AGE, GENDER AND EXISTENTIALISM IN THE LATE-LIFE BILDUNGSROMAN

by

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Abstract

This dissertation aims to reveal the echo of modernist existentialism in postmodern

late-life fiction. In a close reading of works by Alistair MacLeod, Nick Hornby and

Michael Chabon, as well as my own creative work, I have explored the continually

shifting models of gender and age, as characters progress towards development and

navigate questions of the self. Issues of modes of masculinity from the rural to the urban,

as well as female masculinity are investigated in this sample of varying works of fiction.

Grounded in an analysis of the philosophy and fiction of Soren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul

Sartre, Albert Camus and Simone de Beauvoir, with reference to traditional

Bildungsroman (coming-of age, or education novel), I hope to have demonstrated the

similar, but newly interpreted existential trajectory of self-development in contemporary

narrative. This is reflected in postmodern and contemporary narratives that challenge

existing conventions while prizing modernist philosophical tenets. Combining theoretical

and creative acumen, this work aims to contribute to age and gender studies, while

offering a fresh approach to scholarly work.

Acknowledgements

For Judy and Phil Petrou

For Jay, Eli and Leo

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Introduction:

Age, Gender and Existentialism in the Late-Life Bildungsroman

Loneliness, Alvin Toffler writes, "is now so widespread, it has become, paradoxically, a shared experience" (384). Since he made this claim in 1980, many others have arrived at a similar diagnosis of the condition of late twentieth-century society, amassing a wealth of evidence for the claim that we have entered an age of isolation and alienation. Robert Putnam's influential *Bowling Alone* (1995), for example, cites the decline of organized bowling leagues as one of many signs of the erosion of community involvement in contemporary social life. Americans still go bowling, Putnam observes, but they do so outside of the formal communal structures that once organized individuals' sense of their place in society (111). The ensuing angst, moreover, is no longer characteristic only of adolescents in the process of crafting their identities, but also of middle-aged and late-life adults who appear, in many forms of popular culture, to be suffering from existential crises of the self. Contemporary fiction has become increasingly populated with characters who, despite being well into adulthood, are grappling with existential questions of self and identity.

This dissertation explores the influence of modern existentialism on a new form of education narrative. The late-life Bildungsroman, I propose, demonstrates the role that existential concerns play in life-long development. I am interested in particular in the way fiction writers have employed the narrative trajectory of the education story to challenge cultural conventions, harnessing the existential struggles of their protagonists to a revised understanding of gender and age. In the late-life individualist narrative, the existential

preoccupation with the self is still at the center of development, reflecting the cultural climate of transition and loneliness to which Toffler refers. In contemporary fiction, however, these existential concerns take on new dimensions in the context of shifting cultural models of age and gender identity. This work aims to identify some of the ways in which writers continue to prize the values of a modernist philosophy, while moving towards new models of gender and age. I wish to contribute to the fields of aging and gender studies an understanding of the existential underpinnings of the aging and gendered experience as manifested in contemporary narrative. A new form of existentialism values the modernist tenets of the philosophy while adapting to continually shifting modes of age and gender.

Situating the Contemporary Late-Life Bildungsroman

The term "late-life Bildungsroman" references the tradition of the youthful development story, literally the "education story" of an individual. My approach relies on an analysis of the traditional Bildungsroman structure as a basis of comparison with current stories of late life. Studies of the traditional genre tend to address conventional adolescent coming-of-age tales, outlining the kinds of crises or changes that the characters experience in a typical Bildungsroman: sexual, romantic, and educational.[1] Many current studies on the traditional Bildungsroman tend toward feminist explorations or criticism that falls outside the white, Anglo-Saxon canon.[2] While taking this scholarship into consideration, my comparative research builds primarily on traditional approaches to structure and character within the Bildungsroman.

Compared to its traditional counterpart, scholarship examining the education or development of people in a later stage of their lives is notably scarce. There are, however, some studies in this field that are particularly insightful. Margaret Morganroth Gullette has done a great deal of research into the role of the middle-aged person in culture and in literature. Her study *Declining to Decline* (1997) details what she calls the "middle-ageism" of a culture preoccupied with youth, while her *Aged by Culture* (2004) exposes the suffocating nature of self-imposed fears of age within North American society. Meanwhile, in *Safe at Last in the Middle Years* (1988), Gullette explores texts of "late life progress," comparing traditional Bildungsroman and recent late-life stories with regards to structure and character development. The central characters of Bildungsroman texts, she observes, generally experience a change or crisis in which they each learn something about themselves. In the conventional structure, this change often takes the form of something dramatic, such as love, death or near-death. The character goes from an initial stage of confusion, loneliness and questioning, to a self-knowledge and life-knowledge, a kind of transition into awareness. In late-life novels of the same structure, the crisis tends to be subtler and the change takes place over a longer period of time. As I aim to demonstrate, contemporary characters experiencing a second coming-of-age tend to posit the questions "What have I done with my life?" and "What will I do next?" There is a form of guilty self-admonishment and awareness of responsibility that is characteristic of an existential preoccupation with the development of the individual.

There are few scholarly works that address existentialism in contemporary fiction. Those that do analyze existentialism in contemporary literature are preoccupied mainly with narrative structure or with overarching themes of negativity and alienation. An

example of scholarship that analyzes what came to be understood as the existential hero is Colin Wilson's 1956 text *The Outsider*. Providing more current literary analyses, scholars such as Kim Worthington, Steven Connor and Stephen Baker discuss the concerns of the individual in contemporary fiction, some of which relate to tenets of existentialism. David Lodge's most recent text, *Consciousness and the Novel* (2003), provides perhaps the most compelling support for the notion of an emergent existential late-life Bildungsroman. In doing so, Lodge taps into trends in contemporary fiction that go beyond the traditional Bildungsroman. Other recent scholarship on fiction that addresses characters of late life explores the concerns of an aging generation, as the baby-boom cohort now enters late middle-age. Studies such as Irina Sobkowska-Ashcroft and Lorna Bernman's *Portrayal of Old Age in Twentieth Century Canadian Novels* (1991) and Sally Chivers's *From Old Woman to Older Women: Contemporary Culture and Women's Narratives* (2003) are particularly nuanced investigations of the way these concerns are addressed in literature. While not focusing specifically on the Bildungsroman, these studies demonstrate that late-life characters are now frequently featured in fiction, while also recognizing the historical influence of the new genre.

In this dissertation, I conduct close readings of primary fictional texts in order to examine the existential principles still at work within contemporary stories of self-development featuring aging characters. The stories I explore follow a plot trajectory that mirrors the traditional coming-of-age narrative, exhibiting existential concerns while challenging existing gender models and age constructs. In the characters, one can see Søren Kierkegaard's angst and dread, Jean-Paul Sartre's opportunity for choice and

change, Simone de Beauvoir's concern with the gendered and aging experience, and the Bildungsoman's typical transition and development.

Early Existentialism

My exploration of the revival of existential themes in contemporary fiction is founded on an analysis of early existentialism as it relates to notions of angst, dread, and self-development. I have focused in part on the work of Kierkegaard and Sartre to provide a firm understanding of the basis of the philosophy as it applies to this dissertation. Although not representative of existentialism in its entirety, their views most accurately highlight the issues with which I am concerned. Kierkegaard's text *Either/Or* (1846) describes the paths he feels one must take in order to emerge as a full individual amidst the crowd. According to Kierkegaard, one must go through the aesthetic, ethical and, finally, religious stages in order to grow into oneself. Of key importance to an analysis of the late-life Bildungsroman is Kierkegaard's preoccupation with a selfish life in contrast with one that focuses on others in relation to self-development.

Sartre's work provides an example of the existential leanings towards individual responsibility, which is among the central concerns of contemporary fiction. For Sartre, it is the very lack of religion that forms the basis of one's individuality and subsequent anxiety, noted particularly in *Existentialism and Humanism* (1946). The knowledge that there is nothing outside of the individual, Sartre declares, results in a burden of choice; in other words, if there is no God, man is in charge of his own subjectivity. Thus, in accord with Kierkegaard, Sartre proposes that one must take responsibility for the way in which one leads one's life. Sartre emphasizes the fact that one cannot transcend one's own

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subjectivity. To writers and philosophers who argue that the twentieth century was a state

of anxiety, Sartre would rebut that there are no such states; rather, the individual is the

anxiety – an anxiety that has taken shape because one has come to understand one's role

of responsibility in society. This anxiety can be linked to what Kierkegaard popularized

as "angst" and "dread." Kierkegaard's notion of angst was picked up by various authors

and artists as the token emotion for the coming-of-age character, now repurposed in

contemporary fiction by the existential late-life character bearing the burden of choice.

Simone de Beauvoir is also at the centre of my research into the influence of age and

gender on existential concerns. While her approach to the philosophy is generally felt in

contemporary late-life self-development narratives, it is her groundbreaking work on

gender and age that initiated the decades-long exploration of gender construction in

relation to identity formation and individual agency. Contemporary late-life fiction, it

turns out, owes much to Beauvoir's inquiry into the female experience, as well as to her

exploration of the bearing that age has on individual experience and choice. Philosophical

texts such as *The Second Sex* (1949) and *Coming of Age* (1972), as well as her fiction,

thus prove immensely important in my exploration of modernist existential fiction and

the effect it has had on contemporary notions of self-development.

Gender Studies

Judith Butler's work on performance and performativity provides the backbone of my

inquiry into gender codes in late-life Bildungsromane. Butler contends that the repetition

of acts that have been culturally coded to be either masculine or feminine contribute to

gender constructs. Building on this notion, my dissertation extends her feminist concerns

to a consideration of masculinity, coupling Butler's views with the work of masculinity scholars such as Harry Brod, Michael Kimmel and Amy Aronson, and R.W. Connell. In terms of Alistair MacLeod's regional masculinity in books such as *The Lost Salt Gift of Blood* (1976), *No Great Mischief* (1999) and *Island* (2000), Kimmel and Aronson's work on rural masculinity offers insight into established codes of manliness in small communities. Likewise, the study *Country Boys* (2006) by Gregory Peter, Michael Mayerfeld Bell, Susan Jarnagin and Donna Baur explores, in part, the feminization of the land in relation to an assumed masculine role of aggression. Approaching the subject through a different cultural field, Bill Osgerby's *Playboys in Paradise* (2001) also builds on Butler's performative insights in order to chart the archetypical playboy's issues of self-identification as far back as the late-nineteenth century. In contrast, Rosalind Gill (2003) raises similar questions by examining the contemporary surge of men's lifestyle magazines and their reflection of culturally accepted modes of masculinity such as the New Lad and the New Man.

As masculine models such as the New Lad and the New Man have demonstrated, modes of manhood are continually shifting, each model presenting particular challenges to adult males. There is a recent emergence of texts that focus on the immaturity of the adult male. Gary S. Cross's *Men to Boys: The Making of Modern Immaturity* (2008) and Michael Kimmel's *Guyland* (2008) chart the perceived decline of men who opt for what is considered an irresponsible life over one of committed engagement. As I argue in Chapter 4, through a close reading of works by Michael Chabon and Nick Hornby, there is a valuable role for boyish things in the adult life. Highlighting the focus on popular culture and male-male friendships, I aim to defend the so-called juvenile behaviour noted

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in current cultural texts on masculinity. As an example, Barry Faulk brings the importance of popular culture and a non-traditional life to the forefront of Hornby's texts. The overlapping, changing discourses on men and masculinity to which these various scholars point effectively outline an academic context within which I can situate my own consideration of the place of masculinity in contemporary late-life Bildungsroman.

Personal Creative Work in Light of Theory

In his introduction to Mavis Gallant's collection *Montreal Stories* (2004), Russell Banks claims that the short story is an evolving genre that thrives on a tension between the "remembered and felt experience" and "the known truth of what happened" (vii). He observes that the short story denotes loneliness and individuality more than other genres. This statement resonates strongly with the existential leanings in contemporary late-life Bildungsromane and with my own fiction. Banks suggests that Gallant and her characters populate "Borderlands," a term that readily brings to mind the transitional positions of aging characters of much of contemporary fiction. The creative component of my dissertation combines fiction and philosophy as a direct response to both the contemporary late-life Bildungsroman and theoretical analysis. The writing of the creative component is an enactment of the philosophical.

In *Between*, I have tried to capture the private, individual articulation of existential issues – such as the place of the individual within current society – and to offer a new way of looking at the contemporary phenomenon of the late-life Bildungsroman through, in particular, the relationship of the aging mother with her children. It is my hope that my creation of a new work that uses the creative tools of fiction to explore and address the

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theoretical offers an important contribution to the analysis of not only other creative

works, but also the cultural climate of transition and loneliness to which Toffler refers. I

have aimed to develop the style, technique and characters of my collection in conjunction

with philosophical and theoretical research in a way that both responds to and informs the

cultural condition of the late-life Bildungsroman.

An Outline of Chapters

Within twentieth-century middle-class culture, "late life" refers to the time when

individuals well into adulthood face responsibilities toward themselves and others,

typically confronting questions of career, family and personal contentment. Scholars to

date have yet to address adequately the influence of late life on canonical existential

philosophy. As I argue in my first chapter, concerns regarding the individual's experience

of late life are central to the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, and, in

particular, Simone de Beauvoir. These existential thinkers and their philosophies focus in

large part on the question of how personal choice changes as one matures. More

specifically, notions of age and gender emerge as entwined, fundamental threads of

existentialism, especially in the writings of Beauvoir, whose contribution to gender and

age studies cannot be understated. Notably, the individuals depicted not only in these

philosophers' examples and observations but also in their own personal journals inhabit

the late-life stage of their existence, and their choices reflect the transitional phase typical

of the aging experience. The issue of late life thus both inspires and frames existential

philosophy.

A close consideration of the essays and philosophical texts of Kierkegaard, Sartre and Beauvoir demonstrates the relevance of aging to their existential ideas. As I will demonstrate, Kierkegaard's letters and essays prove particularly informative in this regard because he explored many of his ideas through both his own personal letters and through the voices of his pseudonymous authors during his own late-life period. The choices that he faced at this time greatly influenced the existential ideas for which he has become known. Similarly, Sartre experienced political and personal tumult that coloured his philosophical and fictional writings and, as I will argue, the burdensome nature of choice and responsibility prevalent within late-life Bildungsromane. Beauvoir's personal experience of aging is articulated fully through her identity as a woman and, as such, her work offers a different dimension to any existential analysis. New writings on Beauvoir in light of her centenary, such as that of Emily R. Grosholz, suggest that Beauvoir must have felt compromised by a conflict she repeatedly located between her own work on gender and age and her commitment to existentialism.

In my second chapter, I turn my focus to the concept of the Bildungsroman, noting its key structural characteristics and tracing its historical development up to the twentieth century. Having established the framework of the genre, I then turn to recent scholars to theorize the fiction of Sartre, Beauvoir and Camus as examples of the subgenre of the existential Bildungsroman. As I demonstrate, the philosopher's fictional work does more than simply reinforce the claims made in their philosophical writings. In all three cases, the author makes use of fiction writing strategies in order to bring attention to the emotional import of existentialist anxiety for different types of mature individuals. While

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the existential concern might be presented as universal, its formulation differs radically depending on a person's age and gender.

Postmodernists have for the most part been unwilling to acknowledge any indebtedness to modernist existential philosophy. In my third chapter, however, I use a close reading of the works of Alistair MacLeod to demonstrate an extension in fiction from the postmodern period of the preoccupations of age and gender found in Beauvoir's work. More specifically, I explore MacLeod's contribution to the expansion of the existentialist inquiry to a consideration of the rural masculinity of his female characters. His use of subtle irony undermines gender conventions, both male and female, and challenges the long traditions of gender performance noted by Butler. By interlacing Fredric Jameson's and Linda Hutcheon's postmodernism with Butler's performance theory, I am able to demonstrate the altered yet sustained elements of Beauvoir's gender constructionism in MacLeod's own fiction.

My consideration of MacLeod's unique representations relies in part on proponents of masculinity studies such as Harry Brod, Michael Kimmel and Amy Aronson, and R.W. Connell. Just as Beauvoir contended that one becomes a woman (*Second Sex*, 301), these recent theorists of masculinity argue that the male model is a construct and that, therefore, the impact of cultural expectations can be equally constricting to men as Beauvoir demonstrated them to be to women. MacLeod's women, I argue, adopt traditionally masculine gender models, at the same that his men are finding these same paradigms suffocating. The author's depiction of this exchange of gender performance gradually suggests the unsustainable nature of any strict gender code, a view that MacLeod subtly reaffirms through his avoidance of conclusively happy endings.

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In the fourth chapter of my dissertation, I extrapolate on the insights arising from my study of the original form of female masculinity that MacLeod represents. Turning to Michael Chabon's novels *Wonder Boys* (1995) and *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007) and Nick Hornby's *About a Boy* (1998) and *High Fidelity* (1995), I explore the nature of masculinity for the aging male as influenced by issues of affluence, employment and friendship. Chabon and Hornby, I argue, offer men who, in their quests for self-development, eschew heteronormative conventions of the modern family, opting instead for sustainable relationships that lie outside this tradition. The authors celebrate male-male friendships, certain professions and popular culture as viable sources of personal development. Through recent theoretical studies of the masculinities arising from the cultures of the New Lad and the New Man, I provide a context for the wandering male protagonists of these narratives. The sense of fulfillment experienced by the authors' male characters functions, I contend, as a commentary on their society's prioritization of the heteronormative myths of the happy nuclear family and the naturalness of traditional male occupations.

A notable contradiction arising in the works studied in the second half of my dissertation is that, despite questioning the essentialism of the self, contemporary existential narratives still imply humanism is central to identity formation, resulting in a tendency to retain the angst that marks modernist existential works. In my conclusion, I examine two stories within my own creative work, *Between* (2006), in relation to this issue and the possibility of hope. Extending the rubric of relations explored in the previous chapter, in my conclusion I question existing perceptions of parent-child relationships in the context of age and gender. As I argue, the women in these stories

move beyond the dramatic and violent turns of the modernist late-life narratives, while they continue to demonstrate an awareness of the implications of age on their self-definitions. Aging mothers contend with issues surrounding work, care, and relationships with others, including their aging children. In my discussion of two key short stories in my collection, I have made an effort to address the role that same-sex friendships play in their late-life development. My analysis has relied on the groundbreaking work of scholars who have recently explored the particular challenges of mother-son relationships and caretaking (such as Andrea O'Reilly and Sara Ruddick), in addition to those who discuss female friendships (such as Abel). My intention is to establish a dialogue surrounding the changing roles of women in late life, and offer characters that represent a hopeful turn towards development.

Through my exploration of existentialism's relationship to conceptions of age and gender in recent fiction, I have charted the pulse of modernist preoccupations in contemporary late-life writing while, through my own short stories, attempting to create a space for hope within existentialist fiction. Although narratives and cultural conceptions of the self have changed considerably since the writings of the existentialists, questions of the self persist within challenges of existing age and gender constructs. Youthful characters discovering who they are have grown into adults who chart new paths through the maze of gender codes and conventions, navigate the adventures of aging, and attempt to develop identities that resolve any feelings of angst and loneliness.

