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The Aging Contemporary:

Aging Families and Generational Connections in Contemporary Irish Writing

Margaret O'Neill and Michaela Schrage-Früh

The Celtic Tiger was characterized by a celebration of Irish youth who could remain at home, the first generation to find ample employment in their native country, though this was followed by a familiar wave of emigration when the bubble burst. More recently, in May 2018, the press focused on Irish youth returning home from life abroad to vote in the referendum, crediting them in a large part with the successful repeal of the Eight Amendment of the Irish Constitution that banned abortion. Less attention has been paid in recent decades to Ireland's aging population, which is rising dramatically and expected to increase, with life expectation above the EU average.¹ While such demographic change testifies to social successes such as improved health care and support services, it also informs widespread concern about the costs and challenges of sustaining this generation, configured as a burden to the young.

The interdisciplinary field of cultural gerontology views aging not solely in terms of biological processes but as socially, culturally, and historically constructed.² This approach invites scholarly attention to the role that language, in particular, plays in our understanding of aging. It might help to explain, for instance, why recent Irish literature often narrates Ireland's cultural, economic, and social changes from the perspective of middle-aged or older characters. In Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones*, a middle-aged man reviews the boom and bust of the Celtic Tiger, as well as his wife's fatal illness, and in Roddy Doyle's *The Guts* Jimmy Rabbitte, creator of an Irish soul band in Doyle's *The Commitments* thirty years previously, is now a forty-seven-year-old facing health, family, and money worries in the post-Tiger recession.³ In an article written at the height of the Celtic Tiger, Nuala O'Faolain exposed how the material issues facing the "new Ireland" that involve old age raise complex ethical questions. Nationwide campaigns with facile slogans such as "Say no to ageism" struck her "as a wasted opportunity to be serious

about serious things – a Disneyfication of issues that we haven't yet addressed, either in the shaping of the new Ireland, or in ourselves.”⁴ O’Faolain draws attention to how in a youth-driven, materialist society, older adults, often of limited means, may well find themselves marginalized by institutionalized ageism, and figured as outsiders and “Others” in the cultural imagination.

Reading contemporary Irish writing within the interdisciplinary frameworks of cultural gerontology reveals recent changes among the aging characters’ views on, as well as their place within, Irish society and culture. For example, dominant cultural narratives of aging tend to be linear narratives of decline,⁵ yet works like Clare Boylan’s *Beloved Stranger* (1999) and Nuala O’Faolain’s *My Dream of You* (2001) also offer constructive accounts of sexuality, wisdom, and creativity informed by the experiences of later life. In the face of liberal-capitalist values which idealise youth and individualism, new patterns are emerging in post-Tiger Irish literature in their representation of aging. A number of recent works across genres focus on how Irish families manage their aging members. In them, traditional family dynamics are upended: children must take on parental roles, families must become multi-generational to provide the support required by the elderly, and, crucially, members of the family from all generations express among themselves a desire for connection.

Drama

Recent Irish drama has offered audiences characters who must in later life adjust to family dynamics changed by aging. Marina Carr’s *Marble* (2009), by focusing on the crumbling marriages of two middle-aged couples, highlights how instantiated gender roles exacerbate marital stress in the characters’ later years. All four characters in the play suffer the world-weariness and identity crisis that stems from midlife ennui in Celtic Tiger Ireland, a “happy little nation” symbolized by “a woman in a bikini telling us to invest so we’ll be happier.”⁶ Despite the vaunted cultural changes of the Tiger, men are still defined by their professional

success, turning into “steel and concrete, decimals and fractions, the square root of nothing,”⁷ while women continue to be assigned the role of homemaker, mother, and beautiful asset, and must conceal their visible signs of aging. The age of Catherine, one of the wives in the play, is in the spotlight from the first line when Art asks his friend Ben: “And what age is she now?”⁸ In Art’s dreamlife, the flesh and blood Catherine, a woman he “has never fancied,” turns into a perfect, ageless, marble woman.⁹ Catherine, in turn, lives through her own midlife crisis, convinced that, for a woman past her prime, life holds only disdain, invisibility, and ultimately death. In view of this stigmatization of aging, her husband’s joking dismissal of a play about aging women contains more than a grain of truth: “Auld ones dying don’t interest me. Women who’ve stopped ovulating should die offstage. Who cares?”¹⁰

