outsider can become a mediator in this journey toward wholeness. Therefore, life review is an instrument that allows liberation and acceptance of one's past mistakes, but which can also lead to an excessive recapitulation of past events, leaving the person depleted and emotionally unable to live the present. In fact, the sense of being constantly looking at the past refrains the person from living new experiences.

When the elder's memory is at work, the past is thus remembered through the art of conversation in *Liza's England*. Both Liza and Stephen benefit from these conversations. In the case of Stephen, Liza's process of life review affects Stephen's own life as he begins to change his opinion about old people and learns to appreciate the ageing self and its physical context. Thus, a process of self-discovery and transformation takes place for Stephen, who begins to unearth his past looking for peace and reconciliation: for example, he pays more visits to his ill father, as if visiting Liza has encouraged him to become closer to his father:

The positive effect of their meetings was that the interminable, unspoken conversations stopped. For a few weeks at least. *God help me if he dies*, Stephen thought, *I'll never be able to shut him up again*. And then he caught his breath, because for the first time he'd been brought face to face with his father's probable death (102)

Stephen's process of life review is triggered by his own confrontation with mortality through his friendship with Liza. He is exposed to ageing and the idea of mortality and it makes him reevaluate how, despite his young age, Stephen already knows what is like not to fit in society, and to have an acute feeling of failure early in life. Thus, as Stephen begins to listen to Liza's story, he also starts feeling the need to tell her about his life, especially his father's illness, and issues such as death are discussed openly. So, as Liza states, "I don't know what they'll do with me. Put me on top of Frank, I expect. 'She laughed. 'See if we get on any better dead than we did living'" (168).

Interestingly, both Liza and Stephen are marginalised characters. On the one hand, Liza is invisible to a society that has turned their back to the elder, seeing them as burdens rather than as solid foundations of the history of their country. And on the other hand, Stephen suffers from a different kind of "invisibility", as his family rejects him for his sexual orientation and his job as a social worker. Along the same lines, Özyurt Mine Kiliç considers that "*Liza's England* offers scenes of failure in love and suggests that it is mainly the failure to communicate that causes this failure of love" (Kiliç 13). In the case of Liza, she feels she failed in her relationships with her mother, her husband, and her son, whom she lost during the war, which fills Liza's narrative with a deep sense of bitterness. Stephen's situation also has memories of a failed relation with his father, who has lung cancer and aggravates, even more, their superficial relation. The narrative voice describes father and son relation as "a pair of electric plugs that wouldn't fit into each other, until Margaret (Stephen's mother) came and sat between them" (Barker 40). Crucially, how through his interaction with an octogenarian like Liza, Stephen can reconsider his position in life from a perspective of growth and acceptance. In this sense, Liza's process of self-acceptance is oriented towards resolution, whereas Stephen is

oriented towards a past in order to find a new way to reconnect with his life and dear ones.

In this process of emotional connection between Stephen and Liza, what the house and its objects provide is essential. Indeed, many of the stories that Liza narrates are triggered by her interaction with her possessions, especially a metal box that she keeps under the bed that contains photographs, letters, children's hair, and birth certificates. These items have a narrative function in Liza's life and have the capacity to connect the person, in this case, Liza, with significant memories. Also, they function as keepers of the owner's biographical past. Furthermore, even though the elder might be bedridden, or have a severe health problem that makes the person unable to create new experiences, his/her past memories occupy most of the time: the person frequently engages in processes of reinterpretation of the past in an attempt to construct a personal narrative that better represents the self. Jan Baars considers that "what is important about our pasts will vary with the present situations and future prospects; in this sense, the past is never complete or transparent, but changes that are inherent in ageing also change the perception of the past" (151). In this sense, objects are the only elements of our life narrative that do not change, and connect us to people, places and important moments of our life.

To Liza, the box represents a matrilineal heritage as it belonged to Liza's grandmother who passed it on to Liza's mother and that now she holds dear. According to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, "the self of mature adults tends to be structured around networks of past and present relationships, which are often embodied in concrete objects, then depriving an older person of such objects might involve the destruction of his or her self" (102). From an outsider, a metal box is a useless object whose lid is filled with dirt. And that happens with many objects that are

stored in houses, since, if they have a function to evoke memories, it is extremely difficult for outsiders to ascertain, unless the person gives detailed information about the object. And this happens, because, as stated previously in chapter two, in terms of material culture, both the owner and the object need one another for value and recognition. This is illustrated in *Liza's England* when Liza's routine with an old box is narrated: Liza opens the box, touches and caresses it, and then places the box in a place under her control. Both the box and its content have a fundamental role in the character's connection with her past. In many of her daily interaction with the box, Liza admits that what is inside the box could be considered as “loads of rubbish” (Barker 8) that she constantly contemplates or manipulates, unable to throw it away. This emotional attachment to an object reinforces the bond between owners and objects, which becomes more intimate as time goes by. In a way, some objects leave the elder at the expense of a continuous journey, where “memories seem to perform a self-maintenance function for older respondent” (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 112).

Also, Annemarie Money states that objects enable people to remember instances of the past with a liveliness that memory alone is unable to reproduce. This act of remembrance facilitates the re-visitation of the past, and it also helps the ageing person gain a sense of control over the passing of time. As long as objects are preserved, the elder is certain that the connection with the past can be established. In this line, the elder tend to explain to visitors the story behind their objects, so if they keep on visiting, they would become finally acquainted with the object and its function in the remembering process. Then, Ferraro et al claim that “the most meaningful possessions are those that help the owner garner and/or strengthen self-identity and thus construct and symbolize the self” (2). It remains clear that the intertwining of the object and the self in such intimate ways secures both the narrative of the object and the person's life story.

In this line of thought, Stephen is that external visitor in whom Liza has deposited her trust. He knows the importance of the metal box for Liza as well of the most intimate details pertaining to Liza's past. This has strengthened Liza and Stephen's bonding, and it has helped to secure Liza's story after her death. Probably, it is death proximity that triggers in the elder the need to narrate their lives in ways in which the other person can feel that they were valuable, that somehow their life mattered. As mentioned before, Liza's son died during the Second World War, and her daughter Eileen lives too far away from her, so it is Stephen who has become Liza's emotional support, and the safekeeper of Liza's bedside stories.

In a way, this could be analysed as a process of "safe passage" (2), following Ekerdt et al, a process in which the person decides to distribute their cherished possessions before death occurs, or at least share their biographical component. This method involves selling, buying, giving away as gifts things that are valuable for us. This personal transaction is embedded with mixed feelings since it implies a sense of both physical and emotional loss. In the case of Stephen, he is not receiving Liza's possessions, but he will preserve most of the stories that make up Liza's material world. And, indeed, to fully understand someone, in this case elder's identity, material traces need to be taken into account since part of the self is projected onto the object, and both person and object develop their own narrative, so what it was before a meaningless inert object, it comes alive with time and experience. As mentioned in chapter two, Ian Woodward maintains that the way in which people refer to our possessions reflects how much of people's lives are embedded in the narrative of the object. He emphasises that "objects are polysemic" (Woodward 161) and part of their significance is dependent on an exclusive interaction of subject-object, and this can be interpreted from many perspectives. Therefore, we witnessed a strong attachment when in *Union Street* Alice

Bell refuses to leave her house, but more importantly when, before committing suicide, she initiates a farewell ritual, not to her dear ones, but to her house and dear objects. Thus, objects' polysemic nature is appreciated in their emotional and functional perspective.

At the end of *Liza's England*, Liza's metal box has called the attention of some burglars. Thinking that it might contain valuable possessions, they break into Liza's house. They are surprised to observe that inside the house there is nothing of great value, so they expect that perhaps she has kept all the money inside that box. However, as Brannigan concludes, "there are no material treasures in Liza's box, as the robbers who precipitate her death discover. Her only legacy is the story of her life, which Stephen repeatedly returns to hear and it is this scene of bedside storytelling that the magical transformation of death into life takes place" (59). In fact, the box, which lacks monetary value for the burglars, is for Liza her most precious possession. In this sense, after Liza's death, her daughter Eileen is disappointed to find out that Liza has accumulated things over the years that are valueless on the market. Eileen is unable to connect with the material legacy of her mother, disregarding the fact that possessions are an extension of our selves, following Russell Belk, and that it is the fear to forget memories that motivates an excessive accumulation of things that are not necessary for the process of life review or reminiscence. In this case, Eileen must decide what to do with her mother's material remains, and she decides to have most things sold since her mother's legacy is based on memory, and both the house and its content have no value on the market. Critics Carolyn Folkman Curasi, Linda L. Price and Eric J. Arnould consider that today people realise that it is necessary to give away their possessions before they die, and in so doing, their objects will be in good hands after they pass away. Most of Liza's possessions are "inalienable possessions" (Curasi et al, "Understanding" 372),

objects that, as in the case of Liza, have acquired the function of representing the owner. It has been discussed that “the possessions that are inherited from deceased family members are usually assigned a special, almost sacred status” (Curasi et al, “Understanding” 378), but Liza has failed to communicate to Eileen the importance of her material world, and now her house and possessions are regarded by Eileen as valueless object. In this line of thought, Stephen observes Eileen’s attitude of detachment towards her mother’s material possessions, and he realizes how Liza’s daughter’s only concern is to sell and dispose of most of her mother’s things. So, “her daughter wanted things sold, but you can’t sell stuff like this.’ She rested her hand briefly on the sideboard. ‘Nobody’ll have it. There’s no room for it in the new houses.’” (Barker, *Union Street* 278). Barker points out the importance of material things to bond family members and friends, and how if that connection has not been successfully made when the person was alive, death will hardly reestablish that missing connection through objects whose story has not been narrated. Significantly, Stephen keeps Liza’s parrot Nelson, and in this act, he acknowledges their meaningful friendship and endless conversations. So, at the end, when Stephen leaves Liza’s house for the last time, “he was carrying Nelson’s cage” (281).

As it can be expected, after Liza’s death, the house is finally demolished. Pat Barker comments on how young people witness the process “with no memories of the area to make them grieve for these few remaining streets” (Barker 282). To a certain extent, this event emphasises the gap between generations where the young and the old coexist within our society without considering the lack of understanding and empathy. When Liza’s house is demolished, the elder’s space in the neighbourhood, it somehow symbolises the ways in which whole communities of aged people will be replaced with younger generations’ new tastes and habits.

In conclusion, in Barker's novels, both Alice and Liza characters are haunted by an excessive dependence on their material self, which proves an inability to cope with the anxiety of separation from their material possessions. As James Krasner poses, "these literary examples dwell on the way environment imposes on the memories of elderly people" (224) and they give an insight into the daily life of people whose house has provided a bonding with the world. In *The Century's Daughter* Stephen perceives in the act of demolishing some derelict houses, how

most of the crowd were young, excited by the machine's power to destroy, with no memories of the area to make them grieve for these new remaining streets. But he noticed that women, middle-aged or elderly, who walked past on their way to the shops, looked at the machine once and then quickly away. (Barker 282)

Narratives such as the ones under analysis depict cross-generational relationships where the house and possessions play an important role, because there are multiple ways in which materiality affects the person throughout the lifespan, and especially later life. In addition, other aspects like material legacy are crucial, as well as meaningful conversations with the elder, which can ease their transition to death and help the ageing person feel that his/her dearest possessions will be taken care of and preserved. In Krasner's words, "the past, both gerontologist and literary authors argue, exists for us in material things" (227), and that is something that will continue to be explored in the following chapter in the analysis of Doris Lessing's *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, published some years later of *Union Street*.

5. Doris Lessing and Barbara Pym: Home, Materiality and Ageing

In this chapter I will discuss Doris Lessing's *The Diaries of Jane Somers* (1984), specifically *The Diary of a Good Neighbour*, and Barbara Pym's *Quartet in Autumn* (1977), from the point of view of physical and emotional deterioration in later life, to ascertain the ways in which the elder and the space (house, room) interact. Although Lessing's novel came out a few years after Pym's *Quartet in Autumn*, I have decided to focus on Lessing first because *The Diaries of Jane Somers* develops the same topics as Barker's *Union Street* but in a more extended way, so these novels, and authors, are linked up. In Pym's novel *Quartet in Autumn* (1977) the writer explores the impact of retirement on the life of four co-workers, with a special emphasis on two of them: Letty Crowe and Marcia Ivory. The turning point is their retirement day: and Pym deals with this topic extensively from a material perspective, which will give way to two different approaches to later life.

5.1. Doris Lessing's *The Diaries of Jane Somers* (1984)

Doris Lessing's *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* (1983), the first novel included in *The Diaries of Jane Somers* (1984), depicts an ageing protagonist, Maudie Fowler, her physical deterioration, and the ways in which her house is a mirror of Maudie's infirmed body. Lessing will expand on ideas already present in the final chapter of Barker's *Union Street*, such as the experience of later life from a woman's perspective within the context of the house and possessions, the relevance of post-war period and the importance of coming to terms with old age from social, political and cultural perspectives. However, Lessing centres on later life as the central topic

of the novel and the consequences of years of interaction between the ageing self with its material extension, as suggested by Russell Belk in chapter two. Furthermore, the writer also emphasises the importance of cross-generational bonding in order to construct emotional connectivity and confront ageist thinking. Clearly, Lessing's text belongs to Reifungsroman as it shows all the features previously described, with an emphasis on how both ageing bodies and material entities are intertwined.

Lessing has also manifested her interest in the elder as her literary production makes it patent, as well as her strong commitment for social and political and individual change. In a nutshell, Lessing advocates for the construction of literary spaces where the reader can reconsider how culture imposes on the self a set of patterns which shape the perception of the world, in this case about old age and ageing processes, from a negative and oppressing stance. Thus, her incursion into the territory of ageing literature has been key in the increasing visibility the ageing woman is gaining in different quarters. Notably, Lessing has depicted the ageing self, in *If the Old Could* (1984), *The Diary of a Good Neighbour's* follow-up novel where Lessing continues with the life of one of the protagonists, Janna Somers, as she is involved in middle-aged and unexpected romance, and in *Love, Again* (1995) where Sarah Durham has to come to terms with love, sex and desire in her mid-sixties. As Roberta Rubenstein posits,

Female aging in patriarchy may be understood as a time-advanced version of what Friedan termed "the problem that has no name." It is not yet clear whether contemporary feminist authors of fiction and theory have "named" the problem in ways that might enable women to imagine alternatives to culturally embedded negative scripts and to redirect our lives affirmatively during and beyond midlife. (3)

Therefore, as mentioned already in chapter three, Doris Lessing is, among other writers, an essential figure in the fictional representation of ageing, not only in the relation with the physical environment, but also in the process of giving voice to important concerns about women's ageing processes, and the social and cultural response to them.

The novelist was born in Persia in 1919, and soon she had to learn how to live in between cultures, which caused her feeling of uprooting early in her childhood. Her identity was built up in Africa and shaped by a British sense of elitism, something that did not represent her ideals of equality and unity many of her novels depict. In many ways, living in a British colony and being a white British girl opened her eyes to the need for political and social activism, so most of her work draws on Lessing's first-hand witness account of issues such as inequality of gender, race and class. This experience was fictionalised one way or another when in her literary production Lessing portrays individuals caught up in unjust situations and social conflicts.

After his second divorce, Lessing made the decision to move to London in 1949, which had a powerful impact on her life, family and work. This move contributed to her sense of fragmentation: the fact that she had been educated into British culture did not annihilate the acquisition of African cultural values as well, so she had to live with a feeling of being an outsider in both countries. In this sense, Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis states that, "in her early realistic novels Lessing presents individuals trying to relate themselves to a fragmented social reality, trying to find social and political ways of healing that fragmentation" (*Sufism, Jung and The Myth of Kore* 61), to search for ways to reconcile herself with society.

In addition, the city of London features prominently. Indeed, London would become Doris Lessing's permanent residence after leaving Africa, despite her

constant travels around the world and her childhood roots. In her non-fiction book *Going Home* (1957), she returns to the African landscapes, and the memories of her childhood. Undoubtedly, as Ruth Whittaker asserts, “Lessing may have returned home to try to recapture a sense of her childhood and of belonging. Nevertheless, hers is a colonial heritage, and carries with it the sense of not belonging” (18). London offers Lessing and her characters a complex setting full of diversity, history and tradition. As far as her production is concerned, Lessing’s literary career has been divided by some critics into three main periods that range from her interests in Communism (1944-1956), and the psychology of the individual in terms of unconscious and conscious mind (1956-1969), to her incursion into the Sufism that was explored in the “Canopus in Argos” sequence of science fiction. Other relevant publications are autobiographical essays, memoirs and two parts of her autobiography in two volumes *Under My Skin: Volume of My Autobiography, 1949-1994* and *Walking in the Shadow: Volume two of My Autobiography, 1949 to 1962*; among her non-fiction is *Prisons We Choose to Live inside* (1987). She wrote poetry collections such as *Fourteen Poems* (1959), plays, and cat tales such as *On Cats* (2002). Some of her most acclaimed novels are *The Grass Is Singing* (1950), *The Golden Notebook* (1962), and a five-novel sequence, a semi-autobiographical series, entitled *Children of Violence* (1952-1969), also known as the Martha Quest series. This series narrates the evolution of the female protagonist, Martha Quest, in the following novels: *Martha Quest* (1952), *A Proper Marriage* (1954), *A Ripple from the Storm* (1958), *Landlocked* (1965) and *The Four-Gated City* (1969).

Lessing has been labelled as a feminist writer, precisely when *The Golden Notebook* was published, but she refused labels and tags, as she did not like to be constrained by any ideology. It is true that women’s issues were predominant in her

novels. Nevertheless, Lessing understood that literature had a social function, and through writing, she pointed out social injustices, inequalities and gender disparities among other social and political concerns. Among them are old age and ageing since Lessing denounced the public discourse against ageing and the elder, which strengthened their invisibility and stigmatisation. Therefore, Lessing's approach to ageing advocates for a change at individual and collective levels. This is the context in which Lessing wrote *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, published under pseudonym. Lessing wanted to prove that in publishing companies the common practice was to turn down unknown writers' work, despite its quality. Thus, Lessing decided to send her manuscript on an unpopular topic off to her publisher, and it was rejected, which proved Lessing's point, among other things. Because of the topic under consideration, ageing and the inescapable fact of decline in later age, the manuscript did not attract interest at first, but eventually came out in a different publishing house.

As discussed before, women writers' approach to ageing stems either from their own exposure to ageist attitudes towards their own ageing bodies, or from being witnesses of the ageing process of family members, friends, or encounters with the elderly. In this sense, when asked about her interest in writing *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, Lessing mentioned that, "[she] was involved with old people for about seven or eight years, quite by chance. It was as simple as this: somebody stopped [her] in the street and asked if [she] could help them and suddenly [she] was involved in a great network of old people who were desperately lonely and so on" (Gray 84).

The Diary of a Good Neighbor, published in 1983, narrates, alternating first-person accounts, the relationship that emerges between the middle-aged Janna Somers and the ninety-year-old Maudie Fowler after one day they run into one another at the chemist's. From this casual encounter onwards, Janna decides to



befriend Maudie, and takes responsibility to visit her gradually and assists her on what she might need. Many critics have regarded Janna as Lessing's alter ego since both have been involved with old people spontaneously, highlighting a possible autobiographical component. However, as Lessing argued, Janna

had very different experience from [her] own... Janna was a person who had no experience of anything unpleasant at all [...] but you meet them all the time, younger people who have never had any experience of illness, unpleasantness, anything, and they're like creatures from a different planet. (Gray 95)

In Lessing's words there is a recognition that people obviate unpleasant realities, a particular acute feeling when the individual is young, healthy and fit, and s/he thinks that it is long before his/her body will be vulnerable or ill. This initial attitude of denial is prevalent in Western societies where the aged body is socially and culturally stigmatised, and where people usually show ageist behaviours in their daily lives, as explored in chapter three. Therefore, according to Amy J. C. Cuddy and Susan T. Fiske,

conscious or not, noticing age drives our interaction with others. Age seems to answer: How should I address them? What are their political views? What do they know about popular culture? Will they be competent? Socially aware? How slowly should I talk? How loudly? From an individual's perceived age, we infer social and cognitive competencies, political and religious beliefs, and physical abilities. These inferences guide how we behave and what information we seek, heed, and remember. (3)

At the beginning of the novel the character of Janna embodies the middle-aged group who have the fear of venturing into later life and who are terrified with the idea of losing their youth, beauty and potential. Thus, on the first pages of the novel Janna,

as a kind of everywoman, walks the streets with a self-imposed blindness towards the world of the elder. Through her, Lessing delves into the common lack of acceptance of human beings' ageing nature and undertakes a process, a journey, towards her acceptance of her "ageing shell" (Arias, "Moments of Ageing" 5). There are many elements of the Reifungsroman genre in *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, but the main aspect is the process of self-discovery and growth that both characters, Janna and Maudie, undergo after they begin to forge an emotional bond with one another. Moreover, Sherry Ann Chapman considers that Janna's emotional involvement with Maudie fuels a process of personal re-evaluation of her preconceived ideas about her ageist approach to life, and in doing so, a new age consciousness emerges.

The novel is set in London and it places Janna and Maudie on the same street: Janna appreciates Maudie's patent age symptoms in her appearance and movements, and she describes Maudie as a "tiny bent-over woman, with a nose nearly meeting her chin" (10). Maudie looks aged, her body is aged, and Janna's gaze has to adapt to Maudie's slow pace. Janna adapts and realises how "it was hard to walk so slowly. Usually I fly along, but did not know it till then" (Lessing, *The Diaries* 11). In fact, Janna begins to be aware of her self-imposed blindness towards the elder very soon in the novel. Thus, as she confesses, "before a few weeks ago, I did not see old people at all. My eyes were pulled towards, and I saw, the young, the attractive, the well-dressed and handsome. And now it is as if a transparency has been drawn across that former picture and there, all at once, are the old, the infirm (Lessing 20).

In this line of thought, the novel sets in motion a process of gradual transformation of two characters that, according to Virginia Tiger, find each other in two different moments of their lives. On the one hand, Janna still feels young to

continue her successful career as a fashion editor in the magazine she works in and considers herself young and attractive. However, she is in a crucial moment where she is beginning to distance herself from younger selves, and time, for her, acquires a different value. It should not be forgotten that, following Kathleen Woodward, people who are already in their middle age begin appreciating time differently. Indeed, the middle-age is often considered “as the stage when one’s worth has suddenly become shaky” (Woodward, *Ageing* 49), thus the individual is increasingly anxious about the visual signs of ageing and fears decline. In turn, Maudie, according to Virginia Tiger, is “frequently the depicted object of fear, derision, lampoon, hostility, ridicule and disgust” (3), a recurrent discourse of decline associated with the elderly, in which their physical appearance is felt unpleasant by the beholder, and a reminder of the ravages of time in later life.

As Sandra Lee Bartky observes, it is difficult to develop a positive approach to ageing when physical deterioration is often connected with loss, physical, emotional and spiritual. In this line, Lee Cuba considers that old age is taken,

[f]or the most part, as a series of losses. There is the loss of one’s social or professional networks; the loss if one lives long enough and if there is one, of a life’s companion; the loss, if one is unlucky, of mobility, or sight or hearing or the control of one’s sphincters; the loss of one’s home, if illness requires moving in with an adult child or else removal to a nursing home: inevitable, there is the loss of life in death. (Bartky 61)

Furthermore, in Bartky’s view, old age is a time where the self feels the fear of time more intensely, not only from a spiritual, physical and emotional perspective, but also from a material one. As stated before, material culture has a strong impact on the individual across the life cycle, especially during later life when the elder develops a

stronger attachment with the house and its possessions, considered an extension of the self (Belk). Then, as the person begins a slow process of decline, this change is reflected on the arrangement of possessions and cleanliness of the space inhabited. Possessions not only are elements of the past, but also indicators of the physical state of the owner, as well as the psychological state of the individual's mind. Some individuals are prone to certain behaviour patterns, like hoarding, as they “amount to an excessive faith in the power of material objects to convey memories. The challenge we all face cleaning out basements and attics is primarily one of being disarmed by materialized memory” (Krasner 221). This is perceived in the way things are arranged in the house.