Notes

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[1] Scholars who offer especially influential discussions of the traditional youth-centred

form of the genre include Thomas West Gregory and Susan Gohlman.

[2] Pin-Chia Feng, for example, explores female development stories coloured by race and

cultural and personal oppression, while Martin Japtok draws comparisons between

Jewish and African American coming-of-age narratives.

Chapter 1:

The Philosophical Writing of Søren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone Beauvoir in Relation to Late Life

The philosophy of existentialism is fraught with popular misunderstanding: it tends to be considered indulgent, overly analytical and even sad. Sartre stated in *Existentialism and Humanism* (1946), an article written in "defence of existentialism", that "[Existentialism] has been reproached as an invitation to people to dwell in quietism of despair" (25). It is often the butt of jokes in contemporary culture – having "an existential crisis" can be loosely translated as suffering a kind of melodrama, inviting not intellectual consideration but eye-rolling. Suffering similar misunderstanding, it appears, is the transitional period of late-life, coined as midlife. Like the term "existential crisis", "midlife crisis" makes its way onto greeting cards more often than into well-informed conversation. It brings to mind balding men and convertibles rather than a powerful turning point in the lives of aging adults.

A deeper exploration of the key principles and writing of existentialism reveals a philosophy with a focus on responsibility, action and change, one that is contrary to misconceptions about inaction and indulgence. The accountability inherent in existentialism belies the notion of nihilism or melodrama. It is indeed contingent upon self-reflection, but with the objective of personal development it situates one in a position of responsibility to oneself and, ultimately, to others. According to existentialism, one can and should grow and change while contemplating the effects of one's choices and the role one plays in a social context. Above all, there is no essentialism in existentialism: one is not born into life with preordained characteristics. The individual is free to create

his or her life, to act according to his or her freedom within "situations," to use Sartre's term. This freedom and lack of essence, however, is not to be confused with a careless approach to life, but is bound up with a burden and anxiety that is a marked characteristic of the philosophy. One is free to make choices but, as Sartre famously noted, this is a binding liberation: we are condemned to be free. And the responsibility of one's actions can be overwhelming.

The anxiety of responsibility and the implications of choices are also marked characteristics of midlife or what I will call a late-life coming of age (generally experienced in the years between 40 and 60, depending on the individual). A relatively new area of inquiry, contemporary theory on late life addresses key "turning points" and the weight of actions as integral to the subsequent anxiety often suffered by individuals at that stage in life. The work of Phyllis Moen and Elaine Wethington prove particularly useful in this area. The overlap between existentialism and late-life coming of age is revealed through transition and change, both demonstrating the imperative of personal development over time.

I wish to address existentialism's shifting analysis of the individual's self-development as a lifelong process. Existentialist texts often present a person's growth as having two stages: self-reflective individualism followed by recognition of one's responsibility and relationship to others. As I will demonstrate, late-life coming of age has a crucial connection to these concerns. A transitional period of self-development, late life and existentialism share a focus on the individual in terms of anxiety, responsibility, self-reflection and choice. Key aspects of existential philosophy have shifted over time, with the aid of many philosophers including Søren Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre and

Simone Beauvoir. While these philosophers offer distinct approaches to the existentialist development of the self, they all point to its commonalities with late-life coming of age.

In this chapter, I use Charles Taylor's philosophy of the self to establish a theoretical framework through which to address the self-reflection within the non-fiction of these philosophers. My analytical focus is on Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, Sartre's *Existentialism and Humanism, Being and Nothingness* and *Search for a Method* and Beauvoir's *Second Sex* and *Coming of Age*, and they are shown against the contemporary backdrop of late-life analysis. In some cases the personal lives of these philosophers reflect their existential and late-life concerns. Their own choices and experiences offer new insights into their philosophical interests, strongly suggesting that they see private life as an enactment of their philosophical explorations.

Contemporary Theories of Late Life in an Existential Context

While midlife is a relatively recent distinction, I aim to demonstrate that transition and change in mid to late life have clear ties to the existential claim of the imperative of choice and responsibility in the development of the self. Moen and Wethington explore the notion of a life course perspective on midlife (*Midlife Development in a Life Course Context*), claiming that rather than pinpoint a particular age as midlife, it is more inclusive to examine midlife through transitions and their psychological results in the development of the individual: "a life course approach focuses on life *pathways,* considering role and developmental transitions, trajectories, and turning points in lives over time"(5). They look at four major themes in relation to the midlife stage: lives in context; transitions and trajectories; subjective definitions and social change and

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individual lives (6). Most of these categories are objective and environmentally contextual with a focus on socioeconomic status, gender, race, employment, and family roles. Of interest to this analysis is the segment on 'subjective definitions'.

Moen and Wethington assert that a number of sociological and psychological theorists "have adopted a dynamic (or 'dialectical') view of the relationship between role transitions, life events, and psychological development in the middle years" (13). They claim that change or maturity in the individual can be initiated through transitions such as distress or unexpected events, and that these provoke an understanding of the individual's complex responsibilities[i]. Their definition of a "turning point", which they share with J. A. Clausen (1990), is

> a new insight into one's self, a significant other, or important life situation; this insight becomes a motive that leads to redirecting, changing, or improving one's life. The experiences of a "psychological turning point" are thus a marker of when important shifts in thinking and insights into self and other occur during the course of life. (14)[ii]

This notion of a transitional change reflects the existential preoccupation with turning points in terms of self-development and personal growth. As Sartre explains in *Existentialism and Humanism*, existentialism is a philosophy of optimism and not, as it is so often misunderstood, of pessimism and inaction. There is no essence to the human condition; that liberation from the notion of a static and imposed essence provides freedom and responsibility at once. It is a good thing, we are meant to understand. Literary theorist Margaret Morganroth Gullette observes that, in Western culture, midlife has until recently been related to decline and depression. These perceptions, she argues,

must be challenged because development is not reserved for youth, but indeed can evolve

throughout life:

> The new consensus in serious psychodynamic theory is that development is probably a
>
> life-long process. This version of aging is trying to displace a persistent older myth:
>
> that some essence (sometimes called "human nature" or "character") gets *fixed* in
>
> human beings at a very early age. (xxi)

Gullette's suggestion that there is no human essence echoes the existentialist doctrine, as

will be explored. More importantly for my argument, she demonstrates that late life

offers the possibility of personal development, optimism, and responsibility – the very

cornerstones of existentialism. That is not to say that the late-life experience is not

without the fear and dread that existentialists identify with self-development. Gullette

continues,

> What these conventions ignore is that many people [...] anticipate adulthood with
>
> some dread. We fear failing in its tasks (or, considering what we think some of them
>
> consist of, succeeding in them). [...] Instead [...] we should consider the possibility
>
> that life can be constructed as a process of losing our false *fears,* our overly
>
> *pessimistic* anticipations. [...] It would also provide a brand new evaluation of adult
>
> knowledge, no longer regularly identified with clear-eyed pain, but also, and perhaps
>
> primarily, with hard-earned relief. (xix)

A departure from pessimism and despair in relation to midlife parallels the existential

belief in an optimistic and responsible life-course in the face of anxiety and dread.

Furthermore, it coincides with the philosophers' own progress through late-life and their

recognition of action and responsible personal development. Gullette calls late-life (what

she terms mid-progress novels) "cure stories" and, in many regards, the existentialist ideas on self-development are cures as well.

A Summary of Charles Taylor's History of Inwardness

The notion of inwardness or self-reflection, as noted, is integral to both existentialism and late-life. An appreciation of this cultural development aids in situating the self in a historical context. In *Sources of the Self* (1989), Charles Taylor charts the modern acceptance of an inner self or consciousness versus "outwardness." His analysis of this and other binaries such as passion versus reason offers a compelling framework for my analysis of existentialist philosophy and its relationship to late life because Kierkegaard, Sartre and Beauvoir also use such binaries in their approach to existence, the self and the self's relationships to others. In *Sources,* Taylor addresses the development of "inwardness" – the modern sense of self as a matter of acceptance: "we naturally come to think that we have selves the way we have heads or arms, and inner depths the way we have hearts or livers" (112). For Taylor, inwardness and morality are intertwined. Self-reflection, he claims, is bound up with who one should be and so the self is placed in what he refers to as a "moral topography," which he formulates as a binary articulated at least since Plato.

Taylor summarizes Plato's approach to the self in the *Republic* as one that, from a moral standpoint, favours reason over passion. To succumb to passion is to succumb to the lower part of the soul, whereas reason is a form of "self-mastery" involving the "high soul." Taylor claims that the conflict that Plato's doctrine articulates was an early form of moral hegemony marked by the domination of reason-based philosophy. What is of

interest for existentialism here is the connection Taylor draws between reason and self-reflection: "Plato's work should probably be seen as an important contribution to a long-developing process whereby an ethic of reason and reflection gains dominance over one of action and glory" (117). Action and passion without a clear examination of the self, Taylor sees Plato suggesting, result in a person being unbalanced and incomplete.

As Taylor notes, while Plato saw knowledge as the only key to reason, later philosophers such as Augustine and Descartes recognized the importance of freewill and agency, emphasizing one's capacity for choice determines self-development. This turn towards individuality marked a shift from a central or universal experience that had been the prior basis for the self: "What is morally crucial about us is not just the universal nature or rational principle which we share with others, as with Plato and Aristotle, but now also this power of assent, which is essentially in each case *mine*" (137, my italics). Augustine was concerned with the development of the self within relation to God. While he represents what Taylor calls "radical reflexivity", or self-examination, it remains, as with Plato, in connection to a higher being or ideal. What is unique in Augustine's work is his claim that even God is found within; our understanding of reason is awakened in us through God (Taylor 136). Unlike Augustine, Descartes praises a disengagement of the self, in part because disengagement detaches one from God: "Now freewill is in itself the noblest thing we can have because it makes us in a certain manner equal to God and exempts us from being his subjects" (qtd. in Taylor, 147). Taylor notes that the principles of Descartes and those after him represent "the growing ideal of a human agent who is able to remake himself"(159). He states,

Descartes is the founder of modern individualism, because his theory throws the individual thinker back on his own responsibility, requires him to build an order of thought for himself, in the first person singular. (182)

This lack of essential humanity, the privileging of the human agent, and the resulting responsibility of the individual in one's own development are key principles of philosophies of the self. As a close reading of Kierkegaard, Sartre and Beauvoir demonstrates, existentialism contributes to this formation of the self-determining individual agent an anxiety that revolves around the responsibility and choice connected specifically to late-life coming of age.

Søren Kierkegaard's Existentialism: The Transition from Esthetic to Ethical in *Either/Or, A Fragment of Life*

In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard initiates that focus on late-life anxiety by juxtaposing two key stages of life represented by youth and age. Kierkegaard's approach to self-development is sometimes thought to be a three-part rather than two-part progression: esthetic, ethical and religious, and Christianity is an important aspect of Kierkegaard's existentialism. In this study, however, I am interested in late-life development and the philosophy later coined as existentialism. My focus here, therefore, is on his first two stages as represented in *Either/Or, A Fragment of Life* (1843). This work is divided into two parts, each of which includes a series of essays or letters. According to the editor, Victor Eremita (one of Kierkegaard's pseudonyms), "the anonymous manuscripts [were] found in the secret desk-compartment by the editor" (37). Eremita prefaces each part, which represents a phase of life. Part I exemplifies the passionate, "esthetic" stage of

development and includes "the papers of a witty, ironical, disillusioned young esthete the editor called A, who had seen through everything in life and found it wanting" (37). Eremita's preface outlines the esthetic stage, of which A's papers are characteristic. He describes this approach as one in which the individual "is to play shuttlecock with life by maintaining esthetic distance from relationships and circumstances and arbitrarily controlling one's experiences on the basis of 'the interesting'" (37).

Taylor states that, according to Plato, "what we gain through thought or reason is self-mastery. [...] To be master of oneself is to have the higher part of the soul rule over the lower, which means reason over the desires" (115). In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard exposes not only the immorality of the life of passion – what Taylor calls "outer" experience – but also the early markings of existential philosophy. By contrasting "inner" and "outer" dialogue, with Part II offering the ethical antidote to Part I's estheticism, Kierkegaard builds the framework for a subjective, individual self whose development is reliant on freedom and choice. Plato's discrediting of passion and desire begins to develop, with Kierkegaard, into a recognition of the self as an individual with will and agency. Eremita, in his assessment that the goal of the esthetic is "continually to change 'the eye with which one sees actuality'"(37) encourages a process by which the developed self turns an eye inward and faces actuality.

The first part of Kierkegaard's text establishes the image of the individual absorbed in Plato-like outwardness and passion, but also hints at the modernist revision of this notion of the individual. Part 1 begins with A, lamenting his position as an artist, at a crossroads in his life. He is plagued by doubt and anxiety, yet continues to praise the esthetic life. The essays in *Either/Or* are poetic and often fragmented, echoing A's sense of himself as

an individual who is inwardly lost due to his past focus on immediacy and pleasure, and his disregard for both the effects of his choices and his responsibilities to others. And yet, despite his devotion to pleasure, A also voices doubts and abstract regrets, and even demonstrates an understanding of the impact of choice:

> What is going to happen? What will the future bring? I do not know. I have no presentiment. […] Before me is continually an empty space, and I am propelled by a consequence that lies behind me. This life is turned around and dreadful, not to be endured. (39)

At one point he makes mention of self-reflection, a characteristic of the "high" or reason-based soul: "For me, nothing is more dangerous than to recollect [*erindre*]" (42). More than a philosophical insight, this is likely a personal note, but one that references what Moen and Wethington would characterize as a key turning point for the philosopher. Kierkegaard is known for personal references throughout his texts. Those made to ended relationships and love-based regret are usually credited to his terminated engagement with Regine Olsen, a young woman with whom Kierkegaard was infatuated for much of his life. A's pointed refusal to look inward at his relationship with others may well be directed at Regine and to the source of his own late-life regret and loneliness.

Connections between *Either/Or* and late-life coming of age are found in A's transitional life position. Although not an adolescent, he is clearly at a crossroads. As A states, "My soul is like the Dead Sea, over which no bird is able to fly; when it has come midway, it sinks down, exhausted, to death and destruction"(43). The poet-esthete has enjoyed a life of passion, but having found what Taylor calls "outer" life unfulfilling, is

now prepared for change. And later in Part I, A waxes even more philosophical with regards to his desire for change:

> Marry, and you will regret it. Do not marry, and you will also regret it. [...] Laugh at the stupidities of the world, and you will regret it; weep over them, and you will also regret it. Trust a girl, and you will regret it; do not trust her and you will also regret it [...]. (45)

While our hero no longer finds relief in the passionate life, there is evidence of hope of change. He claims that while wine saddens him and "Pleasure disappoints; possibility does not." This is a hopeful shift towards possibility – choice – and the ethical stage of self-development. Notably, in A's early remarks in this paper on his approach to philosophy, there is also the suggestion of the anti-essentialism that would be adopted by later existentialists: "Experience shows that it is not at all difficult for philosophy to begin. Far from it. It begins, in fact, with nothing and therefore can always begin"(44). A's papers break off with the esthete poised for counsel and transition; this direction comes from Judge William in the subsequent essays.

Eremita's preface to Part II of *Either/Or* explains its text to be responses to A from his older friend, Judge William, who argues against the esthetic. As Eremita explains,

> In contrast to the episodic, momentary, ultimately desperate esthetic life, Judge William advocates the integrated life of ethical reflection, normative judgment, and qualitative resolution, whereby the discontinuous life of immediacy, inclination and desire is caught up in life as a task oriented to the actualization of the highest good, personal and social. [...] The esthetic is that by which one immediately and

inclinationally is what one is; the ethical is that whereby one becomes what one

becomes. (66)

By contrasting the passivity of the esthetic and the activity of the ethical, Eremita

foreshadows the crucial importance of development in early existentialism: esthetic

individuals adopt essentialism, while the ethical life is one of continual growth and late-

life change, wherein the individual builds the self through an understanding of the

importance of choice. The ethical stage is one that allows for "becoming," and, as

demonstrated by the protégé/mentor relationship of A and Judge William, it is apparent

that the transition to the ethical stage is not common in youth, but requires a self-

reflection and devotion to change more characteristic of age and maturity.

In his letters to A, Judge William foreshadows Taylor in segmenting an individual's

life into the "inner" and the "outer." In his piece on *The Esthetic Validity of Marriage*,

William explains that the outer realm manifests itself in both the goals for which the

individual strives and the world that contains those challenges. The outer segment of

one's life, therefore, requires one to exercise one's freedom of choice, to act upon one's

will or agency. He describes this as a struggle to overcome obstacles (67), which is

consistent with the anxiety that the existentialists link to self-development.

Although he makes a point here of upholding the importance of the esthetic stage in

individual progress, he shifts emphasis in his following piece, *The Balance Between the

Esthetic and the Ethical in the Development of the Personality*. In this section, Judge

William focuses on the imperative of choice in the growth of an individual. For

Kierkegaard (via William) choosing for oneself – in other words, choosing the esthetic –

is to not choose at all. William urges A to see the value in moving beyond living for

oneself and one's desires, and acting and choosing in ways that are reflected in one's community; in other words, striving towards the "outer" life despite the anxiety that the act of choosing may instigate. He makes note of the moment before choice, the time of transition and indecision:

The choice itself is crucial for the content of the personality: through the choice, the personality submerges itself in that which is being chosen, and when it does not choose, it withers away in atrophy. For a moment that between which the choice is to be made lies–for a moment it seems to lie–outside the person who is choosing; he stands in no relation to it, can maintain himself in a state of indifference toward it.

(72)

For Kierkegaard, this "moment" can be become a denial of action, of moving onto the ethical way of living: "[Y]ou have not chosen at all [...] Your choice is an esthetic choice, but an esthetic choice is no choice. On the whole, to choose is an intrinsic and stringent term for the ethical" (73). Moreover, as Judge William observes, in making ethical or sound choices, one experiences overwhelming anxiety: "Therefore, the ethical choice is in a certain sense much easier, much simpler, but in another sense it is infinitely more difficult." The implication is that to choose to transition to a life full of that which is not simply immediate but has long-lasting consequences is frightening because it suggests responsibility not only for one's own development but also for that of others. As Judge William states, the self "is not only a personal self but a social, a civic self. [...] He transfers himself from personal life to civic life [...W]hen he turns back into his personality through the civic life, the personal life appears in a higher form" (82). One

chooses to act for more than pleasure and immediacy, and in doing so, can become more self-reflective, resulting in what William calls an "extraordinary person" (83).