Frank McGuinness’s *The Hanging Gardens* (2013) and Michael West’s *Conservatory* (2014) turn attention to elderly characters, focusing on how the family responds to the physical ailments that plague the elderly. In these plays, aging stokes family crises, and elicits fear from characters young and old. Like *Marble*, these plays draw attention to the familiar gender roles of the Irish family since in them the balance of authority lies with the husbands. However the infirmities of old age provide a counterweight to these familiar family dynamics: the aging patriarch Sam, in *The Hanging Gardens*, experiences symptoms associated with dementia, and “He” in *Conservatory* suffers from prostate pain. The plays subvert not only long-standing gendered norms, but also relations of dependency, as aging and ill parents, particularly domineering fathers, seek reassurance from their adult children.

In *The Hanging Gardens*, the family patriarch Sam, who suffers from dementia, and his wife Jane have invited their three adult children back to their Donegal home. Sam, a novelist, has long exercised his powers of manipulation to instill self-doubt in his wife and children, Charlie, Maurice, and Rachel. That he is now losing his grip on the distinction between fantasy and reality would satisfy any demand for poetic justice, were it not for the stark portrayal of his vulnerabilities, such as when he neglects to put on socks and shoes. The couple has invested all

their emotional and financial resources in the house and gardens, and pushed their three children away. However, now as Sam's dementia worsens, the aging parents seek reconciliation with their children. But rather than obtain the material support they desire, Sam and Jane encounter resentment, as the children, who yet crave love and acceptance, are unwilling to submit easily to their requests. In addition, none of the family is well-off. Donald Morse centralizes "the politics of ageing" in this play to argue that "McGuinness has taken the severe and growing social problem of dementia as a means to present the Grant family in crisis with very limited personal and financial resources."¹¹ No longer able to provide for their children financially, and suffering from ill health, the couple require new roles from their children. Precisely because none of the family members has economic resources, their interdependence is revealed due to the pressures of aging. Willingly or not, external forces push them to reconnect and share the experience of coping with Sam's illness. Ideally, the benefits of mutual care will also unfold expectant mother Rachel and her child, when it is born, in a vertical family structure that cares for old and young.

In both plays, the central male characters seek reconciliation in their declining circumstances. In *Conservatory*, the emotional isolation of an older Protestant couple from each other and from their daughters is echoed in their deteriorating country house and dwindling community. The loneliness of "He" and "She" stems from rural isolation (due in part to the depopulation of younger generations), a declining social circle (friends and relatives are recalled as a list of the dead), and most acutely a lack of connection to their daughters, who are estranged from their father, and the loss of a son who died by suicide. Their unfulfilled need for connection manifests in mutual hostility and looming anxiety. "He" jumps at every creak and rattle of the old house, as they repeatedly check the placement of their pill bottles and reading glasses. In contrast to *The Hanging Gardens*, it is not material but emotional support that this older couple need. However, their only solace is in the imaginative refiguring of their relationships with their children. As "He" states: "Blood calls to blood, thinning or not," and he

compulsively recalls the scene of his son's death.¹² "She" cherishes warm family memories, while fearing the loss of the happiness recalled because "it's like there's a hole, a wound, and it all leaks out, over time, it leaks away."¹³

In these plays, stories and memories function to reconfigure family relationships. Sam, in *The Hanging Gardens*, concocts a story in which a man who has fashioned a house out of the hearts and minds, bones and flesh, of his children stands alone and haunted, hearing only "the silence of the spheres whose music had stopped."¹⁴ Yet, on shaking the trees of the forest, the man's children fall, and he catches them alive and well. The story heralds the final scene in which Sam, no longer in control of his mind, forgets the word for "word," as his life narrative disintegrates.¹⁵ As Sam's dementia worsens his wife and children will tend to him. While *The Hanging Gardens* ends with memory loss, towards the end of *Conservatory* memories are regained, as objects in a box recall the life of the couple's son and his death by suicide. There is comfort to be found in stories and memories, however bleak, as the composition of a life lived. These plays show that family history, whether real or imagined, can intervene in the aging experience. The development of familial bonds and memories over the life course serves as a resource and provides a sense of connection, even in the absence of reconciliation.