The field of gerontology has taken heed of the dynamics that takes place in the house of the elder, and the intersections between memory and space, especially, in order to shed light on “how the home allows for the easy motion between past and present one experiences in thought” (209). Therefore, in novels such as *The Diaries of Jane Somers* the writer provides a fictional account of how elder people, such as Maudie, “are particularly sensitive to the dynamics of memory in domestic space, and who often struggle to remain in their homes” (210), thus producing a strong attachment.

For outsiders like Janna, the relation forged with the place is full of complexity and difficult to understand, since the bond is not established on the basis of comfort, decoration or location, but on other aspects like the owner's sense of continuity over time. Therefore, the first thing that occurs in the relation between Janna and Maudie is what Ruth Whittaker calls a process of “imaginative identification” (Whittaker 121) in which both characters resemble an imaginary mirror for each other. Thus, when Janna has access to Maudie's space, she cannot avoid comparing it to her own place,

and as she observes Maudie's physical decline so does Janna by examining her own journey to later life. Initially, Janna epitomises a belief in material things and their power to validate the self and represent the owner's status. Her position in fashion industry underlines her urgent need to be fashionable and up-to-date: "[she] thought of how all of us wrote about décor and furniture and colours – how taste changed, how we all threw things out and got bored with everything. And here was this kitchen, which if we printed a photograph of it would get us donations by return from readers" (12).

As opposed to Janna, Maudie's only concern is to remain at her out-of-date apartment where decoration is not as relevant as her senses of protection and comfort. Following Krasner, the elder maintains a special relationship with her domestic space, as s/he uses materiality as a way of bonding with life, thus assuring that part of his/her life story can be kept and will be durable through the preservation of cherished possessions. As seen already in chapter two, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halt state that "the self is a fragile construction of the mind" (22). Then, materiality is used as an anchor to guarantee the visibility and value of the self.

The emotional and psychological reasons that foster this attachment between Maudie and her space are scrutinised by Janna at the beginning of the novel. Not only is there no empathy or a sense of understanding, but she is completely taken aback by the state of her house: saturated rooms with all kinds of meaningless things, appliances that no longer function properly, and an unpleasant odour due to the lack of hygiene. Two realities seem to be exposed as she walks into Maudie's domestic space: on the one hand, hers is a derelict house, which should be either demolished or rebuilt; and on the other hand, Maudie is an owner whose irreversible decline shows that her basic needs are to be covered. Indeed, Maudie's living conditions are described in detail by



Janna, as a first-person narrator, and they are a common reality to some elders, victims of low-income pensions and condemned to situations of extreme poverty within their households. Thus, the house becomes an important ally to the self's process of adaptation to the difficulties of life in order to maintain its independence:

We walked along it to the 'kitchen'. I have never seen anything like it outside our Distress File, condemned houses and that sort of thing. It was an extension of the passage, with an old gas cooker, greasy, a cold-water tap wrapped around with old rags and dripping steadily. A rather nice old wood table that had crockery standing on it, all 'washed' but grimy. The walls stained and damp. The whole place smelled, it smelled awful... (Lessing, *The Diaries* 12).

Janna's description of Maudie's place gives materiality an unusual importance in the storyline as it recognises the narrative role of the house and its contents to provide meaningful information about the life of the owner and her health conditions. Thus, in order to get to know Maudie, Janna begins firstly to submerge into her material world to engage in fruitful communication with Maudie, a necessary step for those holding objects as elements of communication. Interestingly, the Spanish journalist Rosa Montero interviewed Doris Lessing and in that article she referred to Lessing's real living room, where the interview took place, since the material arrangement of the space offers clues to disclose private information about the owner:

La sala de su casa apenas sí tiene muebles: hay unas cuantas alfombras persas muy raídas y varios cojines viejos por los suelos, como en el piso de un hippy o de un okupa. En una esquina, una gran mesa de madera está cubierta por entero de libros y papeles; como no hay sillas a la vista, es de suponer que Doris lee de pie. El sofá en el que nos encontramos tiene las patas serradas, de manera que queda exageradamente bajo. No resulta el asiento más apropiado para una mujer

que está cumpliendo ahora 78 años, pero a la luchadora Doris Lessing parecen indignarle las trabas físicas de la edad, e insiste en sentarse en los suelos como si semejante gimnasia no le costara nada. Pero sí que le cuesta, por supuesto, aunque aún esté bastante ágil. Se apoya en la rodilla y gruñe: “Esto es la vejez, ¿se da cuenta? La vejez es esta dificultad para levantarse. (Montero 3)

Material possessions displayed among the house, both in fiction and in real life, reinforce the premise that, through our physical environment and the decoration and distribution of things around the house, the owner’s biography is reflected, as well as his/her current state of mind. In this sense, in Janna’s description of Maudie’s place it is evident how frail Maudie’s health is, and the difficulties that the character finds in performing her daily activities. As Krasner suggests, in later life there is a strong longing for independence where the self struggles to adapt to physical decline renegotiating the use of space which ends up in “the perils associated with environmental self-representation” (210) as in the case of Maudie Fowler.

Clearly, Maudie has always struggled to pay her rent, and live with dignity, under precarious conditions, which is manifested in the detailed description of Maudie’s house. As she remembers in one meaningful conversation with Janna, when she was a milliner’s girl to make a living, she made clear to her landlord back at that time that she would do anything in order to pay her rent. Then, when asked what she would do not to lose her apartment, she clearly knew that,

You leave that to me. When I stop paying, then you can throw me out. ‘And I have never not paid, not once. Though, I’ve gone without food. No, I learned that early. With your own place, you’ve got everything. Without it, you are a dog. You are nothing. Have you got your own place? – and when I said yes, she

said, nodding, fiercely, angrily, ‘that’s right, and you hold on to it, then nothing can touch you’ (Lessing, *The Diaries* 17).

In this sense, it can be appreciated how the strong attachment that Maudie has with its physical environment lies in her independence and that of having a place of your own. To validate her existence and presence, Maudie needs her house, her most precious possession, a valuable item, which will be more valuable as she approaches the last stage of the life course. Then, Maudie spends her life preserving this space, despite economic difficulties, which reinforces and increases her dependence and attachment. Everything in her life revolves around her house, and thus, Maudie embodies, what Shamai calls, “sacrifice for a place” (349), as developed in chapter two. Moreover, taking Krasner’s consideration of the “metaphors of navigation and amalgamation” (210) further, what is found in *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* is an example of a “full embodied self in the familiar environment of the home” (Krasner 210). That is to say, in the novel, Lessing portrays an elderly woman whose identity has become intertwined with her space in an intimate and irreversible way to the extent of refusing to leave her house either to be relocated in a better place with Janna, or to get into hospital due to worsening health.

When Maudie accepts Janna’s presence in her place, and befriends her, proving to have beneficial consequences for both. They learn to rely on each other and succeed in changing some of the prejudices they had. Therefore, Janna’s attitude towards Maudie alters over time not only in terms of old age and ageing, but also as regards Maudie’s engagement with her material surroundings. Then, Janna

sat down in the chair opposite hers and saw that the room, with the curtains drawn and the electric light, seemed quite cosy, not so dreadfully dirty and grim. But why do I go on about dirt like this? Why do we judge people like this? She

was no worse off for the grime and the dust, and even the smells. I decided not to notice, I could help it, not to keep judging her, which I was doing, by the sordidness. (Lessing, *The Diaries* 16-17)

As seen in the above-mentioned extract, there is a correlation between the elder's physical decline and spatial (dis)order, although the stress is on the preservation of possessions. Thus, what Janna is perceiving is the result of Maudie's gradual decline who has been neglecting her cleaning routines due to her ill health, her frailty or lack of motivation. In a way, Maudie develops what James Krasner calls "environmental centralisation" (215). According to Krasner, *The Diaries of Jane Somers* "portrays environmental centralization as the progression from motion to stasis and enclosure, with domestic space collapsing inward on its inhabitant" (215). In this sense, Lessing delves into how time affects the aged body and the way in which the body navigates and interacts within domestic space or how the individual manages the lack of personal hygiene. For example, when Janna is looking for Maudie's underclothes, it remains difficult for her to find clothing that is not dirty, torn or stained, so she

found at last a wool vest, and long wool drawers, and a rather nice pink silk petticoat, and then a woollen dress, blue, and a cardigan. They were clean, or nearly. I worked away in there, shivering with cold, and thinking of how I had loved myself all these last days, how much I do love myself, for being in control, on top: and thought that the nearest I could get to poor Maudie's helplessness was remembering what it had been like to be a child, hoping that you won't wet your pants before you get to the lavatory. (Lessing, *The Diaries* 50)

When the above happens, in some cases the individual will gradually stop using some areas of the house, and will initiate a process of withdrawal and isolation, making specific use of specific areas of the house, whereas others will remain unused.

Interestingly, Janna becomes aware that the signs of neglect in Maudie's space are not due to Maudie's lack of hygiene per se, but rather stem from a common and natural process of someone whose body is beginning to fail. Thus, empathy is activated, and Janna realises that what she is witnessing could happen to her under Maudie's same circumstances,

I am thinking of how Maudie Fowler one day could not trouble herself to clean out her front room, because there was so much junk in it, and then she felt it and left it; going in sometimes, thinking, well, it's not so bad. Meanwhile she was keeping the back room and the kitchen spotless... She wasn't feeling well, and didn't bother, one, twice— and then her room was not really cleaned, only the floor in the middle of the room sometimes, and she learned not to look around the edges or under the bed. Her kitchen was last. She scrubbed it and washed shelves, but then things began to slide. (Lessing, *The Diaries* 55)

It remains clear that Janna appreciates these changes for the better. Additionally, when describing most of the possessions cluttered around the house, through the process of unveiling Maudie's past, Janna is able to see how a past of scarcities has materialised in the present where the fear of losing control of one's space is based on past experience.

It has to be remembered that control through ownership is an important feeling for elderly people, especially in situations with a limited budget, and low pension as in the case of Maudie who has made a great effort to buy her possessions. Thus, having for Maudie has a different meaning as compared to someone whose social status is higher, since Maudie made sacrifices to retain her material identity in the world: "she sits in that old chair or hers, by the cold grate, and feels the heat leaking out of her. She has to get the fire made. Should she plug in the heater? But it takes so much

electricity, she is only just balancing her needs with her pension. She at last struggles up and plugs it in” (Lessing 120).

As Clare L. Twigger-Ross and David L. Uzzell argue, “the first principle of identity is the desire to maintain personal distinctiveness or uniqueness” (206) which can be interpreted as the person’s desire to reaffirm his/her presence in the world through the occupation of a determined space that over years of use will be transformed into a place of personal identification. In their view, the way in which people interact with places reinforces the need for individuals to feel distinctiveness and continuity. Then, through the identification with a location (village, town, city or abstract or concrete place) the individual feels himself/herself different from the rest, and the self has the opportunity to anchor his identity to a place through continuity and duration. In fact, as Twigger-Ross and Uzzell discuss, “places act as referents to past selves and actions and that for some people maintenance of a link with that place provides a sense of continuity to their identity” (207). In this regard, all of us might have a place of reference that provides the self with a source of identity and differentiation. Clearly, possessions are fundamental in satisfying this need for self-validation and differentiation.

The Diary of a Good Neighbour makes us think thoroughly to what extent individuals develop consumer patterns not based on need, but on mere accumulation. Maudie’s hoarding is patent: she is subject to the fear of not only losing certain possessions, but also of experiencing changes in her environment. Thus, disorder is not contemplated as such, but as the only way to keep what it is possessed. Along these lines, Rosellina Ferraro, Jennifer Edson Escalas and James R. Bettman analyse how on television shows such as *Clean House* “viewers may find it hard to understand why the owner dissolves into tears as seemingly useless items are sold at a yard sale or

thrown in the trash” (1). But for some people material things have become fundamental in their lives so the idea of having them helps them feel their lives under control and a sense of power over territory. In the case of Maudie, Janna’s curious look into Maudie’s private rooms and personal belongings keeps the reader closer to the character in her astonishment when observing the amount of junk that has been accumulated over the years:

The bed that has the good eiderdown, the wardrobe, the dressing table with little china trinkets, the good bookcase. But everywhere piles and heaps of – rubbish. I could not believe it, Newspapers dating back fifty years, crumbling away; awful scraps of material, stained and yellow, bits of lace, dirty handkerchiefs, shreds of ribbon – I’ve never seen anything like it. She had never thrown anything away, I think. In the drawers, disorder, and they were crammed with – but it would take pages to describe. (Lessing, *The Diaries* 50)

As James Krasner posits, in *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, there is a difference in the way in which the person engages in the act of having through collecting and accumulation. For Maudie, her material identity seems to be split into those objects which possess a narrative, a meaning, and those which lack such a thing. Indeed, as mentioned in chapter two, hoarding patterns take place when the person loses the ability to decide which objects are important or not, so patterns such as hoarding end up interfering in the meaning and placing of meaningful objects: “accumulations block our way through the door while also blocking the messages they may contain about their owner’s lives” (Krasner 216). In this regard, Janna finds Maudie’s life (and possessions) scattered all over the house, where evocative objects and worthless objects coexist in saturated and inhabited rooms that Maudie no longer visits. Environmental centralisation does not only retreat the self from an active navigation

of the house, but it also reduces the interaction of the self with significant possessions. In this sense, although the idea of having possessions under control within the household is attractive, following Rosellina Ferraro, Jennifer Edson Escalas, and James R. Bettman, real or imaginary loss might affect greatly the emotional stability of the self in the future, as in the case of Maudie who aims to keep all her things until she dies: “Therefore, the loss of these possessions is a threat to self-identity, Burris and Rempel (2004) that the loss of special possessions elicits strong negative reactions because special possessions are identity markers, and the loss of an identity marker is a symbolic form of death of self” (Ferraro et al 1).

In this sense, in *The Diary of a Good Neighbour*, the refusal of Maudie to abandon her place is also based on her refusal to abandon her material self, and to lose a part of her identity. Despite her difficulties to pay her rent, she starves herself to keep her place because she feels that, if she is relocated, her battle will be finally lost, and in a symbolic form she will have been defeated. So, the mere idea of leaving that house and its possessions cause her a profound distress, as if a life outside that environment would mean killing her material bond with the world and, as a consequence, losing her sense of self.

Possessions are polysemic in nature, as already discussed in chapter two, which allows the owner to forge meaningful relations through time and experience. An object can acquire a private meaning, and this “involves active processes in which meaning is ‘cultivated’ over time through repeated, often purposeful interactions with the object” (Richins 523). Furthermore, it is interesting to observe how objects not only connect the elder with his/her past, but also provide the story with the support of material evidence. Therefore, when Maudie is narrating her life to Janna, objects function as visual elements that help Janna picture Maudie in the past, but also connect

Janna to her own past in processes of life review. However, as Cynthia Port asserts,

although, when narrating her experiences, Maudie prefers to concentrate on discrete moments of happiness, most of her narratives end in loss and dispossession— her money is repeatedly stolen, her best-loved new dress is torn, her husband abandons her and later abducts their young son [...] despite her continuous experience of loss, Maudie retains a stubborn sense of what things are “worth,” which is one of the things Janna most admires in her. (9)

Then, Maudie’s attachment to her possessions has been reinforced by a past of struggles where most of the material and emotional things she longed for were snatched from her. In this sense, Maudie’s life story is embedded into the notion of dignity that comes from being able to keep all her possessions within her house. These processes of life review, as mentioned throughout this dissertation, and an important feature in Reifungsroman, are triggered by the immediacy of death or the awareness of limited time. However, materiality has a fundamental role in this process because through the physical encounter (by means of the sense of touch) with a meaningful object a memory can be evoked and the individual can travel back to a specific moment of the past. Indeed, the landscape of the house is determined by the owner’s decision to place objects in public or private settings, so the narrator controls the biography of the self and unveil it when needed. However, in cases of Maudie where hoarding is present, the difficulty of memory recall is evident and might hinder an orderly sequence of events. And this occurs because “memory depends upon the yoking of vision and movement; mental images linked to actually seen objects can be recalled by moving through, or imaging oneself moving through, the remembered spaces of the house” (Krasner 213). When hoarding appears, a saturation of space makes difficult the location of certain objects, so they become physically unavailable

for the owner, and only retrievable by the act of remembering.

As Janna and Maudie engage in active conversation, the imaginary identification, in Whittaker's view, is reinforced in both material and spiritual senses. In a certain way, Maudie's house and her body function as a reminder of the ravages of time, and the fleeting nature of life. In fact, as Janna admits, "once Maudie had been like me, perpetually washing herself, washing cups, plates, dusting, washing her hair" (Lessing 50), and once as well, Maudie's space was as neat and orderly as her own. Thus, the progressive decline of the ageing self in *The Diaries of Jane Somers* is portrayed as an element of growth and self-realisation through the cross-generational bonding that occurs between Maudie and Janna, another trait commonly found in Reifungsroman. Furthermore, there is a moment in the novel where the character of Janna experiences momentarily a setback in her health, as she suffers from lumbago. While being alone in her house without help, Janna realises how, for the first time, she has become dependent on others: "I have not been ill since the children's things, like measles. I have never been really ill. At the most a cold, a sore throat, and I never took any notice of those. What I was coming to terms with is that I have no friends. No one I can ring up and say, Please help, I need help" (Lessing, *The Diaries* 133).

Thus, after two weeks of feeling completely hopeless and with her mobility reduced, she establishes an imaginary identification with Maudie, which is repetitive over the course of the novel, from the moment she has undergone an experience somehow similar to Maudie's ageing process:

I was exactly like Maudie, exactly like all these old people, anxiously obsessively wondering, am I going to hold out, no, don't have a cup of tea, the nurse might not come, I might wet the bed... At the end of the two weeks, when at last I could dispense with bedpans (twice a day) and drag myself to the loo, I

knew that for two weeks I had experienced, but absolutely, their helplessness. I was saying to myself, like Maudie, Well, I never once wet the bed, that's something. (Lessing 136)

The house becomes the epicentre of these moments of mutual understanding, and the time spent together reinforces the reformulation of old age and ageing identities. During the novel, the moments they share nurture both characters towards a more empathetic approach to life and humanity. Then, Janna's temporary illness brings Janna and Maudie closer and reinforces the idea that physical and cognitive decline are not exclusive to old age but can occur at any age. In fact, as seen already in *Reifungsroman*, the novels that pertain to this genre delve into old age from a perspective of growth that allows the self to move towards wholeness. In this sense, Juliet Wigmore argues that, "the German-based term 'Reifungsroman' suggest a process towards full development, in contrast to the less positive connotations of examining women in 'old age', and approach which merely reflects numerical age and assumes certain stereotypical features of the protagonists" (123).

However, these processes should consider the role of the material environment of the ageing self as a context that allows for change and self-transformation. Edmund Sherman and Joan Dacher consider that, "the propensity of possessions to serve as reminiscencia and markers of personal history is demonstrated to be related to the late-life task of achieving ego-integrity" (71). Consequently, Janna and Maudie are in their respective processes towards ego-integrity, where to a greater or lesser extent they need to accept themselves. In effect, Laura Maria B. C. R. Mariano da Rocha and Newton Terra suggest that it is important to learn that our image in the present moment is "a dynamic concept: [that] it alters itself along the life course according to external and internal influences" (257). Then, the fear of ageing should be replaced with a more

open and dynamic perspective where changes are part of the process of venturing to different life stages.

Crucially, the unearthing of the past allows for growth and maturation since Maudie re-examines past conflicts in order to come to terms with life, whereas Janna does the same in order to amend future mistakes. Thus, everyone is enriched through these interactions within the privacy of the house and the help of objects embedded with biographical meaning. Interestingly, “objects allow a quick, instantaneous access to a significant experience” (Krasner, “Accumulated Lives” 214) and, more importantly, in life review processes where objects are involved through physical sensing or visual encounter,

We see our past suddenly illuminated as a dazzlingly bright image, rather than an extended story. Indeed, photographs – particularly of weddings or vacations– are often among the objects collected and displayed, along with china, trophies, and souvenirs; the home thus becomes a “total environment” of self-mirroring surfaces in which virtually every object serves to “stiffen” identity (Rubenstein 82). (Krasner “Mess and Memory” 46)

In this line of thought, the past is recollected through materiality in order to construct a coherent narrative of the self, but, due to spatial disarray, the moments of wisdom and processes of life review are subservient to the random encounter of objects, which make the retelling of the story messy, since objects are scattered around the house, as well as the memories embedded in them.

Among the many stories shared by Janna and Maudie within the intimacy of the house are those in which personal relationships play an important part, and here is another element present in *Reifungsroman*, already mentioned in chapter three: mother-daughter relationships, a pervasive topic in Lessing’s production as, for

example, in the following novels: *Children of Violence* (1952-1969) and *The Good Terrorist* (1985). For some critics, this topic derives from Lessing's own embattled relationship with her mother. Rosario Arias Doblás states how "la propia Lessing ha reconocido en más de una ocasión la relevancia de elementos autobiográficos en su narrativa" (*Madres e hijas* 91). Motherhood has been often idealised, and mother-daughter relations are rarely explored from the point of view of failure. Lessing questions these relations and she explores the consequences of a failed relationship between mother and daughter, as the daughter may bear the traces of traumas and emotional wounds that will haunt her over time. Arias points out the work of Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), as a fundamental text to explore mother-daughter relations, a conflict that in later stages of life is constantly revisited in an attempt to find peace and reconciliation. In this sense, according to Arias, in Lessing's novels there is a development of mother-daughter relationships: "de una representación completamente negativa de la figura de la madre se pasa a una progresiva reconciliación con dicha figura en textos de los años ochenta y noventa, aunque casi nunca aparece en relación positiva con una hija biológica, sino con una figura sustitutiva" (*Madres e hijas* 92).

In *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* these surrogate functions, Maudie as surrogate mother and Janna as surrogate daughter, allow them to explore the failure in their roles as daughters in the case of Janna, and as daughter and mother in the case of Maudie. Their friendship, therefore, evolves and becomes an intense bonding which seems to repair past mistakes and give a second opportunity for them to learn and achieve forgiveness. Thus, as Arias observes, "gracias a la relación que mantiene la protagonista con una extraña, una anciana que hace las funciones de madre sustitutiva y de hija, Janna consigue salir de la parálisis emocional que tenía y desarrolla

capacidades de empatía y de conexión con los demás” (*Madres e hijas* 203) which are important characteristics of Reifungsroman novels. Furthermore, in this line of thought, Lessing’s focus on old age is an important step forward to value the importance of healing and making right choices in life, so the ageing self can find in the past a source of love, confidence and reliability, and the middle-aged individual, a source of inspiration and learning. As Cynthia Port posits, the two of them benefit from this relation, since “after Maudie’s long history of exploitation and dispossession and Janna’s experience of emotional isolation, their intergenerational and interclass friendship fulfils a profound need for each of them” (1).

