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Shriveling Bodies and a Shrinking World:
A Journey from Woolf's Feminism to Contemporary Notions of Aging, Beauty and Visibility

by

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In Partial Fulfillment of a Bachelor of Arts Degree in English Literature and Linguistics

May 2022
Pitzer College

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The Angel in the House… was intensely sympathetic. She was intensely charming. She was utterly unselfish… She sacrificed herself daily…. She never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others… Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer.

– Virginia Woolf, "Professions for Women," 1931

In our mass-mediated society, age and gender structure each other in a complex set of reverberating feedback loops, conspiring to render the older female body paradoxically both hypervisible and invisible.

– Kathleen Woodward, "Performing Age, Performing Gender," 2006

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to understand the experiences and representation of older women, both in fiction and real life as well as in the early 20th century and today. Firstly, I examine the female protagonists in three of Virginia Woolf's novels before turning to a linguistic analysis that explores how older women perceive themselves today and how they think other groups – such as the media, the younger generation and men and women in their age group – perceive them. Woolf's feminist style uncovers the existence of invisibility and embodied aging experienced by the so-called Angel in the House. This Woolfian analysis is then applied to contemporary notions of aging, beauty and visibility. Data collected from a survey distributed to women aged fifty-five and older illustrate the contradictions between how older women see themselves and how they think the media and younger generation portray them. Furthermore, many of the female participants experienced a shift in their linguistic tendencies from their youth, namely that, with age, they speak with more confidence.

PREFACE

For my Senior Thesis, I set myself up for the challenge of working with Virginia Woolf – one of the most well-known, highly regarded modernists of the 20th century. I am new to her work, reading it for the first time less than a year ago. In the Autumn of 2021, I enrolled in a seminar course dedicated to Woolf. The ability to read all but two of her novels over the course of one semester was a structure that I had not yet experienced in college and our class discussions drove my fascination of Woolf. My interest grew to a fixation, then to a love. I have read and reread her novels, her essays, and parts of her diaries. There is still so much I do not know about Woolf, and I don't think a day will come when one of her books reads the same when I reread it, or when a quote I am so familiar with will stop producing meaning as I go about my days.

With Woolf a depth of understanding takes time. It was only after three months of handing in one particular essay that I had a revelation pertaining to a writing block I had kept returning to. Her words are intricate and her characters complicated; she refrains from telling a complete story and her modernist approach continues to be new, exciting and telling. For this project, I read Woolf's diaries from the years that corresponded to her writing process for each novel that I focus on. The physicality of her thoughts has been extremely helpful, eye opening and humourous. What follows is just the corner of my ever-expanding admiration for Woolf as a writer during the earliest wave of feminism. The act of consolidation of Woolf's work is near to impossible; I have pieced together themes throughout her novels that stand out to me every time I read her work. She illuminates the importance of beauty in and around her life, the role of women and motherhood, the embodied female experience and, of course, the delicacies of growing older.

My introduction to sociolinguistics was, in fact, a Language and Gender course. In this class, we explored the (concerning) history of language and gender, child acquisition of gendered talk, language use beyond the traditions of binary thinking, variations in speaking style, as well as the construction of gender and the ways in which we index or perform certain aspects of our genders in different contexts. Though the history of the field felt similar to the disheartening traditions of a male-dominated world, the pace of change and advancement was encouraging and new. Our class discussions about language use in comedy, academia, friendships, education and the media struck me and I began to see how sociolinguistics infiltrated into every part of life. There is no doubt that the subfield of sociolinguistics is what drove me through many of the core courses I took for the Linguistics major. When it came to choosing a topic for my thesis, I already knew I wanted to study gender and Virginia Woolf, but I was unsure of the way I wanted to incorporate sociolinguistics. I looked back to the Language and Gender course from my second year and realized we rarely spoke about linguistic tendencies or attitudes of *older* women. Just as Virginia Woolf worked to highlight the identity of the traditionally overlooked, older woman, I wish to explore and showcase the ways that older women feel represented in society today.

CHAPTER 1: SHRIVELING BODIES & A SHRINKING WORLD – *AGING AND BEAUTY IN THREE OF VIRGINIA WOOLF'S NOVELS*

Notions of aging and agism are important to question, particularly as we live in a time where our global population of people aged 65 and older is growing faster than ever and faster than any other age group. What's more, with improvements in our health systems, older people are living longer than they ever have. Furthermore, on average, women live longer than men and thus make up the majority of the older population[1]. As our population demographics shift towards an older population, we must highlight the experiences of older women to ensure their needs are met, their voices are heard and they are no longer misrepresented.

My paper will be split into two chapters: my English Literature section and my Linguistics section. In this chapter, I focus on notions of aging, beauty and visibility in three of Virginia Woolf's novels, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Waves* (1931). Throughout her career as a writer and her experiences as a woman, Woolf was concerned with female representation in the real world as well as in the novel. These works demonstrate the ways she was dedicated to older, female protagonists as well as themes of embodied notions of identity, invisibility, beauty and motherhood. In October of 1932, Woolf infamously wrote in her diary, "I don't believe in aging. I believe in forever altering one's aspect to the sun" (Woolf 1954). There is no doubt that Woolf had an ambiguous relationship to aging, as shown by her lack of belief in passive aging and emphasis on the requirement to continually reposition oneself in relation to life.

I begin by discussing the importance of Woolf's 1924 essay, "Character in Fiction," in which Woolf depicts the ways novels have overlooked the "old lady in the corner" – symbolized

[1] United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2020). World Population Ageing 2020 Highlights: Living arrangements of older persons (ST/ESA/SER.A/451).

by Mrs. Brown. Next, I turn to *Mrs. Dalloway*, where I examine Clarissa Dalloway's experience as an older woman in high-class society which is undoubtably affected by her relationship with her past, her aging body and her desire to please. In *To the Lighthouse*, I analyze the consequences of motherhood and marriage on Mrs. Ramsay, a middle-aged woman admired for her beauty. By way of turning to *The Waves*, I study the relationship between individual and collective identities as well as the impacts of aging on the body. All the women I look at in these novels face implications of the male gaze or of "masculine subjectivity;" and yet, perhaps Woolf can offer a glimpse of what women might be able to become. I aim to explore Virginia Woolf's notions of aging, beauty and visibility in the early 20th century as well as Woolf's feminisms. I argue that Virginia Woolf uncovers the lack of unity between the outward composure of femininity – of the perfect hostess or the perfect mother – and the inner thoughts of dread that guide older women through the world.

The Novel as a Guide to 'New Women' and Feminist Practice

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) wrote and published her modernist novels, essays and diaries during the first wave of feminism when the fight for suffrage led the charge. Woolf herself tackled the complexities of this feminism in much of her writing. She was concerned with the makings of "new women" who would function differently in society and also be perceived differently in society. Woolf was especially struck by the portrayal of the older woman, who was traditionally removed from literature and the 20th century world. Virginia Woolf's 1924 essay, "Character in Fiction," argues that human character, in novels, changed in the early 1900s (Woolf 1924). She does so through the story of an old woman – Mrs. Brown[2] – whom she observed whilst riding the train from Richmond to Waterloo in London. Though Mrs. Brown sat,

[2] Mrs. Brown is an alias given to the woman Woolf observed.

small, in the corner of the train, Woolf began to imagine her "in the centre of all sorts of different scenes" and, as such, a new character was imposed onto Woolf (Woolf 1924). Significantly, Woolf reveals, "I believe that all novels begin with an old lady in the corner opposite." But now, "there was Mrs. Brown protesting that she was different, quite different, from what people made out, and luring the novelist to rescue her" (Woolf 1924). Woolf declares that though the "old lady" has always been central to the beginnings of novels and the characters in them, she has been misrepresented. It is now, Woolf suggested in 1924, that older women are calling on the novel to redeem this historic misrepresentation of older women. Finally, Woolf argues, "we are trembling on the verge of one of the great ages of English literature. But it can only be reached if we are determined never, never to desert Mrs. Brown" (Woolf 1924). Mrs. Brown represents a break from the Victorian novel and the arrival of Modernism as character begins to function outside of the novel.

Rachel Bowlby, known for her contributions to Woolf criticism, examines the trajectory of Woolf's feminisms in her book, *Virginia Woolf: Feminist Destinations*. Beginning with the figure of Mrs. Brown, Bowlby argues "the passage from one literary or historical phase to the next seems to become inextricably involved with a contention about injustices and reparations to the old lady" (Bowlby 1997). With the emergence of modernism, Woolf strove to center the experiences of older women, beginning with Mrs. Brown. Woolf presents Mrs. Brown in a public place – the train – to center her away from the domestic sphere of the house. Bowlby declares, at last, Mrs. Brown, the "natural woman hitherto unrepresented or distorted in fiction [is] now to be seen at last blooming in her corner" (Bowlby 1997). Virginia Woolf importantly suggests that Mrs. Brown has always been there; as currents and stories have existed around the older female figure, she remained all along. Now, we must illuminate her.

Rachel Bowlby declares how, in this revolutionary essay, “we followed Woolf’s movement through several possible definitions of feminism: in terms of equal rights to travel on the train that has so far been masculine in its direction; as a buried but natural difference presently suppressed by masculine culture; as a protestation of women’s difference from men’s representations of them” (Bowlby 1997). According to Bowlby, Woolf does not suggest where women’s feminism is going but instead keeps many possibilities open to account for differences among women. While we do know that Virginia Woolf fought to kill the Angel in the House – the “man-made figure of femininity” that inhibits the aspiring modern woman – her modes of feminism were multifaceted and ever changing. Next, I turn to *Mrs. Dalloway,* in which, according to Bowlby, “many of these issues about the destinations and definitions of feminism and femininity come to the fore” (Bowlby 1997). In this section I examine the character of Clarissa Dalloway, an aging woman in upper-class London society.

Aging as a Two-Fold Experience

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* was published by the Hogarth Press in 1925. It was not only her first successful novel (and one of her most popular works to this day), but also her first novel to focus on middle-age. Woolf wrote in her diary that, with *Mrs. Dalloway,* she intended to "criticize the social system, and to show it at work, at its most intense" (Woolf 1954). The novel follows Clarissa Dalloway on a singular June day, in London. As readers, we are exposed to her day of errands and party preparation as well as her interactions with the people in her London life. Though Clarissa is a part of high-class, British society, married to a man in Parliament and a mother of one daughter, she leads a life of independence. The decision of each detail for the party is hers to make, the rip in her evening gown hers to sew, and the flowers hers to buy. And yet, these tasks – arguably seen as the domestic chores of a high-society woman in 1922 – are not the only thing occupying Clarissa on this day. Now mid-June, World War 1 has ended but the country still mourns as complications of "post-war" society lived on. Many of these complications are portrayed in the character Septimus Warren Smith, who suffers from post-traumatic stress. As she strolls the streets, Clarissa finds herself pulled into memories of past lovers and friends, Peter Walsh and Sally Seton. Woolf opens our eyes to the inner consciousness of a woman who is not only aware of the world and its beauty around her but is also affected by her abstraction from it. Though she is dedicated to bringing people together, Clarissa must deflect the pressures of society as she navigates the expanding solitude and invisibility of older life. Whilst the events of the day seemingly engage the reader with anticipation for the party, the content of the book lies beyond the time and place of each event. Instead, we gain insight into Clarissa's thoughts, feelings and internal monologues about her youth and past choices as well as her experiences of aging within a society that centers beauty.

Throughout the novel, we observe Clarissa's hyper awareness of how she is perceived by those around her as well as her dissociation from societal expectations. As Clarissa walks to Piccadilly the morning of her party, she is consumed with memories from Bourton in the nineties. She thinks of her ex-lover, Peter Walsh, who, though often intolerable, would have been pleasant to walk in London with on such a lovely spring day. She remembers the decline of their relationship, their difference in opinion and his disregard of the beauty around him. Concluding that she was right to not marry him, Clarissa remembers Peter Walsh calling her "the perfect hostess… she had the makings of the perfect hostess" (*MD*, Woolf 1925). Peter Walsh judged Clarissa this way when she first introduced him to Richard Dalloway, her future husband. Though Peter Walsh was bitter that his lover had found another man, the label of "perfect hostess" bound Clarissa to an identity that would become inseparable from Mrs. Dalloway. Peter Walsh reduced Clarissa to no more than a mistress or the Angel of the house. This identity of domesticity or lady of the house, that is extrinsically placed onto Clarissa, is a label she is not pleased to be called; in fact, she cries over it. Though Clarissa's past and present talent of hosting is something that she has an expertise for, and is known for, it is a characteristic that she resents, partly because she neglected the possibilities of a life with Peter Walsh for the label of "perfect hostess." Clarissa's identity in the novel is often formed by other people's attitude towards her appearance and her actions. Of course, Clarissa functions outside of this inscribed personality; she feels deeply and searches for a sense of self as well as an understanding of, and connection with, the world. Clarissa Dalloway, is, in fact, a highly independent woman who fends for herself despite her privilege and position as a Victorian woman.

Woolf expert and biographer, Hermione Lee[3], in *The Novels of Virginia Woolf*, argues that, as readers, we have access to "Clarissa's existence taking place on several levels" (Lee 1977). The first is the "external level" where Clarissa is seen by society as the perfect hostess, as Mrs. Richard Dalloway and as older since her "illness[4]." The second, a "recognizable external self" which relates to "characteristics appreciated and criticized in different ways by different people" – Clarissa herself included when, for example, she looks in the mirror. The last is Clarissa's "deeper self… made up partly of her feelings about experience… and partly her present emotions" (Lee 1977). Our access to Clarissa's experiences on three levels uncovers her multifaceted existence of self-awareness and self-consciousness that arises from the pressures of society. In other words, we gain access to Clarissa's hypervisibility of her body and image which she, in turn, gains from the external level.

Clarissa Dalloway's existence as a middle-aged woman is two-fold. As she moves through the world, a symbol of femininity, she feels tension between her own thoughts and the pressures of society. After recollecting memories of Peter Walsh and her youth in Bourton, Clarissa reaches the Park gates at Piccadilly. In this moment,

> "She felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged. She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on. She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out… far out to sea and alone; she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day" (*MD*, Woolf 1925).

As Clarissa watches the world before her, her sense of self is twofold and contradictory. She feels simultaneously young and old, simultaneously involved and separate. Though she is physically at a bustling intersection, she is mentally far away. As she is caught in this

[3] There are endless biographies and criticism on Virginia Woolf. In the interest of time, I selected Hermione Lee (among others – Alex Zwerdling, Naomi Black, Gillian Beer, Rachel Bowlby and Laura Marcus – who have extensive literature on Woolf and her feminism.

[4] Clarissa's illness is understood as "influenza," but could arguably just be menopause.

inexplicable feeling, linked to her aging body, Clarissa's experience of seclusion is persistent, even in the busy center of London or amid her own party. Furthermore, within this solitude is a warning of danger, a danger to live or exist. As Clarissa jumps between memories of her early womanhood and the present moment, she is seized by a tension of self that results in an inexplicable isolation and sense of agedness.

As Clarissa tries to grasp a greater sense of self, grappling with the transpiring sense of isolation and agedness, she simultaneously endures the external threats of invisibility as a result of her aging body. Clarissa spends the morning going in and out of shops, wishing that she could do things just for the beauty of the thing itself, rather than for others or for optics. In these bleak thoughts, she ponders what her life would be like if she started all over again. Comparing herself to the beauty and temperament of Lady Bexbourough ("the woman she admired the most"), she observes the drawbacks of her own beauty, sharing who she might have been. Unlike Lady Bexbourough, she had "a narrow pea-stick figure; a ridiculous little face, beaked like a bird's" (*MD*, Woolf 1925). Here, Clarissa reveals the self-consciousness about her aging body; she is fixated on her negative perception of her face, deeming it "ridiculous." Though she recognizes the pleasantness of her hands and feet as well as her style, she becomes haunted by her body's positionality in the world:

> "Often now this body she wore… with all its capacities, seemed nothing – nothing at all. She had the oddest sense of being herself invisible; unseen; unknown; there being no more marrying, no more having children now, but only this astonishing and rather solemn progress with the rest of them… this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa anymore; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway" (*MD,* Woolf 1925).