Both plays offer a linear narrative that moves forward toward closure, toward the curtain falling. However, these plays by Carr, McGuinness, and West are all interrupted by dreams, memories, or the inability to remember. They reveal the internal psychological movement of growing older, and speak to the regenerative potential it can inform. For instance, in *The Hanging Gardens*, in the face of Sam's fading memories, the characters share reminiscences, suggesting these shared stories hold the potential to inspire meaningful connection in a family otherwise malformed by long-term hostilities. As such, these plays support Valerie Lipscomb's claim that "drama most specifically highlights age as performative" – even when they appear to emphasize the natural biological process of aging by placing the actual elderly bodies of actors on stage.¹⁶ Through refashioned and retold tales, shared among family members but

shared in performance with audiences, these dramas suggest that the aging subject can transcend the temporal boundaries of contemporary cultural logic, by revising past memories and bringing them forward to create for audiences alternative national visions of the elderly.

Poetry

Like *Conservatory* and *The Hanging Gardens*, recent poems by Paul Durcan and Sara Berkeley Tolchin consider how old age informs the relationship between children and their parents.¹⁷ In contrast to the plays, which centralize the aging parent, these poems take the perspective of the adult child as they explore the struggle to come to terms with a parent's physical and mental decline and the child's emotional response, encapsulated by Berkeley Tolchin as "that sorrow that breaks over me before I sleep."¹⁸ Searching for ways to preserve the aging parent's dignity and humanity in view of disease and impending death, these poems insist on community and collaboration in a contemporary moment that lauds the individual. Not unlike the plays discussed, they testify to the significance of memory as a relational, imaginative, and continuous process, constructive of identity, meaning-making, and healing. In doing so they point to the importance of intergenerational care in aging societies, societies that tend to marginalize, infantilize, and "Other" the aged and dying.

Perhaps the most sustained appraisal of an aging parent is provided by Durcan's collection *The Laughter of Mothers* (2008), paying tribute to his mother Sheila MacBride Durcan. "Mummy Dead" unflinchingly describes the dead mother's wasted and hardly recognizable body as "a house-fly [...] swatted by a newspaper."¹⁹ This dehumanizing image, however, is immediately subverted by the poem's final reference to the mother's "eighty-eight years of weeping and twinkling."²⁰ Accordingly, the collection paints a rich picture of the mother's long life, ranging from the son's imaginings about her oboe-playing younger years in Paris ("My Mother's Secret") to childhood memories of shared cinema visits ("Treasure

Island,” “War and Peace”), and nuanced depictions of his mother in old age, depictions that question society’s often degrading treatment of the elderly as a burden.²¹

For instance, “Little Old Lady” challenges the middle-aged son’s conventional expectations of how his elderly widowed mother should behave. On her eightieth birthday she shuns the conventional gift of begonia he “has gone to some trouble to purchase”²² in favor of a more exciting present she previously purchased for herself: “[a] steel-and-rope trapeze, which she installed / In a niche over the kitchen door.”²³ Swinging “to and fro” on her trapeze, the “little old lady” mocks her son’s notion of age-appropriate behavior, and is depicted as independent and clearly not “surplus to requirements,” as she provocatively puts it.²⁴ The poem plays on infantilizing notions of old age as a second childhood, only to repudiate them. It may be true that “Mummy shrank as she grew older” and “began to look like a little girl,” but she is still an autonomous adult, with a personality and mind of her own.²⁵

Autonomy and agency are difficult to maintain, however, for elderly people languishing in an Alzheimer’s nursing home. Durcan’s “September 11, 2001” depicts the mother’s everyday reality in such a care home, set against the dramatic events of 9/11, as images of the crashing twin towers flicker across the television screen: “We stare at it, for there is nothing else to do.”²⁶ With the sound turned down, the “inmates”²⁷ have no way of contextualizing these televised images, which underscores how older people, especially those deemed mentally impaired, are relegated to the margins of society and history. The historical events alluded to in the poem’s title are only the backdrop for the family drama unfolding in the care home, as related by the visiting son:

She cries: ‘What will I do?

What am I going to do?’