Besides the story of Maudie, the novel also approaches the life of other elderly women who Janna will get to know as she opens up to old age and the world of the elder. Constant references are made to the elderly in association with the house and possessions reinforcing the idea of “amalgamation” (210) suggested by most gerontologists and used by Krasner. In addition, there is a predominant idea in Lessing’s novel: it is possible to hold positive attitudes towards ageing so chronological age does not have to impose on the individual a sense of decline, as the person is able to overcome setbacks and recover. In this sense, in an interview Lessing refers to those who decide to be old, psychologically speaking, because “you know, it’s hard work getting old and all that, so I think that some people decide, 'Enough, I’m now going to be old and then I can sit around,' and they do it, but they don’t have to do it” (Gray 90). An example of this is illustrated in the story of Annie Reeves, who after being in hospital because of a bruised leg, and despite the fact that “they tell her she could walk again properly, she is on a walking frame and refuses. She is now a prisoner at the top of that house, with a commode that must be emptied, and Meals of Wheels, Home Help, a nurse” (152). As Lessing delves into Annie Reeves’s situation

while being in hospital, there is a correlation between the description of Maudie's apartment and that of Mrs Reeves whose hoarding behaviour is also present. This reinforces the exploration of old age in the novel from a physical and material perspective, projecting into the house arrangement a deteriorated identity as time passes. In this sense, when Janna, along with Vera Rogers, a person in charge of visiting and helping older people in the neighbourhood, enters Mrs Reeves's domestic space, Janna wonders "how are these hoards of rubbish seen by those who let them accumulate" (149).

In the process of cleaning and rearranging Mrs Reeves's house during her time in hospital, there is a recognition of the role in the biographical component of object, so after Janna has cleaned the house, she "filled plastic bags with this silent story, the detritus of half a lifetime, and took them to the municipal dump" (151). In doing this, the character feels that inside those plastic bags there is a part of Mrs Reeves's self. Thus, the act of throwing away Annie Reeves's possessions is compared to a material dispossession of the self. In effect, Ian Woodward indicates that,

it can be said that material objects in the home are crucially linked to human psychological development. In psychological terms, this idea is associated with the process of affordance (Gibson, 1986; Werner et al., 1985), where rather than just focusing on the physical capacity of objects, there are perceived according to human-generated meanings through process of appropriation, attachment and identity investment. (157)

As Janna's active involvement with the elder throughout the novel is intensified with time, she continues to visit other elderly women besides Maudie, so in these passages Lessing seems to make visible the current political and social measures to alleviate the situation of many elder people like Maudie. Interestingly, Janna is often asked if her

relation with Maudie is paid by the government. In fact, the novel was entitled *The Diary of a Good Neighbour*, probably typecasting Janna's generous and open interaction with old people as a recognition of the British figure of the Good Neighbour, Meals on Wheels and home help. As Cynthia Port explains,

During the early 1980s, when Lessing was writing *The Diary of a Good Neighbour*, the combination of a major recession, the Thatcher administration's cutbacks in social services, and widespread unemployment, along with anxieties about increasing life spans and lower birth rates, created a sense of impending crisis in Britain about the financial burden of the old on the resources of the young. (2)

However, Lessing reformulates this stance towards the elderly by exploring the multiple ways in which society can profit from them by listening and valuing their presence, and denouncing how discrimination should be avoided to bridge the gap between generations and the anxieties towards human beings' ageing nature. Furthermore, as Port further discusses, the new economic theories have contributed to spread a negative consideration of the old as a threat to the future of pensions without taking into consideration how life is a cycle where everyone will become old. Furthermore, in the novel there is a constant "attempt to determine what things and people are worth" (Port 9) which posits how material values have replaced the interaction among individuals. Traditionally, the elder are considered as invisible, superfluous, contributing nothing in the last stage of their life course, as they have already fulfilled their objectives.

Because of her illness, Maudie has to leave her material identity behind, and is moved to the hospital where Janna awaits her death. The funeral, as happened in Barker's *Union Street* and *Liza's England* (1986), is a great concern for the old whose

low pensions torment them, as they fear not to be able to be buried properly. Thus, “Maudie paid weekly for many years into a Funeral Benefit. In hard times she went without food to keep up the payments” (259) which is similar to the situation described by Pat Barker, where the elder struggles to live and die with dignity and, therefore, be able to afford a place to remain.

In conclusion, in *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, specifically, in *The Diary of a Good Neighbour*, Lessing gives visibility to the world of the elder and explores their daily life interaction and routines with the household. Through the relation between Janna and Maudie, Lessing succeeds in providing an in-depth analysis of Maudie’s material and spiritual sides, who, along the years, has learnt to cling to possessions as a survival strategy. As seen in the novel, the house remains, according to Carole Després and Sébastien Lord, “a witness to important steps in the family cycle, to memorable events, to economic sacrifices, and physical efforts to maintain and improve it” (331), especially in lower classes, where the difficulties to get by prevail throughout all the lifespan. Furthermore, Lessing addresses issues related with navigation and identification of the self with the physical environment, which is a great concern for those who are already in later life, or close to it, mainly because, “growing older often means a reduction in the scale of the environment used outside the house. Obstacles (physical, climatic, and psychological) between the house and urban places beyond its threshold” (Després and Lord 332) tend to be regarded as a hindrance, so as in the case of Maudie Fowler, this develops environmental centralisation.

When *The Diaries of Jane Somers* was written, Lessing was concerned with topical issues multiple issues related to the current situation of that time, suggesting the growing sense of ageism in Western cultures. Therefore, as Mike Hepworth posits, “old age has been described as the ultimate challenge for the novelist because it is

about people who are living through the final period of their lives; a time when those who live long enough have to come to terms with changes in their bodies and the attitudes of society to growing older” (3). For these reasons, it could be posited that Doris Lessing’s approach to the world of the elder is one in which she expresses the need for our society to change and embrace ageing realities. Also, Lessing inspires the reader to develop a more empathetic attitude to issues related to later life, namely how to understand the elder in their physical context. Thus, the novel makes us wonder if social services are sufficient to achieve this aim as society, as a whole, should be concerned with engaging truly with the elder and listening to them; thinking about their houses and possessions, and, eventually, beginning to value who they are in physical and material terms.

At the end, Janna recalls a final anecdote, recounted by Maudie, in which she mentions how one day she found “half-crown on the payment” (260) on the floor after having begged God to help her in such a critical situation where she had nothing to eat. After buying some food “there was sixpence over. On her way home she went into the church and put the sixpence in the box, and said to God, You’ve helped me, and now I’ll help You” (261). Thus, in the end, society should give back what older generations have done through years of labour and active engagement in the maintenance and sustainability of our culture by being doctors, teachers, electricians, or housewives, among other professions.

5.2. Barbara Pym’s *Quartet in Autumn* (1977)

In this section I analyse Barbara Pym’s novel *Quartet in Autumn* (1977) where the writer explores the impact of retirement on the life of four co-workers, especially, the

characters of Letty Crowe and Marcia Ivory. The writer delves into the moment before and after this major event in life where the self has to readapt to his/her new condition in society. From a material perspective, both Letty and Marcia have two different relations to their homes and possessions, which reinforce the idea of material possessions as connectors or barriers with the outside.

Born in Oswestry, Shropshire, England, in 1913, Barbara Mary Campton Pym was the youngest of two daughters. Pym was influenced by her family devotion to church life. Ellen M. Tsagaris states that Pym's mother was an "assistant organist at her church and much of her family's social life centred around the church calendar. Clergy were frequent guests in the Pym home, just as they are in Pym's novels" (2). The family was well connected to people who provided both Pym and her sister access to a complementary education on issues which were relevant at the time. Her passion for writing is manifested early in life. As Deborah Donato asserts, "Pym began her first attempt to write a novel when she was sixteen with the unpublished *Young Men in Fancy Dress*, a young effort inspired by her enthusiasm for Aldous Huxley's *Crome Yellow*" (12). Also, Pym had a deep admiration for the work of well-known writers such as Jane Austen, the Brontës, T. S. Eliot, or Aldous Huxley, among others.

After World War II, Pym worked as a censor, and travelled to Naples to join the Women's Royal Naval Service. In 1946 she finally began to work at the International African Institute where she undertook a job as an editorial secretary and, when it was required, assistant editor until her retirement in 1974. According to Pym, the work environment stimulated her creativity and she "wrote six of her 12 novels during the 1950s, the most productive period of her literary career" (Raz 1).

Some of the novels were *Some Tame Gazelle* (1950), *Excellent Women* (1952), *Jane and Prudence* (1953), *Less than Angels* (1955), *A Glass of Blessings* (1958) and

No Fond Return of Love (1961). During her literary career, Pym's first six novels were published by Jonathan Cape. However, despite the fact that her first novels were published "modestly successful, generally receiving positive reviews and affording Cape small financial returns" (Donato 14), the author's literary career was in a standby many years after her novel *An Unsuitable Attachment* was turned down for publication in 1963. Pym's relationship with Jonathan Cape Company had always been in good terms, so, she never expected that the company would consider her novel "out of step with the racier literary climate of the sixties" (14). This initial rejection did not discourage her and she continued rewriting *An Unsuitable Attachment* and sent it to other publishing companies until it could be ready for publication. Although all her attempts had been unfruitful for sixteen years, her disillusionment was only temporary, since Pym proved that her passion for writing was greater than the obstacles to overcome, as she never stopped writing.

During this long period of literary stagnation, Pym wrote two more novels: *Quartet in Autumn* (1977), the novel under analysis in this section; and *The Sweet Dove Died* (1978), all with the same luck. As Dale Salwak states, Pym "fought a constant battle with despair over the failure of her writing-career, doing her best, with her sister's encouragement, to remain cheerful and useful" (5). She was so determined not to quit her passion for writing that Pym even used the name of Tom Crampton to see if her work would be considered differently with a male identity. Many ideas might have crossed her mind; did her work lack the interest of her previous novels or simply was it that she had lost her ability to engage with the reading public? As Gilbert Phelps ponders, it is difficult to ascertain whether a novelist would have a prolific career over the years or, as in the case of Barbara Pym or other novelists, would undergo a process of literary stagnation. There is always a mystery in the "ups and downs of a writer's

life, wondering what exactly it was that attracted even the most discriminating readers to some books and not to other equally good in our view: and why praise from the critics seems so often to have little effect” (Phelps 35). Few writers could have had Pym’s personal determination to overcome the negative circumstances that surrounded both her literary and personal life.

As Phelps posits, Pym suffered a minor stroke that caused her momentary dyslexia, and that affected the motor skills that allowed her to write. However, once again, she proved to be an optimistic person and despite this physical impairment “she was already making ferocious efforts to overcome her disability, sitting up in bed with a book in her hand” (36). In addition to this, Barbara Pym had been already diagnosed breast cancer and had to undergo major surgery so the doctors practised a mastectomy and removed one of her breasts. This traumatic experience is portrayed in her novel *Quartet in Autumn* through the character of Marcia Ivory.¹

There are many elements based upon Pym’s life, reflected in her narrative. The novelist never married, as many of her female characters, and at the age of sixty-four found herself living alone with her sister in a country village. She had a strong bonding with church life and that is a relevant topic in her novels where characters are often depicted attending church events. In fact, Dale Salwak argues that Pym seems to make a clear distinction between “those who do and those who do not attend their parish church” (61). In this sense, Pym’s novels were a secure place to those readers who found pleasure in ordinary life issues, where nothing relevant occurs; despite this, the plot attracts the reader who finds resemblances between plot events and his/her life.

Annette Weld considers that Pym’s

¹ Throughout *Quartet in Autumn* it is “common knowledge that Marcia had recently had a serious operation. She was not a whole woman, some vital part of her had been taken away, though whether womb or breast was not generally known” (8-9) which can be linked to Barbara Pym’s own process of coming to terms with her new body, as the novelist refers to Marcia having a breast removed and no longer being whole.

work has admitted limitations: there are no successful intimate relationships or compelling sexual attractions between men and women, indeed no strong or sensitive men; her women are seldom wives and almost never mothers, denying the work of marital or maternal perspective; the comforts of satisfying work or of religious faith are negligible; and there is little evidence of contemporary or political issues. (203)

Taking into consideration the limitations that Weld enumerates, it is not striking that Barbara Pym's last novels were not to the taste of publishing companies at that time. Furthermore, as Penelope Lively posits, "none of the books gives itself up on first reading: it is on the second, third and subsequent visits that some verbal felicity becomes apparent, that a sequence of events falls into a pattern" (46) which sets up a first barrier to readers who are not accustomed to such literary style. However, a point of inflection takes place when Philip Larkin and Lord David Cecil published a list of "the most underrated writers of the twentieth century" (Salwak ix), which contributed to direct the readership's attention to the work of Barbara Pym. Thanks to this, society and the wide public in general began to demand more novels, and it was finally recognised that, as a novelist, Barbara Pym had not yet received enough attention, and that she deserved to be placed among the main figures of British contemporary fiction. After this, Barbara Pym's life underwent a substantial change; accustomed to live a peaceful life after her retirement, suddenly, she became the subject of public interest, and as a result, "with the attention that recognition provoked, publication resumed, [and] *Quartet in Autumn* was accepted by Macmillan" (Donato 14). After this, other two novels were finally published, *The Sweet Dove Died* (1987) and *A Few Green Leaves* (1980), soon after the author died of cancer.

The novel, *Quartet in Autumn*, explores the life of four co-workers (Norman, Edwin, Letty, and Marcia) the months prior to retirement taking into consideration their solitary lives. None of them knows what kind of life they have outside the office, as they hardly discuss issues concerning their private life; for example, Marcia and Letty “did not speak of or break into gossip about the two men, who were accepted as part of the office furniture and not considered worthy comment unless they did something surprisingly out of character” (9). In this sense, Marcia Ivory and Letty Crowe are the first characters to retire and, according to Barbara Frey Waxman, “the omniscient narrator lets the reader see intimately, through frequent interior monologues, how two single women, Letty Crowe and Marcia Ivory, deal emotionally and physically with retirement” (105). Their reactions towards this event are totally different in terms of attitude and relation with their dwelling place and possessions. These differing attitudes would constitute, following Margaret Morganroth Gullette, progress narratives in the case of Letty, and decline narratives in the case of Marcia, as I will analyse.

After the publication, the novel was soon awarded one of the most prestigious literary recognitions in Britain, the Booker Prize in 1977. Salwak discusses that *Quartet in Autumn*, in comparison with other novels, is “distinct from the rest and perhaps the finest achievement. More sombre than the others but with all their wit and accuracy; sadder, but shot with the same braveries, the same triumphs of humour over meanness and egotism” (49). Then, Pym is able to connect with the reader by introducing the idea of retirement as the major event in the lives of the characters of the novel.

From the beginning of the novel the writer emphasises how the four characters, despite having been working together for many years, have been unable to connect

emotionally with one another, and they keep their personal affairs privately during working hours. *Quartet in Autumn* is filled with the domesticity of daily life and it gives insights into the gradual process of social and personal withdrawal of the protagonists. Indeed, Pym has been often regarded as a writer whose characters tend to be described attending social gatherings or in the ritual of preparing and enjoying meals. However, as Ellen M. Tsagaris argues, the novel lacks this element of social connectedness; when the writer describes these moments of social interaction, it is in order to reinforce the characters' self-imposed social and personal exclusion. Much of this isolation is emphasised through the exploration of the characters' process of coming to terms with retirement and the consequences it will have in their lives. In this line, Frank T. Denton and Byron G. Spencer consider that the concept of retirement is "fluid, no doubt shifting over time as social conditions and individual expectations evolve" (64), and even though Pym does not explore in depth British social and political idea of retirement during the 1970s, the writer delves into the idea of retirement as a cultural construction imposed on the individual. Thus, as mentioned in the novel, "the idea of retirement was as serious business, to be regarded with respect, though the idea of it was incomprehensible to most of the staff" (100). In this sense, the novel makes a strong emphasis on the internal struggles of the four characters to figure out their roles after the official day of their retirement. In the case of both Letty and Marcia "their status as ageing unskilled women did not entitle them to an evening party, but it was felt that a lunchtime gathering, leading only to more than usual drowsiness in the afternoon, would be entirely appropriate" (100).

Age is regarded as a reasonable indicator of someone's time to retire, and Pym focuses on how with the passing of time and at the edge of retirement both Marcia and Letty feel that they are no longer valuable for society, or that their role is not



appreciated, as in the speech of the deputy, “who had been commanded to make the presentation speech, [but] wasn’t quite sure what it was that Miss Crowe and Miss Ivory did or had done during their working life” (101). This is commonly shared by many people who feel that they can be easily replaced by other people once they are retired.

As Mark R. Luborsky posits, there is a “profound transformations of public and personal identities (that) occur at the onset of retirement life” (411). In this moment, it is essential that the person adjusts to this change and develops “the quality of being fluid and able to be reshaped” (412), especially in later life when little is expected from the self but house-oriented activities or leisure ones. Thus, despite the fact that free time liberates the self from social and cultural constraints, there are multiple negative connotations associated with this transition into later life as they are suddenly transformed from being active members to passive ones. As posited by Denton and Spencer, “the problem that underlies the concept of retirement is the essentially negative notion of attempting to define what people are not doing—namely, that they are not working” (74) and this contributes to the perception of this event as a forced disengagement from public life.

In many ways, the passing of time is fiercely imposed on the individual, who after a specific age is regarded as an old person with all that it means socially and culturally speaking. In fact, the day of Letty and Marcia’s official retirement they are disappointed to realise that nothing has really changed in their lives after their little lunch party at work, only their condition as ageing citizens. From that moment onwards, they will only attract the interest of social services:

Each would be given a small golden handshake, but the State would provide for their basic needs which could not be all that great. Elderly women did not need

much to eat, warmth was more necessary than food, and people like Letty and Marcia probably had either private means or savings, a nest-egg in the Post Office or a Building Society. It was comforting to think on these lines, and even if they had nothing extra, the social services were so much better now, there was no need for anyone to starve or freeze. (Pym, *Quartet in Autumn* 101)

Three main measures of time, as explore in Jan Baars can be considered in this regard: chronological, cultural and social and psychological time, among others. Firstly, chronological time in which life is observed as a linear evolution towards death. Secondly, cultural and social time, in which visual signs of ageing limit people's performance in society and determine issues such as dress code, activities or behaviour; and psychological time, which is dependent on how the person manages all ageing stereotypes in order to create a progress or decline narrative. Thus, as Baars asserts, "the issue at stake is not whether chronological time should be abandoned" (143-44), but how these three different ways of understanding time should be taken into consideration, so time is not only reduced to a figure in the calendar, and it can be approached from a broader understanding.

As Pym portrays in *Quartet of Autumn*, old age is a period of time where there is uncertainty towards what to expect of life in general. In this sense, the writer, through the character of Letty, makes clear that during the 1970s the majority of novels addressed young or middle-aged women, and few bookshelves included novels where ageing women like Letty were the protagonists. In this sense, "Pym is determined not only to show that such a woman is of interest to writers like herself, but also to persuade readers that such a woman has intrinsic interest as a human being" (Waxman 106), and this is a need to be recognised by most writers who seem to have disregarded the importance to explore later life from new perspectives. Thus, as Letty reflects, "she

had always been an unashamed reader of novels, but if she hoped to find one which reflected her own sort of life she had come to realise that the position of an unmarried, unattached, ageing woman is of no interest whatever to the writer of modern fiction” (3).

Things have changed over the last decades as there is now a proliferation of novels that address ageing as central to the narrative, and where ageing is explored from a wide variety of topics. As mentioned in chapter three, the emergence of the Reifungsroman genre provided new insights that highlighted the need to overcome pessimistic representations of ageing, where love, sex and other issues related to later life could be finally portrayed in fiction. Margaret Morganroth Gullette argues that “it is all too common for younger people to have no imagination of anyone older having an intense selfhood like their own” (“Life Storytelling” 108), since most novels continue spreading ageist thoughts and praising youth over other stages of life. Therefore, as posited by Jody A. Wilkinson and Kenneth F. Ferraro research on ageism has helped to unveil age discrimination but also the more subtle ways in which ageism manifests itself, for example, through art and literature.

In this line of thought, *Quartet of Autumn* explores how both characters facing the same milestone in life and not having relevant sickness that impedes mobility or the interaction with others engage in a narrative of decline or progress despite the temporary or long-term impairment. So, while reading the novel one might question “how do the subjects of a particular culture, come up with narratives of aging – comprehensible stories, prospective and retrospective, about moving through *all* the given ages of life?” (Gullette, *Aged by Culture* 102), and to what extent all progress narratives can begin to replace negative ones.

In the exploration of the character of Letty, it is interesting to observe how she has made steady plans to move to the countryside with her friend Marjorie, so she can have a peaceful life after retirement. As Waxman posits, “Pym shows us through Letty that the older single woman lives not a spectator life but a life of thought, feeling, significant small actions, and growth, a life that engages and touches the reader” (106). This is appreciated when after thinking that her retirement plans were all settled, she receives a letter from Marjorie announcing her marriage to David Lydell. Letty feels all of a sudden how her life has undergone an unexpected change that will oblige her to look for a suitable alternative for her. In Marjorie’s decision Pym gives some touches of unexpected romance in later life, so, as Letty continues reading Marjorie’s letter she realised how Marjorie “went on with what seemed like girlish enthusiasm, but no doubt a woman in love, even if she is over sixty, feels no less rapturous than a girl of nineteen” (54). Interestingly, Letty’s desire for love and romance has never been materialised in a relationship so she has to cope with the bitterness to witness how other women find a partner whereas she is lacking in that respect.

The character of Letty is described as someone “who lived very much in the present, holding neatly and firmly to life, coping as best she could with whatever it had to offer, little though that might be” (25), so one of the main characteristics of the Reifungsroman, life review processes, is not included in Letty’s storyline but it is present in many moments in the novel. As mentioned in chapter two, people’s tendency to engage in life review processes is dependent on personality traits, and whereas some people are prone to look back into the past, others lack this need for re-evaluation. In this sense, Hearn et al distinguish between “non-exploratory or pseudo integrated categories” (3) which cannot be applied to all the novels under study, since as it has been discussed in relation to Pat Barker and Doris Lessing, the characters are

prone to engage in processes of life review through material encounter. However, Barbara Pym, through the character of Letty, exemplifies a non-exploratory type of person, or someone with a few interests in examining her past. Waxman considers that, “part of what makes Letty interesting to the reader is her increasing self-analysis, that precursor to change. The narrator first reveals her accepting, positive attitude about her limited life, her tendency not to dredge up the past for examination, but to live unanalytically in her relative meagre present” (107). An example of this is her reflection about love and her own condition as a spinster, which is a topic that Pym introduces in the novel in an attempt to deconstruct the idea of spinsters as women who have not been interested in romance or whose personality or lack of beauty has been detrimental in their quest for romance. In this sense, Letty broods over a different present and still longs for romance in the books she reads, thinking about how women like Marjorie have found love in later life.

Life review in Letty, in this sense, is connected to revisit through dreams her unfruitful relationships with men she liked. As with Stephen, someone she met in the past who “was very near to her, but nothing happened” (27). In this sense, Barbara Frey Waxman considers that, “whether or not they are literally travelling, these protagonists usually make an internal journey to their past through dreams and frequent flashbacks, essential features of the Reifungsroman narrative structure” (17), as in the case of Letty.

Retirement, as mentioned above, sets the character’s journey in motion and it has a positive impact on Letty who considers enrolling at university, even though she is reluctant at first, since “going back over her past life, she found it difficult to remember anything she had ever done that required brain work, certainly not the job from which she had just retired” (117). However, Pym confronts this in the novel by

providing examples of other people, even older than Letty, who have been able to pursue an academic career. Thus, “she seemed to be totally unfitted for academic work, yet people older than she were taking courses at the Open University. Mrs Pope knew a woman in her seventies who was in her second year” (Pym 117). In many ways, this feeling of fear towards the unknown is not unusual to anyone at any age who is beginning a new project, career or pursuing a dream, so a possible identification can occur between generations who perceive that age does not affect an individual capacity to feel anxious or excited about a particular event, or to doubt one’s capacities to undertake a project if that is what the person really desires.