Clarissa recognizes the capabilities of her female body, yet she views it as something she merely wears, something that only previously had any use. Woolf takes the literary trope of clothes as symbol for someone's identity and extends it to Clarissa's body to communicate Clarissa's

increasing sense of disembodiment, of being both within and apart from herself. Though she sees value in how she dresses, Clarissa no longer sees value in her body. In fact, it seems like "nothing at all." The nothingness of her body causes Clarissa to feel unseen, even unknown as she tries to interact with those inside and outside of the London shops. Whilst her invisibility is a result of her embodied agedness, it is also related to her understood role in society – that of a mother and, of course, a wife. These functions of womanhood – the possibilities of marriage and childrearing – revered so highly in Victorian society, are no longer prominent for Clarissa. Instead, what is left is a fixed, quiet life "with the rest of them." This progression of life, she concludes, follows the expectations cast onto "Mrs. Richard Dalloway," not Clarissa. Nevertheless, Clarissa is a woman who seeks independence, beauty and sensations from the world around her. Clarissa searches for more than the mere duties of a mother or a wife. Therefore, embodying Clarissa – who falls out of line with the standard Victorian, high-society woman – leaves her feeling invisible and misunderstood[5]. The traditions of womanhood, then, require Mrs. Dalloway to break ties with Clarissa. Therefore, Clarissa's experience of invisibility is simultaneously internal – with her aging body – and external – with the pressures to conform to the duties of Mrs. Dalloway in high-class London life. Thus, Woolf reveals the complexities of growing old in Victorian society. She places Clarissa as the protagonist of the novel to disclosure the invisible existence of older woman who, indeed, infiltrate into every scene.

The link between the public and private experiences of aging women is often central in Woolf's novels. Alex Zwerdling, in *Virginia Woolf and the Real,* explains how Woolf's sense of the subject is deepened by her

[5] It should also be noted that Sepitmus Warren Smith is often seen as a blank to Clarissa. Septimus' mental illness is often overlooked, deeming his experiences of trauma unseen, unknown and invisible. add more here.

> "understanding of the interrelationship of the social forces at work – familial, institutional, ideological, historical – and by her awareness of the range of individual human response – internalization, compliance, rebellion, withdrawal… [Woolf has a] persistent interest in how people… have negotiated between what they want and what is expected of them" (Zwerdling 1986).

Zwerdling's inference of Woolf's aims here illuminates the role of Clarissa's inner consciousness. Clarissa is aware of the world she lives in, aware of her duties as wife and aware of the life she would have had if she married Peter Walsh. And yet, Clarissa *chose* to marry Richard Dalloway – an arguably feminist decision made to preserve her agency. Whilst Clarissa does not have all the agency and thus does not experience feminism in an all-freedom sense, she works within the institutional and familial structures to maintain some sense of freedom. Thus, as Woolf's "social vision" showcases the "behavior expected of women" and the "relationship between the self and the world," (Zwerdling 1986). She also reveals the balance that women had to walk in the early 20th century to preserve certain aspects of freedom. There is no doubt, however, that Clarissa is not only caught in the tension of her desires and what is expected of her but is also acutely aware of her fractured self and the anguish that creates.

The tensions of aging, beauty and invisibility often manifest as embodied experiences. When Clarissa returns to her house after completing a few errands, she hears that only her husband was invited to Lucy Bruton's lunch the day of her party. Standing alone, Clarissa feels "herself suddenly shriveled, aged, breastless, the grinding, blowing, flowering of the day…out of her body and brain which now failed, since Lady Bruton… had not asked her" (*MD*, Woolf 1925). The news of Lucy's lunch makes Clarissa feel a sense of agedness that manifests physically, both in her body and her brain. Her body and breasts abruptly shrink and she feels the elements of the day leave her so much so that her body and mind "now failed." With the absence of a full body or connection to the day, Clarissa is left isolated from her own body and its

physical relation to the world around her. Clarissa is caught between two worlds. Though she is tired of performing the duties of Richard Dalloway's wife, she is upset with herself and worried that she has disappointed her husband when she is not invited to Lady Bruton's luncheon. Here, the disconnect between Clarissa and Mrs. Dalloway does not lead to isolation but, instead, to an estrangement from her body that is linked to a sense of agedness that lacks beauty.

In her essay, *The Double Standard of Aging* (1972), feminist Susan Sontag focuses on the process of growing old rather than old age itself. She states, "it is particularly women who experience growing old (everything that comes *before* one is actually old) with such distaste and even shame… 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 1972). Sontag explains that as aging women are judged more than aging men, the process of aging is filled with guilt and discomfort. Sontag argues that the loss of youthfulness, and thus a loss of beauty, is more detrimental to the perception of aging women.

The dual experience of aging – the complex feeling of simultaneous youthfulness and agedness, involvement and solitude – is driven by external pressures of the standards of aging, often imposed by men. Feeling shriveled and aged, Clarissa withdraws to the empty attic for her midday nap, thinking again of moments from her childhood. She reminisces about the time when Sally kissed her and thinks of her relationship once more with Peter. She wonders whether, if he were here now, he would think she had grown older. "Would he say that, or would she see him thinking when he came back, that she had grown older?" (*MD*, Woolf 1925). Though she recognizes that she had changed physically since her illness, she "was not old yet. She had just broken into her fifty-second year" (*MD*, Woolf 1925). In this moment, Clarissa feels older than before her illness, but she does not view herself as strictly old. And yet, her thoughts are filled

with worry of how others might view her. To little surprise, when Peter Walsh unexpectedly shows up at Clarissa's house, he immediately thinks, "She's grown older… I shan't tell her anything about it… for she's grown older" (*MD*, Woolf 1925). Upon seeing Clarissa after all those years, Peter Walsh's first thought is that she looks aged. As such, the reader gains an external view of Clarissa alongside her perception of self. Of course, he chooses not to tell her, but his inference is significant as it confirms Clarissa's insecurities of being seen as aged despite not believing herself to be old. Clarissa is torn between memories of youth, the present feeling of distance from old age, and the consequences of the double standard of aging between men and women. This moment of tension between Clarissa's self-image and Peter's male gaze complicates the experience of aging further as it highlights the hypervisibility of aging in women (and not men).

Virginia Woolf portrays Clarissa Dalloway as functioning within but working against a society that casts her and other women as secondary. Clarissa's choice in marriage marks more than just an individual choice – she followed a path to independence whilst sacrificing a path of love. Though confident in her choice of marrying Richard Dalloway rather than Peter Walsh, Clarissa often finds herself caught up in the past. Her love for Peter might have led her on an adventure, but she reflects on the difficulties of hers and Peter's relationship. From an early age, Clarissa knew that a certain level of independence was required for her marriage to be successful. She explains, "for in marriage a little licence, a little independence there must be between people living together… which Richard gave her, and she him… But with Peter everything had to be shared" (*MD*, Woolf 1925). The small pact that must exist in marriage, according to Clarissa, is a bit of independence. With Richard, Clarissa lives her life with a certain level of separateness from him. Often, she does not know where he is or what his work

meetings are about. With Peter, however, it was imperative that their lives were fully shared with each other, both physically and emotionally. Clarissa took the risk of a safer, less intimate marriage to hold onto her independence, which would have been diminished if she married Peter Walsh.

Separately from Peter Walsh, Clarissa Dalloway continues to honour her independence within her marriage. Later in the day, before the party, Richard brings Clarissa flowers with the hope of telling her he loves her. Whilst holding out the flowers, "he could not bring himself to say he loved her; not in so many words." Clarissa admired the flowers and "she understood; she understood without his speaking" (*MD*, Woolf 1925). Though Richard brings Clarissa flowers as an act of love, his gesture cannot be fully articulated despite his happiness in the moment. There is an understanding between the two of them such that Clarissa recognizes Richard's admiration. This moment lacks a deep intimacy (and the interpretation falls on Clarissa) but, when Richard leaves to attend a work meeting she reflects that,

> "there is a dignity in people; a solitude; even between husband and wife a gulf; and that one must respect… for one would not part with it oneself, or take it…without losing one's independence, one's self-respect" (*MD*, Woolf 1925).

Mr. and Mrs. Dalloway respect one another by maintaining a level of solitude within their day to day lives. Clarissa states that the distance between her and her husband must not be violated or else one's own independence will be lost. As a result, they maintain autonomy, self-respect and privacy within the connection of marriage.

When the party finally arrives that evening, Clarissa is confronted with the shocking news of Septimus' suicide, amidst the event. Her "body burnt…[and] she felt somehow very like him" (*MD*, Woolf 1925). Whilst Clarissa physically processes the news, the feels a connection with Septimus. This momentary connection between the two characters, who both experience

isolation from society, confronts Clarissa with her age. According to Hermione Lee, “the major connection between Clarissa and Septimus is, of course, that his death enables her to encounter hers” (Lee 1977). The similarity Clarissa feels to Septimus – a man she has never met – after his death positions her in contemplation of her future death. Clarissa encounters a physical finality to old age that places her into a deeper seclusion from her own party.

The final scene of *Mrs. Dalloway* depicts the last moments of Clarissa’s party. Most people have left; Mr. Dalloway and his daughter, Elizabeth, as well as Peter and Sally remain. Clarissa has removed herself because of the painful news of Septimus Warren Smith’s suicide. Telling Peter that Richard Dalloway has grown on her, Sally gets up to say goodnight to him. Peter, meaning to follow her lead, lingers for a moment: “What is this terror? What is this ecstasy? He thought to himself. What is it that fills me with extraordinary excitement? It is Clarissa… For there she was” (*MD*, Woolf 1925). Puzzled by a feeling of simultaneous anxiety and exhilaration, Peter looks up to realize it is Clarissa who, after all these years, still makes him feel this way. Peter, though often judgmental of Clarissa’s character has always been drawn to her as she was. After all these years he manages to find his way back to Clarissa at one of her parties. Significantly, the final lines of the novel are Peter Walsh’s perception of Clarissa. Though the reader ends the novel with their own perception of Clarissa as well as an understanding of Clarissa’s view of herself as an independent woman, Woolf refrained from granting her the last word. Ultimately, Clarissa remains defined by how others perceive her as Mrs. Dalloway – “the perfect hostess.”

Mrs. Dalloway uncovers the inner consciousness of Clarissa, a middle-aged woman who – despite the centrality of her party that day – is often confronted by the reality that society deems her old and irrelevant. Clarissa experiences moments of societal seclusion that manifest as

embodied aging as well as physical and emotional disconnects between how she feels and how Victorian society wants her to act. Clarissa's self-perception becomes infiltrated with how society – and particularly men – see her body and her title. Whilst she must play the chosen role of Mrs. Richard Dalloway, in which she has a certain level of agency, she confronts the anguish and invisibility of her shriveling body. As Woolf portrays the multifaceted experience of aging as a woman – one affected by the external, the recognizable external and the deeper self – she highlights a new older woman whose experience is three-dimensional. Next, we turn to *To the Lighthouse* to examine the role aging, beauty and motherhood in the Victorian woman.

Highlighting the Lonely Role of Mother and Wife to Challenge Expectations of Older Women in the Home

To the Lighthouse was published just two years after Mrs. Dalloway, in 1927. Once again, Woolf's protagonist is an older woman, Mrs. Ramsay. Unlike Clarissa Dalloway, Mrs. Ramsay epitomizes Victorian femininity, subsuming many aspects of domestic womanhood – like her belief in marriage, her reducing herself next to her husband and taking on the dutiful role of Mrs. Ramsay. As such, she is only referred to by her relation to her husband, as his wife, Mrs. Ramsay. She is all-providing to her eight children, her husband and her friends. Woolf marks Mrs. Ramsay as the quintessential Angel in the House; and yet, by providing and centralizing Mrs. Ramsay's thoughts and experiences, Woolf establishes a new perspective on both the essential role such women play, as well as Mrs. Ramsay's experiences of aging and isolation. Mrs. Ramsay's presence is only ever praised for her beauty. As a result, she is often left unseen and tired. Ultimately, her harsh experiences are never resolved before her death, after which the other characters must face her absence. What's more, Mrs. Ramsay, in her absence, remains the center of the novel, revealing on a whole other level how essential older women are to the unity of family.

Alex Zwerdling explains, "the exposure of and partial liberation from Victorian domestic hierarchy and coercion… determines who in *To the Lighthouse* is permitted to think… This sense of a revolution in the domestic order, in which formerly silent underlings (wives, children, servants) are suddenly given a voice, directly affects the narrative strategy of *To the Lighthouse*" (Zwerdling 1986). Thus, as Woolf begins to reveal the voices of the underlings in novels such as *To the Lighthouse* (and *Mrs. Dalloway*), the lives of older women are revealed.

Mrs. Ramsay is undoubtably a symbol of beauty who is bound to her children and husband. As Lily Briscoe begins her painting in part one, she finds her vision difficult to execute.

Before long, Mr. Bankes takes an interest in her piece, noticing the purple shape on the canvas, which Lily informs him is Mrs. Ramsay reading to her son, James. Illustrated in the painting, "mother and child then – objects of universal veneration, and in this case the mother was famous for her beauty – might be reduced… to a purple shadow without irreverence" (*TLL*, Woolf 1927). Lily's painting transforms the symbolic and respected image of mother and child into a simple concept of devotion and admiration. As Lily obscures the pure human form by painting a mere shape, the ubiquitous relationship between mother and child remains as powerful as ever. Though the famous "beauty" of the mother becomes a shadow, the child must take on a light. Thus, as a shadow requires a light, Lily and her canvas uncover the relational nature of the mother and child. When Mrs. Ramsay passes away, however, this undeniable bond is lost, leaving her eight children without a maternal figure. The third part of the novel, "The Lighthouse," uncovers the problem of absence for Mr. Ramsay and the Ramsay children. The characters navigate their processes of grief – not only for their mother and wife, but without their mother and wife. The universal symbol of Mrs. Ramsay uncovers the importance of her role and her beauty even when she is not physically present.

The role of motherhood is central to Mrs. Ramsay's interaction with the world. She is dedicated to all her children and spends time reading and playing with them and cooking and knitting for them. Her maternal instincts reach beyond her eight children to those who stay in her home as well as the little boy living with a tuberculosis hip in the lighthouse. Whilst Mrs. Ramsay's role as a mother is clearly meaningful to her, the effects it has on her children are also significant. Their perception of her as a mother is one of adoration and admiration. One night, Mrs. Ramsay goes up to the children's bedroom to check if they're sleeping. To her annoyance, they are not, but instead quarrelling over the terrifying shadow of a skull in the room. After

wrapping the skull with her shawl, Mrs. Ramsay calmed Cam and James to sleep before going back downstairs. Prue, one of the older children, looked up at her mother on the stairs and thought, "'That's my mother,'…Yes; Minta should look at her; Paul Rayley should look at her. That is the thing itself, she felt, as if there were only one person like that in the world; her mother" (*TLL*, Woolf 1927). As Prue looks at her mother, she understands all the work that she does. She also recognizes how much she loves her mother, how unique she is, and how she wants everyone else to see and understand this. The phenomenon of Mrs. Ramsay, according to Prue, should be looked at.

The question of *who* is looking is significant to the ways in which motherhood and beauty are perceived. Rachel Bowlby analyses an important passage in *To the Lighthouse* where Mr. Ramsay sits with his pipe watching his wife and son in the window, beyond which he sees a farm and cottages. These images of motherhood and the natural world, Bowlby states, are treated as analogous and so the small scene acts like a miniature "structure of masculine subjectivity" (Bowlby 1997). Mrs. Ramsay is constantly being looked at for her beauty and her nurturing qualities. However, the danger of the male gaze is what traps her in the traditional domestic role of the Victorian woman[6].