Anxiety surrounding choices is characteristic of late-life coming of age, just as it is of its younger counterpart. What is commonly known as a midlife crisis but what I argue is just as frequent in later life can be marked by feelings of transition, doubt and self reflection. Kierkegaard's two-part esthetic-ethical life development describes late-life contemplative transitions where the individual moves from focusing solely on the self to becoming a "better" self with others in mind. Judge William articulates this shift as follows:

> He does not become someone other than he was before, but he becomes himself. [...]
> Just as the heir, even if he were heir to the treasures of the whole world, does not
> possess them before he has come of age, so the richest personality is nothing before he
> has chosen himself [...] and every human being can be this if he so wills it. (76)

Thus becoming one's "true" self, for Kierkegaard, does not necessarily happen in youth, with the choice to focus on, or "choose" oneself potentially happening well beyond the traditional coming of age period. In this passage, Kierkegaard also suggests an argument for self-mastery and even anti-essentialism in William's contention that one can make changes should one desire and choose to do so, rather than being bound to a predetermined individualism.

The notion of anxiety as a key to self-development represents the connection between Kierkegaard and late-life transition. In *Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard claims that anxiety is the *possibility* of freedom, but that freedom is always in existence despite the fact that the individual is not always aware of this. Once one understands the existence of

freedom, one is filled with anxiety and dread. This recognition of freedom propels one into intense anxiety and guilt. This foreshadowing of Sartre's concept of freedom maintains that the many options available to the individual create intense responsibility and anxiety. In relation to Gullette's claim that individuals dread late adulthood, one can see a shadow of Kierkegaard's attraction/repulsion definition of anxiety. In late life, an individual can shift from the esthetic to the ethical stage and make a motion to a more responsible life; one is filled with the possibilities that this freedom entails. Kierkegaard does not suggest that anxiety is something that can or should be avoided; on the contrary, it is an important experience in self-development. An effort to deny anxiety, Kierkegaard suggests, leads to *despair*, preventing one from becoming one's true self.

While Kierkegaard's later works suggest that to truly overcome despair and reach a higher form, one must develop a relationship with God, the key aspects of early existentialism are to be found in *Either/Or*. It is here in his claim for a commitment to the imperative of individual choice and responsibility that Sartre found support for his own insistence on a model of sole agency that moved beyond a relationship with a higher power, a move that resulted in the modernist anxiety of freedom and choice in the development of the self.

Jean Paul Sartre's Angst of Choice: *Existentialism and Humanism*

While not a religious existentialist, Sartre shared key philosophical interests with Kierkegaard, namely that of the impact of choice. In *Existentialism and Humanism* (1948), he writes that "Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself" and that, "when we say that man is responsible for himself as he is, we do not mean that he is

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responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men" ((29).

These two statements summarize key elements of Sartre's existentialism, namely a

concern with a life of responsibility and action. In exploring the changes in his

philosophical and political convictions, it becomes apparent that Sartre's personal life

enacted his philosophy. His own passage from individualistic into late-life Marxist

existentialism is marked by a change from a concern for the self to a concern for many.

Existentialism is an ideal essay from which to gauge the ways in which Sartre's

philosophy differs from Kierkegaard's. Sartre wrote it after what is arguably his own late-

life transition, in response to what he considered misconceptions about existentialism,

and it provides a clear explanation of his philosophical position. A close reading of the

paper with reference to Taylor's theories of the self illustrates Sartre's existentialism in a

late-life context. Sartre's contribution to a late-life analysis of existentialism lies in the

responsibility of the individual to his or her life-long development, and this is evident

through his changing life and philosophy.

In *Existentialism*, Sartre argues that religious and atheistic existentialists both

"believe that *existence* comes before *essence*" (27). Religious existentialists maintain,

however, that God has a plan for man and, for Sartre, this claim negates the former

because it presumes that man has a "human nature," a universality that comes before

experience. The atheistic perspective that Sartre condoned dictates that without God man

is responsible for his own essence:

We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world –and

defines himself afterwards. [...] He will not be anything until later, and then he will be

what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it. Man simply is." (28)

In Sartre's insistence on the individual's development as an achievable goal, what he calls a "project which possesses a subjective life," there is a strongly implied responsibility for one's actions. We are what we make of ourselves. For Sartre, however, this is not a self-serving ambition, and he follows this claim with an emphasis on the role of the individual in the experience of others.

In Taylor's exploration into the development of "inwardness," he discusses the contribution of Descartes and what Taylor calls "disengaged reason." Descartes' objective in examining the self, the "reflexive turn," was to recognize the self as having the power to determine one's actions. Taylor explains, "It is no longer the way to an experience of everything in God. Rather what I now meet is myself: I achieve a clarity and a fullness of self-presence that was lacking before" (157). As Taylor writes, Descartes was "no closet atheist"; however his move to disengage reason from God foreshadows Sartre's view that power comes from within, not without (or above). The move from a dependent self to a solely independent one is a distinguishing factor between Kierkegaard and Sartre. In *Existentialism*, the latter states "[w]hen Descartes said, 'Conquer yourself rather than the world,' what he meant was, at bottom, the same – that we should act without hope" (35). For Sartre, man is alone. The implications of this are that there is no essence, but no forgiveness (of sins) either: one must act knowing one is the sole determiner of one's actions.

The link between late-life coming of age and existentialism is perhaps strongest in terms of anxiety or despair. For Sartre, this is a byproduct of the development of the self.

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He addresses his view of anxiety and its relation to freedom in *Existentialism*. Because there is no God, and one is alone to create oneself with no *a priori* essence, Sartre claims that this freedom or blank slate causes enormous feelings of overwhelming responsibility. These are compounded by a recognition that the choices one makes have an impact on others:

> The existentialist frankly states that man is in anguish. His meaning is as follows– When a man commits himself to anything, fully realizing that he is not only choosing what he will be, but is thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind–in such a moment a man cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility. (30)

Anxiety is therefore the result of a mature recognition of one's responsibility for others, arguably illustrating an overlap between mid or late life and existential anxiety.

Sartre's approach to the individual, the group and existentialism shifted to Marxism after his capture during the war, when he decided to become more politically engaged. Hazel Rowley writes in *Tête-à-Tête* (2005) that, upon Sartre's return to Paris after his imprisonment, Simone de Beauvoir, his closest companion, had never felt further from the man or his philosophy. He, meanwhile, was angered with Beauvoir for the lack of political conviction in her efforts to survive in occupied Paris[iii]:

> He had not come back to Paris to enjoy his freedom, he told her, but to *act*. He wanted to organize a resistance group. They had to expel the Germans from France. Beauvoir thought him deluded. Had he *still* no idea how powerless they were as individuals? (122)

Sartre started his political engagement by organizing a group with other politically inclined intellectuals such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Toussaint Desanti. The group contained some Marxists, but at this time Sartre was not interested in political parties so much as action, having powerfully felt the effects of the group during his capture: "Sartre had been deeply marked by collective life in the prison camp, which he considered a kind of socialism, and for the first time he thought of himself as a socialist" (Rowly, 123). Members of the group began to make contact with members of the French Resistance, which proved dangerous: people splintered off and were often never heard from; friends were tortured and killed. Some of the Marxist members moved onto Communist circles. The group Sartre formed upon his return eventually disbanded, but activism had been ignited in Sartre, and his socio-political engagement increased from this point onwards.

This personal evolution into a socially concerned individual was reflected in Sartre's philosophy, and both his life and philosophy begin to demonstrate a recognition of late-life self-development and change. In *Search for a Method* (1963), he addresses the criticism his ideas received after his landmark work on existentialism, *Being and Nothingness*. According to Hazel E. Barnes, since the publication of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre aligned himself with Marxism and, as a result, his notion of the individual as alone in the world, as free, had shifted and perhaps drastically changed. Sartre himself was changing and transitioning between his former, apolitical self to one concerned with society at large and thus the role he played within the larger group. His late-life shift may have come as a surprise to those who had become accustomed to Sartre the philosopher and Sartre the individual. In her Introduction, Barnes asks, "Who is this

Sartre?", addressing the obvious drastic changes the reader can expect of the text. A

changing philosophy, we are to understand, is a marker of true existentialism: one's

essence is not fixed, but should be expected to develop. She writes,

> What are we to make of him? Consistency in detail is not important; if we want a
>
> philosopher to develop throughout his lifetime, the last thing to demand of him is that
>
> he fit his new thought to the measure of his own printed word. [...] Contemporary
>
> Marxists [...] leave no room for freedom. [...] If Sartre's declaration for Marxism
>
> means that in his opinion men are not free after all, then those of us who have found
>
> his existentialism a significant philosophy in the past will respect Sartre's decision,
>
> but we will regretfully decline to follow him. [...] But perhaps the opposite is true. If
>
> Sartre has found a way of reconciling existentialism with Marxism, if what he does is
>
> not to forget the free individual of existentialism but rather to make room for him in a
>
> Marxist framework, then the situation is totally different. [...] But we will have to
>
> grant that Sartre has fulfilled his promise – to show how the free individual described
>
> in *Being and Nothingness* may commit himself meaningfully in the world. (ix)

The philosopher should grow and change in his lifetime. It is not a flaw, therefore, that, in

Search for a Method, Sartre marks a new desire to reconcile the existentialist and the

Marxist so that one can develop as an individual within society: "It is the search for a

method by which the existentialist Marxist may hope to understand both individual

persons and history"(ix). In other words, Sartre's transition to one concerned with politics

demonstrates the existentialist concern with the role of the individual in society. Sartre

aligns himself with a Marxist approach in *Search*, in which he situates the individual

anew. Within the text itself, in the chapter "Marxism and Existentialism", Sartre

discusses Kierkegaard in relation to subjectivity and objectivity. He examines both Kierkegaard and Hegel and determines that when compared to the ideas of both, Marxism can be upheld as the most exact demonstration of man's experience: "Thus Marx, rather than Kierkegaard or Hegel, is right, since he asserts with Kierkegaard the specificity of human existence and, along with Hegel, takes the concrete man in his objective reality"(14). Here we see that the individual's freedom, still intact, is a subjective experience but one that it is affected by the objective environment. Sartre reveals his personal turning point in his reflection upon his development and appreciation of Marx:

> I found everything was perfectly clear, and I really understood absolutely nothing. To understand is to change, to go beyond oneself. [W]hat did begin to change me was the *reality* of Marxism, the heavy presence on my horizon of the masses of workers, an enormous, sombre body which *lived* Marxism, which *practiced* it [...].(18)

Priest states that "If we draw a distinction between self and other [...] then existentialism is a philosophy of the self. Marxism is a philosophy of the other"(301). How Sartre reconciles these appears to be a personal reconciliation as well: his shift from a solitary individual to one engaged in society is reflected in his philosophy, but also in his life. Marxism offers potential for mass change with a focus on class and group dynamics, shifting existentialism's focus from the burdensome freedom of the individual toward long-term social change. Sartre's appreciation of the group and his regret surrounding his political indifference prior to the war, I would suggest, precipitated his desire to move his previously phenomenological existentialism into the realm of Marxism.[iv] Priest states, "Sartre entered the Second World War young but emerged middle aged. He was thirty-four when it began in 1939 [captured on his thirty-fifth birthday] and forty when it ended

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in 1945, so it was the mature Sartre who was the socialist Sartre" (9). He stated in an interview after the war that it was being called to military service that made him realize he was a social being. He subsequently increased his political activity, his concern stretching beyond France to Cuba, Madrid, Germany, Vietnam and the Soviet Union. Priest writes that Sartre greatly admired the communists of the Soviet Union and that, "in himself he felt ashamed and inadequate: ashamed of his bourgeois upbringing, ashamed of his privileged education and lifestyle, ashamed of his political and military effectiveness as an intellectual rather than a fighter" (8). Sartre became increasingly political throughout the remainder of his life: he sat on the International War Crimes Tribunal investigating the US participation in Vietnam, took to the streets in May 1968 protesting against capitalism, was arrested (and released) for distributing a Maoist paper, and finally worked to bring peace to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

While Sartre's philosophical and political involvements and preoccupations changed with the different stages of his life, his curiosity about the individual, the self and one's place in society were constant. His concerns about existence, about *being* in the world, were the point at which he approached politics, with which he became actively involved after the war. Sartre's own experiences chart a late-life coming of age. They demonstrate an appreciation of the imperative and impact of choice and responsibility as one moves beyond youth and develops oneself over time.

Sartre's change in philosophy from that of an individualistic to a Marxist existentialism denotes a shift in focus from the self alone to the self within the context of others. In Sartre's previous texts, one understood the individual to be in an altruistic relationship with others, wherein one must be mindful of his or her choices because they

have an impact on humanity. A closer examination of the individual and the "Other" in Sartre's shifted philosophy reveals a power-based relationship that, while still focused on choice, is also understood in terms of conflict. In a relationship with the other, one enacts freedom of choice by squelching the other's freedom. This is an important distinction because it foreshadows Beauvoir's concerns with the woman as other, and contradicts Sartre's previous contentions that we are all free. This perspective was born out of the Hegelian notion that one is defined in part by how one is defined by others; one relies on others and this dependence creates a relationship based, Sartre claims, on the power one has to define others.

Sartre differentiates between "being for itself" and "being for others": he positions an individual as subject and object, as living and seeing. One is simultaneously both: one is at once the subject who sees others and the object who is being seen. He introduces this concept through the notion of "a look":

> If we start with the first revelation of the Other as a *look*, we must recognize that we experience our inapprehensible being-for-others in the form of a *possession*. I am possessed by the Other; the Other's look fashions my body in its nakedness, causes it to be born, sculptures it, produces it as it *is*, sees it as I shall never see it. The Other holds the secret–the secret of what I am. (227)

This is an extension of the existentialist position that one is nothing before existence; it suggests that one makes oneself, but also, less optimistically, one is made–or defined–by others. Sartre is quick to point out that this does not exempt one from responsibility for oneself, that in fact one should see his or her own being as a "project" to take back from the other: "Thus to the extent that I am revealed to myself as responsible for my being, I

lay claim to this being which I am; that is, I wish to recover it, or, more exactly, I am the

project of the recovery of my being" (228). In a late-life context, the anxiety one feels in

a time of transition is arguably linked to the complex, conflicted relationship one has with

others. An exploration of Beauvoir's work will reveal her preoccupation with age; she

suggests that one is defined by others, and that this identity is a melancholy companion of

late life. In this way, the constant "project" of wrestling one's being from others or

simply being aware of the binding nature of relationships is particularly acute in late life.

The Gendering of Late Life in Simone de Beauvoir

Simone de Beauvoir 's philosophy was greatly informed by her experience as a

woman, and her existentialist and late-life concerns differ from those of her male

counterparts. Her *The Second Sex* (1949) situates women as Other within an existential

context. This groundbreaking feminist text has long been considered Beauvoir's

interpretation of Sartre's existentialism as developed in *Being and Nothingness*, with

woman as the central focus[v]. However, in *Is The Second Sex Beauvoir's Application of

Sartrean Existentialism?* (1998), Margaret Simons uses Beauvoir's diary to demonstrate

that she began developing her concerns with the self, the other and women before

meeting Sartre. Of concern to this paper is Beauvoir's view of woman as an established

(chosen) identity positioned within a patriarchal context that greatly influences her

freedom and choices. In a late-life context, the development of the individual is arguably

affected by variables including, as Beauvoir suggests, gender. While *The Second Sex*

provides an understanding of Beauvoir's existentialism in terms of the female individual,

it is her later *Coming of Age* (1970) that applies her analysis to late life. The existential

approach to the "Other" is important to this paper because while Sartre has contended throughout his philosophy that every individual is free, a close reading of Beauvoir's work reveals that women are not as free as men. The late-life experience of some individuals is arguably different from that of others based on circumstance, despite Sartre's contention that choice is available to all. Beauvoir points to the female experience to illustrate this.

Simons' claim that Beauvoir developed her own approach to the self and the other is founded on a close reading of the philosopher's diary entries written prior to her meeting Sartre. As early as 1927, two years before she met Sartre, Beauvoir was already interested in the individual's conflicting relationships with others. An entry of that year states, "I must rework my philosophical ideas...go deeper into the problems that have appealed to me... The theme is almost always this opposition of self and other that I felt at beginning to live" (July 10; p. 95, as qtd. in Simons). Simons interprets these ideas as preliminary notions of existentialism later credited to Sartre: "the discovery of Beauvoir's definition of these central themes of *Being and Nothingness* in 1927 supports the view that Beauvoir originated key elements of the philosophy later to become known as Sartrean existentialism"(2). A close reading of *The Second Sex* with this in mind helps to illustrate Beauvoir's specific interpretations of both the female and the late-life experience.

Beauvoir famously states in *The Second Sex* that "one is not born woman, but becomes one"(301), a view consistent with the existential claim that there is no essence to an individual, but that one becomes what one is. We have seen this in Sartre's existentialism, but the notion that gender is constructed is unique to Beauvoir. She also

defines a notion of "feminine destiny" by which the domestic and seductive expectations of a female confine her to becoming an object to the male subject: "Woman is shown to us as enticed by two modes of alienation. Evidently to play at being a man will be for her a source of frustration; but to play at being a woman is also a delusion: to be a woman would mean to be the object, the *Other*" (51). She maintains that women can struggle against these expectations and make choices that will allow them to transcend this preordained identity:

> I shall pose the problem of feminine destiny quite otherwise: I shall place woman in a world of values and give her behavior a dimension of liberty. I believe that she has the power to choose between the assertion of her transcendence and her alienation as object; she is not the plaything of contradictory drives; she devises solutions of diverse ranking in the ethical scale. (50)

She challenges women to reject feminine destiny. The text, however, is reflective as well as instructive: she charts the "otherness" of women throughout history, from youth to old age, focusing not only on women's role in society but on the relationship to one's own body. She claims that a woman is bound to her body "like an animal", that even the positively interpreted "feminine domain" of giving life has been expounded "in order to lock women therein" (65). Beauvoir positions this otherness in relation to what she terms a male "will to power": a determination beyond Sartre's subject/object relationship to others, but one that targets the female in specific. This "will", she claims, "thought best to keep woman in a state of dependence; their codes of law have been set up against her; and thus she has been definitely established as the Other" (139). In this approach to the

individual, women are predetermined to exist at a disadvantage, a notion that goes against the existentialist contention that we are all born free.

In many ways, Beauvoir is the existentialist whose texts relate most to late-life coming of age. Beauvoir examines the existential struggles of choice and self-reflection as profoundly experienced by the female individual during adolescence and late life. Calling the female identity a "vocation," she asserts that it contradicts a woman's individualism, her "status as a real human being". Discussing the adolescent female's coming of age, Beauvoir argues this is an abrupt, difficult transition that asks the female that she deny her developing recognition of freedom and choice in order to become a woman:

> Up to this time she has been an autonomous individual: now she must renounce her
> sovereignty. Not only is she torn, like her brothers, though more painfully, between
> the past and the future, but in addition a conflict breaks out between her original claim
> to be subject, active, free, and on the other hand, her erotic urges and the social
> pressure to accept herself as passive object. Her spontaneous tendency is to regard
> herself as the essential: how can she make up her mind to become the inessential?
> (336)

Beauvoir states that the young woman learns to live "outside" herself; she forfeits her own subjectivity to become the object in the male subject/object binary. In Taylor's terms, she relinquishes her "inwardness" or consciousness in order to live up to a predetermined identity "outside."