Interestingly, as time goes by, the character of Letty begins to appreciate limited time in a way in which she contemplates life from a perspective of gains rather than losses. And, as it occurs during a party she attends (where people perceive a spinster whose life is already set and done), she is on a journey of possibilities. Thus, at the party “she had already been classified as a typical English spinster about to retire to a cottage in the country, where she would be joining with others like her to engage in church activities, attending meetings of the Women’s Institute, and doing gardening and needlework” (Pym, *Quartet in Autumn* 104). However, those ideas were suitable for her former self and no longer to the new Letty who considers staying in London after all.

From a material perspective, in contradistinction to Marcia, Letty has a more open and fluid relation with her dwelling place and possessions. Renting has given her a more adaptable perspective towards the idea of moving to a different location. Then, when Letty begins the process of looking for a new place she considers multiple possibilities as to move with Marcia, but neither Letty asks Marcia nor Marcia offers

to share the privacy of her domestic space, as it can be seen in one of the conversations where Letty shares with her co-workers her need to move out:

Marcia had so far contributed nothing to the discussion for there was a fear in her mind, even if it was not a very strong one, that she might have to offer Letty a room in her house. After all, Letty had always been kind to her; she had one offered to make her a cup of tea before going home, and even though the offer had not been accepted it has not been forgotten. But this did not mean that Marcia was under any obligation to provide accommodation for Letty in her retirement. For of course it would be impossible – she couldn't have anybody else living in her house. Two women could never share the same kitchen, she told herself, forgetting for the moment that she never really used the kitchen except to boil a kettle or make a piece of toast. (Pym, *Quartet in Autumn* 59)

In this sense, materiality is used in the novel as an instrument of separation among individuals in which the space inhabited is seen as a territory that allows the self to be safe from the outside, and it reinforces the owner's sense of control over the arrangement and order of material possessions. Solitude, therefore, is self-imposed and materialised through the act of not allowing anyone to get into the privacy of their homes. Indeed, as Annette Weld states, in *Quartet in Autumn*, Marcia is not the only character fond of her solitude, but “each [character] insist[s] until the end upon fierce independence: Marcia starves, Norman reserves the right to sell her bequest, Edwin resumes his solitary church going, and Letty balks at realigning herself with a fickle friend” (191). Thus, all characters share this immersion in their private thoughts and individual concerns.

Following James Krasner, in the particular case of Marcia's refusal to offer Letty to stay with her, there is a strong dependence on the “the belief that orderly

surroundings make memory possible, allowing us to find stored memories as easily as we can find the solid and definable features of a building” (213). Thus, the space inhabited becomes a kind of personal museum where visitors are regarded as threats to the maintenance of the owner’s sense of order and placing in such a way in which the house becomes a barrier. So, the company that other people can provide is not as important as the intimate relation with one’s space. This goes along with Russell Belk’s idea of material possessions functioning as an extension of the self, as if both self and material environment will become impregnated with one another over time. So, the first day of Letty in her new room, she knew that she will sleep “in a strange bed that would soon become as familiar as her own body...” (Pym 78). This idea of a self projected into the material environment goes along as well with new findings in subject-object relation during later life where most researches “have found that longtime home residence represents a crucial imaginative structure through which elders define themselves and their life stories” (Krasner 210). In the novel Pym considers this through the character of Letty whose attachment is likely to happen over time.

From a material perspective, Barbara Pym continues exploring the idea of the house and possessions, and how material things can interfere in the process of growth or decline through women protagonists, intertwining the storylines of both characters between restricting mobility due to strong attachment as in the case of Marcia, or mobility when possessions are few, portable or the emotional bond is not strong in the case of Letty.

In this line of thought, Letty, as mentioned before, is not emotionally attached to her former house, but to some material possessions she carries out with her,

the things that might give some clue as to what sort of person she was. There were books – anthologies of poetry, though nothing later than *Poems of Today. Second Series*– and her current library book; her transistor radio, a bowl of hyacinth nearly in flower, her knitting in a flowered cretonne bag. There were no photographs, not even of her friend Marjorie or of her old home, her parents, a cat or a dog. (Pym, *Quartet in Autumn*, 78)

The reasons behind such bonding lie in the capacity of objects to carry out meaning, something that has been discussed in chapter two, and that reinforces the idea of objects as transmitters of biographical meaning. Janet Hoskins argues that, “it is not the physical characteristics of objects that make them biographical, but the meaning imputed to them as significant personal possessions” (195). Thus, ordinary objects become precious possessions to the owner who wants to keep them and protect them within the security of the house. An example of this is seen in “the last shirt a man wore before his death, the plates used at a wedding dinner, the glass broken in response to shocking news – such events can attach themselves to ordinary objects and fix them in memory as markers of the extraordinary” (Hoskins 195). In this sense, the owner preserves important pieces of information about their past, and in a daily material discourse, outsiders cling to objects in order to have access to the observer’s private life. In the novel, one day that Letty has left the house, Mrs. Pope, the landlady, invades Letty’s privacy, eager to find out if her new tenant has an obscure past or hides something. Therefore, since “Letty had not asked for a key to the room [...] Mrs Pope felt that she had a duty to see that everything was in order. It would also be just as well to judge from her possessions what kind of a person her new lodger was” (81). Then, Mrs. Pope relies more on the information that materiality proof conveys than the information given in a straightforward conversation with her tenant. In the end,

material discourse tends to replace face-to-face conversation, where objects act as a bonding of the observer with the owner. Similarly, Ian Woodward considers that people are constantly engaging in processes of classifications, and judgments in terms of material meaning. Indeed, “we can say that objects are part of any social performance, whereby people go about actively constructing and communicating meanings” (152) and the value is placed in personal significance rather than in a financial one.

In the case of Mrs. Pope, little information is revealed about her tenant and what she finds is regarded as memorabilia with no value:

Only one item caught Mrs Pope’s eye, a rather gaily-patterned cotton kimono, which seemed not to be in character with the rest of Miss Crowe’s things. Had it perhaps been a gift from somebody in the mission field, a relative out there? There were some things one could hardly ask [...]. The most one could say, and it seemed hardly enough, was that Miss Crowe seemed to be the ideal lodger or at least nothing could be gleaned to the contrary. (Pym, *Quartet in Autumn*, 82)

In many ways, objects are important elements in the life of the owner because, as it has been mentioned previously, they not only represent the self, but they carry out functions as wardens of the past. In fact, the way in which memory interrelates with possessions is complex throughout the lifespan, especially as the person approaches later life.

Then, Letty’s relation with her home, according to Shmuel Shamai, is found among the first phases of attachment, in other words, “knowledge to be located to a place” (349). Following Lynne C. Manzo, Letty’s relation with her house is “as a way of being in the world” (56) as she has not been identified with a specific house, but rather with an abstract idea as being either in the city or in the cottage. In this sense,

every person relates with the material environment in unique ways. The idea of home, and how people interacts with it, varies greatly among individuals. In fact, “we are all embodied and embedded in a physical context, [and] we are compelled to understand the nature of our emotional relationship to places” (Manzo 56). In this sense, as explored before, Letty has not committed to her physical environment as Marcia has.

As far as Marcia is concerned, it is interesting to observe how her level of attachment with her dwelling place is, as in the case of the characters of Alice Bell or Maudie Fowler, one of “sacrifice of place” (349), the highest level that has been identified so far. In this sense, Marcia’s house and its contents are everything she cares for after retirement. Hence, the house epitomises the safest place where everything that is dear will remain stable despite the passing of time.

In addition, Marcia’s time is devoted to activities that are related to the house, where “she collects and organises tinned food and plastic bags, and is very specific about which milk bottles she will store in her shed” (Tsagaris 139). Through these daily actions, Marcia is not only replacing social contact, but she is as well reinforcing her attachment with possessions and the space she inhabits. In effect, Joan Kron argues that it is through the “process of choosing, arranging, buffing, puffing, and caring for our things –working to pay for them– we become bonded to them the way parents bond with a child” (56). And this bonding has several levels of intensity that can lead, as in the case of Marcia, to total isolation from the outside world.

James Krasner posits that Marcia’s strong attachment to materiality ends up developing excessive accumulation patterns. Over time, Marcia’s dependence to collect all kinds of things increases, as in the case of milk bottles which she keeps just in case “there could well be a shortage of milk bottles and [she] might find [herself] back in the situation, of ‘bottle, no milk’, as in the last war” (Pym, *Quartet in Autumn*,

64), or tinned food that “could be arranged according to size or by types of food” (Pym, *Quartet in Autumn*, 64). This excessive accumulation not only creates a space where the character’s memorabilia overflows and clutters the space, but “Marcia’s ability to engage in the sort of physical rituals that reinforce memory becomes disrupted by the increasing squalor of her environment” (Krasner 218).

In keeping with this, if the distribution of space is no longer based on organisation, and in the end even the owner has problems to keep track of all the things that have been stored in the house, this is clearly a sign of dysfunctional behaviour, as mentioned in chapter two. Hence, according to David F. Tolin, Randy O. Frost and Gail Steketee, “over the time, new possessions cover the previous layer of the pile, and you are left with only a rough mental map of where things are located in the pile. If someone else touches or moves anything in the pile, your mental map is ruined” (20). This can be observed in the anxiety of hoarders to let people inside their houses out of their control. For the owner, the content of the house, despite the saturation of objects and apparent disorganisation, contributes to maintain “visual and spatial memory” (Tolin et al 20), and a sense of control over their space.

Importantly, visual memory is reinforced by cherished objects, which have an important function in triggering processes of life review, as Ian Woodward poses when discussing interviews conducted by Cszikszentmihaily and Rochberg-Halton where respondents were asked about the most important objects to them within their homes: “objects (...) such as photographs (of family and loved ones) are symbols used for] preserving memory, personal ties and suggesting perpetual presence of departed kin” (146). In this sense, even though Marcia’s attachment to possessions is not restricted to those who are visual representations of the past, during the novel through the character of Marcia the role of objects to retrieve memories of the past is explored. As

an example, in a fragment of the novel, the death of her cat, which occurred a long time ago, comes alive in Marcia's memory through the encounter of her cat's dish:

Marcia still missed the old cat, Snowy, and one evening she found herself particularly reminded of him when she came across one of his dishes in the cupboard under the sink. She was surprised and a little upset to notice that it still had some dried-up fragments of Kittikat adhering. (Pym, *Quartet in Autumn*, 139)

The keeping of Snowy's dirty dish is slightly repulsive, but it provides an accurate description of the capacity of objects to evoke memories, and revive moments lived with our loved ones. Significantly, Rosellina Ferraro, Jennifer Edson Escalas and James R. Bettman Escalas propose that "possessions with which attachments are created are often ordinary objects that derive their meaning through experiences involving the objects" (Ferraro et al 3). The dish becomes an element that allows the person to revisit the past because it is something with lived experience. The cat and the owner have created an emotional attachment by the interaction of both during a certain period of time. In this sense, James Krasner posits that "Pym render[s] the power of an object (the dish) to reignite a personal story" and "the very dirtiness of the dish allows her to remember her pet more vividly" (219). So, here objects are important because they remain as the living proof of such relation, and their contemplation triggers instances of the past, for Marcia the ones related to her beloved cat, Snowy, a terrible loss she still mourns.

Marcia attached to what her house contains, as the owner has become entangled in a complex framework of emotional identification where the house and the owner function as mirrors of each other, and reflect how the passing of time has changed them. Thus, in Marcia's house, "the outside paint was a conventional dark green and

cream, now in need of re-doing, and the net curtains at the windows could have done with a wash, some thought” (28) where “dust lay everywhere”(28). Metaphorically, the house becomes the container of an identity decayed by time. Along the same lines, James Krasner discusses the multiple ways in which the self intersects with the house, and in the case of Marcia, one might question if “the house has become a physical correlate to the self, or if the elderly person is only a fully embodied self in the familiar environment of the home” (Krasner 210). Then, Pym seems to have outlined in Marcia the example of the embodied self in the house, trapped in a self-imposed routine affected by a gradual decline which limits Marcia’s domestic space as happens with Maudie Fowler in *The Diaries of Jane Somers*.

However, a distinction needs to be made between accumulation and hoarding. Visually, excessive accumulation is apparent when the person finds difficulty in the performance of daily activities such as walking around the room or cleaning. In these simple actions the person might be experiencing the beginning of a “sign of mental degeneration among the elderly” (Krasner 220), where space is saturated by excessive memorabilia and meaningless objects. In turn, Michael A. Tompkins and Tamara L. Hartl consider that hoarding, as found in Pym’s novel, is not the result exclusively of ageing, but it is aggravated by it: “Typically, these people are older and have suffered from the problem of compulsive hoarding for years, often decades, and live in very dilapidated and unsafe conditions” (4). Many times, the person detects some habits that can end up in hoarding, but the difficulty to get rid of stuff remains stronger. There are many factors that contribute to the development of these patterns of behaviours. Thus,

Many people who hoard have other conditions, such as depression, inattention, or health problems, that can make it more difficult for them to work on the

hoarding problem even in small ways. Depression, for example, can decrease your loved one's motivation to organize his possessions or declutter a room, as well as diminish his ability to concentrate or tolerate the distress when he does. Similarly inattention, as in the case of someone with attention-deficit disorder (ADD), can interfere with your loved one's ability to focus and stay on task when organizing or sorting possessions (3)

David F. Tolin, Randy O. Frost, and Gail Steketee consider that, over the last decades, there is a growing tendency to accumulate all sorts of things. If the consumer likes an object, this can lead them to buy the same item in different colours or sizes. It seems that the more we have, the safer we feel having that object with us. Marcia, for example, spends most of her time taking care of her objects: "all the plastic bags needed to be taken out of the drawer and sorted into their different shapes and sizes" (110). Tolin et al argue that collection itself is not a negative behaviour per se if the person is able to develop a sort of space consciousness in order to avoid an excessive engagement in the act of buying and having. These consumerist behaviours are reinforced by this material culture, which relies on the idea of having as synonymous of power and personal value. As in the case of Marcia, one might consider oneself a collector when acquiring determined objects. The bigger the house, the easier it becomes to fill empty space with more and more things. As mentioned in chapter two, when the person's domestic space becomes difficult to navigate, so the individual will isolate himself/herself and withdraw from certain areas of the house: environmental centralisation takes place. In Marcia this is due to various reasons—a frailty of the self and a desire to let some areas of the house untouched. As Marcia admits, "you want to remember things as they were, not go changing them" (Pym, *Quartet in Autumn*, 31). In this sense, her mother's room has remained intact since she died, the same happened

with Snowy's belongings that she still preserves. Even "over the bed cover there was still an old fur ball, brought up by Snowy in his last days, now dried up like some ancient mummified relic of long ago" (31). In Marcia's attempt to maintain her past unaltered, she manifests a common similarity among most hoarders: the refusal to allow an outsider to enter their space, as when Marcia rejects the idea of letting Letty live with her or accept the social worker Janice Brabner's interest in helping her with anything she might need.

In Pym's approach to old age, there is no cross-generational bonding between young and older generations, but a recreation of later life as a place where the house replaces the owner's need for social interaction. This goes along with the idea of domocentrism mentioned in chapter two, where Clare Cooper Marcus considered that in later life there is a tendency to develop "domocentrism" (80) where the house functions as a barrier for social interaction. Indeed, when Janice visits Marcia for the first time, "Marcia was if frozen into her chair. She never had visitors and nobody ever called" (Pym, *Quartet in Autumn*, 29).

Also, following Barbara Frey Waxman, if Letty engages in a journey towards wholeness, the character of Marcia is the opposite to her as she embodies the "stereotypical old spinster" (Waxman 110) living alone with the memories of a cat that has died but remained through preserving its belongings. The difference between Letty's and Marcia's approach to retirement allows the reader to explore how stereotypes are there to be deconstructed as Letty does when she comes to terms with life in a positive attitude. Whereas Pym promotes Letty in the novel, as far as Marcia is concerned, she "does not automatically inspire affection" (Waxman 111).

Among the four characters, Marcia's narrative of decline reinforces the idea of ageing as a time of losses where materiality is perceived as the only anchor of life. The

house and its possessions become, in the case of Marcia, the only bond with the world. It could be argued that the process of decline that Marcia undergoes is the consequence of ageing, but it is more related to Marcia's inability to forge emotional bonds with others across the lifespan than the perils of physical and emotional changes in later life. Age in many cases only enhances qualities and attitudes inherent in the person. So, personality and personal attitude to life setbacks are elements that have an influence on the way the people move across life stages. In the case of Marcia she is described as "a mean, reclusive, inactive, desexed old crone, the antagonist of youth" (Waxman 111), which might have been a long-term quality enhanced by time, and consequently, it has affected the duration of her relationships, as well as her capacity to keep a healthy state of mind. In fact, the lack of positive qualities, in some cases, determines a person's isolation in the confines of their houses in order to avoid future disappointments.

At the end of *Quartet of Autumn*, Barbara Pym's exploration of later life provides a liberating ending for the four characters who are able to connect emotionally to one another thanks to Marcia's last will where Norman becomes the heir of all her material possessions. Thus, "through this act she finally expresses herself directly, wielding economic power in her bequest and also showing both her co-workers and readers this softer, more generous nature beneath her hard, hoarding surface" (117). So, the house that once functioned as a barrier in Marcia's relation with the external world, in the end, becomes the key for a future bonding among them.

Interestingly, Norman had never set a foot in Marcia's house, and had throughout the years maintained a shallow relationship with her. This surprises all of them, who try to figure out the reasons that have led Marcia to make Norman the safekeeper of her material legacy in the world. David J. Ekerdt, Mark Luborsky and

Catherine Lysack state that, “the literature’s dominant observation about older people and their possessions is that they place increasing value on the symbolic properties of their things. And so, when disposing of possessions, they make efforts to protect, conserve, and project these meanings (1)”.

One assumption is that Marcia tried to see in Norman someone who can protect and assure the continuity of her possessions, but what really comes out of this act is the possibility for Norman, Edwin and Letty to finally connect at a deeper level. The house becomes a point of connection for them, and it allows each of the characters to get to know Marcia from a more intimate and empathetic stance. In a sense, Pym uses materiality as a tool which is conducive to characters’ self-growth and re-evaluation about the importance of bonding with other people:

Norman wanders through the house to which he had never been invited, learning about Marcia’s obsessively arranged drawers, her bottles, and her predilection for poetry. And the others help Norman sort through Marcia’s possessions, learning how she spent her time and what she thought about: becoming her intimate friend at last. (Waxman 117)

To a certain extent, Marcia’s death symbolises the disappearance of the narrator to explain the meaning of the objects and, in Marcia’s case, the memory of Snowy, which no one except her knew and loved. Now, Norman has to decide whether the house will be sold and what objects he will keep, all of this based on Norman’s lack of awareness about the biographical component of most objects. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton argue that current research, conducted in the field of material memory, focuses on the relationship established between owner and possession “little is known about the reasons for attachment” (10), and that is something exemplified when Norman walks around the house of Marcia: “He wandered from room to room, seeing not

himself in possessions but Marcia as she must have been in the time he had known her but never been invited here” (197). Norman wonders if his relation with Marcia could have been any different but it is too late. Now Marcia will remain in the material possessions Norman decides to keep. At the end, Norman, Letty and Edwin promise to see each other after their meeting in Marcia’s house, which opens up a possible scenario where bonding will develop. This is important, especially for Letty who, as stated by Waxman, when Marjorie’s plans to get married finally do not take place, reconsiders her initial idea of moving with her “realizing that she can make choices that will shape her future, she is experiencing the heady power of personhood” (109). Therefore, in the end, “Letty felt that even though it was difficult to think of Edwin and Norman as objects of romantic speculation, and two less country-loving people could hardly be imagined. But at least it made one realise that life still held infinite possibilities for change” (Pym, *Quartet in Autumn*, 218). Thus, even though *Quartet in Autumn* has many moments of bleakness and solitude, the novel offers aspects pertaining to the novels of ripening where characters are given a second chance in life. As Rosario Arias states, the novels that deal with ageing characters’ spiritual journeys of self-discovery in old age “can be considered as sources of insight into the self in later life insofar as they explore imaginatively ways of dealing with the multifaceted subject of ageing and the adjustments that have to be made in the later stages of life” (Arias, “Moments of Ageing” 11). These adjustments are not just emotional as they derive from the important relation that the person forges with the material possessions accumulated throughout the years. In this sense, the novel provides an insight into the intertwining of self and domestic environment, as well as it promotes a challenging reformulation of old age where readers are given two different treatments of the same ageing journey. Now it is up to new generations to regard that it is not only the attitude

towards life that determines our decline, but also an excessive attachment to place and possessions.

6. Penelope Lively: Material Memory

As discussed in previous chapters, materiality is an important element in the construction and maintenance of the ageing self during later stages of life. In this chapter, I will focus on Penelope Lively's *The Photograph* (2003) and *How It All Began* (2011), two novels where the writer refers to how, during old age, the person clings to possessions as a way to connect with the past. In the case of *The Photograph* this is associated with the frail mind since, after the death of his wife, Kath, Glyn unveils a secret by finding in a photograph an image which alters the perception of his married life. In the case of *How It All Began*, through the character of the elderly Charlotte, Lively delves into the notion of the house as a potent source of identification in later life where despite frail health the self longs to be at home with his/her possessions.

Born in El Cairo in 1933, Penelope Lively wrote her first book *Artercote* in 1970. Lively's passion for writing can be compared with her fascination for history and the influence of collective and individual memory in the present. This passion led her to pursue a degree in History and become a historian. Furthermore, as Lively admits in her memoir *Ammonites & Leaping Fish: A Life in Time* (2013), she has always been an avid reader who has a considerable home library, and as she also confesses, among her most intimate fears, it

is not being able to read— the worst deprivation. Or no longer having [her] books around [her]: the familiar, eclectic, explanatory assemblage that hitches [her] to the wide world, that has freed [her] from the prison of [herself], that has helped [her] to think, and to write. (196)

From the moment Penelope Lively began her literary career she has proved to be a prolific writer whose narrative addressed a wide variety of readers; children fiction, non-fiction, memoirs, and autobiographies are the pillars of Lively's literary production. As Charles McGrath states,

Lively belongs to a cohort of brilliant female novelists who defined the fiction culture of postwar Britain, and who often worked into their late age – as Byatt, Margaret Drabble and Edna O'Brien still going strong, with such great figures as Muriel Spark, Penelope Fitzgerald, Iris Murdoch, Angela Carter and Anita Brookner recently departed. (McGrath 1)

Among many of the awards she has been bestowed along the years, the author won the Booker Prize with her novel *Moon Tiger* in 1987. In this sense, Maricel Oró Piqueras poses, “despite the different characters, settings, situations, and plots that each of Lively's novel presents, there is a common and recurrent feature in all of them: her exploration of the relationship between time and memory both at an individual and at a collective level” (114). Furthermore, with time, Penelope Lively's writing has gradually become oriented to address old age and ageing as well as immediacy of death. In fact, Lively's latest novels have focused on ageing. In this regard, her memoirs *Ammonites & Leaping Fish: A Life in Time* (2013) written at the age of eighty make clear Lively's interest in exploring her own insights into old age. In fact, from the beginning of her memoir, Lively announces to the readers that what they are about to read “is not quite a memoir. Rather, it is the view from old age” (3). In addition, the author admits that

I have not paid too much attention to old age. To individuals, yes – family, friends. But the status has not been on my radar. Give up my seat on the bus– of course; feign polite attention to some rambling anecdote; raise my voice, repeat myself with patience. Avoid, occasionally, I fear that hazard light worn by the old– slow,

potentially boring, hard going. Now that I wear the light myself, I am nicely aware of the status. This is a different place. And since I am there, along with plenty of my friends, the expedient thing seems to be to examine it. And report. (Lively, *Leaping Fish* 5)

Lively makes her approach to ageing a journey of scientific, historical and spiritual exploration in which she longs to understand old age in depth. Thus, in *Ammonites & Leaping Fish: A Life in Time* the author reflects that “one of the few advantages of writing fiction in old age is that you have been there, done it all, experienced every decade” (Lively 19). Lively, indeed, gives a deep insight into what old age means for her and into her understanding of the importance of instilling in younger generations a more compassionate approach to later life and their former selves. In many ways, as has been discussed previously in this dissertation, Gullette advocates for a new conceptualisation of ageing as a subject of conversation where fear or pessimism should not be associated with it. However, in an interview published in *The New York Times*, the writer’s experiences of old age are punctuated by adversity, since the writer

lives alone in a house overlooking a leafy square in the London borough of Islington. Her husband died almost 20 years ago, and she barely knows her neighbors anymore: They’re all young hedge-fund types. She has a badly arthritic back, she underwent breast-cancer surgery a few years back, and her eyes have started to go. (McGrath 1)

In this line of thought, the author has often spoken up about her experiences of old age in interviews where she has expressed her lack of motivation to carry out activities that gave her great pleasure when she was younger. Then, Lively has noticed how her previous excitement with travelling has been replaced over the years with a desire to stay more time at home. In this sense, the novelist acknowledges that she has slowly changed into a

different self. Lively argues that thinking about her ageing self is like recognising she has become a different person: “this someone else, this alter ego who has arrived, is less adventurous, more risk-averse, costive with her time” (*Leaping Fish* 31). As discussed in this dissertation, an important characteristic in the process of coming to terms with ageing is the acceptance of the “changing shell” (Arias, “Moments of Ageing” 5), that is to say, human beings’ physical and emotional adaptations to the passing of time.