Except to hold her hand and stammer

There is nothing I can say to her, nothing true.²⁸

In his analysis of the poem, John McDonagh notes how the mother retreats “into a child-like state of fading memories where [her] son becomes the parent.”²⁹ Yet this role reversal is undermined by the son’s inadequate stammering and his wistful memory of “a young mother on her back / Sick with laughter, on the sunny shore.”³⁰ This isolated image of his youthful, strong mother counterbalances recurrent references to her sheep-like condition of helplessness, imprisonment, and confusion: “Her sheep’s eyes stare at me, / Imploring all that sheep’s eyes can implore: / *Why hast thou forsaken me?*”³¹ Despite reverberating with echoes of children’s rhymes and psalms, the recurring image of sheep throughout the poem primarily serves to highlight the dehumanizing treatment of elderly Alzheimer patients locked away in “a pristine, gleaming death-row cell.”³² In doing so, the spotlight is also on the son’s helplessness and sense of guilt; he feels like “a sheep-killer”³³ as he grapples with his mother’s desolate situation in institutional care. Unlike the situation depicted in *The Hanging Gardens*, there are no family or communal structures to fall back on.

In *What Just Happened* (2015) Sara Berkeley Tolchin likewise devotes a series of poems to her mother’s painful demise. Seeking to find an appropriate language in which to address her aging mother’s frail physical and mental frame, in “St Laurence’s Ward” she describes the aged woman as “my glass mother,”³⁴ suggesting her fear of breaking her. At once fragile, hardened, and unresponsive to her daughter’s hug, the mother has withdrawn to an inner state beyond her daughter’s reach. Oblivious to her adult daughter’s presence, she stares at “the children only she could see at the end of the ward.”³⁵ However, the daughter, too, has a vision. Hugging her “frail mother,” she suddenly sees her mother’s younger self in war-time London, “black-haired in her polka-dot dress / the years unravelled from their wooden spool.”³⁶ It is the contrast between the mother’s younger self and her current trapped condition that makes her daughter entreat the forces of nature “to open the door for her and mercifully send her out.”³⁷ Like Durcan, Berkeley Tolchin refuses to reduce her mother’s identity to her current dependent

state, recalling and recording memories of her mother's younger days that the old woman can no longer communicate.

In a similar vein, the speaker in Berkeley Tolchin's "Burrow Beach" resists having her mother's personhood eclipsed by her inevitable decline. The poem starts out with the speaker's observation that her mother's increasing silence does not necessarily mean that "she has nothing to say."³⁸ Instead, the daughter realizes: "The thoughts are there, but words get in the way."³⁹ Likewise, the speaker notes that the sound made by her mother's air-bed is "not like a lullaby that you might hum / to a sleepy child" but "a hospital sound that has invaded her home."⁴⁰ The speaker thus rejects the notion that her mother's dependency reduces her to a child-like state. Instead, details of the mother's former life and her personality, such as "her artist's eye,"⁴¹ shine through in this and other poems. Such memories of her mother's younger days crucially bring the middle-aged daughter face to face with her own mortality. The speaker realizes: "I'm now the same age – forty-five – / that she was when her mother died."⁴² To her, taking stock of her ailing mother's health clinic equipment feels "like a crash course in growing old" as she notes laconically: "So one day all this will be mine."⁴³ Thus, these poems by Durcan and Berkeley Tolchin give voice to the shifting nature of the parent and child bond as families age, a bond which is crucial not only materially and emotionally, to provide care and connection against the estranging environment of contemporary institutional life, but also imaginatively, to bear witness to a life lived.

While Durcan and Berkeley Tolchin stress intergenerational connection from the adult child's perspective, Seamus Heaney's final poems in *Human Chain* (2010) demonstrate a similar approach from the vantage point of old age. "In the Attic" links the poet's age-related "blank[ing] on names"⁴⁴ to memories of his forgetful grandfather. This generational bond is extended into the future in "A Kite for Aibhín," dedicated to Heaney's granddaughter, with whom he is flying a kite like he once did in "another life and time and place," watching how it "takes off, itself alone, a windfall."⁴⁵ Casting back and forward in time, these poems by Durcan,

Berkeley Tolchin, and Heaney reveal how memories created together over a lifetime make bearable the hardships of old age across generations.