In a chapter titled, "From Maturity to Old Age," Beauvoir argues that the female experience in late life is "much more uneven, more discontinuous" than that of her male counterpart: "Each period in the life of woman is uniform and monotonous; but the

transitions from one stage to another are dangerously abrupt; they are manifested in crises – puberty, sexual initiation, menopause" (575). While men gradually transition, women are abruptly removed from or relieved of their binding female identities. According to Beauvoir, all of women's possible responses to old age involve self-reflection upon past relationships and choices, and either a relief from domestic and sensual expectations or an attempt to try to relive girlish roles. Thus the irony of late-life freedom is that it is just that – late:

> It is in the autumn and winter of life that woman is freed from her chains [...] Rid of her duties, she finds freedom at last. Unfortunately, in every woman's story recurs the fact we have verified throughout the history of woman: she finds this freedom at the very time when she can make no use of it. (584)

> While in "Situation and Character" Beauvoir reasserts that women are bound to their bodies and to time – losing usefulness in losing their "perishable" strengths – she also insists that, in denying the power of predetermined time-based roles, women can transcend and become developed individuals that affect humanity. Her call to action sounds much like Sartre's Marxist existentialism:

> Let the future be opened to her and she will no longer cling desperately to the past. When women are called upon for concrete action, when they recognize their interest in the designated goals, they are as bold and courageous as men. Many faults for which women are reproached – mediocrity, laziness, frivolity, servility – simply express the fact that their horizon is closed. (603)

For the female individual, choice and freedom exist, but they are harder won.

The claim that choice is a determining factor in becoming is often considered an application of Sartre's existential terms of responsibility. However, as Simons notes, in a diary entry of 1927 Beauvoir precipitates her philosophical "voluntarism" or individual responsibility later revealed in *The Second Sex*. She writes in her diary, "for me, a choice is never made, it is always being made; it's repeated each time that I'm conscious of it [...] The horror of the definitive choice is that it engages not only the self of today, but that of tomorrow" (35-6, as qtd. in Simons, 4). Taylor discusses the "becoming self" in terms of differing identities: the young self may be a different identity than the older self, the older self has a depth of past selves with which to define the "whole self":

> It is not only that I need time and many incidents to sort out what is relatively fixed and stable in my character, temperament, and desires from what is variable and changing, though that is true. It is also that as a being who grows and becomes I can only know myself through the history of my maturations and regressions, overcomings and defeats. My self-understanding necessarily has temporal depth and incorporates narrative. (50)

Beauvoir addresses this temporality of self in her insistence that a concrete identity or "definitive choice" is too inflexible and implicates the "self of tomorrow" in its definition. Taylor contends, however, that despite the flexibility of change, we rely on the present self to define the future self in not only our plans for our own future, but for those of others and society:

> On the basis of what I am [...] I project my future. [...] Here too we note that a future project will often go beyond my death. I plan the future for my family, my country, my cause. But there is a different sense in which I am responsible for myself [...] How

could I justify in considering myself in my sixties, say, as another person for this

purpose? And how would *his* life get its meaning? (51)

According to Taylor, we are faithful to our own self, even as it changes. Beauvoir's

gendered perspective suggests, however, that there are times when it is necessary to deny

the preordained self, to make a radical about-face from the feminine "vocation".

Beauvoir states in the introduction to *The Coming of Age* (1970), "I mean to break the

conspiracy of silence" (2), referring to the denial of society to accept old age as a state of

being and as a group. In this text, Beauvoir exposes the late-life experience from a social,

biological and political perspective, establishing late-life experience as a prominent

existential concern.

According to Beauvoir, the past is a preoccupation of age: "as the years go by, our

future shortens, while our past grows heavier" (361). What Sartre calls the burden of

freedom in terms of choice and responsibility is magnified, Beauvoir implies, by a late-

life focus on the unalterable choices of the past. Addressing recollection in existential

terms, she claims that one must turn one's past into a project in order to bring it back, to

remember it. Far from a comfort, however, Beauvoir contends that reflection does not

necessarily return one to a peace of the past: "The past moves us for the very reason that

it is past; but this too is why it so often disappoints us – we lived it in the present, a

present rich in the future towards which it was hurrying; and all that is left is a skeleton"

(366). Beauvoir regards the present for the late-life individual as primarily a melancholy

collection of past expectations. As she explains, because others define the individual, in

late life one sees oneself as one's past and as others do. Of Hans Christian Anderson's

late-life return and celebration at the place of his upbringing, Beauvoir writes, "Andersen

wept when his native town greeted him with cheers: 'How happy my parents would have been,' he said. For them, his fame would have been a reality; he would have seen it reflected in their eyes" (368). The implication is that in the end, after a life of trying to wrestle one's individuality from the self defined by others, one continues to struggle against the other – sometimes leaning heavily on how one has been seen. Hazel Rowley writes of her interview with Beauvoir in the philosopher's later years, "She answered all my questions as if by rote, without the slightest reflection or hesitation. By the time she ushered me out the door, I could see, and it saddened me, that she herself could not disentangle the reality of her life from the myth" (xiii). Beauvoir's own late-life experience demonstrated her philosophical and feminist concerns.

The Second Sex challenged the feminine world and demonstrated the trap in which women were ensnared despite the existential tenets of personal freedom and choice. Her own life was a direct enactment of this struggle and shows evidence of a personal application of her philosophy. Rowley's passage on the culture of women during Beauvoir's life reveals the challenge for them of adopting an existential doctrine:

Beauvoir came from a world in which women were extraordinarily sheltered and constricted. [...] [M]en and women inhabited sharply divided worlds. Women could not vote. France's best educational institutions were for men only. Women were expected to go to church; men could be atheists. [...] Women remained virgins until marriage; men did not. Unmarried women were pitied. And even if a young woman was beautiful and cultivated, the only way she could aspire to a socially desirable marriage was by means of a substantial dowry. (17)

This summary suggests the narrow-mindedness of Sartre's claim that there is no God and that one can make choices even in dire circumstances. Sartre's assumption of agency allows no room for gender, race, poverty, torture and war, all of which Sartre and Beauvoir eventually explored in a late-life move towards politics. As Rowley observes,

> [...] nothing compelled them to see things otherwise. They were young, in good health, with a lot of free time and enough money to do what they wanted. As philosophers, they were convinced that they appraised the world with a detached, objective gaze. [...] Sartre and Beauvoir maintained their belief in an almost absolute individual freedom. It took the cataclysm of the Second World War [...] to make them discover history. (41)

Even from the privileged position of one's healthy youth, the ability to become an intellectual, to cultivate ideas, to explore one's sexuality and deny religion was a shocking course for a woman to take. Beauvoir was the youngest person and one of the earliest women to pass the *aggregation*, a grueling exam at L'École Normale, where she and Sartre became friends (and were the top two students). Beauvoir's family was not wealthy enough to offer a dowry for their daughters, and she has claimed that this might have aided her along her atypical path, deciding early on to become a teacher because she knew she would have to work rather than depend on a husband.

Sartre encouraged Beauvoir's liberal and intellectual ambitions; they read and edited one another's books; they confided in one another on every subject from love to philosophy to politics. However, unlike Sartre, who was rigid in his insistence on personal freedom and choice, Beauvoir appeared to recognize the challenge of a freedom that is contingent on cultural or familial ostracization. As she and Sartre embarked on

their nontraditional relationship, Beauvoir acutely felt the sacrifice: she was still appalled by promiscuity and knew that in committing to a different path her family would be mortified. Rowley observes,

> Did Beauvoir point out that they were not quite "two of a kind," that the stakes were
>
> not even, that society regarded women in a completely different light from men?
>
> Probably not at the time, though both of them knew it. Twenty years later, in *The*
>
> *Second Sex*, she would make the point that women were not the "other sex," but the
>
> "second sex." They were not seen as equal; they were seen as inferior. (28)

Beauvoir articulated that the female, late-life experience was unique, even within an existential context, meaning despite the philosophical contention that there is no essential existence. She demonstrated in her own life, via her relationship with Sartre, the development of the female self as Other: an anxious position that became more acute with late life. As a woman, she was arguably more sensitive to both the subjectivity of existentialism and also the anxieties that aging and late life can cause.

A Summary of the Existential Self in Relation to Late Life

Kierkegaard, Sartre and Beauvoir offered unique contributions to the development of the existential philosophy and also to a late-life analysis. Through both their changing philosophies and their lives, they demonstrated that an individual continues to develop throughout life and that choices and relationships to others play integral roles in the despair that can result in becoming a developed self.

Kierkegaard introduced the divisive nature of choosing between a life for oneself and a life for others, as portrayed through *Either/Or*. Judge William's urge for an

understanding of the impact of choice and the imperative of moving towards a life that engages with the greater community (and at last, with God), builds a basis for the existential insistence on responsibility. What becomes a strong call for action when developed by Sartre begins as a demand that is not political but strongly self-reflective: the individual must examine the self and make strides to become an individual that exists for more than his or her own gains.

The by-product of this move from the esthetic to the ethical is the despair that first Kierkegaard, then Sartre and in many ways most fervently Beauvoir, recognize as strongly connected to personal reflection and change. Kierkegaard is the first to encourage us not to shrug off the anxiety produced by making choices that affect others: the attraction/repulsion relationship he pinpoints in his writings are echoed in both existential and late-life texts after him. Gullette's observation that we approach age (and development) with fear and dread – that we will either succeed or fail in the tasks or choices awaiting us – has a direct relationship to Kierkegaard's articulation of the uncomfortable anxiety of an ethical life.

While Kierkegaard and Sartre both recognize anxiety as associated with choice, Kierkegaard's Christianity is a cornerstone to his philosophy, while Sartre is an atheist. The very basis for anxiety from Sartre's perspective is the lack of a higher power: if there is no God, one's aloneness positions one in the sole role of responsibility. The individual must create the self: there is no essence on which to rely. In this self-creation, Sartre contends, one is also creating others, both individuals and community. Sartre's interest shifted from the development of the individual to that of the greater community, but he was consistent in his main existential tenet that one is responsible for the choices one

makes, and that this responsibility creates despair. As Sartre the man became more politically engaged, his concern for one's relationship with others became more of a priority and this relates directly the late-life concerns as articulated by contemporary aging theorists like Moen and Wethington. We define ourselves by others, Sartre claims, and in late life, the individual tends to feel tremendously responsible and indeed defined by the other individuals and the community itself.

The "secret of what I am", was stated by Sartre to be in the hands of others, and is given a new treatment in the philosophy of Beauvoir, who articulated the key difference of gender in this social equation. Beauvoir claimed that while a woman begins, like a man, to have no essence and to be free, this is abruptly wrestled away as she moves from adolescence to adulthood, a final humiliation awaiting her as she ages into late life. The first of the three philosophers to specifically articulate the experience of late life, Beauvoir is acutely aware of life transitions (childhood, youth, late life) as particularly painful for women. Women are defined even more by others than their male counterparts, and Beauvoir contends that the experience of late life positions women at the end of a pre-determined "vocation", where the inevitable transitions and choices are "dangerously abrupt" (575).

The period of late life as a second coming of age or Bildungsroman begins in the philosophy of Beauvoir. Her personal life, her philosophy, and, as a close reading will discover, her fiction articulately and emotionally tease out the relationship between existentialism and late life. Beauvoir's own female experience made her arguably sensitive to both the subjectivity of existentialism and the anxieties of aging and late life, and positioned her perfectly to articulate "the conspiracy of silence" surrounding age (2).

Existential philosophers generally wrote both theory and fiction, but that of Beauvoir is the most emotionally charged, the most self-aware, and arguably the predecessor of the contemporary late-life Bildungsromane that have become the voice of an aging population.

Notes

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[1] For more in-depth psychological analysis on the impact of transitions in midlife, see

N.L Dohrenwend and B.R. Dohrenwend, 1981; J.A. Clausen, 1990, 1993; Wethington et

al., 1997.

[2] See Wethington et al., (1997) for evidence of a qualitative study of adults aged 25-70

conducted in 1992 to aid in their definition of turning points.

[3] Among other things, Beauvoir had signed an affidavit affirming that she was not

Jewish.

[4] See Martin Heidegger for more on phenomenological existentialism.

[5] For example, Diane Raymond's text (1991) *Existentialism and the Philosophical*

Tradition.

Chapter 2:

Gendering Self-Development: The Existential Fiction of Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre
and Simone de Beauvoir

In *Aged by Culture* (2004), Margaret Gullette calls Beauvoir "the godmother of age

studies"(101), referring to the relatively neglected school of theory that arguably began in

Beauvoir's philosophy and fiction. Age studies, which has since been integrated with

other cultural studies in a recognition that age is not fixed to one culture or gender, deals

in the ideas and ideologies of aging, typically represented as a kind of decline. As

Gullette remarks, "The mere term 'age theory' slightly disrupts our mental habits by

implying that we should become wary about every age reference" (102). Aging is at the

centre of the dialogue and popular culture concerning our identities and our relationships

with others. To offer an example, the term "coming of age" has been understood to

describe narratives that present young peoples' identities as being determined through

one or many marked experiences by which they are forever changed. What Beauvoir and

other existentialists demonstrated, however, is that identity change is not limited to one

age: self-development can take place over a lifetime. The key transitions in one's being

might actually take place later in life, and this coming of age should be neither ignored

nor considered an end, but recognized as a stage in the development of the self.

Camus, Sartre and Beauvoir all turned to fiction to articulate their philosophies around

issues of self-development. Concerns regarding one's existence, relationships with others,

anxieties and actions found their way into all three authors' fiction. Arguably, the

movement into late-life coming of age began with the existentialists, whose philosophy

and literature revised the formulaic Bildungsromane that came earlier. Notably, a close

reading of existential late-life coming of age narratives demonstrates a particularly

crucial role for gender politics in both philosophy and fiction. More specifically, women

in existential fiction contradict some of the tenets of the philosophy and demonstrate the

challenges evident in the cultivation or alteration of identity. In this chapter, I outline the

tradition of coming of age in literature within the Bildungrsoman genre. Comparing this

tradition with late-life self-development as presented in the fiction of Camus and Sartre,

but chiefly Beauvoir, I argue that the female experience as described in late-life

existential fiction is one that not only differs from the male experience but that offers

specific challenges both to the existential expectations of self-identity and the tradition of

the Bildungsroman as a self-development genre.

The Bildungsroman: The Tradition of the German Development Novel

As Franco Moretti notes in *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European*

Culture (2000), the longstanding heroes of classical fiction were all men, grown adults.

He cites Achilles, Hector and Ulysses as examples. The major shift towards youthful

protagonists took place with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Apprenticeship of*

Wilhelm Meister (1795-96): "Wilhelm Meister, followed by Elizabeth Bennet and Julien

Sorel, Rastignac and Frédéric Moreau [...]. Youth is both a necessary and sufficient

definition of these heroes" (4). The character Wilhelm Meister represents not only a

change in style, but also in perspective; prior to his appearance, the young person as a

protagonist becoming a man – the education of a young hero – was rarely represented in

fiction. Moretti argues that this shift occurred not only in literature, but also in society. It

reflected a new age of young people moving from the country to the city, rejecting the

lives of their parents to try to succeed on their own. Furthermore, he claims that society was searching to add meaning to modernity itself. A youth culture changed the modern experience to one that offered new identities for individuals that differed from the established norm. For Moretti, the young protagonist represented a modernist yearning for the future:

> [Y]outh is 'chosen' as the new epoch's 'specific material sign', and it is chosen over the multitude of other possible signs, because of its ability to *accentuate* modernity's dynamism and instability. Youth is, so to speak, modernity's 'essence', the sign of a world that seeks its meaning in the future rather than in the past.(5)

The young person acts as a representative, therefore, of the age that prizes the new and different, refusing to be mired in the past. What has since become of coming of age formula began as a means to separate the old from the new, children from men.

The formulaic tradition of the Bildungsroman rests upon the education and development of the protagonist. The character, through either a single event or a series of experiences, awakes from a period of inactivity, confusion or indulgence to becomes his "true" self, ready to take on adulthood. This "pre-change" persona is key to the genre, marking the shift from internal struggle to responsible growth. Typically, the hero becomes aware of his or her eventual subjectivity. Cue the crisis that marks a turning point for the protagonist; the reader understands that the character is better for the change, has grown into a man. The term "coming of age" suggests such an arrival. The growth and development of the protagonist reflects the modernist reader, claims Russell Berman in "Modernism and the Bildungsroman":

The implied dialectic between thematic representation (the story of the hero's growth)

and aesthetic reception (the reader's experience) stages fundamental assumptions

of a German bourgeois credo in which personal stages of subjectivity, social

integration and aesthetic education [...] constantly reinforce each other. (77-78)

Berman goes on to note that, "the novel of *Bildung* as education is therefore an

exploration of how the hero – and perhaps the reader – might learn to think

independently" (78). Charting the dates of Bildungsromane is, therefore, not as pertinent

as examining the cultures from which they emerge:

One might ask if the tensions between education and democracy, culture and country,

might be due less to the allegedly dated aspirations of *Bildung* than to the character of

modern societies themselves, in which individuals are restricted by the "iron cage" of

professionalism and pressures towards one-dimensionality and conformism. The

greater the attraction of mass cultural identities, the more difficult it becomes to speak

of individual development. (91)

Where does this situate the existential fiction of Camus, Sartre and Beauvoir? Written

during times of social upheaval in France, some of their work is clearly political as well

as philosophical. The greatest influence on their narratives as they concern my study are

life-long development (or aging) and, particularly for Beauvoir, gender as it affects

growth and identity.

Existential Coming of Age and the Move Beyond Fixed Identity

One of existentialism's main contentions is that there is no core essence to an

individual, but that the individual is continually created and changing. Recent scholars

writing about life stories as a genre reflect this tenet of continual self-development. Peter Raggatt, for example, explores the self within narrative as reflective of the culture of readers for whom re-defining the self has become a genuine preoccupation: "the life story is really more like a *conversation of narrators* [... We] must pay close attention to the *synchronic*, and not just the diachronic, in our efforts to understand the emergence of a narrative identity" (16). In other words, the *specific* historical context is as important as the general. Raggatt uses quotations from authors such as Joyce Carol Oates and Philip Roth to illustrate his contention that "the assumption of a core self underlying all this might be misleading," echoing the poststructuralist tenet that the idea of an essential identity is problematic.

What Raggatt's investigation adds to the poststructuralist position is the suggestion that the range of narrative selves is a reflection of our own self-development. Through a Bakhtinian paradigm, he declares that the self is continually made and remade. Mikhail Bakhtin developed the notion of different voices that were manifested through both introspection and dialogue with others. Bakhtin found in Dostoevsky's novels "a kind of mirror on the multiplicity in our psychological lives" (18). Raggatt calls this construction of the self in relation to others "positioning," citing the earlier use of the term within social and discursive psychological texts on discourse. He states, "many theorists of the self would concur that narratives of self are *positioned* in a matrix of social and moral relationships" (19).