From a material perspective, possessions have a crucial role in the transformation of the self in the life cycle, as they function as witnesses and supporters of lived experience, as developed in chapter two. In the case of Lively, her background as a historian has contributed to the material representation of human beings in the small context of their characters’ houses. Indeed, Charles McGrath, as well as Rosa Montero did when interviewing Doris Lessing, makes reference to Lively’s house as “a very tidy museum to the past” (3) where memory is reinforced by the materialisation of the past, and especially through her books: “your books tell you where you’ve been – they’re the story of your own mind,” she said. “Getting rid of them would be like getting rid of that.” In old age, she added, memory seems more and more unbidden. “It is in no way linear, more like assorted slides that come up unprompted” (McGrath 3).

Accordingly, the interior of houses often resembles public museums embedded with multiple stories and symbolism. Lively acknowledges how much of her past and identity is reflected on her own house through material possessions, so, “when [she] look[s] around [her] cluttered house –more ballast, material ballast – [she] can see [herself] oddly identified and defined by what is in it: [her] life charted out on the bookshelves, [her] concerns illuminated by a range of objects” (McGrath 4). In this sense, the house, as observed in chapter two, has multiple functions in the construction of an individual identity across the lifespan, especially in later life.

As people grow older, they become more aware of house symbolism and the function of certain objects to keep them connected to their past. Furthermore, the bonding between people and places greatly intensifies as the person ventures in later life. In this sense, through time, the self feels protected and sheltered in the house, and finds a space to express himself/herself through the distribution and arrangement of house possessions. Therefore, as well as the house is subject to renewal or refurnishing, the self experiences the same process of self-actualisation. As Joan Kron states, “in our culture, ending one stage involves evaluating the past, deciding which activities, relationships, interests, residences, and possessions to keep and which to discard” (148). This is done, most of the time, unconsciously, without fully grasping the reasons behind keeping one object and not the other, or behind the feeling of discomfort thinking about the loss of certain possessions since “possessions are [considered] identity markers, and the loss of an identity marker is a symbolic form of death of self” (Ferraro et al 1).

For example, in *A House Unlocked* (2001) Lively focuses on her childhood house in order to begin a process of recollection of familial past experiences and personal recollection. This environmental past is vivid and proves how her memory recalls childhood places perfectly well, as if those places were fixated on her mind in inexplicable ways, so writing about them is like transporting the self to the past. In this memoir, Lively recognises that “the house as [she] knew exists only in the mind” (*House Unlocked* ix) and with the passing of time, she feels the need to materialise this childhood memory in a writing record. As maintained by A. M. Brickman and Y. Stern, and as it has been discussed early in this dissertation,

Increased age puts an individual at risk for the development of neurogenerative disorders, such as Alzheimer’s disease (AD). Central to the dementia syndrome that characterizes AD is the gradual and progressive loss of long-term memory

functions. Although the vast majority of older adults do not develop dementia, most experience some degree of cognitive change. (175)

This need to revisit the past from an early age, as in the case of Lively, is common practice for those who confront later life and are aware of limited time. As the novelist recalls, after the death of one of her aunts, her aunt's physical remains were still standing, reinforcing one of the roles of materiality as preservers of one's existence in the world. Lively, indeed, appreciates material legacy as a way of fostering cross-generational bonding and ties: "Objects had proved more tenacious than people – the photograph albums, the baffling contents of the silver cupboard, the children on my grandmother's sampler of the house– but from each object there spun a shining thread of reference if you knew how to follow it" (*A House Unlocked* x).

In promoting material legacy, Lively agrees with David J. Ekerdt in the notion that possessions "can sustain and comfort people by evoking the past, promoting reminiscence, and providing assurance about important relationships. They have the potential, when passed on to others, to perpetuate one's self, values, and memory into the future" (9). In fact, in the act of passing on possessions, people contribute to the continuation of cultural and social rituals of a specific historical time, or moment.

6.1. *The Photograph* (2003)

Lively's *The Photograph* places its attention to how objects connect with the ageing self. Although the main character, Glyn, is not a female character, the subject matter of this dissertation, but a man in his sixties, this character embodies many characteristics already described in relation to ageing and materiality in later life. Indeed, one of the prevalent approaches to ageing is the study of material memory as a way of accounting for a person

lived experiences. In this analysis, therefore, I offer a reading of the use of objects, especially pictures, as a means of understanding a sense of past in Lively's *The Photograph*. As Elizabeth Edwards asserts, "materiality is closely related to social biography. This view argues that an object cannot be fully understood at any single point in its existence but rather should be understood as belonging in a continuing process of meaning, production, exchange and usage" (68). This process of exchange meaning leads to the formation of a self, providing a narrative of their lives. Thus, the role of objects in the construction of ageing identities not only gives context to the novel, but it reflects the relevance of materiality in coping with the past and coming to terms with his/her ageing self.

The novel, therefore, explores how the character of Glyn, while searching things in a cupboard, finds objects that belonged to her deceased wife Kath, among them, a photograph of Kath holding hands with her brother-in-law Nick. Glyn, Kath's sister Elaine and her husband Nick are taken back to a moment of their past that will affect their lives and relationships deeply. In fact, this photograph will change Glyn's perception of his marriage as he attempts to look for a renewed interpretation of the real bonding between him and Kath during the time they were together.

As mentioned before, during later life the elder confronts limited time ahead, and consciously or unconsciously engages in retrospective looks into the past in order to make sense of experience and construct a coherent narrative. Lively has often admitted her interest in the processes of the production of collective and individual memory, as well as how the past is a frail construction relying on multiple factors. Thus, as Maricel Oró Piqueras states, Lively "is fascinated by the paradoxical nature of time" (114) and that can be seen in novels such as *The Photograph* where the writer

resources to literary techniques such as the use of different narrative voices to explain a same episode and realistic descriptions that combine with unreliable interior monologues in order to offer a multiplicity of views and perspectives which aim to express both this paradoxical nature of time and the unreliability of our memories in trying to make sense of the chronological events that explain a human life. (Oró 114)

Memory has indeed an important role during old age where people tend to engage more actively in processes of looking into the past. In this sense, the novel not only delves into old age as a time of reflection and reinterpretation of past events, loved ones or unresolved issues, but also as a moment where the narrative that one has constructed can be easily disrupted by the encounter of material evidence. As it has been analysed during this dissertation, there are a number of reasons behind this journey to the past, for example, the need to come to terms with it and amend past mistakes. In fact, the past is always connected to the present emerging spontaneously by unconscious recalling or the contact with material things embedded with personal meaning, being objects great allies of memory retrieval where the ageing self finds a reliable source to both preserve and sustain the life narrative.

In this line of thought, when Glyn is in possession of some material that belonged to his deceased wife Kath, the memories of his marriage are altered forever. Then, Penelope Lively shares with Russell Belk the notion that possessions are an extension of the self in later life. In this sense, when Glyn is arranging things “he tugs at a file to improve his view of what lies beyond and, sure enough there is a landslide. Exasperated, he gets down on hands and knees to shovel up this mess, and suddenly there is Kath” (2). In fact, despite Kath’s death, her possessions are still impregnated with her, so Glyn cannot avoid but think about her as if she had materialised in front of him. Indeed,

“possessions have the ability to symbolize others” (Belk, “Extended Self” 148) and trigger moments of revisitation of the past where the person is suddenly connected with a specific moment or person.

In this sense, it is during old age where material possessions reach highest levels of emotional attachment and dependence in order to support the frailty of the ageing self who often wanders between the border of time and space. So, “integral to a sense of who we are is a sense of our past. Possessions are a convenient means of storing the memories and feelings that attach our sense of past” (Belk, “Extended Self” 148), and an example of this is illustrated when Glyn finds a photograph of his wife Kath’s affair with her brother-in-law, Nick. This triggers in Glyn a desperate look into the past in search for answers. This is a life review moment that is not based on limited time ahead, which is one of the main characteristics of life review processes, but it signifies an important moment: he realises that the past, which defined who he was as a husband, his marriage, and his relation with Kath and other people, is no longer valid and that it is in need of reinterpretation.

Therefore, materiality exerts multiple functions in the life of the owners, and this is due to the fascination of objects as accessories of the self that either reinforce status, group differences or similarities, or provide information of our preferences or dislikes. As Danielle Todd posits, “instead of aspiring for love and peace, we wish for products. This has not only polluted the environment, but the very nature of humanity” (48), and as a consequence, the narrative of individuals has become entangled with a strong dependence on material objects, which clearly indicates that materiality is fundamental scaffolding of the self across the lifespan, and especially in later life. Then, from many perspectives, “consumerism hands us the tools to become whomever we want and lets us make the decision on how the world views us” (Todd 50) in the present and in the past,

since not all the things that are bought and stored in the house will remain forever, due to the owner's ongoing process of negotiating his/her identity throughout the life cycle. In this line of thought. The fact that Kath decided to keep the photograph is significant in her probable intention to keep material proof of a brief story that it mattered. Thus, when Glyn is going over Kath's possessions, what he finds is a combination of items that reminds of and defines her wife: a recipe book, a birth certificate, jewellery, bills and papers. What calls the attention of Kath's husband is an envelope with the instruction "to not open it and destroy it". Inside the envelope, there is a picture in which Kath and someone else "have their hands closely entwined, locked together, pushed behind them so that as they stand side by side in this moment of private intimacy, this interlocking of hands would be visible to the rest of the group" (Lively 5). Lively's novel privileges materiality to reactivate memory in later life, and despite the fact that the main protagonist is not a woman, the novel proves that objects have powerful effect on individuals, However, the photograph, as other material objects analysed in this dissertation, functions as a visual testimony of the past, in this case an affair, proving to be an effective instrument in the destabilisation of the self. The consequences of this are many since in his sixties Glyn has to confront facts about his past, which will drastically change the narrative of his life. Furthermore, photographs among other possessions are considered some of the most effective traces of the past, since they seem a vivid replication of the past.

Recently, special attention has been given to the impact of photographs as material traces of the past, particularly in today's consumer culture with an interest in understanding the act of taking photographs, storing and displaying them as a homewise activity. As Elizabeth Edwards maintains,

Many studies have focused, for instance, on the key relations between photographs, their place in the negotiation of relations between the past and the present, the living and the dead, the spirit world and the future (Wright 2004, Deger 2006, Smith & Vokes 2008), and the powerful connection between the photographic object, as a relic held in the hand and the physical connection to the subject” (229).

In this regard, people have developed specific rituals around the documentation of the present through material discourse in which they have become fundamental as indicators of individual and collective practice. Thus, one might wonder

how are photographs actually used as objects in social space? How are they acquired and accumulated? By whom? How are they displayed? Where? To whom? Which remain in small private worlds intentionally hidden? How do these link with the performative material culture with which the photographs are linked such as frames and albums? (Edwards 70)

All these inquiries reinforce the idea that material culture exerts a powerful influence on the way in which people communicate and confront the passing of time, where objects are becoming central to their owner’s life. According to Ian Woodward, Igor Kopyttoff or Arjun Appaduri, objects end up developing a biography of their own, especially as in the case of the novel, with photographs or family albums. Objects are embedded with meaning and, therefore, when people refer to them, they are pointing out to “objects specifically made to have social biographies. Their social efficacy is premised specifically on their shifting roles and meanings as they are projected into different spaces to do different things” (Edwards 222). Indeed, photographs can have central and secondary roles in our lives that are determined by the position they occupied in our houses. In many ways, it is not the same to display pictures in the living room, that is usually the place

where people spend most of their time, as to display them in other areas whose access is more restricted, and the message conveyed about the owner can be more intimate.

In many ways, within the home the owner always makes decisions to where, how and when to display certain information about the family or himself/herself in front of friends, visitors or guests, so it is interesting to regard the home not only as a dwelling place but in terms of private and public content. Following Edwards, “placing is defined as a sense of appropriateness of particular material forms to particular sets of social expectation and desire within space and time” (226) where the self is projected and some information is finally revealed.

In contradistinction to other possessions, it could be argued that photographs provide more information than other objects, which might be regarded inert, lifeless, without the owner. However, for the most part, photographs display information in such a powerful way that the owner uses them as tools to support as an instrument to give veracity to the story that the picture already reveals since the outsider might recognise elements that connect them in the present or in the past. Unfortunately, Kath is no longer alive to respond Glyn’s questions, and he decides to go against his wife’s desire to keep her affair private.

Penelope Lively, indeed, plays with the idea of materiality as an instrument of disruption in the novel, where Glyn’s quest for the truth becomes an obsession that influences other characters who were also unaware of what had happened, among them, Kath’s sister, Elaine. Thus, “as a consequence, his action has an effect that modifies these characters’ future by bringing in revised and/or new information into their past memories and making them redefine their position within the life episodes in which Kath and Glyn were present” (Oró 117), especially for Elaine and her husband Nick, the man with whom Kath had the affair.

Then, in the process of recollecting information about what, when and why that happened can be seen how Glyn constantly looks at the picture during the novel and confronts the fragmented memories he keeps about his time spent with Kath. Lisa Tabor Connor considers that “at its broadest level, memory is retention of something over an interval extending beyond its physical presence” (117), and the self engages in the process of retention for various reasons, for example, the fear of forgetting. Tabor states that “memories will not be successfully retrieved if they are not successfully encoded and stored; some memory performance problems of older adults have been attributed to insufficient encoding” (118). Therefore, material objects are used to support memory retention with time, as in the case of the novel they might exert great control over the narrative of the owner or those involved in the narrative of the object.

This interplay between memory and materiality in the construction of our life narrative is complex and frail. William L. Randall and Gary M. Kenyon consider that every person perceives time differently, and it is in old age when most people become more aware of time from a wider perspective and begin a process of appreciation of time from different angles: “In effect, we understand the past (through the present) in terms of the future, and the future (again, through the present) in terms of the past” (334). However, in an interview with Sarah Crown, Lively mentioned the following: “‘the idea of memory is linear,’ says Penelope Lively, crisply, ‘is nonsense. What we have in our heads is a collection of frames. As to time itself- can it be linear when all these snatches of other presents exists at once in your mind? A very elusive and tricky concept, time’” (1).

In the case of *The Photograph*, Penelope Lively is interested in the way in which the past imposes constraints on the present and how in a given moment something, in this case a photograph, can change the perception of the person’s sense of past: “rage is the

top-note- beneath that a seethe of jealousy and humiliation, the whole primed with some kind of furious drive and energy. Where? When? Who? Who took this photograph? Who presumably passed it on to Nick and destroyed the negative?” (Lively, *The Photograph* 5). In fact, Kath has become a stranger for him, as well as those who were aware of the affair and ended up being accomplices. In effect, the past, which before was certain, now lies in front of him as something shaky and unreliable.

Thus, Glyn in his sixties is forced to reconstruct his life narrative and reformulate his past, disrupting his former sense of self and identity in order to “reconsider [his] life stor[y] as well as the paths to follow in the future” (Oró 115). The consequence is a frenetic quest for the truth of his marriage, and a constant revisitation of his past during the novel, where the photo is used as a material statement of the affair, which he often looks at as if there were information he could have omitted. In fact, there is always a constant effort in the character of Glyn to look into his past in a kind of obsessive manner, where the feeling of desperation for not having been aware of the affair is an emotional burden that he can hardly resist. So, many questions arise which make him feel that his wife is a total stranger for him.

In this regard, material objects are introduced as elements that can “destabilis[e] the life narratives of the protagonists” (Oró 117) and force the person to reformulate certain memories of past events, since the past is a changeable construction of the mind, where people’s stories are always subjected to be transformed or acquired different meanings, as already explored in chapter two. Indeed, the past is the result of a complex intertwining of personal, social and cultural factors that the person attempts to respond by making sense of experience. Then, Dan P. McAdams maintains that:

the stories we construct to make sense of our lives are fundamentally about our struggle to reconcile who we imagine we were, are and might be in our heads and

bodies with who we were, are and might be in the social contexts of family, community, the workplace, ethnicity, religion, gender, social class, and culture writ large.” (243)

This act of reconciliation is based on a personal commitment to construct a coherent self with whom people can feel at ease when engaging in processes of reminiscence or life review on their own or with other people. For example, Glyn’s discovery affects Kath’s sister, Elaine, who in later life is forced to look back into her marriage in order to make sense of the photograph that Glyn has found. The photo lies in front of her as irrefutable truth: an intense need to look into her marriage and her relation with her sister is triggered after her conversation with Glyn. As Elaine recognises after finding out about the affair, “within the last hour her perception of the past has been questioned, her understanding of three people has been shown to be faulty” (70), but nothing can alleviate the sense of betrayal and injustice. Thus, *Lively* shows a particular interest in making us reflect about how material objects can influence the present and alter the past, which emerges as a driving force into the present. In the end, what Glyn does is not solving the problem, but extending it to other characters who were also involved. So, in the novel Kath will come alive through the memories of her sister. So, the photo is able to bring the character of Kath into the present, and revive her influence and relationship with Glyn, Elaine and Nick, especially in Elaine, who attempts to comprehend her failure to communicate over the years with her sister Kath. The reader is left pondering on the truth behind Kath, whose voice is not heard. Thus, as Oró states, “the presumably unfaithful wife that Glyn was ready to hate when he found the photograph turns into an extremely sensitive and unhappy being who had been primarily judged by her extreme beauty all her life” (123), and now she will remain unknown forever.

As seen in this analysis, the construction of the past begins early in life, and there is a tendency in today's culture to transform moments into tangible realities that can be kept in private or public displays in the familiar setting. In this sense, by using an object such as a photograph, Lively develops the idea that materiality has a function not only to document the present, but also it is used as an element of disruption which threatens the stability of the self, especially in later life when the elder look into the past in order to acquire a sense of identity and security. The novel seems to suggest how people are affected differently by the photograph. So, whereas Glyn craves to know everything about what happened, Elaine attempts to incorporate this new information into her life and continue with her life, in this case after taking the decision to finally divorce Nick. On the contrary, Nick looks back to the past with the idea that "what's done is done. You can't change what's happened, so why keep hauling it out and looking at it?" (91), which puts into question if people's attempts to review one's life can be beneficial at all, since the result are subjective interpretations of events where important information might be missing.

6.2. Penelope Lively's *How It All Began* (2011)

In 2011 Penelope Lively published *How It All Began*, a novel about the casualties of life and how a random event may trigger unexpected consequences in the life of others who are somehow connected. The novel begins with Charlotte, a retired schoolteacher who has been mugged in the middle of the street and as a result of a fall is injured with a broken hip. Not only has she been disposed of all the possessions she was carrying, especially her home keys, but she is also obliged to spend some time in hospital after the incident. As Charlotte is taken to hospital, the lives of her daughter Rose, Henry and her

niece Marion are brought to the fore, since Charlotte's temporary impairment has to be dealt with in the family. Although Charlotte is not the central character of the novel, her injury and the need to move to her daughter's house, Rose, while she fully recovers, affects the life of the characters. Alfred Hickling states that Charlotte's temporary impairment sets a train of actions in motion, for example, in the case of Rose, who has assumed the responsibility and will take care of her mother. She "is unable to accompany her employer, Lord Peters, to receive an honorary doctorate in Manchester. His Lordship's niece, an interior designer named Marion, goes with her uncle instead, though a text explaining her absence is intercepted by the wife of her lover, thus hastening the demise of their marriage" (Hickling 1).

Lively's exploration of old age, portrayed in Charlotte, fulfils the main characteristics of Reifungsroman, as the fall initiates in the ageing character a journey of self discovery and wholeness in her attempt to overcome reduced mobility to go back home. Interestingly, as mentioned in chapter two, Lively pays especial attention to the material attachment existing between the house and the owner during later life, where the idea of temporary or permanent abandonment of the dwelling place causes distress and anxiety. As Hickling considers, "the novel is mostly preoccupied with the themes of recollection and consciousness which run through her fiction as a continuous thread" (1), where through the character of Charlotte, in her seventies, old age can be reinterpreted as a moment of life where remaining independent regardless of setbacks is crucial. However, the need of crutches delays Charlotte's return to her life the way it was before the accident, increasing even more her sense of dependence and despair: "So, just what one didn't want. Being a burden and all that. What one had hoped to avoid. Derailed. Thanks a lot, muggor. Sorry Rose. And Gerry. And bless you. Let's hope this won't blight a beautiful

relationship. It's the classic situation: tiresome old woman moves in" (Lively, *How it All Began* 7).