Just as Mrs. Ramsay is an artistic symbol of beauty, the physicality of her beauty is something she is often admired for and remembered for once she passes away. As women age, it is assumed that their beauty will dissolve with their youth. However, Mrs. Ramsay, a woman of fifty**,** is revered for the shocking preservation of her beauty. When she walks into a room, her beauty is noticed; when she sits on the beach, her presence glows – Mrs. Ramsay possesses a certain draw about her. At the beginning of the novel, when she and Mr. Tansley go to town to

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[6] It is important to note the significance of Mrs. Ramsay's name. Her first name is never revealed to us and so her character is forever tied to Mr. Ramsay and her role as his wife.

shop, Mr. Tansley watches Mrs. Ramsay. Before long, he realizes, "it was this: she was the most beautiful person he had ever seen" (*TLL*, Woolf 1927). Admiring her eyes and her hair, he second guesses, "what nonsense was he thinking? She was fifty at least; she had eight children" (*TLL*, Woolf 1927). Nevertheless, he walks home – Mrs. Ramsay beside him – beaming with pride as he carries this beautiful woman's bag. Mrs. Ramsay is like no one else Mr. Tansley has seen. Despite her age and her abundance of children, he cannot deny her beauty. Questioning his own "nonsense" suggests Mr. Tansley does not usually equate beauty with middle-aged or older women. Mrs. Ramsay, then, takes him by surprise as she defies the standards of beauty that Mr. Tansley might be used to. Though Mrs. Ramsay's beauty is unexpected due to her societally deemed older age and possession of multiple children, Woolf highlights the beauty of an "aging woman" at the center of this novel, even after Mrs. Ramsay passes away.

Though others see her as radiant and beautiful, Mrs. Ramsay faces herself in the mirror. When she looked and "saw her hair grey, her cheek sunk, at fifty, she thought, possibly she might have managed things better – her husband; money; his books" (*TLL*, Woolf 1927). As she imagines a life for her children, one different to hers, Mrs. Ramsay looks at her face in the mirror, perceiving it as aged. Interestingly, her physical appearance makes her think she could have done better to manage – not her own – but her husband's affairs. Though she recognizes her aged face, her selflessness makes her think to how she can make her children's life better than this.

Mrs. Ramsay's beauty functions as an unconditional source of comfort. During the heart of Lily Briscoe's grief for Mrs. Ramsay, when she returns to the house ten years later, she cries for Mrs. Ramsay, cries for all the moments they shared and the anguish she feels. Eventually, her suffering lessens and she feels a sense of relief as well as,

> "a sense of some one there, of Mrs. Ramsay, relieved for a moment of the weight that the world had put on her, staying lightly by her side and then (for this was Mrs. Ramsay in all her beauty) raising to her forehead a wreath of white flowers with which she went" (*TLL*, Woolf 1927).

Lily feels Mrs. Ramsay in this moment of intense grief. Mrs. Ramsay's presence removes the weight on Lily's shoulders and brings a comfort of a familiar beauty. It is significant that Lily feels more than Mrs. Ramsay's presence – she senses Mrs. Ramsay "in all her beauty" shining for Lily in this moment of despair. Thus, even when Mrs. Ramsay is absent in death, her beauty is still present and central to others' memories of her. Her beauty continues to shine as her family and friends navigate the hardships of losing a loved one.

Mrs. Ramsay's role as caretaker exists throughout much of the novel. Nevertheless, the reader is exposed to the impacts of this role. Thus, it is with *To the Lighthouse* that Woolf attempts to "challenge the assumptions of Victorian family life" by highlighting the role of marriage within the family structure (Zwerdling 1986). Mrs. Ramsay's role as caretaker goes beyond her role in the home or her role as a mother to her eight children. She finds herself also having to care for, support and praise her husband. As Mrs. Ramsay sits knitting and reading with James upon her knee, Mr. Ramsay continues to interrupt the "perfect simplicity and good sense of [James'] relations with his mother," demanding sympathy (*TLL*, Woolf 1927). Obstructing the unity of mother and child, "it was sympathy he wanted, to be assured of his genius… and then to be taken within the circle of life, warmed and soothed… He must be assured that he too lived in the heart of life; was needed" (*TLL*, Woolf 1927). Mr. Ramsay reaches for Mrs. Ramsay for comfort and assurance. Despite his egotistical and harsh fathering, he needs to hear that he – like Mrs. Ramsay – is a central part to the world he revolves in. This search for self-validation from his own wife establishes him as another body that Mrs. Ramsay must care for. Furthermore, as he interrupts a moment of mother and child, Mr. Ramsay's needs

are immediate and, arguably, uncontainable. Hermione Lee declares that, “the woman’s emotional act of giving sympathy paradoxically fertilizes the man, but more in the manner of a mother feeding her child than a lover” (Lee 1977). Mrs. Ramsay is placed in the position of caring for Mr. Ramsay, like a mother does to her child and not in a way that connotes power. As readers, we are inundated with what the *man* wants.

The exerting effects of the duties of mother and wife reveal themselves in the form of embodied aging. Though Mr. Ramsay’s demand for validation is a rare moment, she does not hesitate to soothe him like she does her eight children. However, when Mr. Ramsay is satisfied with her words of assurance, Mrs. Ramsay has “scarcely a shell of herself left for her to know herself by,” reminding us of Clarissa’s sense of only wearing her body (*TLL*, Woolf 1927). These women’s bodies are external to their sense of self, or they feel hollowed out inside of them. Mrs. Ramsay’s role as a caregiver transcends her duties as a mother and grants little time for her to care for herself or even have a strong sense of self. Instead, she is left in a state of exhaustion that extracts all the physical capacity out of her – reducing her to a scarce “shell of herself.” James (unlike Mr. Ramsay) notices the toll that his mother’s double duty takes and so he leaves her be. As he leaps off her knee, “Mrs. Ramsay felt not only exhausted in body but also there tinged her physical fatigue some faintly disagreeable sensation with another origin” (*TLL*, Woolf 1927). Mrs. Ramsay realizes that her fatigue goes beyond physicality. The exhaustion and dissatisfaction of validating her husband emerge from the fact that “she did not like, even for a second, to feel finer than her husband” (*TLL*, Woolf 1927). Despite her dedication to her family and her central role in caring for her children and husband, Mrs. Ramsay – whether she agrees with it or not – must remain modest in her status as a wife. The contradictory and confusing act

of reducing herself in the presence of her husband until he requires recognition of his magnificence, leaves Mrs. Ramsay physically and mentally depleted.

Alex Zwerdling argues that Woolf was often concerned with feminine inability. "It [feminine incapacity] is embodied in her portrait of Mrs. Ramsay, who is convinced it is right and proper that men should govern the world and empedestal their women" (Zwerdling 1986). Whilst Mrs. Ramsay does not fight against the norms of Victorian womanhood, she *does* begin to notice the effects they have on her mind and body. Zwerdling continues about the broader impacts of Woolf's work and legacy. "Woolf's particular contribution to the women's movement was to restore a sense of the complexity of the issues after the radical simplification that had seemed necessary for political action[7]. Why did women so often lack self-confidence? Why does Mrs. Ramsay dislike, "even for a second, to feel finer than her husband?" *(TL 65)*, and why is men's anger against women at times so violent?" (Zwerdling 1986). There were moments when Woolf was not involved with the fight for suffrage. According to Zwerdling, she was more interested in the nuance in women's perceptions of themselves. The internalization of diminishing one's female-self next to her husband undoubtably resulted in an invisible existence.

Despite her dedication to her family and their reliance on her, Mrs. Ramsay – like Clarissa – pursues solitude and independence. Between all the moments of arduous maternal, spousal and domestic caretaking, Mrs. Ramsay must find time for herself. She relishes in moments when she can be alone, often staying back when her children go to the beach or denying help when she goes to town. She gets caught in moments of tension when she knows she would enjoy spending time laughing and playing with her children who're growing up so quickly. After putting the children to bed one night, Mrs. Ramsay has a moment to herself. In

[7] Namely, the fight for suffrage.

this occasion of relief, she "could be herself, by herself… to be silent; to be alone." In this quiet solitude, she reflects:

> "all the being and the doing… evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others." As she sat and continued to knit, "she felt herself; and this self having shed its attachments was free for the strangest adventures. When life sank down for a moment, the range of experience seemed limitless" (*TLL*, Woolf 1927).

Mrs. Ramsay, alone and knitting in her chair, is able to dissolve any sense of existence or responsibility. Consequently, she can begin to look inwards as if others can no longer see her. Mrs. Ramsay feels a sense of self so fiercely, here, that she can strip herself of any responsibility, even if just for a second. What emerges is a "limitless" imagination of her future that grounds her in a sense of stability and resolve. Without the pressures of her role, Mrs. Ramsay experiences such clarity about herself, her future as well as the natural world around her. It is in these movements of solitude that Mrs. Ramsay's perspective on life and her future can revitalize. It is also in these moments that Woolf sought to portray a domestic, older Victorian woman imagining who she could become.

Whilst Mrs. Ramsay seeks out moments of solitude, there are also instances where she feels isolated and invisible. Before the scheduled supper with the Ramsay family and guests of the house, Mrs. Ramsay is getting ready with two of children, Jasper and Rose. Frustrated and anxious by the lateness of her other children, she "felt alone in the presence of her old antagonist, life" (*TLL*, Woolf 1927). Mrs. Ramsay feels separate from the world around her. This feeling of isolation emerges from her sense of older age and an opposing life. She must constantly put the livelihood and comfort of everyone in her family before her own. And yet, as a woman, her efforts, and triumphs of care, as well as her exhaustion from it, are rarely appreciated. Though the happiness of those around Mrs. Ramsay necessitates her presence, she feels alone in the mere

"presence" of this life of hers. As Jasper and Rose pick out the final touches for their mother, Mrs. Ramsay looks in the mirror "but avoiding her face" (*TLL*, Woolf 1927). In this moment of separateness – not solitude – Mrs. Ramsay avoids catching her eye and aging face in the mirror[8].

As dinner approaches, Mrs. Ramsay goes down to the kitchen, forlorn and disconnected. When she descends the stairs – caught in this sense of aloneness – a portrayal of her superiority arises.

> "Like some queen who, finding her people gathered in the hall, looks down upon them… and acknowledges their devotion and their prostration before her… [she] bowed her head very slightly, as if she accepted what they could not say: their tribute to her beauty" (*TLL*, Woolf 1927).

Mrs. Ramsay is described as a queen descending on her subjects, looking down at "them." Though the people around her are only family members and close friends, there is an othering that occurs. The reactions of devoutness and submission almost sets Mrs. Ramsay in her own, untouchable world. In this moment, it seems as though Mrs. Ramsay is also aware of this unspoken hierarchy since she bows her head. The tribute to Mrs. Ramsay during this deliberate recognition of her presence, however, is one associated with her beauty. Thus, as Mrs. Ramsay senses a separation from the world, the physicality of her presence – her beauty – is recognized and appreciated. Perhaps, it is a different kind of recognition that Mrs. Ramsay seeks.

At moments when Mrs. Ramsay is at the center, she feels the most alone. Mrs. Ramsay sits at the head of the table, questioning what she has done with her life. She seats everyone, curating the evening of conversations ahead. When they're all at the dining table she feels desperately separate from the current of the room. As she ladles the soup, she notices: "There was no beauty anywhere… Nothing seemed to have merged. They all sat separate. And the

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[8] Please refer to the section of *The Waves* for analysis of mirrors in Virginia Woolf's novels

whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her" (*TLL*, Woolf 1927). Though everyone else sees beauty within Mrs. Ramsay, she doesn't see it around her anymore. Seated among her friends and family, she observes that no one is coming together. What's more is that Mrs. Ramsay assumes the responsibility of unifying everyone's separateness. Once more, "she felt… the sterility of men, for if she did not do it nobody would do it" (*TLL*, Woolf 1927). Not only does Mrs. Ramsay feel responsible for merging everyone, but she also understands that, as the lady of the house, she is the only one who will make the effort to make it happen. She functions as the center and, thus, her presence is required for the meal to have a harmonious flow, though she herself feels external to the flow. The "effort" of curating a successful meal is rarely acknowledged by those around her, particularly Mr. Ramsay who gets fed up with the events of family life. Laura Marcus, in her essay "Woolf's Feminism and Feminism's Woolf," might call this moment a separation of spheres. She argues *To the Lighthouse* is the "novel in which Woolf explored most fully the Victorian concept of 'separate spheres' and the chasm separating past from present (Marcus 2006). She continues, "Mrs. Ramsay becomes perceived as a representation of the mind and sensibility of the female novelist, holding the whole together" (Marcus 2006).

Though Mr. Ramsay and the other men sit obliviously as Mrs. Ramsay works to create a harmonious setting at dinner, Lily Briscoe observes "how old she looks, how worn she looks… and how remote" (*TLL*, Woolf 1927). Lily sees that Mrs. Ramsay, though crucial to the meal, is far away, tired and aged. Unlike Mr. Ramsay's fixation of Mrs. Ramsay's beauty when she was in a moment of aloofness, Lily analyzes the movements and age of Mrs. Ramsay as she entertains William Bankes next to her. The tensions in the *Boeuf en Daube* scene between Mrs. Ramsay's internal monologue, her obligation – as a woman – to bring everyone together, as well

as the acknowledgement of her beauty and nothing else is a crucial moment. Mrs. Ramsay has the most significant role in the home, and yet she must constantly question her role as a mother, wife, friend and woman in society. Therefore, the feminine representation that Mrs. Ramsay stands for, is lost without notice.

Though Lily can see multiple layers of Mrs. Ramsay's character, such as her remoteness, she is also taken aback by Mrs. Ramsay's beauty. When Mrs. Ramsay's extravagant meal gains recognition by her family as well as her guest, Mr. Bankes, she seems to come back to the present moment more joyfully. Lily witnesses this transformation and reflects, "how absurd she was, sitting up there with all her beauty opened up again in her. There was something frightening about her. She was irresistible… she put a spell on everyone" (*TLL*, Woolf 1927). Furthermore, "without looking young, she looked radiant." Lily watches Mrs. Ramsay's beauty wane and brighten, locating an absurdity in the vacillations. Whilst one part of Lily is threatened by Mrs. Ramsay in this moment at the dinner table, the other is compelled by it, as if Mrs. Ramsay has cast a spell that keeps them close. Therefore, as Mrs. Ramsay feels the tensions of her curatorial and essential position to create a successful dinner, others look to her as the centerpiece of the event. She brings people together and, though it is challenging for her, others feel the effect as if under a spell. Here, Woolf also challenges the synonymity of beauty and youthfulness; though Mrs. Ramsay no longer looks young, she remains vibrant.

The second section of *To the Lighthouse,* "Time Passes" depicts nature's takeover of the Ramsay home during the war. The infiltration of an impersonal voice blurs the distinction between foreground and background. The destruction of the war – on the world and on the Ramsey family – is secondary in this section. As readers, we learn of multiple deaths in the family, including Mrs. Ramsay's, "[Mr. Ramsay… stretched his arms out, but Mrs. Ramsay

having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty]" (*TLL*, Woolf 1927). The reader finds themselves re-reading this passage over and over to ensure the words are correct before them. Mrs. Ramsay's death is placed alongside the inevitability of nature's course. And yet, when the novel returns to the life of the Ramsays, the characters must navigate their world without their mother, their wife and their friend. By focusing on Mrs. Ramsay even after she dies, Woolf highlights the presence of an absent figure – a aging woman who never reached old age.

Though overlooked by her family, Mrs. Ramsay was central to the family's unity. Thus, her death marks a change in positionality. The characters must find peace in an absence that feels so ominously present. When Lily Briscoe revisits her unfinished painting in the novel's third part, she faces the challenge of representing the beauty of something – or someone – who no longer exists. Though the symbol of mother and child is universal, Lily has lost her subject. In a moment of grief bubbling to the surface, Lily's anger turns to Mr. Ramsay. "That man, she thought, her anger rising in her, never gave; that man took. She, on the other hand would be forced to give. Mrs. Ramsay had given. Giving, giving, giving, she had died" (*TLL*, Woolf 1927). Whilst Lily recognizes the amount that Mrs. Ramsay gave and, in turn, how much Mr. Ramsay took, she also understands that she is on the path to filling in the same domesticity and "would be forced to give." To a certain extent, Lily sums up Mrs. Ramsay's life as one of giving.