While not new, this notion of the narrative as a social reflection sheds light on the established existentialist perspectives on the self. Sartre stated that there is no essence to humanity, but the role of others in an individual's personal development is a key tenet of

his existentialism. The individual is defined by the Other, entwined in a struggling relationship wherein the self continually tries to regain power from the Other (and thus, make progress in self-development). Raggatt similarly addresses the formation of the self as an act of both personal and social positioning:

> Following Bakhtin, it is proposed that identity develops initially in a process of dialogue between the individual and the host culture. The individual appropriates meaning from the culture in the form of important attachments, to people, events, valued objects, environments, and even orientations to our bodies (i.e., an *embodied* identity). Over time this dialogue becomes increasingly reflexive as the individual interacts with the world and appropriates new attachments, new stories and new voices. (22)

The individual, therefore, is immensely influenced by his or her environment, using varied aspects to define the self, allowing the self to adjust as flexibly as the surrounding culture. The culture may not yet be prepared, however, to support the impact of age on the individual, as Gullette explores.

Gullette distinguishes between what she calls "decline" stories of midlife (that is, those that see aging as the beginning of the end) and those that offer optimism, a trademark she claims of fiction that focuses on the "middle years." She contends, however, that, as a culture, we are still not committed to viewing aging with hope:

> "We" are by no means yet sure that we generally approve of midlife progress narrative as a concept. The concept requires readers willing to identify with adult protagonists who are not ultimately daunted by their aging bodies, their inner dragons, their responsibility for creating their own lives, or the worst blows dealt by fate. (xx)

Decline narratives, she claims, position characters in a temporal limbo, being unable to decide how to proceed or allowing life to take them along. A hopeful future eludes these characters, and their self-development may be stunted as a result. As an exploration of the work of Camus, Sartre and Beauvoir reveals, gender distinctions prove a constant element around which the philosophical inertia of the midlife Bildungsroman is wound.

Camus and *The Stranger* as Self-Development

Albert Camus never considered himself an existentialist, and he and Sartre went to lengths to insist on the differences in their philosophical ideals. Nevertheless, his work raises many of the same key issues of philosophic inquiry found in the fiction of other existentialists. With regard to gender specifically, his fiction demonstrates a sustained interest in essentializing the masculinity of the Bildungsroman hero even as the subgenre shifted into the realm of the existential.

Camus's novel *The Stranger* (*L'Etranger*) (1942) features a protagonist, Meursault, whose defining trait is his indifference in the face of a string of episodes that demand emotional reactions. The book begins, "Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don't know. I got a telegram from the home: 'Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Faithfully yours.' That doesn't mean anything. Maybe it was yesterday" (3). The same lack of affect is apparent when the hero attends the funeral, where the most palpable feeling described to the reader is that of the unbearable heat. In fact, throughout the novel, descriptions of heat and environment are far more compelling than those of Meursault's feelings. His sadness, if he feels any, is not mentioned. Even Meursault's descriptions of his discovery of his impending execution are given without any feeling.

While imbedded in social roles and norms (what Raggatt would call "attachments"), Meursault is emotionally removed and on the fringe. And yet when, at his trial for murder, the prosecuting judge describes Meursault as antisocial, the hero responds, "I wanted to assure him that I was just like everyone else, exactly like everyone else" (65). And indeed, he performs a rigid masculine identity effectively. He has a clerical job that he appears to do well, has both friends and a lover, and is on good terms with his neighbours.

The main character similarly responds to key transitional occurrences with a deliberate, almost robotic nature. He experiences both the death of his mother and the murder of an unknown "Arab" at his own hand, for example, with detachment. From an existential perspective, he is in denial of his responsibility and his obligation to make choices.

When Meursault finally finds himself before a court, it is not whether or not he killed the man that is at the centre of the dialogue, but why. His emotional disinterest is shocking to the outsiders, and indicates an individual who is existentially unwilling to acknowledge the violence he has chosen. According to Sartre, the style of *The Stranger* results in the novel depicting the philosophy of the absurd: For Camus, "the Absurd springs from the relation of man to the world, of his legitimate aspirations to the vanity and futility of human wishes. The conclusions of which he draws from it are those of classical pessimism" (qtd. in Dunwoodie, xix). Sartre considers Camus to be lacking the hope and action that is integral to existentialism.

The pessimism of *The Stranger* is heightened by the style. As Peter Dunwoodie notes, for example, the most salient aspects of Camus's novel are its first-person narrator and its use of the perfect tense:

Prominent among such expectations, when faced with a first-person narrative, is the traditional pact between narrator and reader, [...] the confidence not only that the text being read allows one to follow inner feelings and reactions but that the account itself is sincere." (xxii)

But because Meursault does not reveal any inner feelings, the reader is caught off guard by a character that is experiencing events of transition and action and yet appears unaffected. At one point, Meursault's lawyer inquires as to whether he feels any grief for his mother, to which the hero responds that he "rather lost the habit of noting my feelings, and hardly knew what to answer. I could truthfully say I'd been quite fond of Mother – but really that didn't mean much" (80). Meursault's strange reaction is evidence of his crisis of the self, even seemingly instinctual emotions are suspect or completely absent. In the face of a life-changing transition, one that will forever alter the cultural attachments that have hitherto defined his life, Meursault remains impassive. The court's reaction to his seeming indifference to his mother's death is noted more than once as being a larger issue than his trial for murder. Meursault simply will not put on a face of remorse or accountability. This peculiarity on his part, in fact, points to the possibility that he is not acting entirely in indifference. Meursault's action, in other words, is his inaction: his indifference is his passive aggressive choice, from an existential point of view. It is also an embodiment of masculinity contorted into self-directed aggression. Meursault is acting as an exaggerated male in his extreme emotional stoicism and

withdrawal. More so, however, his denial of emotional response is so stark a contrast to his circumstance that it becomes apparent that he is making a choice to be unmoved. The response from others is visceral if not violent, wherein the characters in the courtroom grow continually aggressive upon learning of the depth of Meursault's indifference. In this way he has shifted from being defined by others around him to greatly influencing others, controlling their response in his inaction.

Camus's text invokes a quintessential masculinity. The style is terse and lacks anxiety. Meursault has a lover, but is basically a single man with little demonstrated investment in his family and environment. David Sherman views Meursault as an exceedingly irresponsible character of fiction: "Meursault negates nothing less than his selfhood. His project, naturally unarticulated, is to have no project" (66). Sherman notes, however, the change in Meursault's self-reflection as the novel draws to a close. During his trial and his time in a cell, Meursault begins to describe his feelings in a way that the reader has not experienced previously in the novel: "As the trial progresses, Meursault becomes increasingly reflective, and, correspondingly, increasingly Self-aware" (75). He begins to hope for a "loophole," an appeal that will spare him execution. He even notes that the interrogation and, importantly, how he is viewed by his interrogators makes him want to "burst into tears" (123). This acknowledgement of how one's identity is constructed by others and the profound effect that it has on Meursault suggests that he is finally aware that he is responsible for his own self-development. Sherman contends, conversely, that Meursault acts out of irresponsibility throughout the novel. A close reading of the conclusion of *The Stranger*, however, reveals a character that is not only self-reflective

and becoming aware of responsibility, but also one for whom age and gender is transformative.

A chaplain is sent to see Meursault and encourage him to reflect on his circumstance. The protagonist flies into a rage and describes both the absurdity of life as he sees it, and his ownership over choice. "I had been right," he declares, "I was always right. I had lived my life one way and I could just as well have lived it another" (115). It is at this moment in the plot that the reader sees Meursault's identity take shape and it does so through a combination of the female and the emotional.

At this point in the novel, the chaplain leaves and the hero finally reflects on his existence with particular attention to his mother, who has symbolized his emotional void and personal irresponsibility up until this point:

> I felt as if I understood why at the end of her life she had taken a "fiancé," why she had played at beginning again. Even there, in that home where lives were fading out, evening was a kind of wistful respite. So close to death, Maman must have felt free then and ready to live it all again. Nobody, nobody had the right to cry over her. And I felt ready to live it all again too. (116)

The result is an outpouring of feeling that indicates a sensitivity to the gendered experience. This key transition exposes the occasion as one that is highly emotional and self-reflective. Indeed, it is Meursault's encounter with an emotionalism coded as feminine that finally moves him into a process of self-development and self education. The introduction of a woman as a crucial player in the protagonist's transition demonstrates a shift from a categorically masculine experience to one that recognizes the female and aging experience in development. Meursault's statement that nobody has the

right to cry over his mother indicates that she had such a strong degree of ownership over her life and her choices that to mourn her would be to rob her of the role she played in her own identity, in her own freedom. She was not scared of her freedom, responsibility and choice, notions that Meursault just now understands at the end of his own life.

The Issue of Freedom in Sartre's "Intimacy" and "The Room"

Some of Sartre's stories included in his collection of short fiction *The Wall* (1939), such as "The Room" and "Intimacy," are existentialist cautionary tales likened to Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*. They are also demonstrative of Sartre's later-developed theories on bad faith: the refusal or denial of action in the face of freedom-based choice. In the previous chapter, I had noted that Sartre's own life and philosophy shifted from a pre-war, apolitical stance to a position characterized by an interest in others and political activism. *The Wall* is from the earlier period but a close consideration of the work suggests that Sartre was not entirely ontological (Barnes 23) in his tenets on individual freedom. A closer look at Sartre's work on bad faith, and a subsequent exploration of his texts in terms of feminism will allow for further understanding. Sartre argued that all people are ultimately free to make their own choices; a consideration of his depiction of gendered narratives, however, suggests a far from homogenous notion of potential agency for individuals and shows that even within Sartre's texts, the impact of gender cannot be overlooked.

Sartre wrote extensively on bad faith in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), the text in which a lack of human essence, in addition to an insistence on freedom, was most famously explored. Arguing that we live a meaningless existence in which we were born

with no predetermined nature, Sartre contends that we are struck with dread and anxiety because we are overwhelmed by the freedom to determine our identities. "Bad faith" is a denial of this call for action and self-definition. It is the non-choice in which, Sartre suggests, we revert to socially determined roles and do just what is expected of us by others. It is pretension and a lie to oneself, Sartre suggests, not to continually develop and choose to act out of responsibility. He argues that "attitudes of negation toward the self permit us to raise a new question: What are we to say is the being of man who has the possibility of denying himself? (206). In other words, one cannot develop if one refuses to participate in one's own identity, but simply allows life to happen without taking action.

While the male protagonists in most of Sartre's stories are presented as alone, the female protagonists of "The Room" and "Intimacy" are both in relationships that are at the centre of their personal development. As with the masculinity of the hero in Camus's *The Stranger*, the characters' genders in these stories are reflected in not only their social roles but also in Sartre's approach to their narratives. While the male protagonist can more easily be a single character, unencumbered by the crises awaiting his female counterpart, the female characters are presented as already caught in the complications of their gender models. Their relationships are problematic and yet they are unable to extricate themselves. Sartre's women are tied to their cultural "attachments," to their roles in society as mothers and wives, and their actions and choices are compounded by the impact of aging. As I wish to demonstrate, Sartre's decision to use female characters in his fiction was not coincidental, and he was more aware of the female experience than he has been given credit for to date.

Lulu, the heroine of "Intimacy," wants to leave her husband, Henri, for her lover but Henri ultimately convinces her to stay. Or, in Sartre's words, "she did not shake him off," language implying less a decision to stay than an inability to leave. This lack of action does not simply signify bad faith in Sartre's terms, but does so using the clearly identified role of the female. If Lulu were to choose freedom, it would require making the difficult choice of abandoning her marriage and her socially determined identity.

Hazel Barnes, Sartre's translator for much of his work, has said that she cannot subscribe to the widely contended view that his writing, particularly his early material, is sexist and excludes the female experience (23). Nor could she accept

> the view that it is based on the notion of a purely male consciousness, presented as an all but disembodied, hostile stare. Nor the charge that Sartre's concept of human freedom is so abstract as to be virtually unrelated to the real world. Nor even the conclusion that, while Beauvoir managed to bend Sartre's ontology to suit her own purpose, the only way to find Sartre's philosophy at all useful for feminism today is to concentrate on his later work and regard *Being and Nothingness* as preenlighted Sartre. (23)

Instead, Barnes insists that Sartre frequently uses women in his work and that he is not chauvinistic in his use of women as examples of the paradox of freedom. Barnes could have gone even further had she focused on his literary works as much as his philosophy. It is in his fiction more than anywhere else that Sartre recognizes the frustration of the female experience and adapts it as a commentary on the difficult reality of freedom.

According to Barnes, we must acknowledge that Sartre "has at least peopled his world with women, introduced them to his discussion; the 'men only' setting of the fused group

appears to be more the exception than the rule" (25). Choosing examples from Sartre's

philosophical work on freedom and bad faith, Barnes notes that he "not only illustrates a

general point with a feminine example, but considers how she is affected *as a woman*, not

just as a human being"(26), demonstrating that Sartre was indeed aware of a gendered

climate and the complications that that distinction entails.

Like Camus, Sartre's male characters demonstrate an emotional starkness that his

female characters do not. In *Nausea*, to offer one example, Sartre's protagonist Roquentin

is unencumbered by relationships and eventually achieves a singular freedom unavailable

to the women. As Edith Kern points out, "It is only through a conscious preference for

loneliness that Roquentin becomes a witness to existence; that is, less and less blinded by

prevailing prejudices and clichés. In *Nausea*, Roquentin is not just incidentally and

regrettably but essentially alone" (101). The male character, reflected in the unemotional

narrative, chooses to be alone, a choice evidently not available in the female experience.

Sartre claimed in his autobiography *Words* (1964) that Roquentin was an articulation

of himself: "I used him to show, without complacency, the texture of my life" (251).

Roquentin was to Sartre what Raggatt calls "a conversation of narrators" – he was written

to illustrate Sartre's own lived experience. Elsewhere in *Words*, Sartre observes that "As

author, the hero was still myself; I projected my epic dreams upon him" (91). In a similar

way, he worked so intimately with Beauvoir and other women that he was no stranger to

the selves created for women by others. He arguably understood the implications of the

female experience and the influences on life choices for women. Thus the heroines of

Sartre's fiction often involve many different points of view, lending credibility to the

multiple selves influencing a narrative, as well as the multiple influences on a developing self.

Sartre's story "The Room" features a female character caught in a relationship in crisis and thus at a point of potential transition and change. The story opens on an aging heterosexual couple, focusing on the woman Mme. Darbédat. She is bound to the house with an unknown illness, sinking deep into memory and self-reflection. Her age seems more apparent than that of her energetic and preoccupied husband, whose vitality she reproaches (23). The story centers on a visit M. Darbédat takes to the home of his daughter and son-in-law. The older parents have been discussing the issue of their daughter Eve's marriage to Pierre, who has been overcome by madness. Despite his being the most confident character, he is not the one with whom we sympathize. While Mme. Darbédat is weak and reflective in her closed room and lonesome experience, and Eve is a kind of prisoner to her marriage in the room that Pierre occupies, it is M. Darbédat who is shown to be unreasonable, and so the more complicated women are pitted against a close-minded man.

Sartre portrays his female characters as emotional and in transitional points in their lives: one is painfully aware of the passing of time, the other experiencing the oppression of a future kept in the company of madness. For the women, the social expectations invested in their gender deepens the difficulty of making any sort of personal choice. M. Darbédat, meanwhile, with his unreflective insistence, represents the unyielding society in which the women live. Eve resents his superficial approach to her predicament. When her father leaves, she watches him from the window and sees his weakness, his vanity, and his self-assured inflexibility. M. Darbédat is made to look like a vain fool whereas

the female characters, polarized by age and experience, are humanized. Eve makes the choice to stay with Pierre, who she knows will continue his decline into deeper madness. She even tries at one point to mimic his madness to see if she can feel as he does, but is almost saddened that she cannot relate. She acknowledges that eventually she will have to leave but, for the time being, she chooses not to change and thus she defaults on choice, acts in bad faith. Such scenes of passivity in a narrative hinging on questions of choice reflect Sartre's sensitivity to the particular difficulty women experience in making such life-changing decisions – decisions characterized by the Bildungroman itself as necessary for an individual's full maturation.

What Sartre does offer in his fiction is the possibility of change and self-definition, even if in the present moment the characters appear to be stunted. All of the characters in "The Room," "Intimacy," and elsewhere in his work appear to see the potential of a self that they will shape by wrestling their current identity from its situation. Barnes contends that the most interesting feminist interpretations of socially determined identities are from feminists who suggest that there comes a time when a woman can move beyond her social role and *become* herself:

If we follow Sartre in holding that the ego (or self) is the product of a basic consciousness and not its originator [ie., there is no essence], then perhaps we can better understand how a woman, out of what the world offers her, makes herself, as a woman and as a person, and how she is able to assume a new point of view on the self she has made and to modify it. [...] Sartre offers an ontology to justify that hope. (40)

Just such a self-fashioning process occurs in "The Room." The story ends with Eve imagining the decline of her husband into a vegetative state: "One day his features would

grow confused, his jaw would hang loose, he would half open his weeping eyes. Eve bent over Pierre's hand and pressed her lips against it: *I'll kill you before that*" (40). These final lines predict change, something that Sartre previously maintained is the instinctual effort of reclaiming oneself from the Other. Eventually there will be choice and action as a result of the character's desire for identity.

As "The Room" makes apparent, Sartre is keenly aware of the female in society, and his stories reflect his sensitivity to the social limits unique to women's existential experience. He does not, however, demonstrate equal awareness of the impact of age as a gendered experience, and his women do not experience aging with the raw emotion that we will see in the work of Beauvoir, for whom the female experience was agonizing and inextricably tied to time.

Self-Development, Temporality, and Embodiment in Simone de Beauvoir:
She Came to Stay

As discussed in the introduction, it has often been assumed that Beauvoir's fiction and philosophy address Sartre's own ideas, but some scholars are uncovering evidence that points to certain existential arguments originating in the work of Beauvoir either before or simultaneously as those of Sartre. Certain ideas addressed in *She Came to Stay* are, in fact, some of the earliest records of particular existential notions, specifically around consciousness and the Other. Edward Fullbrook argues that, while both texts were published in 1943, Sartre had already read at least one draft of *She Came to Stay* before beginning *Being and Nothingness*, a text heralded for introducing ideas of identity, existence and otherness to philosophical discourse. According to Fullbrook, both share an

interest in appearances, time, embodiment and one's relationship with the Other (51), but

Beauvoir was first to address these in her novel. She identifies three "attitudes" regarding

the Other:

> A person may seek to experience herself as the Other's object; a person may seek to
>
> guard their subjectivity by making the Other their object; or a person may seek a
>
> reciprocity with the Other, whereby each treats the Other as both subject and object, as
>
> equal freedoms and sources of value. Of these three, [...] *Being and Nothingness*
>
> omits reciprocity, but devotes its third chapter on intersubjectivity to analyzing the
>
> other two. (52)

This quotation serves to illustrate how Beauvoir's fiction predates in a creative form the

philosophical ideas that were later explained in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. The

notion of a relationship between an individual and the Other in terms of love, masochism,

desire and sadism among other themes is played out through Beauvoir's characters,

demonstrating Raggatt's suggestion of multiple selves through narrative.