As developed in novels under study in this dissertation ageing characters prove a reluctance to abandon their homes despite of the deterioration of the building as in *Union Street*, *The Century's Daughter*, and both home and health deterioration in *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, and *Quartet in Autumn*. One commonly shared element is the house as a source of identification. In contrast to Barker, Lessing and Pym, who depict derelict houses (also, in a different social context), Lively reinforces the notion of the house as one's act of ownership, for some ageing people want to remain in their house despite their health issues. However, in *How It All Began*, Lively delves into the state of mind of Charlotte, once she is momentarily disposed of her home and possessions, as she is not able to cope with her daily routines while she is under her family's care. Furthermore, in the case of Charlotte, her attitude attempts to avoid decline, thus, despite struggling with health issues, she does not decrease her passion for learning and being active, as well as her desire to remain at home. Thus, the hip is one more thing to add to what has been happening in her body through the passing of time, because,

before the hip there was the knee, and the back, but that was mere degeneration, not malign external interference. The knee. The back. And the cataracts. And those twinges in the left shoulder and the varicose veins and the phlebitis and having get up at least once every night to pee and the fits of irritation at people who leave inaudible messages on the answerphone. (Lively, *How It All Began* 8)

Physical pain is present in the novel as a symptom of the consequences of old age in the body, which reinforces the initial association of ageing with decline. As Charlotte expresses "for years now, pain has been a constant companion" (89) with whom she has learn to cope and live with. This pain is not only rooted in a decline of health, but also in

the slow transformation of the self into an ageing one. This is something mentioned in chapter three by Rosario Arias as “changing shells” (“Moments of Ageing” 5), where the person, in order to accept ageing, has to begin a personal process of reconciliation with her former selves and the reality, acknowledging that the body has drastically changed. In this sense, being mugged in the street makes the character stop and wander about life from a broader scope since Charlotte becomes more aware of old age suddenly. Thus, “Charlotte views her younger selves with a certain detachment. They are herself, but other incarnations, innocents going about half-forgotten business. She is not nostalgic about them—dear me, no” (Lively 8) but there is a recognition of the past as a moment in time when she was fit and healthy, and pain was something she barely experimented. Seen in this light, the character of Charlotte can be termed as a Reifungsroman protagonist as she confronts a terrible event as a moment to reflect about her past and who she is in order to live her life to the fullest until the last day of her life. In this sense,

Reifungsromane do not paint a uniformly rosy picture of old age— they include themes of physical and psychic pain; loneliness; alienation from family and youthful society; self-doubt feelings of uselessness; and grief over the loss of friends, mental acuity, and physical energy— there is, nevertheless, an opening up of life for many of these aging heroines as they literally take to the open road in search of themselves and new roles in life. (Waxman 16)

In this sense, old age in the novel is often defined as an inevitable change where the physical body resents and loses vitality and mobility, as one moves on to later stages of the life course. There is an association between old age and disease so extended in Western societies where ageing is perceived as an illness that needs to be cured. In fact, it is defined in the novel as “a condition, and a condition from which one suffered, but the dignified and expedient thing was to dismiss it, as far as possible” (Lively, *How It All*

Began 118). Furthermore, in the novel *Lively* delves into the idea of the transformation of the self into a different one that is difficult to recognise due to the considerable changes that a person experiences through time. This can be seen when Rose, Charlotte's daughter, reflects about her mother's own process of ageing after the hip incident and begins to be confronted with what old age really is. The same happens to the characters of Janna in *The Diaries of Jane Somers* or Stephen in *The Century's Daughter* where the younger generations are exposed to old age and to their own mortality. In the case of Rose in *How It All Began*,

She felt nowadays these painful twinges of compunction where her mother was concerned. Not just on account of the hip, but the whole business of age, of what has happened to her, what happens, the way in which a person is pushed into another incarnation, becomes a different version of themselves. Her old mother was still herself, but she was diminished in some way, had lost emphasis, was not the figure of Rose's childhood and youth, and Rose felt in some irrational way guilty. (73)

In this reflection about her mother, transformation over the years is associated with the idea of decline where Rose observes her mother through the eyes of decline, unable to perceive that, despite the physical changes, her mother still strives to continue being independent and back to normality, especially to her home. Indeed, for the character of Charlotte, more than physical pain after the mugging, it is the fear of not being able to come back to her home and continue with her life without the help or assistance of others, an idea that will be developed throughout the novel as Charlotte's desire of returning home becomes an obsession. In this sense, Gullette considers that the predominant ideas associated with old age predispose some elders to act in accordance with socio-cultural expectations. Thus, in the end, "knowing what we know about the role that mind plays in illness— even the worst— a story well told could lengthen, or at least gladden; your one

and only life” (Gullette, *Declining to Decline* 51), as in the case of Charlotte who focuses on recovery rather than on the limitations of the incidents in her daily life performance. Furthermore, during the novel, Lively does not romanticise with later life, but on the contrary, departs from the idea that old age inflicts in the self a series of losses: she believes that only a defiant attitude can help the ageing self to adapt to both cognitive and physical changes.

One of the major challenges in the relation between the ageing self and the house and possessions is the desire to age in place. However, in contradistinction to other novels already analysed, the character of Charlotte accepts to be moved to her daughter’s house until she recovers, an idea that Maudie Fowler contemplated in *The Diaries of Jane Somers*, but it never took place. The fact that Charlotte is temporarily dispossessed from her house and possessions, to occupy a space in which she does not feel familiar, highlights the importance of the idea of ageing in place. According to Janine L Wiles et al “ageing in place related to a sense of identity both through independence and autonomy and through caring relationships and roles in the places people lives” (357). Indeed, there are several reasons why the ageing self forges emotional connection with the house and possessions that favour such attachment with the place inhabited as developed in the theoretical framework of this dissertation.

For example, in chapter two, I have mentioned how there are several levels of attachment which vary greatly among individuals, since, in extreme cases, the idea of being detached from the dwelling place is regarded with anxiety and fear by the person who often refuse to abandon his/her place. This is illustrated in many of the novels where the house is used in order to replace social interaction, and where the person might end up developing what Clare Marcus Cooper calls “domocentrism”(80), as happened to the character of Marcia Ivory in *Quartet in Autumn*. In other cases of strong attachment, the

person's refuses to abandon one's home, which is the strongest level of attachment, following Shamai's "sacrifice for a place" (349). This has already been explored in Alice Bell in *Union Street*, and Maudie Fowler in *The Diaries of a Good Neighbour*.

In *How It All Began*, Charlotte's recovery in her daughter's home reinforces the feeling of anxiety and desperation to see herself fitting into the identity of an old dependent old woman. Thus, in order to return to her house, Charlotte begins to learn how to walk again and be crutch-free as soon as possible. However, this process takes more time than she expects, "doing what she would not wish to do - living with her daughter and son-in-law. She is filled with resentment and compunction" (35), a turning point in her life where she engages in a process of life review in order to make sense of her past, and the future that awaits her once she leaves her daughter's home. So, "Charlotte is much given to reflection. She reflects upon the past, she reflects with irritation—upon the present. The past is not gone, but is now that abiding ballast without which she would capsize" (Lively, *How It All Began*, 140) in order to grow and continue with her life despite the setback.

Crucially, in this dissertation I have developed the manifold nature of the term 'home', understood as a source of identification, reliability, shelter and continuity throughout the lifespan. Lively's novel delves into the feeling of nostalgia for the loss of home, and the environment the ageing person is used to, deprived as she is because of an accident and health decline: "In Rose and Gerry's house, Charlotte misses her books. Her familiar walls, lined with language" (36). In addition, in the unfamiliarity of her daughter's place she feels even more connected with her house, in a total identification, now separated and incomplete. As Janine Wiles et al suggest the following as regards home:

for several participants, home was seen as a kind of refuge or base from which to go out and do activities. Aging in place therefore had the practical advantage of the

security and safety of home. For some, it was important to stay in their own homes as long as possible; for others, it was more about the sense of familiarity, which their homes represented. (361)

In this sense, in *How It All Began* Charlotte's stay in her daughter's house causes a split between Charlotte and her dwelling place, which has an impact upon Charlotte whose daily rumination about her position and her home while recovering. Although her situation is provisional, Charlotte is increasingly more aware of her need to be back home after so many years in complete identification with her space:

If Charlotte was at home, her day would be filled. Getting up with The Today Programme (occasionally interrupting John Humphrys), breakfast with *The Guardian*, tidy the kitchen, do a bit of cleaning, put on a wash, walk to the shops, lunch with a book propped up in front of her- one of the few mitigating factors of life alone is that you can read during meals without giving offence- a rest on the sofa, then whatever needs doing in the afternoon- letters, a spell in the garden, her shift at the adult literacy class on Tuesdays and Thursdays, then the evening with plenty more reading time and whatever is acceptable on the telly. (Lively, *How It All Began* 39)

Because of Charlotte's need to return to her normal life, the character refuses to let this setback affect her state of mind. Therefore, she is portrayed as a strong ageing woman who is willing to enjoy her life as much as possible. This novel proves to be a fit example of the Reifungsroman genre, where she takes her temporary physical impairment as an inflection point and undertakes an examination of her past, her present and what she still can do in the future. Indeed, an important characteristic pertaining to this new genre is how after an important moment in the life of the protagonists "these protagonists usually make an internal journey to their past through dreams and frequent flashbacks" and

“usually they become have become revitalized, newly self-knowledgeable, self-confident, and independent before they move forward” (Waxman 17). Interestingly, this moment of self-transformation is often connected to the material extension of the self where the ageing self reflects and interacts with objects that connect him/her with a distant past.

Following Waxman, she considers that in the novels in the Reifungsroman genre, there is a “female attentiveness to objects” (184) that has been illustrated in the work of Pat Barker, Doris Lessing and Barbara Pym. Then, “it is evident in this new genre’s focus on aging’s relationships to the domestic environment and the details of household management” or “when they move to new, alien environments” (Waxman 185) as in the case of Lively’s *How It All Began*. In this sense, the material environment fulfils an important role in Charlotte’s life whose independence is rooted in the possibility to maintain her domestic space and the control over the things she wants to do or not.

As time goes by, Charlotte finally feels that she might be able to return home, a dream coming true, and she is willing to make some changes once she comes back home as hiring someone who will assist her with some of the daily activities. Charlotte has acquired some wisdom as she realises that she will not be able to do as before. Because,

it is not good pretending that she is self-sufficient once more- she cannot get in and out of a bath, stairs remain an undertaking, shopping and cooking would be a challenge. But she is inching towards that complacent state before her life collide so briefly with that of that vanished stranger, the person who decided that he (or she) could not go a moment longer without taking possession of Charlotte’s bag.
(Lively, *How It All Began* 202)

Although of Maudie Fowler in *The Diaries of Jane Somers* bears some similarities with Charlotte, Maudie never leaves her place to be taken care of by Janna or any other relative.

Both Penelope Lively and Doris Lessing especially emphasise the importance of daily routine, the feeling of control, navigating one's space, and the sense of having one's identity through materiality and the place. Indeed, As Shmuel Shamai states, "having a sense of place consists of three phases. The first phase is belonging to a place, the middle phase is attachment to a place, and the highest phase is commitment to a place" (349). The fact that Charlotte accepts to leave her home for a short period of time until she finally recovers indicates that, even though she forged a link with her place, she has not reached the highest level of attachment or commitment. Following Shamai, I developed such a level of attachment in the portrayal of characters in *The Century's Daughter* and in *Quartet in Autumn*, which fall into the category "sacrifice for a place" (349). That is to say, this "readiness to give up personal and/or collective interests for the sake of the larger interest of the place" (350) is actually taken to the extreme when Marcia and Alice Bell die alone in their homes.

Charlotte's ageing narrative is not one of decline, but, that of self-growth and appreciation of life after the incident. Through her process of physical recovery she waits anxiously for her return to her home. Thus, "Charlotte was not too bad, as it happened. She was crutch-free now, around the house, the stairs were less of a challenge, she had managed a bath without Rose to help her in and out. 'Home next week', she said. A statement, not a query. Try it, anyway" (Lively, *How It All Began* 227). In fact, Charlotte fits into what Margaret Morganroth Gullette states as progress narratives, where the character celebrates her regained mobility with every little thing she can do by herself without the help of others.

In this sense, every move freely without the crutches keeps Charlotte closer to her home and back to her former self before the incident: "Charlotte cleared the table, moved about the kitchen, rejoiced in these new abilities: I can put things into the dishwasher, I

can change the rubbish bin liner, I can clean the able and the worktop, I am a free woman, or nearly so” (228).

In contradistinction to Pat Barker and Doris Lessing, Lively introduces the idea of home help as a fundamental step in order to Charlotte’s return to her place. Then, a new perspective of home help is proposed by Lively, one which differs from the viewpoint deployed in Barker’s and Lessing’s novels where home help and nursing care were regarded by the ageing characters as intruders to their spaces, and a reminder of the frailty of their bodies who after all the effort needed someone to carry out basic needs. This can be interpreted as a change in the political and social measures to help the elder in cases such as Charlotte. It also brings about the normalisation of home help as an instrument to retain independence and not as a negative result of decline; in other words, home help can contribute to the elder’s independence in his/her environment. In the novel, at the end, “Charlotte is home. Grateful to Rose and Gerry; deeply grateful to be once more her own woman. She is mobile, if precarious, and there is Elena from the Czech Republic who comes in daily to minister, to shop, to do household chores” (242).

In this chapter I have demonstrated that Lively focuses on the house, possessions and the self differently. In *How It All Began* Charlotte, the protagonist, is momentarily away from her place, which provides the framework for an exploration of ageing in place alongside the attachment to domestic environment. Also, in both novels there is an emotional journey to wholeness, a feature commonly found in the Reifungsroman, triggered by a photograph (in the case of Glyn) by an accident (for Charlotte). This journey helps them come to terms with the ravages of time, and their ageing selves. In fact, Reifungsroman “insists, above all, on the humanity of the old” (188), and this should be privileged today, when the discourse of decline and ageist thinking are so prevalent.



7. Conclusions

In this dissertation, I have explored how ageing and the material world interact in a selection of novels by Pat Barker, Doris Lessing, Barbara Pym and Penelope Lively. These writers are connected by their concern to give visibility to the daily life discourses of old age, as how ageing is experienced in the context of the protagonist's home and possessions.

The main focus of study has been placed in the relationship that the ageing self establishes with their material possessions over time, and how this results, in most of the cases, in processes of identification with the physical environment, and the forging of an emotional bond with accumulated possessions, which act as materialisations of past experience and of their relationship with their loved ones. In today's culture materiality has become central in the way people relate and communicate with one another. In many ways, not only culture has been made material, as Ian Woodward states, but also the emotional experience of human beings in the world, which has contributed to replace values by materialistic whims.

As I have developed in this dissertation, due to demographic changes several disciplines have addressed ageing in their research, especially in the field of the humanities, as explored in the visual arts, feminist theory, cultural criticism or fiction. I have mentioned key figures in the emerging field of ageing studies such as the cultural critics Margaret Morganroth Gullette, Stephen Katz, or Roberta Maierhofer, among others, whose work has contributed to shed light on how culture and society affect the way in which individuals experience time and ageing across the lifespan. Furthermore, as explained in the previous chapters, ageing is an interdisciplinary subject of study in which

several disciplines intersect. In this sense, firstly, I have reviewed the current existing literature in material culture studies, space and gender theory, and I have also discussed the psychology of ownership and attachment, and subject-object theory in which the relation between the self and its dwelling place and possessions has been explored. As Russel W. Belk posits, “one of the foremost issues involving materialism that needs to be addressed is whether materialism is a positive or a negative trait” (“Materialism” 266).

However, I have placed the focus of attention on the way in which materialism affects the construction and maintenance of ageing identities in later life and old age. Therefore, I have approached materiality in order to point out its importance as basic scaffolding of the self, and how its function goes beyond a physical contextualisation of the self within a physical location, but it affects the emotional representation of the self. Among many aspects under analysis in this dissertation, objects have been highlighted as conveyors of meaning, status, identity markers, modes of experiences; objects also serve the purpose of underlining differentiation in a world where mass consumption tends to impose a certain assimilation and sameness on individuals. Belk considers that the relation established nowadays with our material possessions varies greatly depending on generations, so this difference shows that “the expectation of generational differences in materialism might be predicated” (“Materialism” 268). As the person grows older, possessions begin to be regarded not as a means of control and mastery over one’s territory or as sources of power and prestige, but as elements of emotional nurturance. In this light,

as people age, there is evidence to suggest that their thoughts about the future tend to decrease and their thoughts about the past tend to increase (Cameron 1977).

Whereas major accomplishments and relationships lie in the future for adolescents

and relationships lie in the future for adolescents, they lie in the past for older adults.

(Belk, “Materialism” 269)

In this line of thought, I consider that the novelists selected for this dissertation explore the way in which the house, as a possession itself, and its contents display a complex relationship with the ageing self in terms of use and distribution of the space inhabited during later life and old age. Indeed, the house provides nurturance, and security to such an extent that the ageing individual feels s/he can express his/her identity through space and possessions. As Melanie Lovatt states,

through the course of a lifetime people can accumulate a vast amount of objects, and a growing literature attests to the ways in which the lives of people and objects intersect. Objects become meaningful to people by their association with events, places and people (Rubinstein 1978); Shenk et al. 2004; Cieraad 2010), both reflect and create aspects of people’s identities (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981, Belk 1988; Miller 2010), and come to act as ‘material companions’, acquiring ‘meaning and value by sheer dint of their constancy in a life’ (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1989). (Lovatt 14)

This multifaceted relation between the self and its material extension in the world has been often portrayed in literature tinted with pessimism and loss, viewing time as an enemy which imposed on the person a gradual disappearing of self and its value. The exaltation of youth has been used as an instrument against both women and men, who confront the different life stages differently, since, as I have discussed in this dissertation, ageism discourse is imposed more fiercely on women, even though

men, too, are prone to periodic bouts of depression about ageing— for instance, when feeling insecure or unfulfilled or insufficiently rewarded in their jobs. But men rarely panic about aging in the way women often do. Getting older is less

profoundly wounding for a man, for in addition to the propaganda for youth that puts both men and women on the defensive as they age, there is a double standard about aging that denounces women with special severity. (Sontag 286)

In this sense, my approach has centred on women's processes of coming to age in fiction written by contemporary British novelists who fulfil in a greater or lesser extent the interest in materiality. An exception to this analysis on women's processes of coming to terms within their context of their home and possessions is found in Penelope Lively's *The Photograph*. In contrast to the other novels, I included this one because I considered that the author's approach to the impact on objects to alter the narrative of our past in later life was connected to the theoretical framework of my dissertation, even though Lively focuses on the experience of an ageing man who finds out the material evidence of an infidelity rather than an ageing woman.

As it has been explored, this dissertation delves into the world of the elder taking into consideration a new sub-genre, coined Reifungsroman by Barbara Frey Waxman, in the twentieth century. In this sense, Waxman's work sheds light on the need to reformulate cultural, social and political conceptions about old age and ageing, as she gathers the fundamental work of some novelists in reimagining old age outside pessimism. The Reifungsroman stems from the original Bildungsroman, but it differs in the fact that its protagonists are in their late middle age, or later life. In fact, there has been a shift of paradigm in the way in which ageing and old age are narrated, especially since old-fashioned ideas related to physical and cognitive representation of the elderly have been challenged and re-interpreted from a more accepting and inclusive perspective.

Interestingly, most of the novels that belong to this new sub-genre portray the life of elderly women: Cathy McGlynn, Margaret O'Neill and Michaela Schrage-Fröhe agree on the notion, expressed by many feminist and ageing critics such as Margaret

Morganroth Gullette, or Kathleen Woodward, that “yet, the ageing woman’s experience is one that has, up until relatively recently, received little critical attention in feminist studies” (4). Therefore, following up this need to address ageing from different perspectives, I have analysed Pat Barker’s *Union Street* (1982), and *The Century’s Daughter* (1986), Doris Lessing’s *The Diary of a God Neighbour* (in *The Diary of Jane Somers*, 1984), Barbara Pym’s *Quartet in Autumn* (1977), and Penelope Lively’s *The Photograph* (2003), and *How It All Began* (2011), where the novelists portray the influence that materiality has on the ageing self in the last stage of the life course. Therefore, an important similarity in all the novels under study is the writer’s recognition of the role of materiality in later life and the exploration of this intimate relation in their narrative. Thus, I have discussed how the house and its contents are fictionalised in these novels, as well as the way in which the elder is portrayed physically and emotionally within the context of their material landscape following the main characteristics of the Reifungsroman genre. Also, I have stressed the relevance of possessions in the life of their owner, and I have discussed the need to reinforce someone’s presence in the world by the act of participating in the current material discourse that predominates in today’s Western societies.

As far as the novels are concerned, firstly, I have dealt with Alice Bell in *Union Street* (1982) and Liza Wright in *The Century’s Daughter* (1986), written by Pat Barker. Interestingly, Barker devotes the last chapter of *Union Street* to portray the life of the elderly Alice Bell, to move on to the analysis of *The Century’s Daughter*, which, according to John Brannigan, “grows out of the final chapter or story in *Union Street*, the story of Alice Bell” (56). The inclusion of old age and ageing as a central topic in fiction has been done progressively in the last decades, and in most of the cases it has been a response of the own writers to their own processes and experiences of ageing. Therefore,

Barker's fiction goes back to the world of the ageing after the publication of *Union Street* and devotes an entire novel to daily experiences of later life and old age. The similarities among the novels are multiple since,

Like Alice, Liza is living in a cold, condemned house, and prefers to die rather than be moved to 'sheltered accommodation'... Both women bear the scars of working-class labour and the struggle for survival against war, poverty and loss, and both articulate clearer sense of working-class community than appears to be available to their younger neighbours. Both Alice and Liza are forced to confront the state authorities who presume to act in their interest, although Liza's relationship with her social welfare visitor, Stephen, develops into a warm friendship, unlike Alice who feels as if she has been raped by the impersonal bureaucrat who wants her out of her home. (Brannigan 57)

As seen above, the house is a material link in both novels where Barker is concerned with the attachment after years of navigating one's space. Thus, despite the poor conditioning of the dwelling place, Barker's narrative places in materiality a point of departure in the understanding of the daily life of the elder, in this case, women's experiences of old age. In this sense, this contributes to shed light on the way in which the ageing individuals experience their last stage of the life course not as passive agents, but active narrators of their own story. Moreover, this notion of the home as a place that matters is a recurrent topic in the novels under analysis, such as Doris Lessing's *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* (1983), which follows the context of post-war Britain and its effect on a marginalised sector of society, such as the ageing one. Lessing's narrative integrates some of the characteristics of Barker's fiction on ageing, since the writer also focuses on the way in which the social services interact with the elder and how the elder perceives their visits or fear to become a subject of scrutiny in their lives. Therefore, the cross-

generational bonding that occurs between Maudie Fowler and Janna Somers is very relevant since Janna is repeatedly confused with being “a good neighbour” rather than just a good friend. Furthermore, Lessing, through Janna, points out the existence of British social services that provide multiple services for the elder, but in the end they are seen as a threat to their sense of control and independence. Thus, when Janna asks, “what Services is [Maudie] entitled to?” (40), the answer is clear, Maudie would be entitled to “Home Help, of course. But [they] tried that before, and it didn’t work. A Good Neighbour, but she didn’t want one...’ (40). This reinforces the difficulties that British social services faced in 1980s in order to provide the help needed to the elder due to their initial refusal to let outsiders in their homes. Besides the attention given to social services, both Barker and Lessing focus on the house in these novels which are scheduled for demolition. The ageing characters feel the fear of having to be evicted to shelter accommodation and struggle to age in their homes, as a way to reinforce the self’s need of continuity over time and the maintenance of their biographical past. Both Pat Barker and Doris Lessing share these representations of old age and later life in the construction of their physical environment, as well as the cross-generational bonding that occurs between Liza and the social coworker Stephen in *The Century’s Daughter*, and between Janna Somers and Maudie Fowler in *The Diaries of Jane Somers*.

However, it is interesting to observe how in *The Diaries of Jane Somers* the author makes especial reference to the way in which an identification between the elder and the dwelling place is at the strongest level of attachment and results in what James Krasner has referred to *amalgamation* (210), or Proshansky as *place identity* (112). Furthermore, in the refusal to abandon her place, despite frail health, the ageing self assumed what Shmuel Shamai considers as “sacrifice for a place” (349); in other words, the identification and feeling of emotional attachment impede the person to consider being

moved out of their home and in the case of *Union Street*, Alice Bell considers suicide as she engages in a farewell ritual to all the dearest possessions.

Objects in later life not only become dear possessions, but they also begin to be accumulated in such a way that the elder ends up developing hoarding patterns. Because I wanted to explore the literary portrayal of this behaviour that some elderly people develop throughout years of buying, I selected Barbara Pym's *Quartet in Autumn* to follow up the idea of excessive accumulation present in the work of Barker and Lessing. The novel is published in the late seventies, but despite lacking a chronological connection, it can be seen as a follow-up of the relevance of the dwelling place in later life. Thus, in *Quartet in Autumn* (1977), the character of Marcia Ivory bears some resemblances with Maudie's excessive accumulation, hoarding, and what Clare Marcus Cooper considers "domocentrism" (80) or replacement of social interaction by a more intimate relation with the home and possessions. In this sense, Pym explores, like Lessing, the importance of the home for the elder, as both writers delve into the character's processes of coming to terms with their ageing selves and their material legacy in the world. Especially in the novel *Quartet in Autumn* where Marcia's last will is used as an instrument to connect the four protagonists of the novel Letty, Norman, Edwin, once Marcia has died.