Fiction

Cultural gerontology has shown that identity formation is closely bound with continual reviewing of one's life story, a life-long process extending "well into old age" and the novel is a capacious genre well suited to this.⁴⁶ John Banville's *The Sea* (2005), Edna O'Brien's *The Light of Evening* (2006), and Sebastian Barry's *The Secret Scripture* (2008) are merely a few examples of recent life review novels, while Clare Boylan's *Beloved Stranger* (1999) can be classified as *Reifungsroman* and Nuala O'Faolain's *My Dream of You* (2001) as a midlife progress novel.⁴⁷ Joseph O'Connor's *Ghost Light* (2009), Sara Baume's *Spill, Simmer, Falter, Wither* (2015), and much of William Trevor's fiction also share a preoccupation with time, memory, and reminiscence.⁴⁸ By revealing identity as being "constantly under construction"⁴⁹ these texts revise normative notions of older age and lend weight to Gullette's "active concept of aging as self-narrated identity."⁵⁰ In these fictional life stories, the aging narrators are involved in the process of "restorying"⁵¹ their lives and identities as they review, reminisce on, and reimagine their own and their nation's past. They thus share a concern with the creative and regenerative potential of memory and imagination and testify to the "powerful revisionist potential of life story *writing*."⁵²

If the plays and poems under consideration here attend closely to changing family dynamics, Sebastian Barry's *The Secret Scripture* turns attention to an isolated subject seemingly untouched by how aging might affect the biological family. This novel features a centenarian protagonist, Roseanne McNulty, who has spent most of her adult life wrongfully locked away in a mental institution. Roseanne fashions her life narrative in isolation, rather than in concert with her family, writing it in a diary she hides. As she writes, "I did not know that a person could hold up a wall made of imaginary bricks and mortar against the horrors and cruel,

dark tricks of time that assail us, and be the author therefore of themselves.”⁵³ While Rosanne’s “secret scripture” shows that identity formation continues into deep old age, her life narrative, no longer “secret,” also influences the younger generation. The middle-aged psychiatrist Dr William Grene comes to view Roseanne not as patient but as a “person who [...] was admirable, living, and complete.”⁵⁴ Dr Grene, an Englishman bereaved of his adoptive parents and, more recently, his wife, is aware of his own affinity with the aging Roseanne, not least because he is nearing retirement and similarly seeks solace in his work, without which he “will be like a sparrow without a garden.”⁵⁵ In the novel, Dr Grene is revealed to be the child stolen from Roseanne, but the affinities shared by these two aging subjects are strong long before they are discovered to be familial. Thus, emotional and biological experiences of who is a parent and who is a child are interwoven in this novel, which brings into view the subjective ways in which bonds are formed. Robbed of their life together, Dr Grene and Roseanne nonetheless construct in later years a supportive family that inverts traditional caring and dependent roles but provides solace for both.⁵⁶

By highlighting elderly and middle-aged characters, Barry echoes the contemporary critiques of an Ireland that failed to protect the vulnerable, that shunted responsibility for caretaking to deeply flawed institutions rather than encouraging support to families and other networks of care. Clare Boylan’s *Beloved Stranger* foretells the crisis that would arise out of the resulting gap in care, and envisions alternative family and community arrangements. As in *The Hanging Gardens*, the novel presents a family in crisis as eighty-year-old Dick Butler rapidly descends into dementia. While Dick’s increasing violence and paranoia highlight implicit patriarchal family structures, his growing disorientation yet renders him vulnerable and dependent. The family’s excruciating search for a suitable nursing home offers a blatant critique of care institutions that provide “only the suggestion of marginal maintenance and entombment.”⁵⁷ However, for his seventy-five-year-old wife Lily and their middle-aged daughter Ruth, the changed situation, though difficult and painful to deal with, facilitates

healing, progress, and a hopeful future. Ruth initially bemoans her fate as an only child turned “parent” to two difficult “geriatric [children].”⁵⁸ In the course of the novel, however, she realizes that “getting older brought a need to rediscover your source.”⁵⁹ By caring for her parents and retrieving her own buried memories, Ruth resolves her childhood conflicts and grows emotionally. Lily, who throughout her married life had depended on Dick to make decisions and manage their financial affairs, experiences a late flourishing as she comes to realize that “deep inside she would be sustained by the seed of her own life, reaching up for the light. There wasn’t much left of her life but it was money unspent.”⁶⁰ In view of Dick’s mental and physical decline, and eventual death, mother and daughter bond and Lily even feels that her formerly aloof daughter might turn into a “woman friend.”⁶¹ The novel thus gestures towards a redefinition of the harmful patriarchal family and additionally highlights the need for community support and care through Ruth’s plans for a housing complex offering space to young families alongside elderly people.