Françoise, the main character in *She Came to Stay*, ultimately does "protect" her

subjectivity, to use Fullbrook's term, in her violent casting out of her younger counterpart

at the end of the text. What is unique to Beauvoir, however, is not only that her discourse

on Otherness is interpreted through fiction, but also that the interpretation is in the form

of a gendered experience. One might argue, moreover, that the indifference to this

experience in Sartre's approach to choice and freedom was also reflected in the

philosophical community in general, as suggested by the fact that Sartre was privileged

over Beauvoir without due consideration. As Fullbrook states, "Recognition of

philosophical achievement was apportioned between the two not on the basis of a

determination of whom contributed what, but instead, like so many things, on the basis of gender" (51).

In *She Came to Stay*, Beauvoir deals with "the Other woman" or, more precisely, with the Other in an existential sense. The book is largely considered autobiographical given the similarities between the three characters and Beauvoir, Sartre and Olga Kosakievicz, to whom Beauvoir dedicated the novel. Superficially, the story is one of a middle-aged woman driven to anxiety and ultimately to murder a young intruder on her romantic life to rid her life of the Other. Upon deeper examination, however, we can see that Beauvoir has written Françoise as a woman developing her self over time. The development of an identity necessitates the apparent move into violence in order to regain subjectivity. *She Came to Stay* is thus at once a narrative of self-development and a philosophical text based ultimately on action.

Françoise and Pierre have a relationship that mirrors that of Beauvoir and Sartre in its intimacy and closeness. The result for Françoise is an identity that is most fully defined through Pierre. The existential view that one is defined by the Other is acted out here first in the relationship between Pierre and Françoise and then, when young Xavière arrives, by her role in the threesome. Early on in the text, Beauvoir writes of Françoise,

Nothing that happened was completely real until she had told Pierre about it; it remained poised, motionless and uncertain, in a kind of limbo. [...] If they were not mentioned, it was almost as if they had not existed at all, and this allowed a shameful subterranean vegetation to grow up under the surface of true existence where she felt utterly alone and in danger of suffocation. (17)

Françoise does not simply feel trapped by her dependence on Pierre; her very identity does not register unless he has verified it. She cannot conceive of herself as having an individual identity, since her very process of conceiving requires the participation of the man. Ironically, on the surface, Françoise is relatively independent in the couple's nontraditional routine, suggesting at least the performance of some control of her own agency.

Young Xavière is initially an interest of Françoise's and the two have a brief if innocuous affair. Françoise and Pierre find the new member of their relationship entertaining and encourage her to move to Paris where they will support her and attempt to get her engaged in work and the arts. Françoise is frank with Xavière in these discussions: "A few hours of boring work wouldn't seem to me too much to pay for your independence" (27). The declaration reveals Françoise (or Beauvoir) as one who disapproves of dependence, although the scenario does not offer freedom so much as the replacement of one form of dependence for another. Françoise baits Xavière, accusing her of being afraid: "Perhaps not afraid of your family, but afraid of breaking with your own little ways, afraid of freedom" (28). This is exactly what Françoise herself fears, although in her case it is the freedom of independence without Pierre. Despite her superficial freedom, the reader understands that the image of the liberated, modern woman in the workforce proves circumscribed by other insidious cultural structures, in this case gender and age.

The closer that Xavière gets to Pierre, the more Françoise painfully senses her own need for independence and freedom, to wrestle herself away from how she is defined by others. Françoise's suggestion to Xavière to take action precipitates Françoise's own

shaky individuality, which emerges over the course of the narrative. As things progress with Pierre and Xavière, Françoise sees the weakness in her dependence: "She ought not to have felt herself so lost the minute Pierre's support failed her. [...] She was wrong to depend so entirely on Pierre: that was a real mistake, she ought not to thrust responsibility for herself upon someone else" (108). In allowing Pierre to define her sense of self, Françoise is defaulting on the Sartrean belief that every individual has freedom of choice and action in his or her life, and that leaving this in another's hands is acting in bad faith.

Seeing herself as defined by the Other, Françoise reluctantly admits her place in a world filled with others who create her identity:

> 'I am no one', thought Françoise. Often she had taken pride in not being
> circumscribed like other people in narrow little individual confines [...]. And yet
> all these people saw it; and, whether she liked it or not, she too was in the world, a
> part of this world. She was a woman among other women and she had permitted this
> woman to grow at random without shaping her. She was utterly incapable of passing
> any judgment on this unknown. (146)

In suggesting that she cannot see herself, Françoise relinquishes control over her identity. Furthermore, she views her environment peopled with individuals who are subject to cultural definitions, something of which she had not considered herself a victim because she led an atypical life. In the end she has discovered that she is deeply entrenched in a predefined life as a result of her relationship with Pierre and arguably her gender and her age, two variables that make her particularly sensitive to her experiences.

Broaching the politics of these themes in *She Came to Stay*, Mary Sirridge contends that Françoise moves from a strong dependence on Pierre through to a kind of painful

self-development: "Her happiness with Pierre gives her no sense of herself as a person, because she thinks of herself and Pierre as perfect reflections of each other" (138). Sirridge makes use of Beauvoir's essay *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* (1943) wherein the philosopher addresses the relationship with the Other as one of control and, ultimately, violence. Both Sartre and Beauvoir suggest that individuals can turn to violence as a means of regaining one's subjectivity or consciousness from the Other. In *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, Beauvoir proposes that the impetus to violence is an over-investment in the Other in their own identity formation. "We are condemned to check and be checked because we are condemned to violence," she declares, "We are condemned to violence because man is divided and opposed within himself, because men are separate and opposed to each other" (117), suggesting a kind of eternal competition and separation between the individual and others.

Sirredge notes that Beauvoir's definition of violence in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* may well be "used very broadly simply to denote conflict of interest, it seems – in this sense there is 'violence' whenever my project is incompatible with yours" (143). Aggression used to reclaim oneself can also pertain to Françoise's murder of Xavière at the end of *She Came to Stay*. Through a physical act that ends the existence of the Other upon whom her own self-identity relies, Françoise wrestles herself back, albeit in an altered formulation. In the existential sense, Beauvoir's heroine can only exist if the Other through which she was formulated no longer maintains any control. Françoise's reaction to Xavière does not simply bring forward the presence of the Other, but is enriched throughout by the contrast of youth and age and of Françoise's experience with her own body.

In *She Came to Stay*, Beauvoir addresses her interest in women's aging through characters' reflections on their own bodies or those of others in relation to the past and future. The reader gets the sense that Xavière's youthfulness exacerbates Françoise's sense of suffocation, and it comes as a shock when the younger woman discovers that Françoise is only 30 years old. But for Fraincoise, even at 30, it is "too late for her":

> Too late. She would never be the type of woman who had absolute mastery over her body. [...] That was what to be thirty years of age really meant: a mature woman! [...]. These thirty years were not only a past that she dragged along behind her [...].
> That was her present, her future, that was the substance of which she was made. (143)

This passage appears to counter the existential belief system to which Beauvoir has subscribed, in particular with regard to the Sartrean contention that one has to make choices that suit one's embodied experience. The weightiness of time does not allow for the existential self-reinvention permitted by choice and action. Françoise's subsequent actions, however, result in just such a reinvention. In contrast to Maretti's analysis of the traditional youthful hero who looks only towards the future, Beauvoir offers an aging protagonist who feels that her past is inherently linked to her current identity.

Beauvoir illustrates existential preoccupation with violence as used to protect one's subjectivity through Pierre's early fascination with Xavière. He says to Françoise, "'To make her love me is to dominate her, to enter into her world and there conquer in accordance with her own values. [...] You know this is the kind of victory for which I have an insane need.'"(164). Further in the same scene, Beauvoir has Françoise confront the need for the Other in her examination of her own identity: "Without jealousy, without love, ageless, nameless, confronted with her own life, she was no longer anything but a

calm and detached spectator." There is an aggression and violence depicted in these characters that embodies an almost masculinist ferocity, but it reoccurs in Beauvoir's female characters. Furthermore the emotions are presented as visceral and physical . François finds the idea of abandoning her obsession so terrifying that she feels it in her very body:

> All she had to do was make the simplest of gestures – open her hands and let go her hold. She lifted one hand and moved the fingers of it; they responded, in surprise and obedience [...]. She couldn't make up her mind to let go her hold. She had no fears for tomorrow, there was no tomorrow; but she saw herself surrounded by a present so naked, so glacial, that her heart failed her. (171)

Françoise is preoccupied with time and its role in her identity. In this quotation, the present is of utmost importance but the future is explicitly rejected. At the climax of her despair, Françoise feels she has no identity because she is so linked to Pierre, but he is now engrossed in the identity of another. Again, her anxiety manifests itself in how she sees her body: "for many years now she had ceased to be an individual; she no longer even possessed a face. The most destitute of women could at least lovingly touch her own hand" (173). Immediately after this, Françoise gets very ill and must be taken to hospital. As her ailment makes apparent, the loss of self that she describes is not only a psychological situation but also a manifestly physical one.

Françoise's health proves an excellent metaphor for her shifting identity and her self-development. Her time spent in hospital provides her with an opportunity for solitude and self-reflection, wherein the reader sees her contemplate her future. While at the hospital, she acknowledges the role of time in her self-view:

She had only been able to cling obstinately to the past; she had let Pierre proceed alone. [...] She, too, must give herself without reservation, that was her only chance: perhaps then she, in her turn, would be caught up by this new future into which Pierre and Xavière had preceded her. She looked excitedly at the door. She would do that; she made up her mind to do that. [...] it was her life, her future, and the resurrection of her happiness. (209)

This signals a shift in Françoise's self-development from passivity to aggression in terms of her relationships with others. In addition, the association of happiness and resurrection with the future seems perfectly aligned with the common trajectory of the modernist Bildungsroman. *She Came to Stay* is, however, different from the comparably quick education of the youth in traditional coming of age narrative. The crisis within the narrative builds much more slowly and is more personal. This process accords with Gullette's description of the midlife progress novel: "By showing how characters grow in the ever-lengthening stretch of the middle years, it shapes a hope [...]. It can steady us in our relations with the future by intimating that we might become meaningful to ourselves in some more satisfactory way" (172). Françoise is hoping for just such a sense of meaning – a future, self-worth and self-definition that have evaded her throughout her relationship with Pierre.

In a demonstration of the contrast between the existential and practical concerns of the two characters (and likely between Sartre and herself), Beauvoir has Pierre comment on Françoise's crisis of identity:

"What surprises me is that you should be affected in such a concrete manner by a metaphysical problem."

"But it is something concrete," said Françoise. "The whole meaning of my life is at stake." (302)

This succinctly demonstrates the importance of the impact of such variables as gender on existential freedom from Beauvoir's perspective. For Beauvoir, life is at stake in the development of the female self, who is concretely influenced by her gender.

The clearest demonstration of both the development of Françoise's identity and the narrative enactment of the tenets of existentialism can be found in the final passages of *She Came to Stay*. Françoise is convinced that Xavière's existence negates her own. Xavière had existed for herself in an aloneness that Françoise had never experienced, and the older woman found that the presence of such an Other called her own identity into question. "It is she or I. It shall be I," she states boldly before heading to Xavière's room to turn on the gas and exile Xavière from her life permanently (408). She finally defines herself through aggression:

[I]t was only necessary to pull down this lever to annihilate her. 'Annihilate a conscience! How can I?' Françoise thought. But how was a conscience not her own capable of existing? If it were so, then it was she who was not existing. She repeated 'She or I.' She pulled down the lever. (408)

Her relief and her emergence as a self (if a wretched one) are evident in the final lines of the book, mirroring or predicting Sartrean ontology once more: "She had at last made a choice. She had chosen herself" (409). This provides a final example of Beauvoir's philosophy enacted in her fiction. It is arguable that the heroine is not acting in the existential "bad faith," making no choice or taking no action when faced with her own consciousnesses. She is choosing herself and, though her action is repugnant, she has

defined her identity beyond her relationship with others despite her preoccupation with age and her body, recognizing the potential of the future for the first time. A deeper examination of her actions, however, shows them to be traditionally masculine in their aggression. Françoise could not maintain her existence in the shadow of female conventions and so is forced, as the only means of establishing her identity, to behave with masculine violence. This is not to say that she is abandoning gender conventions, but rather is adhering to those of the masculine experience which endures its own host of constraining expectations. The woman has, however, more freedom even within these patriarchal expectations, and so Françoise breaks with being a woman in an effort to regain her identity.

Age, Existentialism and Beauvoir's Women

In her 1965 article, "The Art of Fiction," Beauvoir notes that, as a writer, she has always been keenly aware of the passing of time:

I've always thought that I was old. Even when I was twelve, I thought it was awful to be thirty. I felt that something was lost. [...] For me, the problem of time is linked up with that of death [...] with the horror of decay [...] that love peters out. (qtd. in *The Woman Destroyed*, 8)

In Beauvoir's existentialist stories, the notion that love fades in the face of age is demonstrated to be an issue of particular import to women. The conundrum between what we understand as existential thought and a discussion of age is that the former tends to negate the latter. What has come to be known as Sartrean existentialism contends that there is no essence and, therefore, nothing prevents one from living a life wherein one is

free to choose one's actions unencumbered by preconceived definitions of the self. In the previous chapter, I noted that Sartre himself shifted his philosophy to allow for his changing political leanings. Age and gender, however, two forces of life that are thrust upon the individual, did not appear to influence his view that we are all born and remain free. In contrast, Beauvoir has, in both her fiction and non-fiction, broached the difficult conflict between existential freedom and the compromising nature of age and gender. Despite the fact that both Sartre and Camus probe late-life self-development in their fictions, it is Beauvoir alone of the existentialists who tackles the anguished experience of the aging woman. An exploration of her approach to ontological versus practical freedom demonstrates her fiction's uniquely gendered politicization of existentialist identity formation. While Camus and Sartre established the self as changing, Beauvoir, in her depictions of complex women experiencing age as a crucial stage in development, introduced the very kind of mid-life coming of age narrative to which Gullette alludes. The two novels *A Woman Destroyed* (1968) and *She Came to Stay* (1943) both illustrate the experiences of aging in relation to the Other, particularly painful as experienced by women.

Beauvoir established the woman as eternal Other, and introduced the female and the aging experience as unique in self-development. In Raggatt's terms, the female identity is defined by the gender-specific roles of a woman's culture. Beauvoir's fiction reflects these "attachments" and demonstrates their impact through the actions and choices of her characters that are generally trapped by their gendered and aging circumstances. In a passage from *Coming of Age*, Beauvoir notes the established treatment of men and women as they become older. Men may benefit from the "positive contribution of the

aged to the community" (90), with society often turning to aged men for their wisdom. Women, however, are locked in the role of Other: "The societies that have a history are ruled by the men: the women, both young and old, may perfectly well lay claim to authority in private, but in public life their status is always the same – that of perpetual minors." This view reflects Beauvoir's established contention that, in western society, women have a preconceived role as Other. The nature of this preconception, moreover, is a practical reality that is in direct conflict with the philosophical claims to universal freedom.

Penelope Deutscher keenly differentiates between Sartre's and Beauvoir's approaches to age. She notes that Sartre does not deny the body and its role in our lives, and that he believes our embodiment should not impinge on freedom because there is a range of choices and ways to exist within our bodies. Deutscher concludes, therefore, that one is, "in this sense, no more or less (ontologically) free for Sartre at 20, 40, or 90" (296). It is Beauvoir who points out, in her writing, that the effects of aging have implications on the practicality of freedom. Sartre's detachment from the impact of age causes concern for Beauvoir despite her exploration of the philosophical merits of existentialism. Speaking about Sartre, Deutscher writes that

> it is surely the absence of a reflection on different kinds of bodies that allows him to evade an account of freedom adequate to those differences, a philosophical interest in reflecting on practical or ethical freedom as much as on ontological freedom. Beauvoir's concern was with the social change that could increase the possibilities for ethical freedom of all subjects and allow a qualitatively improved relationship to the anticipation of one's future. (298)

Deutscher excuses Sartre for ignoring the impact of such things as age and gender, to say nothing of class or ethnicity. She recognizes, however, that it was not simply Beauvoir's experience of being a woman but her interest in social change that led her to an exploration of varied experience in relation to individual development.

Beauvoir's interest in self-development has an emphasis on time and the future, and this is demonstrated in her fiction wherein the experience of aging has a substantial impact on late-life self-development. In *She Came to Stay*, the character Pierre – a thinly veiled Sartre – declares, "Time isn't made up of a heap of little separate bits into which you can shut yourself up in turn. When you're thinking you're living purely in the present, you're involving your future, whether you like it or not" (51). There is a balance between what appears to be in Beauvoir's texts a pessimistic (or realistic) description of aging and the social roles of women, and her sometimes tenacious hold on the existential belief in freedom: there is hope for change even for old women, a group in which she could eventually count herself. Beauvoir was an avid outdoors person until late in life, and her own experience and those of her aging characters tend to suggest that one is not entirely encumbered by age or circumstance, but that the attitude of the subject towards her freedom determines her life course. It is one's own responsibility to make choices that improve both oneself and society.

The Woman Destroyed: Beauvoir's Late-life Bildungsromane

Discussing "The Age of Discretion," one of the stories in Beauvoir's *A Woman Destroyed*, Bethan Ladimer states that the "key to understanding the role of this story in the corpus of Beauvoir's works about aging is precisely the structuring of the narrative as

a crisis, or even a brief breakdown, from which the character recovers in a convincing and reassuring way at the end" (131). This is consistent with the notion that Beauvoir's texts are "cure stories," to borrow Gullette's term, or late-life Bildungsromane. The women in the collection *The Woman Destroyed* are on an arc of self-development and their age plays an integral role in their self-definition. All three stories feature women in late life dealing with a crisis that provides the foundation of their development. As with *She Came to Stay,* themes of the Other, time, embodiment and age dominate this collection. Beauvoir's interest in the female experience of age is still a priority but the philosophical concerns are less heavy-handed. Furthermore, the character addresses both age and relationships from an empowered position early on in the text. There is a shift, more subtle than in *She Came to Stay,* but there is the sense, at least initially, that the protagonist has come to terms with the experience of age on a woman.

Told in the first person, "The Age of Discretion" is the story of a nameless retired professor in her sixties. She has had a lifelong close relationship with her husband André, a scientist, and dedicated much time in the past to encouraging her son Philippe to pursue likeminded academic and political goals. When Philippe decides instead to join his father-in-law's business, the protagonist is furious and thrown into a crisis of the self. She reexamines her age, her relationship with André, her professional success and her approach to life in general.

Unlike Françoise in *She Came to Stay,* the protagonist of "The Age of Discretion" is comfortable with her age and status, and relishes her memories. She comments on a pleasant morning with André:

How many times had we sat there opposite one another at that little table with piping

hot, very strong cups of tea in front of us? And we should do so again, tomorrow, and in a year's time, and in ten years' time... That moment possessed the sweet gentleness of a memory and the gaity of a promise. Were we thirty, or were we sixty? (7) Self-contentment itself would seem to have erased the issue of age, and yet the fact that this is the subject to which the protagonist herself turns suggests a subtler development.