Therefore, as Lily tries to fill the absence of her artistic subject, she also finds herself under pressure to fill in for Mrs. Ramsay's prominent role of caregiving. Before Mr. Ramsay, Cam and James begin their journey to the lighthouse, Mr. Ramsay hovers over Lily's easel, asking if she has everything she desired; "and then-this was one of those moments when an enormous need urged him, without being conscious what it was, to approach any woman, to

force them, he did not care how, his need was so great, to give him what he wanted: sympathy" (*TLL*, Woolf 1927). Mr. Ramsay's urge for attention and comfort is so sudden and powerful; yet, he is unaware of what drives this urge. Without the comfort of Mrs. Ramsay, Mr. Ramsay must seek sympathy from "any woman." Mr. Ramsay will go through serious measures to get what he wants, but Lily is unable to give Mr. Ramsay what Mrs. Ramsay was once able to so naturally. Thus, there is no doubt that the absence of his wife's sympathy leaves him unguided. He is disconnected from, and unfamiliar with his surroundings as well as himself. As a result, his grief for Mrs. Ramsay goes unnamed and Mr. Ramsay's self-pity isolates him and Lily as they sit in the discomfort of unacknowledged grief. Thus, though Mrs. Ramsay had to live in her husband's shadow, her absence casts an even greater shadow on Mr. Ramsay, one that he cannot place because he never recognized the central role Mrs. Ramsay played.

To the Lighthouse depicts the unrelenting, yet central role of women in the family. Mrs. Ramsay embodies traits of womanhood throughout her short life. Her role as a wife is one of separateness whilst her role as a mother is all encompassing. As her body ages, she becomes physically fatigued by the chores of motherhood and mentally exhausted by the amount of caring she must do. All of this is obvious, and yet Mrs. Ramsay still ascribes to the traditions of Victorian women – she is even compared to Queen Victoria before the family dinner. Significantly, her symbol of femininity is often overlooked. It is only through death that her centrality becomes more obvious. On the one hand, the children mourn their beautiful mother and are flooded with memories of her care; Lily mourns Mrs. Ramsay's company and composure but also seeks to live differently to the domesticity of Mrs. Ramsay. On the other, Mr. Ramsay recognizes a void but cannot directly place his suffering. Doing so would require him to go beyond the bounds of traditional, patriarchal Victorian life. Woolf's depiction of Mrs. Ramsay as

a presence as well as an absence highlights the ways in which the role of mother, wife and women have been taken for granted. Indeed, the relationship between womanhood and the symbol of mother and child is significant; nevertheless, Woolf's creation of Mrs. Ramsay's character allows us to see the complexities that exist within older, feminine caretaking roles, which were assumed for centuries. Woolf reveals the contradictions between the experiences of living as an aging woman and the expectations of older women. Even when they are perceived as "nonsensically" beautiful, older women still suffer under the cultural gaze that prioritizes youthfulness and men. Next, I move to *The Waves*, where I examine how aging affects one's relation to society as well as how one's own identity (and one's evolution of identity with age) is often known through the body.

Age and the Dissolution of the Collective in the Search for the Self

Virginia Woolf's seventh novel, *The Waves*[9], follows the interwoven voices and lives of six characters from childhood to adulthood – from youth to old age. Nine interludes, depicting the arch of the sun throughout the day, separate each stage of life. *The Waves* begins in darkness, before the sun has risen, when the sea and sky are one. Yet, as the "sky whitened a dark line lay on the horizon dividing the sea from the sky…" (*W,* Woolf 1931). As light dawns the earth, the novel's primary image is one of division. The divide occurs between two natural elements and, as the sun rises each morning, the separation is cyclical and inevitable. This first interlude introduces a function of time that runs parallel to the lives of the six characters we follow hereafter. As the sun rises and sets in the background, we are pushed to observe the arch of Bernard, Jinny, Louis, Rhoda, Neville and Susan's lives and friendships with one another. Their circle of friends is often referred to as a ring or a globe. They must "hold it forever… this globe whose walls are made of Percival, of youth and beauty, and something so deep sunk within us" (*W,* Woolf 1931). The circle of friendship, declares Jinny, is supported by Percival – who arguably exists outside of the ring – as well as by "youth and beauty." However, the walls of youth are insecure as they are not permanent, suggesting that a divide is inevitable. Youth and beauty are grouped here as if they are one in the same, questioning the permanence of beauty. *The Waves* examines what happens to the six characters when their ring of friendships can no longer be supported by youth. We observe as the characters age and develop individual senses of self, thus reconciling the division of unity. Alex Zwerdling declares, *The Waves* is "a vision of human solitude. It is based on the feeling that even our most intimate relationships are flawed by our limited access to other minds" (Zwerdling 1986). As the female characters grow to older age,

[9] Published in 1931 by the Hogarth Press.

their relationship with the bodies shifts, resulting – yet again – in a two-fold and solitary existence.

The characters in *The Waves* are bound by childhood and by the novel's form. The soliloquy form can blur the distinction between characters, particularly in part one. This flowing dialogue constructs a conscience that appears singular or whole. Part one presents the playful, insular and collective nature of childhood. The six characters play before school in their make-believe world of Elvedon, their senses guiding the relational experience. Though they each perceive their own immediate surroundings – Bernard a ring, Susan a slab, Neville a globe, Rhoda a sound, Jinny a colour and Louis a stamping – they create a complete image. Unified in this collective experience of sensory perception of the world before their eyes, Bernard observes, "when we sit together, close… we melt into each other with phrases" (*W,* Woolf 1931). The six friends, existing in the same physical space, fuse together through sensory utterances. Thus, in childhood, the circle of friends is entirely strong; they are bound together by the present moment just outside of them.

Though these characters feel a connection between each other at this young age, they lack a connection with their individual identities. In the primary school classroom, the teacher writes a few numbers on the blackboard and Rhoda watches her friends write down their answers with full understanding. She sits alone as the others leave the classroom one by one, panicking: "but I cannot write. I only see figures… Meaning has gone…The world is entire, and I am outside of it, crying, 'Oh, save me, from being blown for ever outside the loop of time!'" (*W,* Woolf 1931). Rhoda struggles to find meaning and compares her skills to those of her friends, ultimately leaving her to feel excluded from a complete world, in which the "loop of time" continues without her. Though this fear of exclusion is common in childhood, it suggests that Rhoda knows

her friends' place in the world but not yet her own. Rhoda's self-consciousness continues into secondary school. As her, Susan and Jinny run up the stairs to get changed, they pass a mirror. Jinny notices her body is cut from the image and so continues on to find a full-length mirror. As Rhoda and Susan look in the mirror, Rhoda sees her reflection alongside Susan's and declares,

> "That is my face… but I will duck behind her to hide it, for I am not there. I have no face. Susan and Jinny have faces; they are here. Their world is the real world… whereas I shift and change and am seen through in a second" (*W,* Woolf 1931).

Upon seeing herself in the mirror, Rhoda hides from her own reflection and claims she has "no face." The face is the part of the body most unique to an individual and most related to the perception of identity; its concealment suggests Rhoda's identity is less determined. Furthermore, Rhoda compares her existence to the other girls', whose faces are present and beautiful. Thus, Rhoda's identity is abstract and fleeting in this moment as she compares herself to Jinny and Susan who are seen as beautiful young women. The formation of a self in a world that harshly judges beauty and youthfulness, is an experience filled with self-consciousness and anxiety for young women; they can often fall victim to forms of self-blaming or self-hatred that emerges from external pressures of beauty standards.

As the characters leave school and begin their own journeys, they look towards the future and develop stronger senses of selves. Developing a relationship to and understanding of the body is significant to their identity formation. Throughout the novel (unlike Rhoda), Jinny explores the world through the exploration of her body, her lovers, and her independence. When she leaves school, Jinny announces her body to society: "There is then a great society of bodies, and mine is introduced; mine has come into the room… I open my body, I shut my body at my will. Life is beginning" (*W,* Woolf 1931). Jinny self-assuredly refers to her body and its place within a "society of bodies." Though her body is newly introduced to this world, she has control

over it and confidence in it. This moment, she marks, is the "beginning" of her life. As Jinny comes into her body as she ages, she is sure of herself and looks to her life ahead, allowing her interactions with the world to be undeniable bodily. The pattern of embodied experience permeates through many of Woolf's novels. Her commitment to writing the body was particularly prominent when she referred to *écriture feminine*. Woolf "regarded the lack of representation of the body in literature as something which needed to be remedied; Jinny in *The Waves* declares ardently that 'My imagination is the body's' *(W, 149)* … Woolf further implies that the body's present absence is an effect of suppression on the part of men" (Bowlby 1997). Jinny feels the world around her intensely through her body. Not only does her body grant her visibility during her youth, but it is also a visibility that she claims.

The responsibilities and transformations of adult life disrupt the unity of friendships, suggesting that, with age, the ring of friendships begins to weaken. After the fourth interlude, when the sun has risen, adulthood presents itself and the six characters reunite for dinner with Percival before he leaves for India. As Bernard exits the train on his way to the restaurant, he does "not wish to be first through the gate; to assume the burden of individual life. I, who have been since… she accepted me, charged in every nerve with a sense of identity, now wish to unclasp my hands and let fall my possessions, and merely stand here…without desire" (*W,* Woolf 1931). Bernard is recently engaged, and he brings this news with him to the dinner. Though Bernard has felt an intense "sense of identity" since his engagement, the prospect of individual life in front of him leaves him wanting to loosen this sense of identity, taking with it his desires. Not only is Bernard not yet ready to undertake this individuality, but it is also a "burden," suggesting that a collective life is somehow easier. Though he knows that marriage is something to look forward to, Bernard cannot seem to dissociate his identity from his circle of

friends. Therefore, if Bernard feels that stepping off the train initiates some form of individualism, then the formation of a stronger sense of identity causes a divide from the collective.

At this first dinner of the novel, the characters still possess parts of their collective consciousness. Until Bernard reveals the news of his engagement to the others, they slip back into some of the sensory perception tendencies they had as children. Emerging from their "isolation," they reminisce about old teachers, Elvedon, memories of nature and of school days when they were all together. Now slightly older, they also talk about new experiences: Susan speaks of fertility, Louis of technology; Bernard shares his hatred of solitude, and Rhoda remains distant; and Jinny and Neville reflect on their bodies. Susan shares her life on the farm where she is dedicated to the cycles of nature and her children. She explains, "I shall be debased and hide-bound by the bestial and beautiful passion of maternity… I shall let them wall me away from you, from you and from you" (*W,* Woolf 1931). Susan's identity is reduced to, and confined by, her role as a mother; and yet, she sees it as a "beautiful passion." As a result of the harsh yet beautiful emotions of traditional motherhood, Susan is unable to change because she recognizes that her children will "wall [her] away." As Susan allows her children to do so, fertility – though bringing more bodies into the world – divides the mother from the rest.

With age, comes individual choices that set the characters apart, establishing something fixed that cannot be changed. Just as Jinny and Neville talk about the "infinite" time and plethora of choices before them, Bernard declares that he is engaged. Upon hearing the news, Susan says, "Everything is now set; everything is fixed… something irrevocable has happened… We shall never flow freely again" (*W,* Woolf 1931). Bernard's engagement to be married marks something in the friend group that is final, unchangeable. This fixed position consequently

restricts each of them from a steady continuation of their lives. Somehow, Bernard's future of marriage removes the possibilities that came with time before they heard of the news. Since Bernard's engagement confines the freedom of all the others, despite the individuality of their now isolated lives, an empathetic connection between them seems to persist. However, as the imposition of marriage reduces Bernard to an individual life, it also poses a threat to their unification. Rhoda continues, "the circle is destroyed. We are thrown asunder" (*W,* Woolf 1931). Not only does Bernard's engagement establish a rigidity among the six friends, but it also shatters the ring that keeps them connected to one another. Bernard's expanded sense of self and engagement creates a division between his individual and collective lives as well as between the entire circle of friends. Therefore, as the characters shift away from the collective confines of childhood, with the events of older age, it disrupts the integrity of the circle. Though they remain affected by one another, the characters' lives become increasingly fixed as they are more aware of their individual identities and paths.

As midlife approaches, a focus on the body is reestablished for women. As the female characters reach middle-age, they have lost their youthfulness, but their lives are established and many of their desires have been met. Susan reconciles the "violent passions of childhood… [and her] rage in the classroom" with her current "security, possession and familiarity" (*W,* Woolf 1931). Susan's memories of childhood are fraught with intense emotions of uncertainty and anger. Now, older, she feels safety in the certainty of herself, her life, her children, and her land. However, though Susan has "reached the summit of [her] desires," a notion of individuality, she declares, "I am sick of the body" (*W,* Woolf 1931). Susan, who is content in many parts of her natural life, admits to feelings of entrapment that come with motherhood; she is tired of her own body. Jinny, who is also in the "heart of life" and surrounded by places "where everything that is

desirable meets," also experiences a disconnect from her body. Though her body was once her connection to the world, with age, Jinny becomes increasingly less self-assured in her body. Catching her figure in the mirror in the tube station, she exclaims, "how solitary, how shrunk, how aged! I am no longer young, I am no longer part of the procession… I shall look into faces, and I shall see them seek some other face" (*W,* Woolf 1931). Looking at her reflection in the mirror, Jinny reckons with the decreasing desirability of her body, which has aged and shriveled. No longer young, her aged body is removed from an observed societal "procession," plunging her into a new state of solitude. The societal inscription of youth as synonymous with beauty induces experiences of embodied aging for Susan and Jinny that impose on their lives even at the peak of their desires. Whilst Susan's bodily experience centers in the womb and Jinny's in the confidence of her appearance, both experience a realization of bodily decline. Thus, this female experience of growing older is twofold: though desires can be fulfilled, youthful beauty and an admiration for the body declines. As beauty fades with youth, the ring of friendships weakens, resulting in a decreased sense of collectiveness.

The presence of mirrors runs throughout many of Woolf's novels, their function shifting but ultimately reflecting significant images of self, body and society onto each looking character. Katherine Woodward is a leading scholar in the field of aging. Her book, *Aging and its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions*, puts psychoanalysis into conversation with fiction to extract notions of gendered aging that Freud neglected. Woodward agrees that society has become "fundamentally ageist;" age – like gender – is yet another hierarchical structure (Woodward 1991). Woodward constructed the concept of the "mirror stage of old age," which

manifests as an inversion to Lacan's notion of the "mirror stage" of development[10]. Woodward insists that "old age is in great part constructed by any given society as a social category" (Woodward, year). In this stage, then, the mirror reflects an image of society's perception of old age. Judith Gardiner, a professor of Gender and Women's studies, sums the mirror stage of old age up nicely: "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" (Gardiner 1992). Just as Jinny is happy with her sexualized London life (the only of Woolf's female characters to so openly do so), her desires met, she observes her body in decline when she looks in the mirror. The looking glass functions as a site of self-image that is influenced by society's perception of aging women.

With older age, the characters must also reckon with the permanency of their lives. When the characters meet for a second dinner at Hampton Court following Percival's death, the scene lacks the playfulness of childhood that was imitated at the first dinner – when the characters were not yet twenty-five. When Percival dies, he is no longer present to support the walls of the ring of friendships. Neville asks how they feel among the sorrow and weight of middle-aged life. He concludes, "change is no longer possible. We are committed. Before, when we met in a restaurant in London with Percival, all simmered and shook; we could have been anything. We have chosen now" (*W,* Woolf 1931). Now, middle-aged, Neville perceives their lives as fixed. No longer is there a possibility of modification in life; instead, the characters are "committed" to their paths. He suggests that change was possible when they were younger and when Percival was still alive. Though Percival's death did not establish this new lack of choice, it was an event

[10] Lacan's mirror stage of development occurs when babies are anywhere from 6-18 months. At this time, babies recognize themselves in the mirror for the first time; they are conscious of their bodies as whole but also as object (https://plato.standford.edu/entries/lacan/).

that comes with aging, like Bernard's engagement, that limits change. Thus, as life events mark something fixed, aging functions as a narrowing of range.