If Barry invokes an aging figure hand in hand with critiquing a country that divided rather than supported families in crisis, and Boylan envisions alternative familial and social constructs, Anne Enright’s *The Green Road* (2015) extends this territory in response to recent cultural change. As characters grapple with a family altered by an aging parent, their struggle is complicated by the disingenuous notion of care through consumption in a neoliberal society. The novel covers the 1980s and the prosperous years of the Celtic Tiger, as it follows two generations of the Madigan family. Four children leave their family home in the rural West of Ireland, while their widowed mother, Rosaleen, remains at home. Alone, as she sees it, in Christmas 2005, Rosaleen compels her children to return by expressing her intention to sell the family home. Her actions bring to the foreground the emotional complexities of the relationships between aging parents and adult children, with attention to the bond between Rosaleen and her eldest daughter Constance. Read from a gerontological perspective, this novel

exposes the intersections of aging and illness with parenthood and social status, inflected by the excesses of Ireland's recent past.⁶²

Set at the height of the boom in 2005, *The Green Road* exposes how materialist assessments and gendered assumptions within families cloud the intergenerational bonds that can provide for a morally and socially regenerative sense of connection. Living near her seventy-six-year-old mother Rosaleen, life for Constance is defined by her roles as wife, caring daughter, and mother to three teenage children. In neoliberal economies, as children gain independence and identities are reconfigured over time, consumption practices provide a means for the continuation of the mothering role.⁶³ Such "caring consumption" may be identified in Constance's lavish Christmas Eve shopping, which includes everything from parsnips for her husband, to "eight frozen pizzas in case the kids rolled up with friends," and batteries "more out of habit, now the children were grown."⁶⁴ Four-hundred-and-ten euro lighter and with swollen feet but "happy, happy, happy," Constance finds her mood altered by a terse phone call from her mother.⁶⁵ "'It's a lot of work,' Rosaleen said, with a real despair in her voice; you would think she had just spent an hour in the insanity of the supermarket, not Constance. 'But I suppose it's worth it to have you all here.'"⁶⁶ Frustrated by her loss of self-sufficiency, and desirous to maintain the primary mothering position in the family, Rosaleen seeks to control her involvement in the Christmas dinner. As she re-enters the store for a gruelling second shop to pick up Brussels sprouts for her mother, Constance's desire to care for those she loves seems unnecessarily complicated. Enright illustrates the consequences of the centring of the individual under neoliberalism; the elevation of a mother who can "care" more and more emphasizes self and family management, as opposed to cultivating relationships of interdependence.

In *Conservatory*, a box of objects tells the story of a child's life and death, unveiling memories necessary to his isolated aging parents' inner lives. In the poems, emotions are crystallized in symbolic objects such as the mother's polka-dot dress, as adult children encounter their parents impending death. In *The Green Road*, objects bring forth the conflicts

that arise between an adult daughter and her mother as the relationships that shape family life change over time. When Constance purchases a scarf as a Christmas present for her mother, the tension between giving and receiving care is intensified. When “Rosaleen told Constance she did not want a present,” “She said it in a faint voice, meaning she would be dead soon so what was the point?”⁶⁷ Regardless, Constance spends a lavish amount of money on a beautiful silk scarf which will suit her mother perfectly. The scarf symbolizes a mutual struggle as both women renegotiate their roles over the life course. As Daniel Monk describes, discussing intergenerational relations, “it is through material claims that people perform complex psychosocial negotiations and communicate emotional expectations; rejections; dependencies; and, indeed, the perils and pleasures of love.”⁶⁸ Through the gift of clothing, Constance is mothering her mother. In her extravagance, however, Constance is also vying for prominence, and as the gift is unwrapped, beautiful in the light of the sitting room, Constance considers that she has won. Rosaleen claims the scarf to be too good for her, she too old for it, “And because it was Christmas, she started to cry.”⁶⁹ She cries, not for lost youth or beauty, but through fears of dependency and loss of control. As a rejoinder to Constance’s gift, Rosaleen, furious now with her children, “as though they had ganged up against her in some terrible way,”⁷⁰ chooses this moment to inform them that she has put the family house on the market. She is planning to divide the profits between them. As she states, “Well none of you has any money.”⁷¹ Rosaleen reasserts her power over them by drawing on her legacy.⁷² She refuses to age on their terms. In the same breath, she asserts that she will move in with Constance. As a middle-aged woman, Constance is considered predestined to do the domestic work of caring for her mother. Aspects of care, assertions of control, and confrontations with identities of agedness persist on both sides of this mother-daughter relationship. Yet, when Constance is diagnosed with cancer, a tenuous balance of roles comes undone, and mother’s and daughter’s vulnerabilities come to the fore as the corporeal realities of aging are revealed.