Her comfort with the past and the future is consistent with the optimism with which André describes her early in the story. In fact, it is André who is having a difficult time with aging, the protagonist commenting that her own age no longer bothers her. She is sensitive, however, to the difficulty of reaching a certain age, addresses the transition from working to retirement, for example, by stating, "I have crossed other frontiers, but all of them less distinct. This one was as rigid as an iron curtain" (10). Despite this awareness, however, the existentialist insistence on choice and freedom is evident when she later acknowledges that she could not let age determine her self-worth. She claims that she had herself gone through a similar phase of self-doubt and feelings of uselessness that in the face of her changing body, age filled her with dread. She overcame her feelings through the existentialist move towards action; she began her new book and focused on her son's career. "And now, if André were not so very sharply aware of his age," she remarks, "I should easily forget my own altogether" (13). One may want to believe her, but her repeated discussion of aging suggests that the process continues to haunt her.

The heroine lists choices and actions – projects, as Sartre refers to them – which define her identity. Her list of what Raggatt would describe as attachments of a cultural kind demonstrates a minor Bildungsroman in itself, as we see the protagonist reflect and

transition to a new stage of life and self-development. Unlike Françoise, the protagonist feels so much contentment in her relationship with her partner André, her Other, that she feels no pressure to examine her physical being: "I looked after it with bored conscientiousness, as I might look after a somewhat reduced, somewhat wanting old friend who needed my help" (17). And yet again, despite the heroine's claims to contentment, the language she chooses implies a sense of dissatisfaction with her own aging body.

This persistent hint at discontentment flares when her son Philippe tells his parents that he has chosen his own career path. This crisis coincides with a series of poor reviews his mother receives for her latest publication and the protagonist suddenly feels adrift, useless. In her anger, the protagonist even disowns her son for his refusal to take up scholarly pursuits, while her husband has a less aggressive reaction and maintains his relationship with the youth. The heroine's previous sense of peace with her age and with time in general is shattered as she sinks into fear of the future. There are many passages in which she claims no longer to know or understand either man, and it is evident that her previous perception of them was a contributing factor in her contentment: she was a wife and mother, the chief roles in her female experience.

The heroine's sudden lack of self-satisfaction arising from her loss of control over the identities of others illustrates the existentialist view that self-definition is contingent on a recognizable Other. In this story, however, Beauvoir emphasizes the way in which the western hegemonic order drives women to resolve the sense of emptiness arising from changes over a lifetime by turning to male support. The character laments, "There was only one hope left to me – André. But could he fill this emptiness within me?" (55).

Sitting with André's mother, she regards the content older woman with new appraisal but cannot imagine herself filling the same role: "I could not see myself calling my solitude freedom and peacefully drawing all the good from each succeeding moment. As far as I was concerned life was gradually going to take back everything it had given me: it had already begun doing so" (61). In her denial of solitude, the heroine articulates the very conundrum that proves central to Beauvoir's writings – the desire for both the full agency to formulate her own identity and the desire to have that identity situated within a larger network of individuals. The protagonist's sadness and fear contrasts with the earlier comfort she herself had felt, enacting the Bildungsroman shift that the crisis of the protagonist's life has forced upon her. How she emerges and what she learns provides the "education" or self-development of this late-life coming of age.

While the protagonist is reflecting on the future with new dread, her husband abandons his own preoccupation with age, and for a short time the couple separate. Her husband appears to have been revived by his son's act of independence, becoming more engaged and enlivened by future opportunities. In this way the power associated with the characters and their genders has been reversed, both put into action by the son's decision to depart from their expectations. That the father gains a sense of virility through his son's bold actions demonstrates a masculine convention at work in the story. The protagonist, on the other hand, loses her power and confidence when her son determines that she cannot be in control of his identity. When husband and wife reunite, they find peace with one another, but the protagonist's final comments demonstrate that, while she has changed, she remains utterly aware of the effect that the marching of time has on their lives. When André tells her not to look too far ahead, she asks, "We had always

looked far ahead. Should we now have to learn to live a short-term life?" (71). In the face

of the difficulties associated with such a revised approach to being, the heroine locates

solace notably not in personal conviction but in mutual contingency. "We are together,"

she tells André, "that is our good fortune" (71), and relies on this potential for mutual

support as her own source of contentment in the face of death and the unknown that

always hover on the margins of existential inquiry. She and her husband still require one

another for their own self-definition, to provide comfort and to stave off fear of the

future. She does not know, however, if this will be enough. She claims that they have "no

choice" – an interesting phrase for an existentialist, reflecting Beauvoir's preoccupation

with the lack of control one has over time and age, regardless of the choices one makes in

life.

The final and title story, "The Woman Destroyed," is similarly ambiguous in its

conclusion regarding the potential of aging women to attain a sense of control in self-

fashioning, but it differs from the previous story because Monique, the protagonist,

develops almost against her will. This story demonstrates a long, painful education or

self-development that suggests, even to the very end, that the heroine would rather live in

denial of the self than regain her individualism. The piece charts the experience of

Monique, a married woman with two grown children whose husband, Maurice, reveals he

has been having an affair. She opts to stay with Maurice, buckling under the emotional

pressure of his continued affair. Over the course of the story, as he becomes more

involved with his mistress, Noellie, the reader witnesses Monique's emotional collapse.

To deal with her depression and paranoia, Maurice urges Monique to take up writing in

her diary, the excerpts of which form the story.

In this personal narrative, the female subject struggles to articulate a position of selfhood characterized by alienation. "I see the gimmick perfectly well," she muses, "– he is trying to give me back an interest in myself, to reconstruct my identity for me" (208). Despite this insight, she immediately reverts to the position of the subject who can only self-identify through the Other. At one point, she concludes, "Not only do I not know what kind of person I am, but also I do not know what kind of person I ought to be" (219). She asks herself, "How is it possible to live without believing in anything or in myself?" (219). Notably, in the act of asking herself a question, the heroine momentarily constructs two selves within a single voice. Thus she momentarily circumvents her reliance on the Other, but does so unwittingly.

The "safety" of allowing oneself to be defined by another is contrasted, in this work, with making difficult personal choices and taking action in order to disengage from the Other. Monique soon flounders and ultimately gives in to passivity, allowing her husband to make her choices for her. Ultimately, Maurice leaves her and the story ends with Monique not taking responsibility for her life, frozen in inaction. Existentially, she denies herself freedom as an individual by giving in to a socially determined identity construct – in this case that of an older, married woman subjected to betrayal. Beauvoir, however, offers an alternate explanation for this female experience.

The final lines of the story see Monique returning to her marital home after visiting her daughter. On viewing the house, she reiterates a desire for stasis rather than growth or change: "Do not stir: ever. Stop the flow of time and of life" (220). Despite this declaration, however, she goes on to acknowledge the inevitability of her participation in her own life narrative: "The door to the future will open. Slowly. Unrelentingly. I am on

the threshold" (220). Although the story ends with Monique alone and frightened, Beauvoir makes explicit the heroine's awareness of her own inevitable momentum. This relenting education or self-development is not consistent with traditional Bildungsromane. It is indicative, rather, of the slow-burning crises of the late-life coming of age. While it seems like a tragic story, ultimately Monique has changed and will, by her own admission, "get used to it," to life without the Other as her identifier. The modernist Bildungsroman, as Beauvoir formulates it, is a gender-sensitive tale, one that, while honouring the existential preoccupations of action and responsibility, recognizes the impact of gender on experience.

In Beauvoir's texts, gender is a condition of the self. The very fact that her characters are women creates circumstances that position them in crises of self-development. The existential tenet of a lack of essence, however, appears to contradict this position. Sartre and Camus's male characters, like Beauvoir's heroines, also feel extreme dread and even pain in recognizing their freedom and potential choices. There is a sense, however, of emotional impotence among these male characters; they lack the anguish of Beauvoir's women. While the characters in all three authors' works develop well beyond the "education" stage of the traditional Bildungsroman, the characters of Beauvoir's narratives often wallow in bad faith, or what Gullette would call decline or pessimism. In most cases, these female characters are eventually shaken into an appreciation of time, responsibility and even a tenuous sense of hope. Certainly they do not offer the appreciation of aging that contemporary late-life narratives tend towards, but they represent the beginning of a tradition of late-life narratives in a culture that was still resistant to aging heroes.

In a discussion of Beauvoir's fictional exploration of the aging female experience,

Sally Chivers notes the term *Reifungsroman*, or fiction of ripening (coined by Barbara

Frey Waxman), arguing that Beauvoir was among the first to prepare readers for

narratives on the topics of old age. Recognizing the dark themes of Beauvoir's fiction,

Chivers observes that such stories "damage, as much as they help in initiating new,

constructive cultural models of aging"(1). Building on this insight, it is arguable that

Beauvoir's novels, while indeed dramatic and at times disturbing, also have elements of

strength and hope for the aging female protagonists, as they at times painfully extract

themselves from dependent male relationships. Chivers questions Beauvoir's suggestion

that aging is physically disgusting and renders the aged economically powerless (3),

recognizing that Beauvoir was speaking on behalf of those in late life, and giving a voice

to those she thought had no representation. As a first foray into age studies, it is hardly

surprising that Beauvoir exposed the difficulties of aging, rather than focusing on

offering hopeful direction. As Chivers observes, "De Beauvoir is among the first to claim

that old age is created contextually and is not a purely biological and chronological

problem" (5).

Gullette describes late-life narratives as "cure stories", by which she means stories that

involve resolutions for the characters. While fictional works by existentialists such as

Camus, Sartre and Beauvoir function as Gullette suggests, it is inaccurate to describe the

characters of these narratives as having been cured when they are driven to thoughts or

actions of madness, loneliness and murder. The implication is that the cure is self-

development and awareness and, from an existentialist perspective, a rejection of bad

faith or essentialism. The characters often wrestle their identities away from socially

determined roles and the identities others suggest they fulfill. In their development they recognize what role they can fulfill in the future. Even the character Meursault in Camus's novel *The Stranger*, facing execution, finally sees the value in both age and in having more time with which to make choices and changes. Moreover, as I have demonstrated, all three writers use gender distinctions to explore the philosophical dimensions of the mid-life Bildungsroman. Beauvoir's texts stands out in this regard, however, for contributing an understanding of the female late-life and existential experience in terms of the aging body and the confining nature of a gendered identity.

Attention to aging and transition may be more prevalent in contemporary fiction but the issues addressed today are rooted in the philosophical concerns of the existentialists. Gullette states that, "once you've lived long enough, an identity story is always a story of aging" (*Aged*, 122). Focusing on the American context, she argues that the self in the twentieth century is unbalanced in its approach to age,

> like those blow-up toys that fall over from their low center of gravity. Insofar as
> "temporality" was implicitly reduced to one dominant narrative of the life course [...],
> the material body loomed lopsided, body-heavy, with grotesquely age-graded features.
> (138)

As I wish to demonstrate in the following chapter, however, postmodernity offers a shift that recognizes aging-conscious narratives of crises and development, a form of fictional exploration first arising within the philosophical innovations of the existentialists and moving into a flexibility of gender that is a departure from the strict conventions of modernity.

Chapter 3:

Alistair MacLeod and Postmodern Gender Flexibility

The Bildungsroman as a genre changed remarkably during the postmodern era. Most notably, it ceased to be exclusive to youthful characters, with postmodern works offering a proliferation of protagonists who come of age over the course of a lifetime. Moreover, within the genre, a broader diversity of changes and crises marked the characters' self-development. Characters became increasingly reflective and aware of the impact that age and gender have on one's notion of self. Nevertheless, continuing from where Beauvoir's characters left off, the concerns of the characters in these later works still reflect those of modernism, and it is here that we see the imprint of existentialism and its prizing of both individual agency and the constant opportunity for change. In this chapter, I address the influence of existential philosophy and fiction on postmodern late-life coming of age narratives. Central themes of existential Modernism – such as choice, freedom and action; gender and age; and responsibility to others – also appear dominant in their late-life postmodern counterparts. The individual contributions of Camus, Sartre and Beauvoir, however, vary in their approaches to the subjects of age, gender and relationships and this is reflected in recent fiction.

In the previous chapter, I explored the challenges of age and gender in the work of Camus, Sartre and Beauvoir. Beauvoir's work in particular had an emphasis on the female experience that significantly influenced later work in feminism, philosophy and literature. I have established that Beauvoir's existentialism effectively addresses the unique contradictions faced by aging women, thereby coupling gender to the issue of

aging already explored by Kierkegaard and Sartre. By focusing in this chapter on the perhaps unlikely subject of the writings of Alistair MacLeod, I hope to suggest just how broadly postmodern late-life fiction expanded Beauvoir's approach to gender-based issues of personal growth. Considering her formulations within the context of masculinity studies, I demonstrate that MacLeod's aging male and female characters move towards a more flexible self-development wherein gender boundaries are not as clear as those Beauvoir herself depicted. As my analysis demonstrates, MacLeod has not turned his back on the earnest or emotional exploration of modernism. Rather, his work pays tribute to Beauvoir's existentialism by situating her feminist interrogations within a distinctly postmodern, rural masculine context. In his work, MacLeod takes the anti-essentialist feminism of Beauvoir's midlife Bildungsromane and uses it to challenge both of the binary gender models assumed to dominate contemporary rural society.

Gender Politics within Postmodernism

Postmodernism was a post-World-War-II movement that sought not to find meaning out of nothingness, as modernism had, but to impose a sense of irony and mischievous cynicism onto modern conventions, including interpretations of gender roles. According to Frederic Jameson, postmodernism was dismissive of historical reference, choosing instead to offer up empty parody or pastiche in lieu of "real" substance. Jameson's contention that there is no role for history in postmodern work undermines the existential experience of the Other, and that of the gendered experience in particular. Linda Hutcheon, however, believes that the ironic smirk that characterizes postmodern fiction is in fact a clever parody of, and in some cases a tribute to, history. Hutcheon's

interpretation of the movement finds support from the re-formulation of the modernist

existential writings within contemporary Bildungsromane. As Judith Butler and many

other feminists and poststructuralist scholars have argued, gender is to a notable degree,

if not fully, a construct and so too is the individual subject. To gain some understanding

of the construction process giving rise to the contemporary individual and the female and

male experience, it is therefore necessary to situate these constructs within their histories,

and postmodernists have recognized that this can be effectively done through subversive

applications of irony.

Jameson's theories of postmodernism focus on the role of economics and politics in

the move towards postmodernism. They do not, however, aim to account for the

contributions that feminism and gender studies have made to postmodern thought. For

Jameson, the postmodern era was a period in which all forms of creativity and

commercialism are acceptable, with little recognition of history or tradition. He laments

the loss of the subject and individualism, which he claims are the markers of modernism

and its prizing of the "unique self and private identity [...] expected to generate its own

unique vision of the world and to forge its own unique, unmistakable style" (6). Jameson

suggests that the reason for the move away from a respect for the notion of the individual

lies in the dissolution of a culture of competitive capitalism and the reconception of the

innately separate and unique individual as a construct.

The thrust of Jameson's position on postmodernism is rooted in the loss of a sense of

history, which he ties to a number of changes in western society – most particularly the

shift to multinational capitalism or late consumerism. He claims that a widening of

capitalist interests accounts for the "disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which

our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past [and instead has begun] to live in a perpetual present" (20). An immediate and present-focused culture, he argues, extinguishes tradition, rather than benefiting from it. Hutcheon, on the contrary, examines the role that history played within the postmodern.

Hutcheon argues that the term "postmodernism" is "fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political" (4). Rejecting the idea that postmodernism has replaced modernism and liberal humanism, Hutcheon sees it as working with a historical hindsight that employs self-awareness and often subtle commentary on the dominant culture. Postmodern fiction that employs or references history – what she calls "historiographic metafiction" – does not deny modernism but "contests it from within its own assumptions" (6). Within the arts, these challenges take on a myriad of forms, from examining and commenting on institutions and space in the visual arts, to questioning the media, universities, and genre divisions within literature. Previously specific boundaries between novels, short stories and autobiographies became less defined during the postmodern era. The results, however, were never "an unproblematic merging" (9); within the postmodern context, history and even memory are considered constructs, and as such, narrative devices are employed even as they are questioned. As she states, "What the postmodern writing of both history and literature has taught us is that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past" (89). This fluidity of form is evident in contemporary novels such as Dave Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000), which employs a style of fictionalized memoir. Hutcheon also makes note of a

postmodern shift in perspective, wherein the singular narrative voice no longer carries the authoritative weight that it once did in modernist fiction. Indeed, as MacLeod's work demonstrates, the perspective often changes throughout the narrative. Often the protagonist is as much a witness to the narrative events as the reader. At times, the author speaks to the reader directly, making note of his or her role in the tale, while also challenging the façade of verisimilitude.

In postmodernism, Hutcheon suggests, there is a tendency to doubt heterogeneity or "*any* totalizing or homogenizing system" under which we can consider gender, race, class and location (12). Historically speaking, then, postmodernism tends to gravitate toward issues of marginality, highlighting what has been alienated. Despite this tendency, Hutcheon stresses that "postmodernism is careful not to make the marginal into the new center" (12). As she notes, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard and others suggest that there cannot be an actual master narrative because any hierarchies that exist do so because humans have fabricated them (13). Furthermore, the notion of the "other" as one who has been excluded is itself a problematic term that brings to mind historical hegemony: "The single concept of 'otherness' has associations of biniarity, hierarchy, and supplementarity that postmodern theory and practice seem to want to reject in favor of a more plural and deprivileging concept of difference and the ex-centric" (65). Postmodern fiction supplants this clear-cut approach, allowing for a fluid and flexible interpretation of individual identity.

Hutcheon's definition of "otherness" differs in an important way from the existentialist "Other", which positions the self against one or many. Moreover, it deals mainly with the definition of the self, a focus that belies a sustained investment in the

humanist notion of a core individual being. I demonstrated in the previous chapter that Beauvoir's notion of women as Other recognizes the constructionist element of gender relations, highlighting society's culturally formulated privileging of an androcentric point of view. This awareness stands as a precursor to Hutcheon's summary of postmodern "otherness" as a politically formulated and sustained notion.

Hutcheon explores the role of feminism within the early stages of postmodernism, noting in particular that 1960s feminisms, alongside issues of race and civil rights, became part of a larger challenge to cultural hegemony. For Hutcheon, feminist discussions "'complex-ified' questions of identity and difference almost from the start, and raised those upsetting (but, of course, productive) issues of social and cultural marginality" (qtd. in O'Grady, 1). In terms of literature, Hutcheon observes that women writers and Canadian writers (male and female) share the postmodern narrative techniques of irony and parody. In an interview with Kathleen O'Grady, Hutcheon expands on the pattern:

> Marginalization – in a word. Just as women have traditionally been positioned on the fringes of male culture, so Canadians often feel as if they are watching the action (be it American or European) from the sidelines. [...] Canadians have often turned to irony to position themselves (self-deprecatingly) or to contest the strength of those dominant cultural forces of history or of the current situation. (2)

Hutcheon contends that, like Canadians, women tend to seek defiance against dominant discourse by using the language of that culture but then applying irony, exaggeration and other techniques to subvert it.