The final interlude of *The Waves* depicts the fully sunk sun, which can no longer illuminate the distinction between the sky and the sea. With this image, we are led to the final stage of life, old age. Bernard's voice is the only one remaining, set with the task of summing up the meaning of life. Bernard recalls memories from childhood to the present day. Looking back, he says, "but we were all different… we suffered terribly as we became separate bodies" (*W,* Woolf 1931). Bernard's memory of the difference among the six friends suggests that the differences were always present. He reveals the suffering came not from their temperamental differences but as they each became "separate bodies," implying that they were once a unified body. As each figure moved away from the collective consciousness of childhood and into their own individuality, so too did they sever from a unified body. Bernard returns to the image of a globe. "Let us pretend that life is a solid substance, shaped like a globe." However, this circle, "the globe of life as one calls it… has walls of thinnest air" (*W,* Woolf 1931). Bernard supposes that life is a stable, circular substance, the walls of which are fragile and able to be burst. Bernard's impression of the world establishes a contradiction between its strong and delicate qualities. This understanding of the globe is different to young Jinny's understanding. The walls of her globe – which contained happiness, nature, love, hate and the mundane of the everyday – were held by Percival, youth and beauty. However, with the death of Percival and the loss of youth, the globe persists with walls of "thinnest air," causing a physical instability to the unity of the friendship circle.

The Waves traces the loosening bonds of friendship and the separation of the whole into separate units. As the six characters grow and experience the events of older age, their collective

unity is compromised through an expansion of individual identity. The death of Percival marks a solitude in the characters that cannot be reversed; the characters' lives become fixed and unchangeable with the narrowing of choice. With age, the characters – especially the women – reflect on the decline of their bodies and its solitary effects. Time, then, functions as a fragmentation of collective unity, choice and youth which splits the characters into solitude. Thus, with time, an inverse relationship exists between a connection to others and a sense of self; as the characters' bodies separate from a collective consciousness, they develop individual identities. In 1931 – the same year *The Waves* was published – Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary, "now is life very solid or very shifting?" (Woolf 1954). Woolf was clearly interested in the physicality of life – if it is stable or dynamic and whether people remained fixed or free with age. There is no doubt that these properties of life infiltrate into *The Waves* as she questions how age affects the body, identity and unity. The interaction between nature and human stories, with the presence of interludes, establishes a connection between these two cycles of life. As nature renews itself, so too does human existence, suggesting that time can be both fixed and fluid. As time moves forward, life narrows for the individual but, through the cycle of new life, expands elsewhere. As the six characters in Woolf's *The Waves* age, the circle holding their friendships shifts and splinters when they develop separate bodies and identities. Significantly, only the women must reconcile the meaning of their aging bodies as they look in the mirror.

Bringing Woolf's Notions of Aging, Beauty and Visibility into the Present

There is so much to be said of Woolf's feminism, of Woolf's notions of beauty, of visibility and, of course, of Woolf's notions of aging. As a young woman reading these novels almost 100 years later, it is shocking to observe the similarities of today's current discourse around female aging, beauty and visibility as well as the emotional (and physical) labour provided by capable women being played out in Woolf's novels. Since then, we have witnessed second and third wave feminism, which saw gradual changes in legislation and a more nuanced and a less upper-class kind of feminism. Still, now in fourth wave feminism – which finally aims to highlight the intersectionality of identities in terms of race, sexuality, class and geography – older women continue to be daunted by the harmful invisible trope. Woolf's notions of aging, beauty and visibility illuminate the existence of many older women today that might otherwise go unrecognized. How can we – particularly the younger generation – reconstruct the balancing act of feminism that Woolf so strongly showed through Clarissa Dalloway, Mrs. Ramsay and the women in *The Waves*? As we move from Virginia Woolf's notions of aging and beauty from the early 20th century, during the first wave of feminism, I look to linguistics as a way to understand how older women experience, think and talk about aging and beauty today, in what might be called the fourth wave of feminism.

CHAPTER 2: A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY NOTIONS OF AGING, BEAUTY AND VISIBILITY

Introduction

In this chapter, I investigate contemporary notions of aging, beauty and visibility through the analysis of a survey distributed to women aged fifty-five and older, throughout the United States. Whilst beauty is widely studied in many fields within and outside of linguistics, aging is often excluded from discourses of the female experience. I examine the ways in which older women express and form their "older" identities through their use of, and association to, language relating to age, beauty, strength, relevance and visibility as well as in relation to their sentiments of how other groups – the media, the younger generation, older men and women and the workplace – perceive them. Sociolinguistics is an intersectional field, by nature. Looking at the intersection of aging and gender, then, is an important addition to many previous sociolinguistics studies that have analyzed how young and adult women index their genders.

Clare Anderson, in her research on aging and gender in England, explains the importance of highlighting older women's experiences: "A consequence of the tension between the prevailing model of normative femininity (i.e., based on youth/beauty/sexual desirability) and the ageing female body is that there is no accepted linguistic or visual trajectory for accommodating age and ageing within the cultural rules governing the performance of femininity" (Anderson 2019). Anderson argues that the aging female body and experience has been overlooked in our current notion of feminism. Bringing the linguistic experiences of older women to the forefront then, as this paper seeks to do, will initiate a necessary dialogue concerning the blatant contradictions between their experiences and the societal attitudes that disfavour older women.

In our current social climate, the media has a lot of power in circulating ideologies, images, knowledge and so-called "facts." Today's children are the first to grow up with the

persistence of a screen and the inundation of information about how to be and what to look like. Social media, in particular, has encouraged young children to adhere to unrealistic and harmful ideals that cater to the hetero-normative male gaze as well as the market that drives increasing amounts of content each year (Casares and Binkley 2021; Flynn 2022). Children and adolescents are not the only ones living under the pressures from the media. As girls grow up, they are persistently told what to wear, how to act and what to eat. At an early age, this translates to lessons on how to keep yourself *young* and *beautiful* (and slim). In the face of perpetual "anti-aging" products aimed towards women, I seek to explore whether older women actually believe they need to use these products and how (or if) they internalize societal pressures and perceptions of older women.

The questions I seek to answer are: how do women aged fifty-five and over perceive themselves? How do women aged fifty-five and over think other groups – such as the media and men their own age – perceive them? Beyond how they experience it, how do women *talk* about aging, particularly in relation to beauty? What do these linguistic tendencies suggest about the ways they construct or perceive their self-images? In answering these questions, I examine varying definitions of "beautiful," how participants reflected on their speech shifts in older age as well as how social, connected and confident they feel.

My paper is formatted as follows. First, I explore the background of language and gender as well as previous literature on the positionality of older women. Next, I discuss the methodologies used to collect current experiences of aging, beauty and visibility. Finally, after my analysis of the data, I conclude by considering the impacts of the media and other groups on the experiences and identities of older women.

Background

Sociolinguistics is a relatively new field, particularly as it relates to language and gender. Sociolinguists Janet M. Fuller and Ronald Wardhaugh define it as the study of "our everyday lives – how language works in our casual conversations and the media we are exposed to, and the presence of societal norms, policies and laws which address language" (Wardhaugh and Fuller 2014). Sociolinguistics is concerned with language's influence on sociocultural norms and also how sociocultural norms influence the ways in which we use language. In this way, sociolinguistics can be a tool for social justice and social change. Transformations in how populations communicate and circulate societal norms can question our understandings of race, ethnicity, gender and more.

The linguistic intersection between gender and age is an area of sociolinguistics that requires more research. Sociolinguists are guided by linguistic variation among individuals, groups and communities; yet studies of older speech tend to trail behind. The scope of this entire paper analyzes experiences of female aging, both in fiction as well as in reality; this linguistic section focuses on gathered experiences of female aging. Before moving to current discourses of aging in linguistics, we must first look at discourses of language and gender.

Generalizations About Male and Female Speech

Before West & Zimmerman (West and Zimmerman 1987) and Judith Butler (Butler 1990) advanced the feminist theories of "doing gender" or "performing gender," respectfully,[11] Robin Lakoff established the conversation between language and gender. Lakoff's 1973 essay, *Language and Woman's Place*, was instrumental in highlighting the intersection between

[11] Both Butler and West & Zimmerman see gender as a transitive act that is never set. Butler is concerned with speech utterances and gestures which constitute a performance of gender which becomes "constituted over time … through *a stylized repetition of acts*." West and Zimmerman's *Doing Gender* discuss the "understanding of gender as a routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction."

language and women. Lakoff argues that the "personal identity of women… is linguistically submerged; the language works against treatment of women" (Lakoff 1973). Female identity is located in language; however, language is also used to subordinate female identity. Though Lakoff works within a binary and often egregiously overgeneralizes how women speak and how women's speech is perceived, the 1970s essay explores the consequences of the double bind that women face, linguistically and socially[12]. Lakoff states that women have two choices in their speech use: "to be less than a woman or less than a person" (Lakoff 1973). When women of all ages refuse to speak in the way they have been taught to do so, they are deemed unfeminine; when women do speak how society expects them to – or how society deems acceptable – they are taken less seriously and only as counterparts to men. Of course, Lakoff's conclusion here is highly simplified. And yet, much can be drawn from her argument almost fifty years on.

If individual and social identities are expressed through language, and if language has the capability to shift identities, then studying the social context of "linguistic imbalances" can illuminate how language ideologies work to inform the ways women use language. Penelope Eckert, in her essay *The Good Woman* – in an edited and commentary revision of *Language and Woman's Place* – defines the woman who uses woman's language (WL) as "an ideological artifact – a stereotype… It is not a stereotype of women but of a particular woman – a woman who strives to be refined and superpolite, who mitigates her stances and exaggerates positive affect" (Eckert 2004). This woman has traditionally been, of course, white and middle class. Further, "those of us who aren't that woman (indeed, most of us) are aware of her." The awareness of such a specific stereotype, argues Eckert, is the significance of Lakoff's notion of

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[12] In *Language and Woman's Place*, Lakoff primarily used her own linguistic "knowledge" about gender. Furthermore, Lakoff analyzes her own and her friends' speech. She declares that her own "intuitions" instructed her essay on how female identity is linguistically formed.

WL. This conscientiousness of a "hegemonic womanhood" has the potential to turn into anticipation and internalization of societal expectations of femininity. These societal pressures of womanhood certainly continue into older age.

There is no doubt that Robin Lakoff's analysis of Woman's Language (WL) is highly problematic. However, her work set a precedent for gender's place in sociolinguistics. For example, though she hilariously claims that "women… make far more precise discriminations in naming colours than do men," she also explicates the use of tag questions, politeness, intonation and the produced social meaning of using titles such as *Mrs*., *Miss*., and *Ms.* (Lakoff 1973). There is no way that women have more precision in their naming of colours; however, Lakoff's statement here is fascinating as it reveals more about her own ideologies of femininity than the actual ways she poses women speak. Asking *why* Lakoff thinks this is an important perspective for her essay (that completely overlooks any intersectionality of race, social class or age).

Furthermore, Lakoff was writing a decade or so after the onset of Women's Liberation. Many norms associated with femininity or womanhood were being challenged – both within and outside the realm of linguistics. Lakoff, too, analyzed the dynamics of power in language, arguably setting the stage for change. Ultimately, however, Lakoff did not wish to transform women's language despite its distinct connection, according to her, to the historical discrimination of women. Nevertheless, her work continues to be studied in sociolinguistics today. The themes of power, politeness and emotions maintain relevance in today's discourses of language and gender.

The dynamics of power[13] between men and women are also examined by Lakoff. She states, "in every aspect of life, a woman is identified in terms of the men she relates to" (Lakoff

[13] Lakoff argues that the definition of power is different for men and women; "it is acquired and manifested in different ways." Men often have power over something - i.e. a sexualized and desired female body.

1973). Whether this pertains to the professional, societal, or familial spheres, Lakoff argues that women are linguistically referred to in relation to their male counterparts. This point brings her to the use of *Mrs., Ms.,* and *Miss.*, which traditionally positions women in relation to their marital status[14]. Though heteronormative, Lakoff's argument here illuminates the repercussions of linguistic functions on women like those studied in this paper – namely, Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay. As mentioned, these women and their identities are tied to their husbands'. Clarissa attempts to distance herself from the identity that is Mrs. Richard Dalloway as it allows her to function separately to the social pressures of domesticity. Without her linguistic and social title, Clarissa is more free to explore or think on her sexuality, her admiration for the world and her desires. Furthermore, as readers, we never gain access to Mrs. Ramsay's first name. Her identity is undoubtedly connected to her role as a wife and a mother.

The ideologies informing Lakoff's *women's language* are more significant than WL itself. The conclusions she makes are informed by her own connotations of what it means to "act like a girl/woman" or "act like a boy/man" (Lakoff 1973).

Rather than asking if men and women talk differently, a better framing of the intersection of language and gender might be, does gender affect the way we speak? This new positioning of gender as a point of agency allows for linguistic studies of gender to have nuances in gender expression as well as age, class, race and even geography.

[14] Deborah Cameron also has a blog post about titles: https://debuk.wordpress.com/2016/01/15/mxing-it/

Modern Approaches to Language and Gender

The Social Construction of Gender

The use of language is linked with the social construction of identities and gender. Gender is a social construction. Though gender tends to relate to biological sex, the attributes we link to femininity and masculinity are mere ideologies that have been ingrained and learned within societies. Simply put, gender corresponds to the behaviours that are socially acceptable and socially attributed to each sex. Importantly, understandings of masculinity and femininity are not universal; what it means to act feminine varies from culture to culture. Thus, gender is not innate but rather learned. What's more, gender development is not restricted to childhood or initial identity formation. Rather, our gender identities morph and evolve – particularly with age as social expectations also shift.

Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell Ginet, in their book *Language and Gender*, define gender as the "social elaboration of biological sex" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003). From an early age, often beginning at the "gender reveal" party, babies are socialized as either boys or girls. At school, boys and girls tend to be placed in separate groups of play and even learning. Importantly, Eckert and Ginet speak of the learning asymmetries that arise from classroom sex separation. The asymmetry occurs when, for example, boy-ish toys and games are deemed acceptable for boys *and* girls whereas only girls should partake in girl-ish toys and games. Boys are taught to dissociate from "girl play." This asymmetry, they declare, "is partially a function of the cultural devaluation of women and of the feminine" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003). One element that occurs from this asymmetry as children grow older is the socialized need to please or be desirable to men. Today, models of desire are displayed in the media, encouraging

women to aspire to be and look like what they see. I will refer back to the role of the media in the construction and policing of female language, beauty and aging in a later section.

Gender expression exists in most realms of life – it is reflected in the way we choose to dress, do our hair, use body language as well as in our sexual orientation. Gender is also linguistically expressed: we do and say certain things in varying contexts to draw attention to certain parts of our identities whilst underplaying other aspects of our identities. Not only do we index certain features when we speak, the audience of our speech also partakes in active assumptions about identity. For example, voice and pitch is a huge part of how we express our gender identities. Thus, borrowing from stereotypical traits of masculinity, femininity or queerness allows people to linguistically index aspects of their identity specific to their gender expression.

Speak Like a Lady

Deborah Cameron is a British linguist, feminist and professor at Worcester College. Her expertise within the field is in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology. In her 1995 book, *Verbal Hygiene*, Deborah Cameron defines verbal hygiene as a set of principles or policies individuals follow to "clean up" their linguistic tendencies so as to "conform… to their ideals of beauty, truth, efficiency, logic, correctness and civility" (Cameron 1995a). Verbal hygiene speaks to the way we all correct one another (whether verbally or in our heads) during conversations. We have probably all been corrected for saying "Stella and *me* went to the park" instead of "Stella and *I* went to the park" and we have probably all thought someone misspoke when conjugating a verb incorrectly. The truth is all dialects, vernaculars and languages have systematic rules that govern speech utterances. Linguistics, then, is not concerned with grammar or "correctness;" rather, it studies the language systems people actually use in speech.