Irish mythology is rich with elderly characters, ranging from wise Celtic kings to forlorn old women, and Irish literature produced in its wake has suggested that growing old is accompanied by loneliness, which is often intensified by poverty, emigration, and rural decline. However post-Tiger Irish literature has illuminated the complexities of later life for both the old and young. The texts studied here, either overtly or covertly, urge readers to embrace new notions of the Irish family, ones that might adjust to accommodate and incorporate better the experience of growing old. As life expectancies extend, increasing numbers of middle-aged children must adapt to serve as carers for older family members. This is not necessarily merely burdensome; the relations of support between young and old can be reciprocal, as the older generation provides memories of the past and a preview of the future to inform modes of aging to the young. Rather than provide static concepts of age and the nuclear family as symbols on which to model the nation, the contemporary works studied here link an individual's life story to wider collective narratives. In her study of aging temporalities and the paradoxes of growing old, Lynne Segal is concerned with "the less familiar cultural narratives that we might draw upon to provide more nuanced thoughts on ageing."⁷³ In this approach, a generative encounter with experiential narratives of aging in Irish literature embraces generational interdependencies and rich diversities of age, and welcomes the transformative social potential to be found in multiple notions of the family.

¹ Department of Health, *Health in Ireland: Key Trends 2016*. health.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Health-in-Ireland-Key-Trends-2016.pdf

² See Julia Twigg and Wendy Martin, "The Challenge of Cultural Gerontology," *The Gerontologist*, 55.3 (2014): 1–7.

³ For analysis of Doyle's representations of middle and older-middle age see Burcu Gülüm Tekin, "Ageing Men and Therapeutic Pints in Roddy Doyle's *Two Pints*," *Estudios Irlandeses*, 12 (2017): 129-139.

⁴ Nuala O’Faolain, “On Old Age,” *The Sunday Tribune*, 29 May 2005, *A Radiant Life: The Selected Journalism of Nuala O’Faolain*, intro. Fintan O’Toole (New York: Abrams, 2011), 214-6, 216.

⁵ See Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Midlife* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1997); Jeanette King, *Discourses of Ageing in Fiction and Feminism: The Invisible Woman* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

⁶ Marina Carr, *Marble* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 62.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 19. For further considerations of aging in Carr, see Maria Kurdi, ““Old women interfere with my sense of myself”: Attitudes to Female Age and Ageing in the Midlands Trilogy and *Marble* by Marina Carr,” *Nordic Irish Studies* 17:1 (2018), “Women and Ageing in Irish Literature and Film,” eds. Margaret O’Neill and Michaela Schrage-Früh, 113-129.

¹¹ Donald E. Morse, ed., “The Politics of Aging: Frank McGuinness’s *The Hanging Gardens*,” *Irish Theatre in Transition: From the Late Nineteenth to the Early Twenty-First Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 82.

¹² Michael West, *Conservatory* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 19.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁴ Frank McGuinness, *The Hanging Gardens* (London: Faber, 2013), 76.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁶ Valerie Lipscomb, *Performing Age in Modern Drama* (London: Palgrave, 2016), 1.

¹⁷ Other noteworthy examples of poets who have written extensively about the aging and death of their parents include Medbh McGuckian, Michael Longley, Mary Dorcey, and Kerry Hardie.

¹⁸ Sara Berkeley Tolchin, "Burrow Beach," in *What Just Happened* (Loughcrew: Gallery, 2015), 38.

¹⁹ Paul Durcan, "Mummy Dead," in *The Laughter of Mothers* (London: Harvill Secker, 2012), 129.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 129.