In addition, the house is an important element in Penelope Lively's literary production, who has extensively written about the role of materiality in later life, both in non-fiction and fiction alike. The writer shows a concern about how the past is evoked through the materialisation of memory and how the ageing self finds in the house a place where a sense of protection and nurturance can be maintained, as well as a fluid interaction with former selves. Lively has written several novels about the world of the elder, but I have selected *The Photograph* (2003), and *How It All Began* (2011), where it

is evident the author's fictional interest in the role of materiality in later life. The first one, *The Photograph*, was published in 2003, and even though, as mentioned previously, does not focus on the relation between women ageing and materiality, which is the thematic link in this dissertation, the novel connects with the idea that objects function as anchors of the self. Furthermore, objects in the novel foster an open communication with the past that, in the case of the character of Glyn, triggers in him the need to reconstruct the narrative of his marriage with his wife after finding material evidence of an infidelity.

If *Lively* centres on the role of objects as elements of disruption in later life in *The Photograph*, in *How It All Began*, the novelist develops the significance of the house as a space where the ageing self feels at ease to express himself/herself freely from social and cultural constraints. In this regard, the character of Charlotte fulfils the main characteristics of Reifungsroman since after being mugged in the street and have a temporary immobility, she moves to her daughter's house, but in the end she longs to come back to her house. In fact, Charlotte's daughter realises that her mother "found agonizing to have to live with her and Gerry, and knew that it was not just that she wanted to be in her own house, but that she felt intrusive, superfluous" (74), because, in the end, being outside someone's domestic space makes the person, especially in later life, feel without the control and protection that their homes provide as it has been illustrated already in this dissertation.

In conclusion, all of these contemporary British novelists share many characteristics in their approach to women's experiences of later life and ageing. An example of this is the reconfiguration of ageing identities outside decline and pessimism. They reconstruct a new meaning of old age where wholeness and acceptance toward death and time can be achieved, and later life can be envisioned as a journey to self-fulfillment. Furthermore, this journey of self-discovery in later life that Reifungsroman portrays, as

explored already in chapter three, is used as a strategy by women writers who in their novels offer alternative stories and perspectives on materiality and ageing, “creating a discourse through which readers can experience what is like to be a middle-aged or old woman, and finally, for turning a bipolar concept of youth and age into that of an age continuum and leading us toward an ageless utopia” (Waxman 184). The ageing self is described alongside the memorabilia of the house with objects such as the mirror, used as elements that help confront their ageing processes. In addition, a relevant feature of Reifungsroman, the idea of cross-generational bond, makes an appearance in several novels as this is a moment where both older and younger generations can learn from one another, fostering and promoting a positive understanding of what old age really means. In this line of thought, there are other novelists who also focus on ageing in their production, such as Jessica Anderson’s *Tirra Lirra* (1978), Deborah Moggach’s *Those Foolish Things* (2004), Nora Ephron’s *I Remember Nothing* (2010), Marilynne Robinson’s *Lila* (2014), to name a few. These novels prove that there is room to explore ageing in fiction.

All in all, in this dissertation I have explored new understandings of old age and later life from a gender perspective where women and materiality are the protagonists. In fact, with this attention given to material culture within the domestic sphere of the household, I have illustrated that, as Ian Woodward posits, “objects are polysemic” (161) and that fulfil multiple roles. Thus, through objects, the self not only finds a physical connection between past and present, but a strong source of identification with them. Consequently, materiality should be further researched in the field of ageing studies. In my findings I have observed how these writers delve into the world of the elder acknowledging the powerful role of material culture throughout the life span. This is particularly relevant in later life, due to the meaningful symbolism of daily life objects

and the dwelling place in the construction and understanding of what it means to be old nowadays and the impact of subject-object interaction on the ageing self at home.

The field of ageing studies makes important advances as there is room for further research in, for example, ageing and diversity, queer ageing, ageing masculinities, ageing between cultures, and racial and ethnical ageing, among others. In fact, as McGlynn et al state, there is the need to challenge and respond the prevailing ageist discourses. In fact, as they posit, in popular culture the ageing of many celebrities in the last few decades has put on the spot the difficulties these women face on their daily activities, once praised, now repudiated because of the ravages of time. In this regard, “the ageism experienced by Madonna, Carrie Fisher and Jane Fonda is not atypical in the contemporary entertainment industry, but the issues it raises with regards to the cultural construction of the ageing woman are common across multiple cultural texts and contexts” (4). This common concern is due to the establishment of disciplines such as ageing studies, cultural studies, and cultural gerontology, which open up the path for the study of ageing people and their difficulties. Indeed, ageing affects all of us differently, and it is our duty to see the commonalities and differences in order to construct bridges between human beings. Thus, with this dissertation, I have attempted to illustrate the significant role of ageing studies, cultural gerontology and the humanities in raising awareness of new ageing identities. In so doing, I have demonstrated that it is possible to address our last stage in the life course in a different way, by means of coming to terms with our ageing selves and looking at old age as a narrative of progress, rather than decline.

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Resumen en español

La tesis doctoral que presento tiene como objeto de estudio el análisis de la tercera edad en su entorno físico y material en la literatura contemporánea británica. El interés de esta investigación nace del auge de los estudios de la vejez en varias disciplinas académicas, especialmente en las humanidades, que prueban la importancia actual de este tema. En realidad, desde que el ser humano nace existe sobre él la imposición del tiempo en un cuerpo que, a medida que avanza en los distintos ciclos vitales, se enfrentará a un cambio irreversible que lo llevará lentamente hacia la muerte inevitable del ser. Sin embargo, en este camino hacia las últimas etapas de la vida se ha impregnado en las últimas décadas un sentimiento de profundo pesimismo alrededor de los procesos de envejecimiento que no hace sino mermar las capacidades de la persona, que afronta el paso del tiempo desde varias perspectivas, cultural, social, política y personal, y que, frecuentemente, lo sumen en un sentimiento de desasosiego.

Los últimos avances en medicina y la mejora social y política en la calidad de vida de la mayoría de la población han afectado a la prolongación de la esperanza de vida y la demografía actual, acentuando una gran desproporcionalidad entre ciudadanos jóvenes y envejecidos, que ha sido interpretada como una amenaza al sistema económico global y las futuras pensiones de las generaciones emergentes. De esta forma, la vejez y el anciano han pasado de ser temas secundarios en el discurso político, social y cultural a ocupar un lugar de gran actualidad en nuestra sociedad. En este sentido, uno de los mayores retos que supone la tercera edad y el envejecimiento es la necesidad de reformular de forma plural y significativa el concepto de vejez y ancianidad que ha predominado en los últimos años, y confrontar eficazmente muchos de los estereotipos que se asocian con el proceso de envejecimiento y las últimas etapas del desarrollo humano.

Como se analiza en esta disertación, la vejez como objeto científico es bastante reciente, ya que no fue hasta principios de 1903 cuando el microbiólogo ruso Iliá Metchnikoff acuñó el término *gerontología*. Esta disciplina comprende todo lo relacionado con la investigación del proceso de envejecimiento en los seres humanos desde una perspectiva interdisciplinar, donde se tienen en cuenta los aspectos, biológicos, culturales, sociales y psicológicos, entre otros, de la vejez. Además, tal es el interés actual en la tercera edad y el envejecimiento hoy en día, que en las últimas décadas ha habido una especialización de disciplinas como la psicología, la medicina o las humanidades, entre otras áreas de estudio, reconociendo la relevancia del tema y la necesidad de darle respuesta de forma concreta y personalizada.

De esta forma, esta tesis surge del convencimiento de la necesidad de entender la tercera edad y la vejez en un espectro más amplio que incluya la importancia de la materialidad en el desarrollo de la persona a lo largo de la vida, y cómo esta relación que se establece en el tiempo y a través de la rutina afecta al anciano en las últimas etapas de su vida. Por lo tanto, el presente trabajo se centra en analizar el trabajo de escritoras contemporáneas británicas que con su representación del envejecimiento femenino de sus novelas prestan atención a la relación que se establece entre la persona mayor, su casa y sus posesiones.

Margaret Morganroth Gullette, reconocida por su labor en el campo de la edad, considera que “we are aged more by culture than by chromosomes” (101), lo cual pone en tela de juicio la visión actual asociada a la vejez y el envejecimiento que ha transformado el concepto de este último y tercera edad en un discurso de marcado pesimismo que no hace sino modelar las actitudes y expectativas de la vejez de la persona en un sentimiento de miedo y rechazo.

Por ello como respuesta a esta premisa, y como se analiza en esta disertación han surgido en los últimos años los estudios de la edad como disciplina. El término, estudios de la edad, emerge en los noventa y tiene como convicción la reformulación de la identidad envejecida, y proveer nuevos modelos de envejecimiento donde se tengan en cuenta la diversidad de género, raza, etnia o sexualidad a la hora de abarcar la complejidad de este tema. Por este motivo, el estudio de la edad es interdisciplinar, y aunque existe la complejidad de unificar criterios en cuestiones ontológicas, “we all study age culture now or in the past, here or abroad, in dominant and subcultures, with the knowledge that the systems producing age and aging could be different– and that if they were, our experiences of the life course would be too” (Gullette 102). En este sentido, se puede comprobar cómo en cuestiones relacionadas con la maternidad, en los últimos años se ha producido un cambio cuantitativo en la normalización de ésta en edades comprendidas entre los treinta y los cuarenta, y se ha pasado a considerar los veinte como una edad demasiado prematura y limitante para el desarrollo profesional y emocional de la mujer. Tal y como considera Juan Miguel Martínez-Galiano, “tal vez por la actual situación económica y el aumento de la utilización de técnicas de reproducción asistida, los embarazos en mujeres mayores de cuarenta han aumentado en los últimos años” (452), afectando a la reinterpretación social de “ser demasiado mayor” para ampliar este concepto en torno a los cuarenta. Este cambio paulatino que ha afectado no solo a la concepción de la maternidad, sino a otros ámbitos, demuestra que el envejecimiento es un proceso natural que no es en sí mismo ni bueno ni malo, y que obedece a imposiciones culturales y sociales sujetas a las innovaciones en medicina y calidad de vida del individuo. De hecho, en el estudio de la tercera edad, uno de los mayores retos ha sido “dragging “aging”–arguably the most biologized aspect of the construct of age– away from nature and toward culture” (102).

El factor cultural en la aproximación de la edad y los procesos de envejecimiento ha sido durante algunos años examinado sin tener en cuenta la fuerte relación que existe entre la persona con su entorno físico y material, produciendo en los últimos años una materialización del ser que desde una temprana edad aprende a expresar su identidad a través de las posesiones. De hecho, la cultura occidental ha sufrido una fuerte materialización de sus valores que afecta a la forma en la que la persona interacciona y percibe el mundo exterior, así como a la construcción del auto concepto y del yo, que en muchas ocasiones suele estar impregnado por la necesidad de identificarse con lo que tiene o la ausencia de ello.

Ian Woodward considera que el reciente estudio de la cultura material tiene como objetivo “[to] emphasise[s] how apparently inanimate things within the environment act on people, and are acted upon by people, for the purposes of carrying out social functions, regulating social relations and giving symbolic meaning to human activity” (3). Siguiendo esta línea argumentativa, mi tesis analiza desde una perspectiva teórica la relación sujeto-objeto durante la vejez en las últimas etapas de vida del ser humano dando voz a las experiencias de las protagonistas envejecidas en su contexto físico.

En esta línea de pensamiento, Russell Belk ha expresado recientemente que la exposición continuada de la persona con la casa y sus posesiones favorece la identificación de la persona con el objeto, creando un fuerte vínculo emocional en el que el anciano deposita en su casa no solo los recuerdos del pasado o las posesiones que ha acumulado durante su vida, sino el sentimiento de pertenencia a una localización física a la que considera su hogar y su punto de referencia en el mundo. Tal y como Shmuel Shmai considera, “location itself is not sufficient condition to create a sense of place. In order to create a sense and attachment to place, there is a need for a long and deep experience of a place, and preferably involvement in the place” (348). Es por ello que en la tercera edad el concepto de

espacio y materialidad adquiere un significado más complejo que en otros estadios del desarrollo humano y dan explicación a la negativa del anciano a abandonar su casa y sus posesiones. Como se puede observar en este análisis de la representación ficcional de la figura de la persona mayor, se prueba que “we regard our possessions as part of ourselves” (139) por varios motivos que se ven fortalecidos por el tiempo y la interacción con determinadas posesiones que la persona utiliza como fuente de identidad, reconocimiento o conectores con su pasado y seres queridos entre otras.

Como analizo en esta disertación, la figura de la casa es ampliamente analizada como punto de referencia en todas las novelas seleccionadas para este análisis. Principalmente, el hogar es un espacio rico en simbolismos, donde la persona mayor tiende a sentir que puede volver a conectar con su pasado de una forma segura. Antonio Cristoforetti, Francesca Gennai y Giulia Rodeschini afirman que “in the aging process and in widowhood, the home is progressively invested with new meanings and functions, and becomes the emotional center of older women’s lives. It is a territory of meaning, a place where pleasure, affect and esthetics closely interweave with the emotional dimension” (228). Sin embargo, no todas las personas mayores desarrollan la misma conexión con su hogar y sus posesiones. En este sentido, en relación con el apego que puedan existir con el espacio físico, y que analizo en esta disertación, se puede observar en estudios realizados por Shamai, Proshanky, Canter y Relph, entre otros, que los niveles de apego varían entre personas: de no tener ningún sentido de pertenencia con el espacio habitado, a una fuerte dependencia con el hogar en el que ni el evidente deterioro físico o la merma en la ejecución de sus habilidades diarias impiden que la persona abandone su hogar en busca de cuidados o un espacio más accesible a sus nuevas necesidades.

En las novelas seleccionadas para esta tesis, se analiza cómo las autoras británicas Pat Barker, Doris Lessing, Barbara Pym y Penelope Lively tratan el tema de la vejez en el

cuerpo envejecido femenino en relación con la casa y los objetos. Esta narrativa que resalta la importancia para la persona mayor de mantener un sentimiento de continuidad en su hogar es, a la vez, un punto de salida para el análisis de nuevos conceptos de vejez que entran en el género del *Reifungsroman*, término acuñado por Barbara Frey Waxman en 1990, y que tiene como propósito adentrarse en la experiencia de la vejez desde una perspectiva que permita al ser envejecido una nueva visión de progreso y sentido de plenitud que, hasta ahora, ha estado ausente en la narrativa sobre la edad. Como afirma Waxman el estudio de la edad ha sido homogeneizado sin prestar atención la diversidad existente entre individuos y cómo esto afecta a sus experiencias de envejecimiento. En este sentido,

recent feminist research across disciplines suggests that male writers' characterizations of the "ages of man" in male Reifungsromane are likely to be very different from women writer's presentations of the "ages of women" in female Reifungsromane; women's lives do not completely conform to male paradigms of experience and development observed by male researchers and thus need to be examined separately from men's lives. (12)

El trabajo de estas autoras no solo da voz al envejecimiento, sino que pueden ser consideradas pioneras en la visualización de la tercera edad y los problemas que conlleva la falta de conexión entre generaciones. Habitamos el mismo espacio, pero rara vez establecemos vínculos significativos que puedan erosionar las barreras creadas por una sociedad que teme al paso del tiempo y las consecuencias físicas que conlleva.

En realidad, en muchas ocasiones, la vejez y la muerte han sido consideradas homólogas cuando, en realidad, la muerte es un destino que no es exclusivo del anciano. Por ello, es fundamental prestar atención a la narrativa contemporánea actual como una forma de aproximarnos a un entendimiento de la tercera edad propio y no impuesto, donde el lector

acepte que las últimas etapas de su vida también pueden ser un lienzo en blanco donde escribir los capítulos más bellos, o, al menos, más significativos. Al observar el papel que desempeñan los objetos en el anciano, se puede observar cómo no solamente son hilos conectores con el pasado, sino que, a su vez, conllevan una función de apoyo a las funciones cognitivas de la persona. James Krasner afirma de esta importancia a nivel institucional, debido a que “for gerontologists and caregivers, understanding metaphorical self-representation helps determine how long the psychological support offered by the home outweighs the hazards of remaining in it” (Krasner 227). De hecho, la memoria se ve afianzada por el contenido de la casa, que en muchos casos representa una vida condensada en objetos. Como propone Ian Woodward,

a primary assertion of MCS is that objects have the ability to signify things— or establish social meanings— on behalf of people, or do ‘social work’, though this culturally communicative capacity should not be automatically assumed. Objects might signify sub-cultural affinity, occupation, participation in a leisure activity, or social status. Furthermore, objects become incorporated into, and present, wider social discourses related to extensively held norms and values enshrined in norms and social institutions. (4)

Como se puede observar, el rol de los objetos en la vida diaria de las personas está lleno de simbolismo, y parte de esta vinculación reside en la interacción física con el objeto a través del tiempo que puede desencadenar en la persona procesos de reminiscencia y, lo que Robert N. Butler llamó, procesos de *Life Review* donde la persona ante la inminencia de la muerte o un evento crucial en su vida busca en el pasado un sentido de identidad y tranquilidad entre el recuerdo de sus yos pasados y su yo actual que, envejecido, encuentra en ese pasado un punto de referencia y anclaje.

Como he mencionado con anterioridad, esta tesis recorre el trabajo de las escritoras británicas Doris Lessing, Pat Barker, Barbara Pym y Penelope Lively en referencia a su interés narrativo en las experiencias de la edad en ancianas donde la materialidad tiene una fuerte presencia. El orden de análisis no tiene una base cronológica, sino temática, que parte de la relevancia que las autoras seleccionadas para esta disertación han dado al contexto físico en torno a la construcción ficcional del mundo del anciano. En este sentido, comienzo con la novela *Union Street* (1982) de la escritora británica Pat Barker donde el último capítulo muestra un tímido interés en la vejez a través del personaje de una envejecida Alice Bell. Escrita a comienzos de los ochenta esta novela muestra de una forma realista el día a día de la persona mayor en relación con su espacio físico, que otras autoras como Doris Lessing, Barbara Pym y Penelope Lively retoman en su visión sobre este tema.

Como se ha podido observar en el trabajo de Simone de Beauvoir y Betty Friedan, entre otras escritoras, sus escritos al principio no se centran en la tercera edad, y es su propia vivencia de ésta, la que se refleja más tarde en sus obras. En el caso de Pat Barker, la autora comienza con *Union Street* para luego seguir explorando este tema con mayor profundidad en *The Century's Daughter* (1986). De hecho, en *Union Street*, la autora hace un retrato realista de la situación de las mujeres de su comunidad al norte de Inglaterra, retrato que va desde la joven Kate Brown hasta la anciana Alice Bell, en lo que parece una secuencia lineal de las etapas de la vida. En este sentido, en el análisis de Barker, llama la atención su forma no solo de visibilizar a la persona envejecida, sino de dar relevancia al rol que tienen la casa y los objetos en su construcción de la identidad envejecida de sus personajes. De hecho, se puede observar cómo entre la casa y la anciana Alice hay una vinculación que, metafóricamente, establece una correlación entre el deterioro de la vivienda y el deterioro del personaje que se niega a abandonar su espacio doméstico a pesar de las malas condiciones de su vivienda. En 1986, Barker publica *The Century's Daughter*, que supone



una profundización de la autora en el mundo del anciano dedicando toda una novela para tratar la situación en la que se encuentra Liza Wright, una anciana que vive en un vecindario que está próximo a ser derruido. Esta comparación entre la casa deteriorada por el paso del tiempo y la persona mayor es un tema recurrente no solo en Pat Barker, sino también en la novelista Doris Lessing y su novela *The Diaries of Jane Somers* (1984). Como se puede comprobar en el análisis, existen lazos entre la representación del anciano en Barker y Lessing que podrían sugerir que *The Diaries of Jane Somers* se nutre a su vez de la exploración de la vejez de Barker.

En este sentido, y siguiendo la descripción que Barker y Lessing hacen del interior de la vivienda de sus personajes donde la excesiva acumulación marca el día a día de sus personajes, analizo la novela de Barbara Pym, *Quartet of Autumn* (1977), que a pesar de ser publicada a finales de los setenta se puede ver como una prolongación de la idea sobre la materialidad expresadas por Barker y Lessing respectivamente. En este sentido, la autora trata el tema de la acumulación excesiva y el síndrome de Diógenes en el personaje de Marcia, (pie de página: al igual que Maudie) donde la casa se convierte en un espacio en el que la relación con las posesiones se ve alterada por un fuerte apego a todo lo relacionado con su extensión material. A parte del impacto de la materialidad en la construcción de la identidad de la persona envejecida, Pym trata otros temas más sociales, como el efecto del tiempo cronológico y social en la persona que se aproxima a la jubilación. Además, incluye componentes del género del *Reifungsroman* en el personaje de Letty que tiene una relación mucho más fluida con sus posesiones y un menor apego al lugar donde ha vivido hasta su jubilación. De hecho, Letty con su nuevo rol de jubilada se adentra en un viaje espiritual hacia la aceptación de su pasado y yo envejecido.

La última autora analizada en mi tesis, Penelope Lively, no se centra en exclusividad en el envejecimiento femenino en sus novelas, pero realza el papel de los objetos en la tercera

edad como materializaciones de la memoria que ayudan al anciano a conectarse con lo vivido. Por este motivo he seleccionado *The Photograph* (2003) como un ejemplo de los objetos, en especial una fotografía para alterar no sólo el presente, sino la concepción del personaje de Glyn que se ve obligado a cuestionarse su pasado una vez entrado en los sesenta. Como se puede observar en el análisis, cuando Glyn se encuentra la prueba material de la infidelidad de su recientemente fallecida esposa, le lleva a un intenso proceso de *Life Review*, característica que se asemeja a las experimentadas por todos los personajes analizados en esta tesis, pero que se ve desde la perspectiva de un hombre mayor.

En este sentido, a diferencia de *The Photograph*, la otra novela analizada escrita por Lively, *How It All Began* (2011), se centra en la importancia de la casa en la tercera edad y cómo el personaje de la anciana Charlotte, tras ser víctima de un robo, se ve impedida durante algunas semanas y es trasladada a casa de su hija. Este cambio temporal de residencia en la vida de Charlotte es utilizado por Lively para explorar el significado emocional y de apego que se desarrolla con los años entre posesión y propietario, valorando más la idea de independencia que su espacio le dispensa que la idea de quedarse a vivir con su hija.

En este sentido, tanto Pat Barker, Doris Lessing, Barbara Pym como Penelope Lively hacen referencia a la función de la casa como un punto de referencia de la persona mayor donde la identidad de la persona reside en gran parte de las posesiones que acumula con los años. Además, estas autoras no solo dan visibilidad a la cotidianidad del ser envejecido, sino que han contribuido con su trabajo a construir nuevas experiencias de la vejez en la tercera edad que deconstruyen y desafían las ideas pesimistas que predominan hoy en día. De hecho, el campo de la literatura ha experimentado en los últimos años una proliferación de escritores que han decidido continuar con el legado de estas escritoras bajo el marco de lo que Waxman considero *Reifungsroman*. Esto es algo crucial, ya que no solo vivimos en una sociedad donde tener y ser se han entrelazado hasta desdibujarse los límites, sino que, además, el papel

del anciano debe ser liberado de ideas preconcebidas que merman su capacidad de crecimiento y desarrollo a través de las diferentes etapas de la vida, especialmente, en las últimas.