Deborah Cameron is interested in the ways that our ideologies or systems of language actually *produce* verbal hygiene. In her chapter, *Verbal Hygiene for Women,* Deborah declares that linguistic advice given to women has historically been based upon a white and middle-class form of femininity that encourages women to act more lady-like. She explains, "this reoccurring emphasis on the importance of 'ladylike' speech manifests not only class prejudice but also a more specifically sexist logic that puts women in a curious double-bind" (Cameron 1995b). Women are thus caught between the expectation to adjust their speech to sound the way society wants them to, as well as the trap of sounding inauthentic. The pressures for young girls to sit, dress and speak like ladies ingrains the harmful importance of modesty, submission and beauty.

Deborah Cameron continues to publish research within the discourse of language and gender in her blog, *language: a feminist guide*. Cameron draws on public discourses, events and stereotypes to illuminate myths about language and women, to consider the ways that women are expected to talk, the ways women are judged for talking as well as 21st century feminist issues that can be looked at through a linguistic lens. Cameron is especially interested in the intersection of language and female representation in the media. Stereotypes can hold true: women who speak up or speak out are often perceived as fussy, aggressive, unlikeable or hard work. Cameron compares the surveillance of language to the surveillance of female bodies: "This endless policing of women's language—their voices, their intonation patterns[15], the words they use, their syntax—is uncomfortably similar to the way our culture polices women's bodily appearance" (Cameron 2015). Media outlets portray ways that women *should* and *should not*

[15] Cameron writes more on voice pitch (specifically with Elizabeth Holmes) in her post *Imperfect Pitch.* Carmen Fought, Professor of Linguistics at Pitzer College in Claremont, Southern California, also analyzes Elizabeth Holmes' voice, commenting on the stereotypes attached to pitch: "When we hear someone speak, we make all sorts of judgments about them, about their level of education, about their gender, their ethnicity, age, all kinds of things" (https://www.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/tv/2022/03/04/hulu-elizabeth-holmes-the-dropout-voice-theranos-amanda-seyfried/6979461001/).

look and sound, ultimately laying the groundwork for female self-consciousness in numerous modes of gender expression.

Aging and Gender in the Media

The media's problematic depiction and control of female bodies is not a revolutionary concept. In 1964, *Sports Illustrated* created the swimsuit issue, soon becoming a site for idolized women and the desirable female body for the male gaze to gape over, month after month; makeup and hair brands adhere to this standard by advertising "anti-aging" products, teeth whitening products, fat-sucking products and Botox or plastic surgery. Not only do these standards of beauty exclude marginalized groups of women, but they also generate discourses of body image, self-worth and gender expression that are impossible to reach. The issues related to women striving to be thin and sexualized (for a heterosexual audience, regardless of their gender or sexual preferences) are multifaceted and out of control.

Cameron's 2020 blog post, *Forever 21*, examines the consequences of the double bind of agism and sexism. Upon inundation from yet another weight loss ad, Cameron noticed that the Keto poster had five images of women at different life stages. Women aged 18-30 were at the forefront looking confident, thin and sexy whereas women aged 60+ were reduced to what we might expect a 110-year-old to look like. As she contemplates womanhood in an ageist society, Cameron argues that "ageism shapes women's experience of sexism at every point in their lives" (Cameron 2020). The recognized rudeness of asking an older woman (not man) her age, the perpetual dialogue shouting at women to keep their bodies and minds "young," and the pressure for women to live by their biological clock all contribute to female perceptions of self. Whilst older men are often perceived as successful, silver foxes[16], older women are trapped in the

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[16] Personal care products for men are rarely focused on aspects of male aging or problems to be "fixed" - save for perhaps anti-balding products…

media-imposed rhetoric of "letting herself go." Whilst a shift in advertising techniques to include older women in a way that does not position them in relation to a younger generation might be a good first step, Cameron argues that shifts in language use is as important. She explains, "in English we have numerous labels for women–for instance, 'babe', 'chick', 'MILF', 'yummy mummy', 'spinster', 'cougar', 'biddy', 'bag', 'hag'—which locate them on a continuum of increasing age and decreasing desirability" (Cameron 2020). Avoiding these sorts of labels – which are all antifeminist – is another way to empower older women who should continue to be confident and sexualized in their own right, even after menopause and other life events that patriarchal society has deemed sets them on a fading path.

Philippa Roberts and Jane Cunningham's book, *Brandsplaining: Why marketing is (still) sexist and how to fix it*, analyzes the ways in which the world of advertising continues to be male dominated, despite the vast female audience these men try to reach. As such, a gap persists between the way women are presented on screen and the way women *are* in real life. "Brands profit by telling women who they are and how to be," Roberts and Cunningham explain (Roberts and Cunningham 2021). Intermingled with their own experiences of listening to women over fifty feeling increasingly invisible or ignored, they reveal the ways in which women differ from the standards portrayed in the advertising world. In their section *Women over fifty aren't hiding anymore,* they state:

> "Throughout all these depictions and presentations [of older women]… , the themes are the same: older women are lesser, limited, lost, regretful, on the sidelines and away from the main scene and stream. The lens through which they are seen brings the double whammy of marketing's male gaze and youth fixation, and the multiplying effect of both is belittling" (Roberts and Cunningham 2021).

From the Silent generation of interwar-born women to the Boomers who rebooted the Women's Movement, Roberts and Cunningham reveal the historical rise of power in advertising.

As feminism became more center stage, older women started to feel a "sense of freedom that comes from leaving behind the self-consciousness of their younger years, and with them the warping impacts of having to please and conform." The boomer generation of women began to feel a stronger sense of self in older age (Roberts and Cunningham 2021). Significantly, with a growing sense of self, comes the ability and confidence to speak up. However, despite the growing population of an older generation, the media still neglects to represent the way women aged fifty-five and older actually feel and live. Grappling with the notion that women know themselves is the first step, according to *Brandsplaining*, to changing the way advertising shapes discourses of womanhood, separately from a male gaze.

A Recent Linguistic Study of Aging and Gender

Clare Anderson's book, *Discourses of Ageing and Gender: The impact of private and public voices on the identity of ageing*, explains her research of the language used by and about aging women on both a macro (public) and individual (private) level. Anderson explicated media representations of beauty and aging in advertisements, media texts and conducted interviews with women across the United Kingdom. Anderson's analysis of gendered aging is an in-depth study that relates importantly to this paper.

Anderson is concerned with the ways in which public discourses influence how women use language to speak about their experiences of aging. Through themes of invisibility and hypervisibility, embodiment and cultural gaze, as well as the media's linguistic and image-based portrayal of beauty and aging, Anderson reveals the positionality of the women she interviewed. Older women in this study distanced themselves from the language (and thus process) of aging

"through diverse linguistic strategies such as pronoun shifts, specific positively/negatively loaded vocabulary, use of intensification and hedging" (Anderson 2019)[17].

Anderson argues that, though older women have "greater visibility" in public and private spheres today, the media still portrays older women as invisible and irrelevant. The result, she explains, is individual feelings of invisibility that are "grounded in their acute visibility as older women" (Anderson 2019). As a result, experiences of aging are fixed to appearance and the preservation of youthfulness. The pressures of appearance, argues Anderson, live within the mirror as well as the linguistic tendencies embedded in the cultural and male gaze.

Anderson's analyses of media representations of older women center around menopause, beauty products and a general absence of older women in the media. These public discourses affect the way older women see themselves and their bodies. A menopausal body – as seen in Virginia Woolf's novels – can feel shriveled. The years of old age can feel "sequestered from the life path" simply because we are socially taught to believe that women over a certain age are irrelevant (Anderson 2019). When looking at the media and advertising, it is not surprising that many women seek to shrink themselves or fall subject to the latest – and fakest – skin cream. If beauty equals youth, then appearance becomes a "dominant signifier" of age.

Next, we look to the methodologies used to examine how a group of women experience and talk about aging today.

[17] Clare Anderson also includes fascinating linguistic analysis on aging as "denial," "war," and "regret."

Methods

In order to gain a contemporary understanding of aging and beauty from a female perspective, I distributed a survey to women aged fifty-five and older. The survey methodology was chosen instead of interviews and individual research to collect a wide scope of data from a range of participants. As my Woolfian analysis of aging, beauty and visibility was twofold, the use of a survey for my linguistic study was more appropriate than conducting interviews, which would have required a narrower scope. With questions on female identification and representation, the survey investigated language and linguistic tendencies among women aged fifty-five and older.

The survey, entitled *Contemporary Notions of Aging and Beauty**, was distributed to 100 participants. Specific parameters allowed me to use qualifications that targeted women aged fifty-five and older to take my survey. I chose to target this population because the women in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, studied earlier in this paper, were in their early to mid-fifties. Furthermore, the experiences of aging depicted by the female characters in *The Waves* guided one or two questions on the survey.

Creating the Survey

The survey was built in Qualtrics and distributed via Amazon MTurk, a crowdsourcing site that allows individuals or companies to outsource tasks such as surveys. Participants were asked a range of questions, both qualitative and quantitative, so to gain a wide range of numerical and linguistic data. Furthermore, as interviews were not conducted, free response questions allowed for more in-depth linguistic analyses. Participants remained anonymous. However, at the end of the survey, participants were asked to disclose their gender, age and language experience. This question was important for my own approval of responses.

The survey comprised three sections. The first asked participants to reflect on their self-images as well as how they think the media, the younger generation, men, women and the workplace perceive women aged fifty-five and over. Participants were given a set of ten word-pairings from which to select how they are perceived under each category. Responses to Section 1 were recorded on a sliding scale from 1-9, 5 being neutral. The set of ten word-pairings is shown in Table 1.

Table 1:

Youthful vs. Older	*Finding yourself vs. Losing yourself*
Ugly vs. Beautiful	*Neglected vs. Nurtured*
Maternal vs. Slutty	*Ignored vs. Heard*
Invisible vs. Seen	*Fading vs. Vibrant*
Strong vs. Weak	*Solitary vs. Social*

The set of ten words were chosen with consideration of the themes analyzed in Virginia Woolf's novels as well as words that reflect the ways women talk about and are talked about when it comes to aging and beauty. Though the words are not necessarily opposites of each other, they do run on a scale from (stereotypically) negative to positive. The use of a sliding scale response allowed participants to rank where they are on the spectrum between the two words given.

Section 2 consisted of two free response questions. The first asked participants to explain what the word "beautiful" means to them; the second asked participants if they believe their language use is different from when they were younger. Section 3 asked participants to choose the time period during which the statements provided were more true or prominent. Participants chose between a) when you were 30, b) now, and c) about the same. Eight statements about family, solitude, motherhood, confidence and more were posed. Participants were also given the option to comment further for each statement.

**See Appendix 1 for the survey in its entirety.*

Survey Distribution

The survey was distributed in late March 2022. Participants responding on Amazon MTurk remained anonymous and were paid $2.50 to take part in the approximately 10-minute survey. Compensation was calculated as a pro-rate of California's minimum wage ($15/hour). However, as the federal minimum in the United States is $7.25/hour[18], compensation for participation in my survey was generous. Higher rates of compensation can have a few effects on Amazon Mturk responses. Firstly, the distributed task (ie. a survey) will be completed faster than average when the pay is enticing. Next, participants will try to complete the task as fast as possible by copy and pasting answers from elsewhere. Finally, there is a danger of users abusing the survey and taking it more than once, simply to be paid. I took all these factors into consideration when looking through my data.

To avert participants from taking the survey more than once, a unique reference completion code (jl97-pFc34sZ) was created. Participants had to copy and paste the code found at the end of the survey, in Qualtrics, to the provided space in Amazon MTurk. Participants whose codes did not match were discounted and therefore not paid. Please note, participants were still paid if their unique reference codes matched but their answers were clearly debunked.

Before distributing the survey to 100 participants, I ran a pilot survey on 10 participants to ensure that my Qualtrics link worked. The survey distribution test was mostly successful; most participants were from my target population and responses were personalized and not copy and pasted. Though the survey should have only been seen by users whose profiles reflect that they are women aged fifty-five or older, three men snuck and one person below fifty-five snuck the pilot study.

[18] https://www.minimum-wage.org/federal

As mentioned above, though Amazon MTurk is a reliable crowdsourcing platform, users can work to get around the security I set to take the survey multiple times. As a result, I went through the responses to determine a system of discounting certain responses. Responses that were clearly copy and pasted from either the internet or the participant's previous answers were discounted. Furthermore, responses from participants that were not female and aged fifty-five or older or did not speak English natively were excluded from the dataset. Finally, responses that were completed under 4 minutes and 30 seconds were excluded from my dataset under the impression that the survey could not be completed thoroughly and thoughtfully in this time. When the data were pruned, 71 responses remained.

Data Analysis

Box plots were made to show the distribution of data for the ten word-pairings section of the survey that asked participants to place themselves on a sliding scale. Box plots show the distribution of data as well as skewness by plotting quartiles, averages and medians. Next, graphs were made to show when participants felt each statement in Section 3 was more true. Finally, short response answers were grouped by theme. For example, definitions of "beautiful" were grouped by answers about physical beauty, inner beauty, confidence, happiness and other.

Results

The results presented in this section are analyzed data from the distributed survey, *Contemporary Notions of Aging and Beauty*. The data this section presents aims to answer three questions. Firstly, how do women aged fifty-five and over feel the media (and other groups) represents them? Next, how do the perceptions of other groups influence the way women see themselves, particularly with notions of beauty, aging and visibility? And, finally, what do the ways women talk about aging and beauty suggest about how they ranked their self-images?

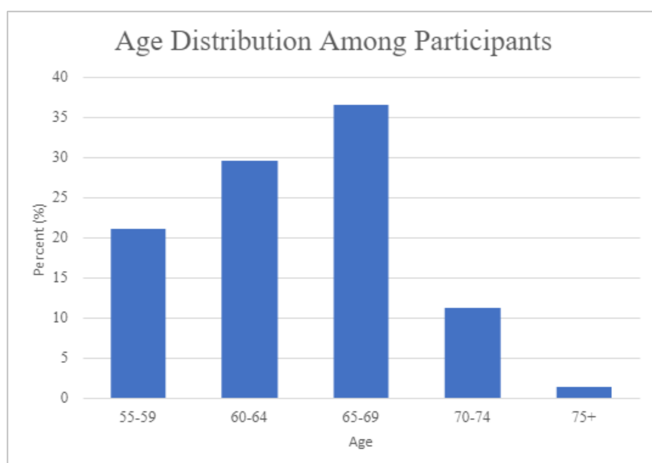
Key findings showed that women aged fifty-five and over, who took my survey, feel the media and younger generations portray older women harsher than they judge themselves. Next, participants think men and women (of the same age) generally perceive women aged fifty-five and over in a similar way as to how they perceive themselves. Participants also defined "beautiful" in numerous ways relating to physical appearance, internal qualities and traits of happiness and kindness.

Participant Information

The collected data was filtered to exclude debunked responses. 71 responses remained from women aged fifty-five and over. Chart 1 reveals the age distribution among participants. The women were from all over the United States[19]. All remaining participants are female; no responses were from non-binary people.

[19] All responses recorded outside of the United States were excluded as for succinctness but also because participants who lived outside of the United States did not speak English natively.

Chart 1:



As shown in chart 1, the majority of participants were between the ages of 55 and 69. Those aged 65-69 were most largely represented. Only one participant was 75.

A Qualitative Insight: The Construction of a Self-Image by way of Multiple Perspectives

Across the data collected in Section 1 of the survey, a few general trends appear. Firstly, the participants who took my survey – a group of women aged fifty-five and older – indicated in all but one[20] word pairing that they feel the media and younger generation represent and perceive them more harshly than they perceive themselves. Next, the ways in which these women see themselves closely reflects the ways they think other women in their age group perceive them. Interestingly, notions of how men in the same age group perceive them was also similar across each set of words (male data was sometimes skewed negatively and sometimes positively).