²¹ For an in-depth discussion of the collection in terms of the complex mother-son relationship see Kenneth Keating, "Paul Durcan and the Death of the Parent in *Daddy, Daddy* and *The Laughter of Mothers*," *Contemporary Irish Poetry and the Canon: Critical Limitations and Textual Liberations* (London: Palgrave, 2017), 113-144. For further discussion of the aging mother in Durcan's poetry, see Michaela Schrage-Früh, "Reimagining the Fourth Age: The Ageing Mother in the Poetry of Paul Durcan and Mary Dorcey," *Nordic Irish Studies* 17:1(2018): 77-93.

²² Paul Durcan, "Little Old Lady," *The Laughter of Mothers*, 118-119, 119.

²³ *Ibid.*, 118.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 119.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 118.

²⁶ Paul Durcan, "September 11, 2001," in *The Laughter of Mothers*, 122-125, 124.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁹ John Mc Donagh, *The Art of the Caveman: The Poetry of Paul Durcan* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2016), 24.

³⁰ Durcan, "September 11, 2001," 125.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 125.

³² *Ibid.*, 124.

³³ *Ibid.*, 123.

³⁴ Berkeley Tolchin, “St Laurence’s Ward,” in *What Just Happened* (Loughcrew: Gallery, 2015), 34.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid..

³⁸ Berkeley Tolchin, “Burrow Beach,” 38.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Seamus Heaney, “In the Attic,” in *Human Chain* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 83-84, 84.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 85.

⁴⁶ Ruth E. Ray, *Beyond Nostalgia: Aging and Life-Story Writing* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 27.

⁴⁷ The term *Reifungsroman* was coined by Barbara Frey Waxman, *From the Hearth to the Open Road: A Feminist Study of Aging in Contemporary Literature* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990). The term “midlife progress novel” was coined by Gullette, *Declining to Decline*, 77. Heather Ingman discusses aging in Banville’s *The Sea* in her book *Ageing in Irish Writing: Strangers to Themselves* (Cham: Palgrave, 2018), 91-124. For a discussion of Boylan’s novel as *Reifungsroman*, see Michaela Schrage-Früh, “‘Embarking, Not Dying’: Clare Boylan’s *Beloved Stranger* as *Reifungsroman*,” in *Ageing Women in Literature and Visual Culture: Reflections, Refractions, Reimaginings*, eds. Cathy McGlynn, Margaret O’Neill, and Michaela Schrage-Früh (Cham: Palgrave, 2017), 55-71.

⁴⁸ Margaret O'Neill discusses aging in *Ghost Light* in "‘This is How Time Unfolds When You Are Old’: Ageing, Subjectivity, and Joseph O’Connor’s *Ghost Light*," *Ageing Women in Literature and Visual Culture*, 289-302.

⁴⁹ Ray, 29.

⁵⁰ Gullette, *Declining to Decline*, 220.

⁵¹ Ray, *Beyond Nostalgia*, 28.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵³ Sebastian Barry, *The Secret Scripture* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), 4.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 309.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵⁷ Clare Boylan, *Beloved Stranger* (London: Abacus, 1999), 215.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 293.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 289.

⁶² Anne Fogarty further explores the psychic impact of aging in this novel in "Someone whose kindness did not matter’: Femininity and Ageing in Anne Enright’s *The Green Road*," *Nordic Irish Studies* 17:1 (2018): 131-143.. Ingman, in her monograph *Ageing in Irish Writing: Strangers to Themselves*, discusses how Enright challenges the narrative of ageing as decline (59-90).

⁶³ Juliana Mansvelt et al., "Still being ‘Mother’? Consumption and Identity Practices for Women in Later Life," *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 17:2 (2017): 340–358, 341.

⁶⁴ Anne Enright, *The Green Road* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2015), 229.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 230.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 230-1.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 227.

⁶⁸ Daniel Monk, “The Pleasures and Perils of Inheritance,” *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 15:3 (2014), 239-243: 242.

⁶⁹ Enright, 235.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 235.

⁷¹ Ibid., 236.

⁷² See Ingman for an extended discussion of Rosaleen’s power in the family, including economic power owing to her ownership of valuable family properties, in *Ageing in Irish Writing: Strangers to Themselves*, 81.

⁷³ Lynne Segal, *Out of Time: The Pleasures and Perils of Ageing* (London: Verso, 2013), 18.