Conclusiones en español

En esta disertación, he explorado cómo se representa la interacción entre el envejecimiento y la materialidad en Pat Barker, Doris Lessing, Barbara Pym y Penelope Lively. El trabajo de estas escritoras está conectado en su preocupación de dar visibilidad a los discursos de la vida cotidiana en la vejez, centrándose en cómo las protagonistas experimentan el envejecimiento en el contexto del hogar y las posesiones del protagonista.

El tema principal de esta disertación se centra en la relación que el ser envejecido establece con sus posesiones materiales, y cómo esto resulta, en muchos de los casos en la identificación con su entorno físico, y la formación de un vínculo emocional con las posesiones acumuladas. Hoy en día, la materialidad se ha convertido en un tema central en la forma en la que la persona interactúa y se comunica con otros. En realidad, no solo la cultura se ha materializado, como Ian Woodward afirma, sino también la experiencia de los seres humanos en el mundo, en la se han ido reemplazando poco a poco los valores emocionales por los materialistas.

Como se ha desarrollado en este análisis, debido a los cambios demográficos, varias disciplinas han abordado el envejecimiento en su investigación, especialmente en el campo de las humanidades. Ejemplo de ello son las artes visuales, la teoría feminista, la crítica cultural o la ficción que gradualmente han ido incorporando este tema. En este trabajo se ha mencionado el trabajo de figuras clave en el campo emergente de los estudios sobre el envejecimiento, como los críticos culturales Margaret Morganroth Gullette, Stephen Katz o Roberta Maierhoffer, entre otros, cuyo trabajo ha contribuido a arrojar luz sobre cómo la cultura y la sociedad afectan la forma en la que los individuos experimentan la influencia del tiempo y envejecimiento a lo largo de la vida. Además, como se explicó en los capítulos anteriores, el envejecimiento es un tema de estudio interdisciplinario en el que convergieron

varias disciplinas. En este sentido, en primer lugar, he revisado la literatura existente y actual que investiga la cultura material, la teoría del espacio y de género, así como la psicología de la propiedad y el apego, la teoría sujeto-objeto en la que la relación entre el yo y su lugar de residencia y las posesiones han sido exploradas. Como plantea Russel W. Belk, “one of the foremost issues involving materialism that needs to be addressed is whether materialism is a positive or a negative trait” (“Materialism” 266), algo que aún debe seguir siendo explorado en el futuro.

En el análisis de estas teorías he puesto especial atención en la forma en el que el materialismo afecta a la construcción y el mantenimiento de las identidades de envejecimiento durante la vejez. Por lo tanto, en esta aproximación a la materialidad he señalado su importancia como andamiaje básico del ser y cómo su función va más allá de una contextualización física del ser dentro de una ubicación física, sino que afecta además la representación emocional del ser. Entre muchos de los roles que he analizado en esta disertación, los objetos han sido destacados como portadores de significado, estatus, marcadores de identidad, modos de experiencias, así como elementos que ayudan a diferenciar a las personas en un mundo donde el consumo masivo tiende a imponer entre los seres humanos una asimilación. Belk considera que la relación establecida hoy en día con nuestras posesiones materiales varía mucho entre generaciones, por lo que la atención a la tercera edad se basa en la premisa de que “the expectation of generational differences in materialism might be predicated” (“Materialism” 268), y especialmente, dado que, a medida que la persona envejece, las posesiones comienzan a considerarse no como un medio de control y dominio sobre el territorio que se habita o como fuentes de poder y prestigio, sino como elementos de cuidado emocional. Partiendo de esta premisa,

as people age, there is evidence to suggest that their thoughts about the future tend to decrease and their thoughts about the past tend to increase

(Cameron 1977). Whereas major accomplishments and relationships lie in the future for adolescents and relationships lie in the future for adolescents, they lie in the past for older adults. (Belk 269)

En esta línea de pensamiento, las novelistas que se presentan en este estudio exploran en sus novelas la forma en que la casa, como posesión en sí misma, y sus contenidos muestran una relación compleja con el yo envejecido, en la forma en que usa y distribuye su espacio durante las últimas etapas de la vida. De hecho, es en la vivienda donde durante la vejez la persona encuentra un lugar seguro para expresar su identidad, preferencias y las posesiones del pasado. Como afirma Melanie Lovatt,

through the course of a lifetime people can accumulate a vast amount of objects, and a growing literature attests to the ways in which the lives of people and objects intersect. Objects become meaningful to people by their association with events, places and people (Rubinstein 1978); Shenk et al. 2004; Cieraad 2010), both reflect and create aspects of people's identities (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981, Belk 1988; Miller 2010), and come to act as 'material companions', acquiring 'meaning and value by sheer dint of their constancy in a life' (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1989). (Lovatt 14)

Esta relación multifacética entre el yo y su extensión material en el mundo a menudo se ha retratado en la literatura de una forma pesimista y haciendo énfasis en la pérdida, donde el tiempo es percibido como un enemigo que impone en la persona una desaparición gradual del ser y su valor. La exaltación de la juventud se ha utilizado como un elemento que limita tanto a mujeres como hombres, quienes confrontan las últimas etapas de la vida de forma diferente, ya que, como se ha argumentado en esta disertación, el "ageism" se ha impuesto más duramente en las mujeres, aunque,

men, too, are prone to periodic bouts of depression about ageing– for instance, when feeling insecure or unfulfilled or insufficiently rewarded in their jobs. But men rarely panic about aging in the way women often do. Getting older is less profoundly wounding for a man, for in addition to the propaganda for youth that puts both men and women on the defensive as they age, there is a double standard about aging that denounces women with special severity. (Sontag 286)

En este sentido, mi enfoque se ha centrado en el proceso de envejecimiento femenino en novelas escritas por novelistas contemporáneas británicas, donde se enfatiza un interés emergente por representar la influencia de la materialidad en la narrativa de la persona mayor. Una excepción a este análisis sobre los procesos de aceptación y crecimiento dentro del contexto del hogar y las posesiones, de los personajes femeninos, se encuentra en la novela de Penélope Lively, *The Photograph*, donde, a diferencia de las otras novelas, la autora se centra en un personaje envejecido masculino. A pesar de que hay un cambio en el género del personaje principal, considero que para este estudio era interesante observar como la autora reflexiona sobre la idea de cómo los objetos pueden alterar la narrativa de nuestro pasado, como en el caso de Glyn que descubre la evidencia material de una infidelidad.

Esta disertación, como ha podido verse con anterioridad, reflexiona sobre el envejecimiento femenino teniendo en cuenta un nuevo sub-género, llamado *Reifungsroman* por Barbara Frey Waxman, en el siglo veinte. Lo que Waxman propone con su trabajo es una necesidad de revisar y reformular las concepciones culturales, sociales y políticas sobre la persona mayor y en envejecimiento, a través de la recolección de novelas donde las autoras han decidido alejarse del discurso pesimista tan frecuentemente asociado a la vejez. El género del *Reifungsroman* se nutre del género *Bildungsroman*, pero difiere en que sus protagonistas

se encuentran ya en la mitad de sus vidas, o en las últimas etapas de la vida. Esto demuestra el progresivo cambio de paradigma en la forma en el que la narrativa del envejecimiento y el anciano están cambiando, especialmente desde que las ideas sobre el declive físico y cognitivo que se imponen en el anciano han ido siendo reemplazadas por otras ideas más inclusivas y diversas. Sobre todo, en la lucha de enfatizar que la tercera edad no es en sí algo negativo, y donde el declive no tiene que ser la narrativa predominante.

En este sentido, es interesante observar como la mayoría de las novelas que pertenecen a este nuevo género suelen abordar el día a día de mujeres mayores, dejando el envejecimiento masculino a un lado. Quizás, como afirman Cathy McGlynn, Margaret O'Neill y Michaela Schrage-Frühe y en la misma línea de pensamiento de otras críticas culturales sobre el envejecimiento como Margaret Morganroth Gullette, o Kathleen Woodward esto se deba a que “yet, the ageing woman’s experience is one that has, up until relatively recently, received little critical attention in feminist studies” (4). Por lo tanto, siguiendo la necesidad de dar visibilidad al proceso de envejecimiento en la ficción contemporánea, he seleccionado aquellas novelas donde se diera una especial visibilidad al envejecimiento femenino, aunque como he mencionado con anterioridad también incluyo un ejemplo de envejecimiento masculino en relación con la materialidad. Las novelas analizadas son las de Pat Barker’s *Union Street* (1982), y *The Century’s Daughter* (1986), *The Diary of Jane Somers* de Doris Lessing (1984), *Quartet in Autumn* (1977) de Barbara Pym, y *The Photograph* (2003) y *How It All Began* (2011), de Penelope Lively, donde las novelistas reflexionan abiertamente sobre la influencia que la casa y los objetos tienen en el yo envejecido durante las últimas etapas de la vida. Una de las múltiples conexiones que unen a estas novelas está relacionada con el reconocimiento de las escritoras en visibilizar el papel de la materialidad en la tercera edad y la exploración de esta relación íntima. Por lo tanto, se ha explorado cómo la casa y sus contenidos se describen en estas novelas, así como

la forma en la que se representa al anciano física y emocionalmente en su contexto material, y siguiendo las características principales del género Reifungsroman. Entre los múltiples roles que las posesiones desempeñan en la vida de su dueño, he enfatizado la necesidad actual del individuo de reafirmar su presencia o valor en el mundo mediante el acto de participar en el discurso material que predomina en las sociedades occidentales de hoy.

En primer lugar, profundizo en los personajes de Alice Bell en *Union Street* (1982) y Liza Wright en *The Century's Daughter* (1986) de la novelista británica Pat Barker. En el análisis de Barker, es interesante observar como dedica el último capítulo de *Union Street* a retratar la vida de la anciana Alice Bell y años más tarde publica *The Century's Daughter*, que, según John Brannigan, “grows out of the final chapter or story in *Union Street*, the story of Alice Bell” (56). Como se puede ver en Barker, la inclusión de la vejez y el envejecimiento como tema central en la ficción contemporánea se ha hecho de manera progresiva en las últimas décadas, y en la mayoría de los casos ha sido una respuesta de los propios escritores a sus procesos y experiencias sobre el envejecimiento. Por lo tanto, en la ficción de Barker existe su necesidad de volver al mundo del envejecimiento después de la publicación de *Union Street*, que tan solo ocupa el capítulo final de la novela, ya que años más tarde escribirá una novela entera en torno a una mujer anciana. Las similitudes entre las novelas son múltiples ya que,

Like Alice, Liza is living in a cold, condemned house, and prefers to die rather than be moved to ‘sheltered accommodation’... Both women bear the scars of working-class labour and the struggle for survival against war, poverty and loss, and both articulate clearer sense of working-class community than appears to be available to their younger neighbours. Both Alice and Liza are forced to confront the state authorities who presume to act in their interest, although Liza’s relationship with her social welfare visitor, Stephen, develops into a warm friendship, unlike Alice who feels as if she has

been raped by the impersonal bureaucrat who wants her out of her home. (Brannigan 57)

Como se ve, la casa es un enlace material en ambas novelas donde Barker explora el apego resultante tras años de navegar el espacio físico de la casa. Además, a pesar del mal condicionamiento de la vivienda, la narrativa de Barker coloca en la materialidad un punto de partida en la comprensión de la vida cotidiana del anciano, en este caso, en la comprensión de cómo las mujeres experimentan la vejez. Todo esto contribuye a arrojar luz sobre cómo son vividas las últimas etapas de la vida desde la narración en primera persona de los personajes, y no como objetos pasivos o secundarios. Esta noción del hogar como un lugar importante para la persona anciana es un tema recurrente en otras novelas analizadas en esta disertación, como *The Diaries of Jane Somers* (1983), que sigue el contexto de la Gran Bretaña de la posguerra y su efecto en un sector marginado de la sociedad, la población envejecida. La narrativa de Lessing sigue algunas de las características principales de Pat Barker, ya que la escritora también se enfoca en la forma en la que los servicios sociales, o personas externas al círculo íntimo de la persona mayor interactúan con el anciano y lo perciben a lo largo de la novela. Ejemplo de ello es la relación y el vínculo intergeneracional que se produce entre Maudie Fowler y Janna Somers. En muchas ocasiones, se hace referencia a Jana como "a Good Neighbour" en lugar de simplemente una buena amiga de Maudie Fowler. Dejando entrever cómo una amistad espontánea entre una persona mayor y una más joven es extraña. Además, Lessing, a través de Janna, señala que, a pesar de la existencia de los servicios sociales británicos, que brindan múltiples servicios para el anciano, al final no dejan de ser percibidos por la persona mayor como una amenaza para su sentido de control e independencia y acaban, como en el caso de Maudie siendo rechazados. Así, cuando Janna pregunta: "what Services is [Maudie] entitled to?" (40), la respuesta está clara, Maudie tendría derecho a "Home Help, of course. But [they] tried that before, and it

didn't work. A Good Neighbour, but she didn't want one...' (40). Esto deja ver las dificultades que enfrentaron los servicios sociales británicos en la década de 1980 para proporcionar la ayuda necesaria al anciano debido a la negativa inicial de la persona a dejar entrar en su hogar a alguien ajeno a su círculo familiar. Además de la atención prestada a describir el papel de los servicios sociales, tanto Barker como Lessing se centran en narrar este proceso de invasión de la intimidad que experimenta el anciano cuando tanto en Baker, un trabajador social, como en Lessing, una persona de media edad, se hacen amigos y consiguen poco a poco traspasar los estereotipos y límites que los separan. Ambas autoras presentan el hogar de sus protagonistas, destinado a ser demolido, donde se reflexiona en el sentimiento de temor del anciano a ser desalojados y su lucha para envejecer y morir en sus hogares. Esto se puede ver como una forma de reforzar la necesidad de continuidad del yo a lo largo del tiempo en el contexto del hogar y la necesidad de estar en contacto y mantener un pasado biográfico que yace en los objetos. Tanto Pat Barker como Doris Lessing comparten estas representaciones de la vejez y las últimas etapas de la vida, en su construcción del entorno físico del anciano, así como la importancia de la formación de vínculo intergeneracional tanto entre Liza y Stephen en *The Century's Daughter*, como entre Janna Somers y Maudie Fowler en *The Diaries of Jane Somers*.

En la novela de Lessing, es interesante observar cómo la autora hace especial referencia a cómo existe en la tercera edad una fuerte identificación entre el anciano y el lugar que habita, resultando en un proceso que Krasner llama *amalgamation* (210), y que conlleva al desarrollo de lo que Proshansky llama *place identity* (112) Además, al negarse a abandonar su lugar, a pesar de la frágil salud, Lessing explora en Maudie lo que Shmuel Shamai considera como "sacrifice for a place" (349) es decir, el momento en el que el apego al lugar es tan alto que impiden a la persona considerar su traslado fuera de su hogar, ejemplo

extremo en el caso de *Union Street*, donde Alice Bell llega a suicidarse después de haber iniciado un proceso de despedida a sus posesiones más queridas.

Los objetos en las últimas etapas de la vida, no solo se convierten en posesiones queridas, sino que también empiezan a acumularse de tal manera que el anciano termina desarrollando enfermedades como el síndrome de Diógenes, o excesiva acumulación. Debido a este comportamiento que la mayoría de las personas mayores desarrollan a lo largo de los años de compras, seleccioné *Quartet in Autumn* de Barbara Pym para seguir la idea de la acumulación excesiva presente en el trabajo de Parker y Lessing. La novela de Pym se publica a finales de los años setenta, pero a pesar de carecer de una conexión cronológica, puede verse en el análisis una continuación de la idea de acumulación excesiva y apego excesivo que incurre en lo que Shamai considera "sacrifice for a place". Así, en *Quartet in Autumn* (1977), el personaje de Marcia Ivory comparte múltiples puntos en común con patrones de conducta que demuestran una disfuncionalidad en su relación con sus posesiones y la casa. El personaje de Marcia podría entrar en lo que Clare Marcus Cooper considera "domocentrism" (80) o el reemplazo de la interacción social por una relación más íntima con el hogar y las posesiones. En este sentido, Pym explora, como Lessing, la importancia del hogar para el anciano, ya que ambos escritores profundizan en cómo el personaje intenta reflexionar sobre el yo envejecido y qué pasará con su legado material después de su defunción. Esta idea se ve claramente en la novela *Quartet in Autumn*, donde la última voluntad de Marcia se usa como instrumento para conectar a los cuatro protagonistas de la novela Letty, Norman, Edwin, una vez que Marcia ha muerto.

Como se ha visto con anterioridad, la casa tiene un papel fundamental ya que es el punto de encuentro de los personajes y donde se forja el vínculo emocional. Tal es la importancia de la relación entre la casa y el contenido que se guarda en ella, que la última autora analizada en esta disertación, Penelope Lively, se centra en la función de las

posesiones, como herramientas que pueden desestabilizar a la persona. En este sentido, Lively, ha escrito extensamente sobre el papel de la materialidad en las últimas etapas de la vida en obras que abarcan la ficción y la no ficción. La escritora ha mostrado en repetidas entrevistas su interés, y así lo reflejan muchas de sus novelas, en explorar cómo se evoca el pasado a través de la materialización de la memoria, y cómo el yo envejecido encuentra en la casa un lugar donde se puede mantener una sensación de protección y sustento, así como una interacción fluida con los seres anteriores. Entre muchas de las novelas que Lively ha escrito sobre el mundo del anciano, he seleccionado *The Photograph* (2003) y *How It All Began* (2011), donde se aprecia la influencia de las posesiones materiales en la estabilidad emocional del anciano.

The Photograph se publicó en 2003, y aunque, como he mencionado con anterioridad, no se centra en el envejecimiento femenino en relación a la materialidad, que es el punto de referencia de esta disertación, la novela se conecta con la idea de que los objetos funcionan como conectores con el pasado, y elementos que afectan el bienestar del anciano o, por una ausencia de él, o el descubrimiento de objetos cuyo significado puedan alterar el recuerdo de seres queridos o la interpretación de eventos o personas del pasado. Además, el papel de los objetos en *The Photograph* deja entrever a lo largo de la novela cómo son capaces de fomentar una comunicación abierta con el pasado, que, en el caso del personaje de Glyn, queda absolutamente fragmentado al descubrir la foto que demuestra la infidelidad de su mujer, por lo que deberá a lo largo de la novela y a través del recuerdo material que su esposa dejó de la aventura reconstruir la narrativa de su matrimonio.

Si Lively se centra en el papel de los objetos como elementos de interrupción en la vida adulta, en *How It All Began*, la novelista explora la importancia de la casa como un espacio donde el yo anciano se siente libre para expresarse fuera de las restricciones sociales y culturales. En este sentido, el personaje de Charlotte, cuya historia no es central en la

novela, cumple con las características principales de las novelas de Reifungsroman ya que después de ser asaltada en la calle y sufrir una inmovilidad temporal, se muda a la casa de su hija, anhelando siempre volver a su casa y retomar su vida. De hecho, la hija de Charlotte se da cuenta de que su madre “found agonizing to have to live with her and Gerry, and knew that it was not just that she wanted to be in her own house, but that she felt intrusive, superfluous” (74), porque, al final, estar fuera del espacio doméstico de alguien, especialmente una persona mayor, hace que la persona, especialmente en la vejez, se sienta sin el control y la protección que brindan su hogar, como ya se ha ilustrado en esta disertación.

En conclusión, todas estas novelistas británicas contemporáneas comparten muchas características en su enfoque de las experiencias de envejecimiento femenino en las últimas etapas de la vida. Un ejemplo de esto es la reconfiguración de las identidades de envejecimiento fuera del declive y el pesimismo. Reconstruyen un nuevo significado de la vejez donde se puede lograr la integridad y la aceptación de la muerte y el tiempo, y las últimas etapas de la vida se pueden imaginar como un viaje hacia la realización personal y la integración del yo. Además de este viaje de autodescubrimiento en las últimas etapas que se lleva a cabo en este sub-genero del Reifungsroman, como se exploró en el capítulo tres, las escritoras están “creating a discourse through which readers can experience what is like to be a middle-aged or old woman, and finally, for turning a bipolar concept of youth and age into that of an age continuum and leading us toward an ageless utopia” (Waxman 184). Al dar importancia al yo envejecido dentro de los recuerdos de la casa, donde los objetos, como por ejemplo los espejos, se utilizan como elementos que ayudan al yo a reflexionar y enfrentar sus propios procesos de envejecimiento, ayudando también a la creación de vínculos intergeneracionales en el que tanto mayores como jóvenes pueden aprender unas

de otras en la creación y difusión de una comprensión positiva de lo que realmente significa la vejez.

En este sentido, con esta disertación he explorado nuevas interpretaciones de la vejez y las últimas etapas de la vida desde una perspectiva de género donde las mujeres y la materialidad sean las protagonistas. De hecho, con esta atención dada a la cultura material dentro de la esfera doméstica del hogar, he ilustrado como Ian Woodward plantea que “objects are polysemics” (161) y cumplen múltiples funciones, como se ha podido comprobar en las novelas analizadas, que van más allá de la funcionalidad o la estética, y donde el yo no solo encuentra una conexión física entre el pasado y el presente, sino una fuente fuerte de identificación. En este sentido, la materialidad debería seguir teniéndose en cuenta en futuras investigaciones en el campo de la literatura. En mis hallazgos he observado cómo estas escritoras profundizan en el mundo del anciano reconociendo el poderoso papel de la cultura material a lo largo de la vida. Especialmente en la edad adulta, debido al simbolismo significativo de los objetos en la vida cotidiana y el lugar de la vivienda en la construcción y comprensión de lo que significa ser mayor hoy en día y el impacto de la interacción sujeto-objeto dentro de la privacidad de sus hogares. El campo de los estudios sobre el envejecimiento continúa creciendo para abordar el envejecimiento y su diversidad y teniendo en cuenta nuevos temas que incluyen el envejecimiento *queer*, el envejecimiento de las masculinidades, el envejecimiento entre culturas y el envejecimiento racial y étnico, entre otros temas. De hecho, como McGlynn et al. afirman, la sociedad todavía tiene que darse cuenta de que existe la necesidad de confrontar y contraatacar a las ideas que prevalecen todavía en los discursos del envejecimiento. De hecho, como afirman, en la cultura popular el envejecimiento de muchas de las celebridades en las últimas décadas ha puesto de manifiesto las dificultades que enfrentan a diario, una vez alabadas y deseadas, ahora repudiadas e invisibilizadas. Desafortunadamente, las mujeres aún deben luchar por

envejecer con dignidad en la sociedad actual. Por ejemplo, “the ageism experienced by Madonna, Carrie Fisher and Jane Fonda is not atypical in the contemporary entertainment industry, but the issues it raises with regards to the cultural construction of the ageing woman are common across multiple cultural texts and contexts” (4).

Esta preocupación sobre el envejecimiento que hoy en día se ha convertido en un tema de debate público, se debe en parte a la aparición de estas nuevas disciplinas, como los estudios sobre el envejecimiento, los estudios culturales y la gerontología cultural, que visibilizan las luchas que enfrentan las personas mayores en el cotidiano de sus casas, teniendo en cuenta la diversidad existente entre los seres humanos. De hecho, el envejecimiento nos afecta a todos de manera diferente, y es nuestro deber ver lo que nos une y lo que nos separa para construir puentes entre los seres humanos. Por lo tanto, con esta disertación, he intentado ilustrar el papel significativo de los estudios sobre el envejecimiento, la gerontología cultural y las humanidades para proporcionar a las personas de diferentes rangos de edad nuevas identidades de envejecimiento. Con esto, las personas podrían tener acceso a las luchas de las personas mayores dentro de lo cotidiano de sus casas, y comenzar a aceptar su identidad de edad, a medida que construyen sus propias narrativas de envejecimiento. Todo esto, fuera de los estereotipos negativos que aún predominan en nuestras sociedades.