Please note: in interpreting the box plots, the 50th percentile refers to the large box, the upper quartile refers to the 25th percentile above the box and the lower quartile refers to the 25th percentile below the box. The end of each so-called whisker (or quartile) on either side of the box, display the maximum and minimum values in the dataset.

[20] *Solitary v. Social* was the only word pairing where the perceptions of the media were the same as perceptions of self for. The younger generation's perception remained lower for this category.

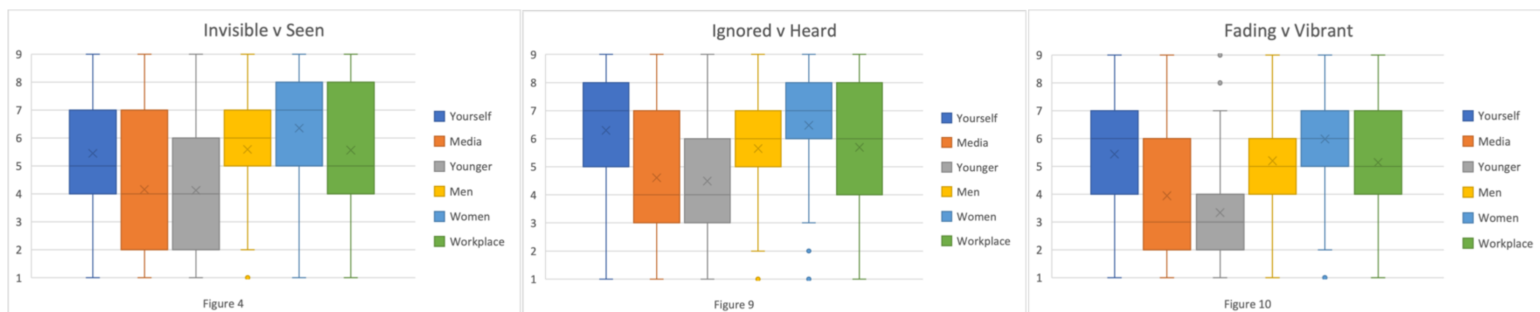
Figures 1 & 2:

Figure 1 depicts notions of age, on a scale from *Older* to *Youthful*. In this chart, we see that women perceive themselves as older and they think men and women their age perceive them similarly, but for all other categories – the media, the younger generation and the workplace – they see them as perceiving older women as even older. The participants' perception of their age ranged from 2-5, with the 50th percentile in the 3-4 range. All quartiles of the participant data fall below the neutral value of 5, revealing they perceive themselves on the older side of the spectrum. The 50th percentile for all other perspectives (media, younger generation, men, women the same age and the workplace) are also negatively skewed as they fall below the neutral value of 5. Participants (women aged 55 and over) generally felt that the media and younger generation portrayed them as older than the women view themselves, though some felt the opposite – as seen by the orange and grey outliers in Figure 1. As the graph shows, the 50th percentile for participants does not fall below 3, whereas the 50th percentile's maximum for the media and the younger generation is 3 and 2, respectively. Interestingly, the upper percentile of participants voted that men see them as more youthful (5-9). This box, marked in yellow, is skewed positively. What's more, the 50th percentile of participants indicated slightly positive trends (towards youthful) for how they feel women of the same age perceive them, suggesting that the

participants judge themselves more harshly on the appearance of their age than other women aged fifty-five and over. Finally, the shortness of the boxes and whiskers in this graph – namely for the categories "yourself," "the media," and "the younger generation" – reveals the data was much less dispersed within these categories for perceptions of age. Less dispersion of data suggests that the women taking the survey were more sure of their answers as a *collective*. Thus, whilst women see themselves as skewed towards "older," they think the media and the younger generation depict them as even older.

Figure 2 depicts notions of beauty, on a scale from *Ugly* to *Beautiful*. In this chart we see that women perceive themselves as more beautiful, and they think women and men their age perceive them the same way, but for the media and the younger generation, they see them as perceiving older women as more ugly. The participants' perception of their beauty ranged from 2-9 with the 50th percentile leaning towards the *beautiful* end of the spectrum, in the 5-7 range. The trend of participants' self-image mirrors the trend of male perception (5-7) and is like that of female perception whose lower 25th percentile trended slightly upwards. Overall, participants thought the media and the younger generation portray or see them less beautifully as they see themselves. Though notions of the media's portrayal ranges from 3-6 (in the 50th percentile), the data is negatively skewed, indicating a stronger pull towards ugly representation than the younger generation. The workplace data are concentrated selection between 5 and 6 but have outliers across the whole spectrum.

Figures 4, 9 & 10:



Figures 4, 9 and 10 all illustrate notions of recognition within society, whether physically, audibly or visually. Here, we look at all three in tandem, specifically at the role of the media and the younger generation. Figure 4 depicts notions of visibility, on a scale from *Invisible* to *Seen*. In this chart we see that older women perceive themselves as more seen, and they think men and women their age as well as the workplace perceive them similarly. On trend, the women think the younger generation and the media perceive them as more invisible. The participants' perception of their visibility ranged from 1-9 with the 50th in the 4-7 range. Participants felt that the media and younger generation's perception of women aged fifty-five and over trended more towards *invisible* than participants' own self-image. There were two participants who felt that the younger generation perceived them as more vibrant. Notions of how men, women and the workplace perceive older women were mostly more positive towards *seen*.

Figure 9 depicts notions of audibility, on a scale from *Ignored* to *Heard*. The participants' perception of how others listen ranged from 1-9 with the 50th percentile in the 5-8 range. Again, participants felt that the media and younger generation's perception of women trended more negatively towards *ignored* than participants' own self-image. Notions of how men, women and the workplace perceive older women fall within the notions of self-image. A few outliers on this

chart suggest that one or two participants think men and women their age perceive them as invisible.

Figure 10 depicts notions of vibrancy, on a scale from *Fading* to *Vibrant*. In this chart we see that women perceive themselves much more as vibrant than faded, and they say men their age perceive them the same way, but for the media and the younger generation, they see them as perceiving them as more faded. The participants' perception of how vibrant they are ranged from 1-9 with the 50th percentile in the 4-7 range. As goes the trend, participants felt that the media and particularly the younger generation's perception of women aged fifty-five and over trended more towards *fading* than participants' own self-images. Notions of how men, women and the workplace closely mirror participants' sense of selves.

In all three of these figures, we can see that women perceive themselves more positively than how they think the media and younger generation does. However, whilst perceptions of visibility – of the self and from the media – are positively skewed towards *seen* in Figure 4, Figures 9 and 10 illustrate negatively skewed perceptions of audibility and vibrancy for participants' self-image and positively skewed for the media's portrayal of the women. Furthermore, all three graphs reveal similarities in how participants perceive themselves and how participants think people in similar age groups (men and women) and the workplace perceive them.

<u>Figures 5 & 7:</u>

Figure 5 depicts notions of strength, on a scale from *Weak* to *Strong*. In this chart we see that older women generally see themselves as much more strong than weak, whilst they feel the media and younger generation see them as much more weak than strong. Two participants felt weaker. The participants' perception of themselves ranged from 3-9 with the 50th percentile in the 6-8 range. The shorter range of this group means there was less dispersion among the data, revealing that the female participants' sense of strength was arguably strong. The ways in which the participants think the media portrays them, however, are depicted in the 50th percentile (shown in orange) that ranges from 2-7. Thus, the data are much more dispersed and negatively skewed; these women felt that the media portrays them as significantly *weaker*. On trend with the data, participants also thought the younger generation's perception of women was harsher as this box is positively skewed.

Figure 7 depicts notions of searching for a sense of self, on a scale from *Losing Yourself* to *Finding Yourself*. In this chart we see that older women see themselves more positively towards finding themselves than losing themselves, whilst the media and younger generation see them as more towards losing themselves. The participants' perception of themselves ranged from 1-9 with the 50th percentile in the 5-8 range. This graph is particularly telling when looking at the how the data skews. The majority of women felt strongly that they were finding themselves; they

also thought that other women saw them in the exact same way. Notions of how men of the same age perceived them was slightly lower (4-7) yet all three of these categories – yourself, women and men – were skewed positively towards *finding yourself.* Unsurprisingly, the women felt that the media's portrayal (2-6) and the younger generations' perception (2-5) was significantly lower. These perspectives were also skewed negatively towards *losing yourself*. The inverse relationship here of skewness between *losing* and *finding yourself* is fascinating as it suggests that women look less to the media or younger generation in their journey to a sense of self.

This section discussed the quantitative trends of notions of beauty, aging and visibility in society.

How do Women Talk About Aging and Beauty?

As shown in the previous section of quantitative data, women aged fifty-five and over feel the media and the younger generation perceive them more negatively than they perceive themselves. Supplementing these numbers with qualitative data about beauty, aging and a sense of self provides insight into how these women have navigated their identity formations and shifts.

When asked to describe what "beautiful" means, a variety of responses were given. Significantly, 41 women (58%) defined beauty as something beyond physical beauty but rather something that comes from within or with wisdom and age. This "inner" beauty is described below:

"To me beautiful means something that is on the inside and not physical appearance."
"To me, beautiful is mostly an inner quality of empathy and love. Outer beauty as typically defined by society is still good but the true definition of beauty concerns good inner qualities"
"Beautiful is the whole person inside and out"
"It means a glow that comes from within when one is happy and healthy. It is looking like you take care of yourself."
"The character of a person makes them beautiful when you are older."
"Beautiful is an inner beauty because the outward appearance isn't youthful or as pretty as it used to be.

Interestingly, these last two definition of beauty seem to have shifted from when the women were younger and their definitions of beautiful were more related to the presence of a beautiful outward appearance.

Eleven women (15%) defined beautiful as being related to confidence, personality or happiness:

“To be beautiful is to really know yourself, your strengths and your attributes. When you have this, I think you have confidence, which is a beauty booster…”
“Beautiful is a person that feels good about herself and exudes confidence. She is beautiful from the inside out.”
“Someone who is unselfconscious about their appearance and relationships with others. Naturally and effortlessly interested and engaged in others; aged.”
“Happy, fulfilled, content, a zest for life.”

There was also a group of 20 women (28%) who defined beautiful strictly in terms of physical appearance[21]:

“Beautiful means looking good. It means not feeling your age.”
“I would describe beautiful as someone with attractive physical attributes. Attractive attributes would include a good figure, pretty face and pretty hair. A pretty smile with white teeth is also an attribute of beauty.”
“A youthful looking face and body with very little wrinkles or saggy skin and healthy and not overweight.”
“I look at beauty as someone who takes care of themselves physically, dresses nice, wears makeup and fixes their hair.”

Reflecting on the Past Self and the Older Self

Participants were asked to explain when certain aspects of life – such as time spent alone, time spent searching for yourself, motherhood, friendships, connection to society, family and confidence in speaking up – were more prevalent (in their 30s, now, or about the same). When asked about friendships and solitude, some responses were:

“When I was younger, I thought being solitary was a bad thing - now I think it is useful and peaceful and no longer feel the pressure to be sociable and outgoing (if that's not what I'm feeling)”

[21] I have to include these two...: “Beautiful to me is Julia Roberts twenty years ago.” “The older I get the more beautiful just means not butt ugly.”

“I don't have more friendships but I do feel I have more close friendships - and I would definitely consider that one of the joys of older female life.”
“As I got aged my friends circle got reduced all got busy with their own life.”

When asked about speaking out:

“I think it is about the same but I think I have less confidence now in a group debating situation. I don't have the same confidence about diving into a conversation and being relevant and articulate.”
“I used to be shy. I still am, but I have learned how to stand up for what I need to stand up for. You get very strong when you raise a family.”
“I am not as timid as when I was younger.”
“I feel more confident speaking up now that at 30”
“My opinion wasn’t heard when I was young and therefore didn’t speak up for myself until midlife”

A variety of responses were collected to the question: Do you think you speak differently now than when you were younger? Survey participants reflected on the ways in which their speech has shifted or stayed the same since they were younger. Participants comments on vocabulary, tone, amount of speech, content, voice pitch, confidence levels, speed, as well as an awareness of words.

Table 2:

“More thoughtful; less impulsive and garbled; probably a bit slow (particularly to those who are younger). **Less anxious to please** in an argument; more willing to call things out (which often means being perceived as "difficult” or "stroppy" by those who are younger or male)”
“Yes, I speak slowly and quietly, **because of my age**.”
“Yes I speak differently now than when I was younger. When I was younger I was much more sure of what the world was about and my place in it. I no longer feel that way. I question things once more and see things with much more empathetic eyes.”
“Change the pitch of my voice in accordance to how **dominant** I felt in the conversation.”
“**I no longer use curse words**, and don't sprinkle today's pop culture meaningless words into every sentence. I have consciously "simplified' (dumbed down) my manner of speaking in many settings since the general extent & level of vocabulary has shifted downward. These days, when some people don't know what a word means, they do not ask, nor do they look it up-instead they look at you like you have 2 heads or misperceive that you are "talking down" and get “offended.”

“**I speak less** than I did when I was younger. I also speak a little **slower** than when I was younger. What I say has also changed. It has more depth and wisdom, reflecting my life experiences.”
“I speak **more confidently** than when I was younger. I feel I have more of a voice. Maybe this comes from experience. I like myself more now than I did when I was younger.”
“I think I am **more careful**, about what I am saying. When I was younger, I probably had a tendency, to just blurt stuff out. Now, I at least try to think, before I speak.”
“I speak and think slower now than before. My line of thought does not flow as freely now.”
“I think I do speak a bit differently now than when I was younger because **my youth was more deferential** to those in power or positions of authority. The older me is more experienced and confident. Generally, feel I have more to offer than to seek from others. My younger self sometimes felt unworthy and spoke more softly with hesitation. My speech today consists of more conviction, forged by the flames of experience.”

Table 2 reveals the ways a few of the women think their language use has shifted with older age. The above data is fascinating as it shows that, when made to observe their language use, older women recognize differences from younger years. Themes of thoughtful, confident, less polite and slower or quieter speech stand out to me[22]. Interestingly, one woman claimed that simplifying her speech was equivalent to “dumming” it down. Participants claim that the content of the speech has also changed – often wiser, or more thought through than when they were younger. Lastly, the final quote I selected shows the ways in which power is involved in speech use. With age, comes power and thus confidence to speak up. The chart below (Chart 2) illustrates participants’ confidence levels in speaking up now, compared to when they were 30.

[22] Politeness is often studied in sociolinguistics when answering the question, how does gender affect the way we speak? Politeness is imposed onto ideologies of femininity (Deborah Cameron). It is fascinating how many of these women feel less inclined to pleased whilst also gaining confidence in their own speech with age.

Chart 2:

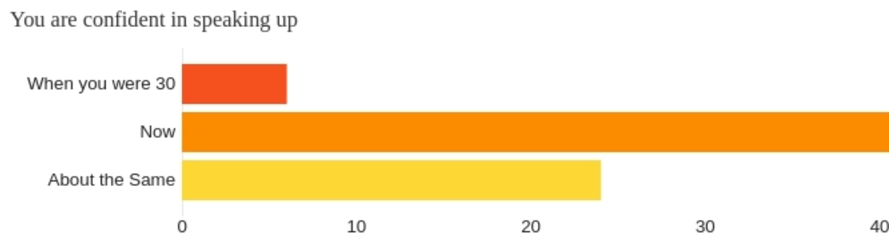


Chart 2 depicts when this group of women felt more confident in speaking up. The majority of women feel more confident today, as seen by the orange line. Few participants felt more confident when they were thirty but some do not see a change, as seen by the yellow. This chart reveals a significant difference in confidence levels from when the women were younger. This chart nicely shows how, with age, this group of women's confidence in speaking up increased.

In this section, I have shown the results from my survey. To summarize, the results illustrate how women aged fifty-five and over see themselves as well as their thoughts on how other groups perceive them. The female participants reveal how they think the media and younger generation perceive older women more negatively or harshly (in terms of age, beauty, vibrancy, and visibility) than older women perceive themselves. Next, we see how older women think they are seen by men and women in the same age group – the three groups generally mirror each other. Finally, a qualitative analysis reveals the ways women talk about beauty, solitude, confidence and language shifts.

Discussion

Main Findings

The data collected from the survey reflect contemporary notions of aging, beauty and the representation of older women in society, among women aged fifty-five and over. Quantitative data from ten word-pairings uncover the positive and negative ways this group of women perceive themselves. Whilst they generally see themselves as older, they do not generally see themselves as ugly; though they feel other groups portray them as invisible, fading or weak, these women generally feel more seen and recognize their own vibrancy and strength. Almost all of the data highlight the belief that the media and the younger generation perceive older women more harshly than older women perceive themselves. Next, the trends of the participants' individual senses of self often mirror the trends of how they think men and women in the same age group see them. Finally, we see the linguistic tendencies of how a sample of women aged fifty-five and over talk about aging, beauty and visibility. Beautiful was defined in numerous ways and reflections of past selves reveal shifts in the ways in which these women see themselves.

Sentiments of the Media

First, let's look at the trends of how women feel the media perceive them. In answering the question, how do women aged fifty-five and over feel the media represents them, it is clear from the data that the women feel the media represents older women more harshly than they perceive themselves – in all areas of my study. Though most women who partook in this survey fall into the category of what might actually typically be called middle aged, we see (in Figure 1) that these women perceive themselves as more old than young. Nevertheless, the women felt that the media portrayed them as even older. As we see from the results, age is not the only aspect of

older women that the participants believe is judged more harshly by the media (and the younger generation).

Unsurprisingly, the media does not distribute the notions of beauty in older women in a way that corresponds to how beautiful these women actually feel. A closer look at the definitions of "beautiful" uncovers the disparities between how these women feel and how the media says they feel. The majority of responses about beauty did not define beautiful as something related to physical appearance. Rather, 58% of the women said beauty radiates from within in the form of personality, confidence, kindness, happiness or health. One woman explained: "the character of a person makes them beautiful when you are older." This definition of beautiful suggests a possible shift away from how their younger self might have defined beautiful. Perhaps, in their youth, beauty would have been closely tied to physical appearance. Now, however, as she is older, character is what is important. The assertiveness of this definition suggests confidence in her answer. However, this certitude of what beauty means to older women does not translate over to the media. Rather, the media continues to fixate on a beauty that is tied to youthfulness and thus often excludes older women (Ng 2021; Thayer 2019). Thus, an intersection exists between notions of aging and beauty within the media and, though the women are aware of this trend, it is not necessarily apparent among these older women's perception of themselves. Whilst they think the media sees them as older and thus more ugly, the women who feel older perceive themselves as more beautiful – even if their definition of beauty does not fit the standard mold.

The trope of the invisible woman is undoubtably present in the data. Significantly, however, the trope does not infiltrate into older women's perception of themselves. Rather, the women feel the media provoke this trope. Since there was a general positive trend in how visible, heard and vibrant the older women felt, there exists a misperception within the media.

Thankfully, however, it does not seem as though these women have internalized their invisibility in the media too much. If they had, we might expect the notions of visibility to be lower (invisible, ignored and fading). Yet, as we saw in the section about speaking up or speaking out, many women feel more comfortable speaking up now that they are older[23]. One response about speaking up and language shifts was particularly telling:

> "[I am] less anxious to please in an argument; more willing to call things out (which often means being perceived as 'difficult' or 'stroppy' by those who are younger or male)".

Though she targets men and the younger generation, here, this woman is aware of how *difficult* or *emotional* her calling something or someone out can be perceived. Nevertheless, she displays that the readiness to speak up came with age. The confidence the participants feel in voicing their opinions and standing up for themselves is indicative of how misconstrued the media's representation of the "invisible, fading woman" is. Not only do these women feel their voices are being heard – though clearly not by the media or because of their representation on screen – they *want* to speak up. Furthermore, though they feel the media casts older women as generally fading, the qualitative data show how some women actually prefer being less social in their older years. A peaceful night in, viewed as a luxury with little pressure of socializing by older women, is depicted negatively by the media and the younger generation and older women are cast as irrelevant. Whilst younger women are generally less confident in speaking up (Cameron), many of these older women revealed confidence in speaking their minds.

The media's portrayal of women as weak and losing themselves is especially highlighted in the data. Older, female participants express confidence in their own strength and a sense of finding (or knowing) themselves. These characteristics are something they do not think the

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[23] As I pointed out in the Background section – and as Deborah Cameron argued in a blog post – women speaking out has traditionally been seen as aggressive or unlikeable.

media portray. Rather, the media continues to portray women as weak and in need of help despite discourses within this age group of strength and independence. Participants explain that they actually have far more time for themselves in older age as they are not looking after children or working their way up the career ladder. Whilst the media focuses on women's shrinking bodies and disintegrating minds, the women themselves are devoting time to themselves for the first time in years. This perspective of older women should be celebrated, not overlooked.

Though the majority of my data suggest that older women's sense of self is not necessarily influenced by the media, there are a few women who define beauty as something entirely physical. These definitions of "beautiful" may be influenced by the media and its perpetual showing of young, slim and usually white women. Separately from these women, most of the participants are not conforming to a standard of an older woman, set by the media. There is, however, a large disconnect between the way older women perceive themselves and the way the media portrays them, suggesting that the media are behind in their depiction of strong, confident older women. Why is it that the media continues to perpetuate negative images of older women? Why does the media *want* to exclude the older, female generation from its platforms? Is society's notion of agedness so severe and unacceptable that we wish to remove the (growing) population of older women from our media consumption habits?

Perspectives of the Same Age Group

In answering the question, how do the perceptions of other groups influence the way women see themselves – particularly with notions of beauty, aging and visibility – we must consider whether women aged fifty-five and over construct a self-image that is influenced by the ways in which others perceive them. The notions of self that are depicted in the qualitative data

mirror anticipated perceptions that men and women of the same age group (55 and older) have of older women. It seems sensical that women's self-perception mimics the way they think a similar group of older women see them; yet the data is less intuitive when thinking about the male perception of older women. As might be expected, participants' perception of how other women see them is the most similar to the own self-image, if not more generous.

Unexpectedly, the participants of this survey were less critical of the older, male gaze than they were of the media and the younger generation. This trend was particularly interesting when looking at notions of beauty (on a scale from *ugly* to *beautiful*). The way women see themselves – as leaning positively towards *beautiful* – is exactly the same as how beautiful or ugly they think men of the same age group perceive them. If the majority of participants define beautiful as something internal, perhaps they think men of the same age group think of beauty in similar terms – though, that would be shocking. Similarly, when looking at notions of visibility, women feel generally more seen but less so than how they think men see them. (This might make sense in the context of heteronormative marriages…). In the rest of the quantitative data observed, participants' indication of the male gaze was only slightly more negative than their own.

So, what might it mean that this group of older women perceive themselves similarly to how they think men perceive them? When comparing participant attitudes towards the media and towards men, the outcome of these two perspectives on older women's sense of self is twofold. On the one hand, we might infer that the difference in attitudes reflects an exchange of power from the male gaze to the gaze of the media or the public gaze. It might also mean that the *younger* male gaze is more influential to a woman's sense of self, though we cannot conclude that from my data. This power, then, is what is circulating harsh images of older women. On the

other hand, we might conclude that the male gaze still regulates the way (older) women construct their identities as they relate to aging, beauty and visibility or relevance in society. In other words, are women in fact still striving for the male standard of beauty and youthfulness in aging? It seems as though some of them are, like the one woman who said, “I look at beauty as someone who takes care of themselves physically, dresses nice, wears makeup and fixes their hair.” Yet, this does not seem to be the case entirely. If older women are reaching for a sense of self that reflects an ideal put forth by men their own age, we would expect women to perceive themselves more positively than how men see them. Though there are trends that reflect this, the similarities in the data makes it inconclusive.

Talking about Aging

When answering the question, what do these women’s linguistic tendencies suggest about the ways they construct or perceive their self-images, I turn to their reflections about language differences with age. Firstly, when defining beautiful this group of women used pronoun shifts to establish distance or generality, like we see in Clare Anderson’s study. For example, phrases such as: “when *one* is happy and healthy;” “when *you* have this, I think *you* have confidence;” “feels good about *herself*” suggest a definition of beautiful that does not necessarily apply to them. This tendency does not indicate whether or not these women think they’re beautiful. However, it does indicate a different form of explanation that is less personal and more general.

When asked to write about their *own* speech and experiences with aging, the participants responded much more personally. Table 2 in the results section shows how a few women talk about changes in their language. There are a few trends this table shows. The first relates to levels of politeness and confidence, which can also be seen in Chart 2 in the results. The older women in my study generally became more confident in speaking up in older age. Though one

woman said she swore less and thus is more "polite," this sample reveals that, with confidence, the willingness to please decreased. The next is speed of speech. Many of these women feel they speak (and think) slower than when they were younger. One woman claims she speaks "slowly and quietly, because of [her] age." This direct reasoning of why her speech has slowed and softened might relate to the ways older women have previously felt more silenced.

Limitations and Future Directions

The time and scale of this undergraduate thesis has absolutely led to limitations within my study. Beyond spreading the notion that older women know themselves, their beauty, their relevance and their voice, further research is needed to understand the experiences of older women. Firstly, whilst 100 is a large sample size, the data in this paper does not encapsulate the breadth and diversity of women in the United States. Thus, this study should be administered on a much larger scale. A whole paper could also be written focusing on the outliers of this study. What's more, though I examined the intersection of gender and age, this study did not include implications of race, ethnicity, class or sexuality on the female experience of aging. There is no doubt that all these play crucial roles in female identity and the experience of aging seen through language. I urge others to study these intersections next. Furthermore, sociolinguists should explore different methodologies, such as interviews, that encapsulate women's speech as it relates to aging, beauty and visibility. Finally, there are so many directions that sociolinguistic research about female aging could go. For example, in my research (and in Woolf's novels) the discourse of menopause is fascinating. Analyses of euphemisms could be its own paper, as could the ways medical professionals speak and write about menopause or how children learn about menopause. This period of hormonal shifts has historically been yet another way to demonize

and overpower women; studying discourses of menopause could lend insight into how women are taught to experience this so-called pivotal part of life.

Conclusion

This paper has described the contemporary beliefs of aging, beauty and visibility – from the perspective of women aged fifty-five and over. By examining their perception of their own identities as well as how they think other groups in society perceive them, I have argued that older women feel the media and younger generations judge their age, looks and relevance more harshly than the women judge themselves. Further, I have explored the ways older women think older men perceive them and how the male gaze may infiltrate into the construction of the participants' identities.

Analyzing twentieth century and present-day notions of aging, beauty and visibility is telling. Whilst the women who took my survey may not feel as invisible as women like Mrs. Ramsay, Clarissa Dalloway or Rhoda, they continue to feel misrepresented in the media. Thus, women continue to be told how to look and act – though now by the media and not Victoria or Edwardian society. Woolf's telling of experiences of female aging are juxtaposed with memories from youth, suggesting a desire for the past self. Today, the media profits off bringing women back to their past, namely through the "beautification" of their aging bodies. Interestingly, however, the survey demonstrated that a few women feel more connected to their societies *because* of different forms of media.

Concepts of motherhood were also analyzed in this study, though they were not highlighted in the paper. Woolf represented domestic life through Mrs. Ramsay, a middle-aged woman at the center of her family's life and well-being. Participants in this study spoke of ways in which motherhood has always been central to their identities – no matter the age of their children. Other participants disclosed that motherhood never interested them or that they are pleased to have more time to themselves now their children have children of their own.

Interestingly, there were a few sentiments about friendship that address Virginia Woolf's understanding of friendship as one ages. Just as the circle of friends begin to break as the characters in *The Waves* grew older and their lives became more fixed, so too do some participants of the survey explain how their friendship circles have shrunk. One participant says, "As I got aged my friends circle got reduced [as they] all got busy with their own life." With the events of adult life and older age, individual life becomes more fixed and, as a result, the strength of friendship circles loosens. Navigating the pressures Woolf felt as an aging woman in a society, when she herself wrote about dismissing the older women, brings up the inevitable question of her suicide. Many have wondered if Woolf herself did not wish to face the difficulties of older life. The similarities between Virginia Woolf's depiction of older women and the themes of aging, beauty and visibility explored in the linguistics portion of this paper are compelling and meaningful.

Words take on a lot of weight, especially when they are out of context. Meanings shift in varying situations just as our linguistic tendencies shift in varying contexts. The participants of this study were asked to reflect on aspects of their identity with the prompt of only a few words. And yet, words like *beautiful* and *ugly* or *invisible* and *seen* have numerous connotations, depending on who is speaking, who is being spoken to and who or what is being spoken about. Removing specific contexts from these words can uncover a few of the most powerful meanings associated with the words. For example, words associated with beauty, aging and visibility may be gendered.

Investigating the relationship older women have with certain words can reveal how language is used in the construction of our own identities as well as other's perception of our identities. Language is a significant part of the way we express our gender, our sexuality our

friendships as well as our age. The linguistic tendencies of the women in my survey showed that – whether positive or negative – the majority of these older women have *strong* senses of self and agency within their cultural contexts.

Uncovering the ways in which the media continues to portray older women as invisible and irrelevant is an important step to changing female representation in the public sphere. It should not be so complicated to realize that when older women look at a keto advertisement (Deborah 2020) that depicts them as physically dissolving and culturally irrelevant, they do not recognize themselves. Until we disentangle the centrality of youthfulness to beauty, the female experience of aging will remain fixed to their physical appearance and how they can preserve their youthfulness. As long as women are targets of "anti-aging" products and utterances like, "you look so young!", older women will not be able to look in the mirror without internalizing the judgmental gaze of society. The media and advertising industries will have to (go against their money-making eyes and) grapple with the notion that older women might not actually *feel* old or *feel* ugly. Particularly as our global population demographics shift towards a growing older population, our standards of beauty and relevance have no choice but to separate from youthfulness.

Appendix 1

Survey: *Contemporary Notions of Aging and Beauty*

Thank you for taking my survey! There are no right or wrong answers. You may have questions about beauty or language but please answer according to your own definitions.

<u>Section 1</u>: *Please note that for questions 1-5 in Section 1 will be accompanied by the sliding scale answers shown below.*

1. How do you see yourself?
2. How do you think the media sees or represents you?
3. How do you think the younger generation sees you?
4. How do you think, in general, men aged 55 and older see you?
5. How do think, in general, women aged 55 and older see you?

Sliding scale:

a. Youthful v. Older
b. Ugly v. Beautiful
c. Maternal v. Slutty
d. Invisible v. Seen
e. Strong v. Weak
f. Solitary v. Social
g. Finding yourself v. Losing Yourself
h. Neglected v. Nurtured
i. Ignored v. Heard
j. Fading v. Vibrant

6. Please describe what "beautiful" means to you. *Blank space provided*
7. Do you think you speak differently now than when you were younger? If so, in what way? *Blank space provided.*

<u>Section 2</u>: For the following questions, please compare if the element provided used to apply to you more, applies more now or is about the same. If you want to expand, please use the space provided for each question.

1. You spend more time alone (when you were 30, now, about the same).
   Any comment?:

2. You have more close female friends (when you were 30, now, about the same).
   Any comment?:

3. You are searching for yourself (when you were 30, now, about the same).
   Any comment?:

4. You are confident in speaking up (when you were 30, now, about the same).
   Any comment?:

5. You dedicate time to self-improvement and interests (when you were 30, now, about the same).
   Any comment?:

6. Motherhood is an important part of your life (whether or not you are actually a mother) (when you were 30, now, about the same).
   Any comment?:

7. You are an integral part of your family (when you were 30, now, about the same).
   Any comment?:

8. You are connected with the rest of society (when you were 30, now, about the same).
   Any comment?:

Section 3: Anyone is welcome to take this survey. For our records, please answer the following questions:

1. What is your gender? (Male/Female/Non-Binary)
2. How old are you?

Please also tell us a bit about your language experience. What languages do you speak? Please list them in order of fluency (most proficient first). *Blank space provided.*

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