Hutcheon suggests that the marginalized woman writer uses the accepted gender codes of her culture to posit ironic criticism. Judith Butler has explored the nature of those accepted gender codes, coining them performative. Butler maintains that prolonged and repetitive acts that are consistent with conventional male and female roles constitute a performance. Just as Beauvoir argues that one becomes a woman, so Butler claims that one becomes the role one is playing when subscribing to gender codes. Writing extensively on Beauvoir, Butler develops what has been hailed as a "new existentialism" (Shrift). In "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*," Butler notes Beauvoir's contention that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (qtd. in "Sex" 301), crediting the existentialist Beauvoir with no less than articulating the distinction between sex and gender in which Butler's own performative theory is rooted. Because there is no essence to women or men, Butler argues, gender should also be a flexible concept: "neither can we refer meaningfully to natural or unnatural gendered behavior: all gender is, by definition, unnatural" (35). Butler later writes that, when Beauvoir made the claim that one is not born a woman, the modernist was arguing that "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time" (519). Thus Butler argues that it is through the repetition of particular physical, social and cultural acts that gender is constructed. In other words, one becomes one's gender, as Beauvoir suggested.

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler claims that much of 1970s feminism did a disservice to gender relations by attempting to unite women through shared experience, thereby reinforcing the false essentialist binary segregating men from women. She observes that, while feminists rejected the notion that one is born to one's gender (meaning that gender

is biologically determined), their acceptance of the gender traits imposed by patriarchal society created a no-win situation wherein men and women "became," in Beauvoir's words, whatever gender was expected of them. This disallowed the flexibility that Butler sees as integral to a discussion of gender. Recalling the tenets of existentialism, Butler contends that there should be room for a changing gender identity that can shift and develop over time, in spite of or in resistance to culturally constructed expectations. For Butler, the way we behave constitutes a type of performance, whether it is in deference to cultural gender traditions or as an act of change.

In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," Butler explores the performative and the potential for changing established gender identities. The gender code, she claims, is established out of "social sanction and taboo" (520) and is, by its very nature, a series of acts or performances that suggest the potential for change. Likening gender performance to theatre but with stricter expectations, Butler expands: "it seems clear that, although theatrical performances can meet with political censorship and scathing criticism, gender performances in non-theatrical contexts are governed by more clearly punitive and regulatory social conventions" (527). Despite the tight grip of established gender codes, the implication is that identities are flexible, the results of performances, and so have the potential to operate outside of normative binary gender models. As Hutcheon suggests, a similar investment in a de-essentialized, flexible notion of identity is a central issue of postmodernism in general.

Existentialist Echoes in Postmodernism

Where is the place in postmodernism, then, for the sensitive, choice-based philosophy of existentialism? While there are elements of the irony one would expect in postmodern Bildungsromane, there are other, more subtle characteristics of the late-life postmodern text that reflect not a parody of history, but a modernist influence in terms of concerns and philosophical preoccupations. One of the key attributes of this new form of Bildungsroman is the use of characters poised at key points of transition in their lives. While this moment of change might be hastily dubbed a "midlife crisis," it recalls the existentialist concern with self-development over the course of a lifetime. The marked characteristics of this in-between time are often a feeling of dread and nostalgic guilt over the past, as well as a fear of the future.

The dominant precursor of this preoccupation is Kierkegaard, for whom dread and self-development were cornerstones of fiction. His character in *Either/Or* was, as the title suggests, choosing between his past conduct and his future potential, and the reader finds him on the threshold of change. Kierkegaard also articulated the dread associated with choice as it pertains to self-development. The young esthete in *Either/Or*, for example, recognizes that his indulgent and soulless existence needs to change, but fears and dreads the emotional burden of a responsible life. As David Lodge points out, Kierkegaard's work had an expository sadness and humanity: "What makes Kierkegaard appealing to many nonspecialist readers [...] is the man's own vulnerability, inconsistency, even folly. [...] He speaks to us out of the flux and the fray of human existence. He grounded the perennial problems of philosophy in man's self-consciousness, which reason alone can never satisfy" (277). The use in existential fiction of transitional characters continues after Kierkegaard in works by Beauvoir, Sartre and Camus, all of whom similarly depict

their characters in between periods of growth, recognizing that they will be the sole determiners of their futures and identities. The burden of decision and personal anguish that they endure is largely impacted by age and gender. In most existentialist works, personal transition and ultimate self-definition result in a great deal of anguish, demonstrating the burden of existential freedom. This emotional fallout is evident in postmodern late-life texts as well, where it is common to encounter characters who are emotionally distraught by their own self-development and the impact of their past choices on their future and that of others.

While genders might not be as distinctly defined in recent decades as they were in Beauvoir's time, postmodern fiction regularly contends with the constraints of gender roles, often in conjunction with age. Many late-life texts include the traditional Bildung subject of youth in a relationship with an aging protagonist. Typically these relationships are between older and younger men, sometimes fathers and sons, but just as often between strangers. The fact that there are fewer female couplings of this sort speaks to the strained experience of the aging woman, particularly in relationship to younger women. The often competitive relationships between younger and older women are an unfortunate byproduct of what Beauvoir saw as the female experience and the pressures of age. As noted in the previous chapter, Beauvoir's *She Came to Stay* and *A Woman Destroyed* both revolve around a late-life female experience characterized by competition with youth and efforts to define the self under the shadow of a dependent relationship to a male companion.

In *Safe at Last in the Middle Years*, Margaret Morgonroth Gullette calls the mid-progress novel a "happier genre"(xii), contrasting the invention of a development novel

that brings change and hope with those she calls "decline" narratives, which take the position that age is a process of devolution rather than an opportunity for progressive change. She writes, "the adult lifespan may be full of sorrow and acquainted with grief, but when growth [...] shows up, it argues for the existence of heavenly days"(xii). She refers to these more hopeful narratives of aging as "cure stories" (xiv). The precedent for texts that recognize that an individual's personal development can happen over a lifetime and that one is responsible for one's own identity lies in the works of the existentialists. With regard to the catalysts for late-life self-development, Gullette compares the subtler narrative techniques that bring about change with the traditional coming of age story:

> There are so many [catalysts] available, contrasted to the standard problems given youth: whom to marry, how to escape. Not wanting children, not knowing what one wants to do with one's meaningless life, not being able to recover from divorce, having become too much oneself [...] – these are some of the given problems. [...] Modern adult progress narratives are stimulated into narratibility by the desire to show a character overcoming an inner block. (31)

While the conventional Bildung narrative depicts a character's education during a short period of time, the late-life Bildung or "progress novel," (xix) as Gullette calls it, charts change over a long period. Her notion of a "cure story" is predicated on the need for the characters in the narrative to heal and change rather than to become educated. Recognizing the suggested cynicism of the postmodern age, Gullette claims that readers and characters will not buy into a quick, educative change: "That's why our midlife novelists had to imagine cures, and particularly in-between kinds of cures, involving more radical psychic changes than most youth Bildungsromane propose, and change

more gradual" (36). This notion that postmodern authors abandon the education of characters for more personal and often drastic shifts represents a subversion of the dominant culture. The postmodern self-conscious voice does not presume to know how to educate an individual but rather pursues an inquiry into the self. Through experiences of anguish and/or rebellion against the roles that society expects, the individual tends towards character growth that often reflects the very culture in which he or she had been educated.

Despite the often depressing or outright violent nature of characters' developments, their despair is presented as necessary and short-lived. As Gullette notes, traditional Bildungsromane also often deal with characters who are by nature depressed or pessimistic, rather than symptomatically so: "Pessimistic younger writers give their characters obstinate natures because, as we've seen, they doubt change so much. Essentialists always do. Essentialism was part of their characters' disease and, in the worst cases, perhaps their own" (36). Essentialism is at odds with existentialism, which believes in change rather than in hard-wired personalities. While older characters dealing with their own development recognize themselves as being in constant flux, their younger counterparts are suspicious of change and are more essentialist in their perspectives on life. The contention that the age of the authors themselves has an impact on whether or not they – and their characters in turn – were essentialist, resistant to change and pessimistic is noteworthy.

This interest in the age of authors points to the role that age and arguably gender play not only in the narratives, but also in the lives of the authors themselves. As I have demonstrated in the previous chapter, Beauvoir's personal life and her experience as an

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aging woman largely affected her stories. The postmodern late-life Bildungsroman

reflects a culture that not only questions distinct gender boundaries but also has a large

population contending with the impact of age. That there is no longer a formulaic

approach to the development of the male or female character as he or she moves towards

a transitional period of life is in keeping with these cultural preoccupations. In some

texts, male protagonists come to share the burden of responsibilities traditionally placed

on the shoulders of female characters. This new responsibility contributes to their

overriding anxiety and struggle with identity. Meanwhile, there are female characters

who accept normative society's expectations of their gender, but at the same time

demonstrate a fierce independence that was lacking in female characters of literature

from the first half of the twentieth century.

This undermining of cultural convention exemplifies Hutcheon's observation that

postmodern texts work within the context of the dominant culture while making efforts to

subvert it. The adherence to gender roles in some postmodern late-life Bildungsromane

acts as a commentary on sexual politics. The gesture verges on the performative, with the

ironic turn becoming apparent when characters finally choose to defy their gendered

exteriors. In other words, they make choices that develop their identities even within the

burdensome climate of gender expectations. Beauvoir's contribution to feminism was to

establish that the freedom to become one's own self was put under increased pressure

given the societal expectation to "become" a woman. Postmodernism's response to

gender-based pressure was to explore the notion that women and men can achieve

independent agency through the control arising from a self-referential, often ironic

perspective.[6]

The crisis around managing one's identity proves especially pronounced for rural male characters who, within both realist fiction and much of twentieth-century western culture, had the privilege of assuming such control simply because of their gender. An exploration into rural masculinity uncovers the performative nature of a widely accepted form of manliness in nonurban communities. Here I argue that, in MacLeod's fiction, rural masculinity is not only being promoted and subscribed to by men, but also being adopted by women, who have been traditionally repressed by such gender codes. In this way, MacLeod, who is in many ways a traditionalist, has employed a postmodern technique of working within an established gender context to comment on a continually blurring gender politics.

Rural Masculinity and the Late-life Bildungsromane of Alistair MacLeod

In the 1980s, amidst changes in economic and domestic conventions, what it meant to be a man in western society became increasingly unstable, resulting for some in what has been recognized as identity crises. The study of masculinities emerged in an effort to explore the male experience. Early contributors to the field of masculinity studies such as Harry Brod, Michael Kimmel and Amy Aronson, and R.W. Connell all contend that there is no biological or psychological essence to men, but rather that the male model was a socially constructed phenomenon. Connell in particular draws attention to the notion of hegemonic masculinities, those models of the masculine that are most commonly recognized and accepted within a society. As the term suggests, masculinity is not limited to its signification regarding individual males but refers to a collection of issues and traits through which males and their larger communities interact and define each other.

In *Men and Masculinities* (2004), Kimmel and Aronson note various issues central to the formation of dominant male identity models, including the relationship between masculinity and fatherhood, as well as that between honour and the rural experience. Exploring how fatherhood contributes to the meaning of men's lives, they find that there are different models and contexts for fatherhood. These range from intensely nurturing father's rights groups and associations, such as the Promise Keepers, to the "hyper-masculine cultures" of army and policing (278), all of which maintain some form of gendered ideology within their different environments. Building on Butler's contention that gender is socially constructed, Kimmel and Anderson observe that "Exploring father involvement in these types of contexts frame fathering as a socially constructed performance, implicating how the gender order both supports and discourages fathers' involvement" (278). In MacLeod's work, the role of the father within the working-class environment is positioned as both quiet involvement and distance. The fathers in these communities tend to prize passing their knowledge of trade or occupation to their children, especially sons, while maintaining a reserved silence. There is an evident lack of intimacy in terms of emotional exposure that is consistent with cultural depictions of the strong and silent country man.

Distinguishing between the "masculine rural" and the "rural masculine," Kimmel and Aronson argue that there is an assumed masculine presence in even the most modest understanding of a country or working-class life, such as the assumed "he" in children's songs and stories about farming or fishing, which act as a marked and visible expression that is evident in both broad and particular notions of nonurban life. By "rural masculine," they wish to suggest that the regionality itself defines masculinity:

The *masculine rural* refers to the creation of ideas of masculinity within rural spaces, as in the idea of the farming man, the mining man, and the logging man. The *rural masculine* refers to how rural spaces themselves help to construct ideas of masculinity everywhere, as in the billboard image of the Marlboro man or the pick-up truck in the suburban driveway. (273)

In accord with Kimmel and Aronson's summation of the nonurban male, scholar Jo Little has argued that there exists a relationship between masculinity and nature wherein the man's role is defined by his ability to control the environment: "a 'good' (male) farmer is one who has tamed the elements to produce crops and manage livestock, overcoming nature's vagaries and uncertainties. Such representations of agrarian masculinity are embodied in fitness, strength, and physical stamina" (189). Mother Nature is controlled by a strong male force, metaphorically reinforcing the masculine hold on the female.

While MacLeod's late-life Bildungsromane are traditional in many ways, they prove highly innovative in addressing rural male identity crises by having characters engage in existential quandaries of late-life self-development. A kind of latter-day Beauvoir, MacLeod employs similar emotionalism and anguish in order to illustrate how the combination of gender and aging interfere with individual agency and the ideals of existential freedom, a predicament that appears particularly pronounced for men who have never had to question their access to self-determination.

MacLeod's stories and novel offer an overarching masculine environment within which characters respond to their gender roles in different ways. Despite the author's focus on men's identities, his postmodern texts resonate meaningfully with Beauvoir's philosophical preoccupations. MacLeod's fiction intensely explores issues of gender,

body and age, while also demonstrating the imprint of existential philosophy and fiction. Beneath the overarching themes are, as in Beauvoir, those more subtle subjects of age, change and regret. MacLeod's characters are often self-aware and doubtful, and at times nostalgic and contemplative. They are also often sensitive to shifts in their environment, demonstrating their reluctance to change and the difficulty they experience when forced to act. Most of the male characters in his texts seem to have a prefixed sense of themselves rooted in large part in normative gender expectations. At the same time, however, MacLeod has them move within and outside these expectations, thereby illustrating both the tenacity of gender and the possibility of manoeuvring within its grasp. Of particular interest, as I will explore, are MacLeod's women, in particular Agnes from "Island", through whom the author has offered a new form of masculinity that both reflects and contrasts with the masculine tradition of his men.

MacLeod's men embody hegemonic masculinity and live by a western code of honour that permeates not only the domestic sphere, but also those of the general community and traditional male occupations. In keeping with Butler's claim that gender performativity comes as a result of long term, repetitive acts, his characters are subject to a strict set of guidelines imbedded within their culture. Father-son relationships are depicted as a balance between a reserved parental involvement and a bond between father and son rooted in the shared traditions of their rural occupations. While some male characters are unencumbered by the responsibilities that befall their female counterparts, others in MacLeod's work find responsibility to be in large part the source of their anxiety and the anguish they endure in the name of self-development. They worry over their children and agonize over conflicting desires for a life outside their traditional occupations and the

expectation that they provide for their families. Beauvoir's concerns regarding women's gender and aging are echoed in the sensitive, responsible male characters of late life in MacLeod's work. As a postmodern writer of late-life Bildungsromane, MacLeod treats the topic of gender with a subtle elasticity. Despite the traditional gender roles imposed upon his characters, the author adopts a sympathetic, skeptical approach to gender that destabilizes the separation that, for Beauvoir, was much more clear.

The hard-working males in MacLeod's stories are often primarily identified by the rigid set of rules and customs associated with their occupations. Seemingly innocuous things such as weather and daily or seasonal routine prove the source of definitive character traits in the world of the miners and fishermen. The strict code that informs their behaviour is in large part influenced by a cultural understanding of honour. Kimmel and Aronson contend that a "mode of social control as well as self-control, [honour] helps to stabilize male hierarchies, especially in small social groups beset by internal instabilities and external threats" (398). MacLeod's characters are indeed at the mercy of environmental and monetary pressures and often maintain grim faces of pride and honour. Even within the traditional masculinities they embody, however, there is a respect and flexibility – namely for women – that underpins whatever male hierarchies may exist. Above all else, the manliness that informs the characters of MacLeod's texts is one that emphasizes the role of the rural space in the construction of male identity. Thus MacLeod's men, as they age and move towards an existential experience of self-definition, are always hindered by the strong tradition of masculinity arising from their maritime environment.

From a cursory perspective, MacLeod's texts can be seen to perpetuate the cliché of the strong, silent man and his affinity with some deeper fundamental knowledge. According to Michael Moyerfeld Bell and Hugh Campbell, "[e]specially significant in the rural masculine is the way in which associations with rurality bring an air of the natural to images of masculinity, legitimating them as allegedly in touch with truths that are deeper than the merely social" (532). In accord with this image, MacLeod's men do not share their often sorrowful self-awareness with others, but maintain a quietude that blends their male personas with their powerful environments. They silently and masterfully go about their jobs, trained by the men of previous generations to honour skill and tradition; their work defines them. As they age, however – and many in his texts are shown in the latter stages of their lives – their hard life wears on them physically and emotionally. More than once, MacLeod's younger characters note that their parents seemed to age quickly over a season, but say nothing of the shift. The men's quiet suffering symbolizes change and transition and represents a bygone golden era of their regional and masculine occupations. They suggest, in their silence, insight into matters that are deeper than fishing or mining alone.

Elsewhere in Canadian literature there is evidence of strong codes of masculinity that rely on male-based environments. Timothy Findlay's work is notably masculine in his tendencies towards strength, violence and various forms of homosocial groups of men. Susan Billingham notes (2001) that while Findlay's men are positioned in male-dominant environments and his women are often conservatively depicted, the author maintains a personal expectation of gender flexibility and overall humanism. She notes, however that "as a result, his fictions produce the curious impression of simultaneously acknowledging

and refusing to deal with specific histories of oppression [...]"(207). Alice Munro, too, in her *Lives of Girls and Women*, takes a male-dominated context and brings women to the surface. Janet Beer, in "The Lives of Boys and Men in the 'Lives of Girls and Women'" (2001) states that, "the rapidity of social change is reflected in the accumulated detail of people's lives in Munro's fictional small town"(126). These authors tend towards superficial conservativism, while making an effort to subvert gender convention even within rural and working-class environments.

In an article on agriculture and masculine dialogue in *Country Boys*, joint authors Gregory Peter, Michael Mayerfeld Bell, Susan Jarnagin and Donna Baur note consistent cultural references to the land as a female, typically to be controlled: "To these men, there are farmers who 'rape' the earth, and there are those that treat the land the way 'she' should be treated" (23). In MacLeod's writing, however, the environment has adopted a tough masculinity. His men are caught up in relationships with the weather and the water, as well as with the animals with which they share the land, over which there is cast a strongly traditional manliness. MacLeod's men do not conquer the land or sea, but rather treat both with fearful respect, often dying by the winds, water and ice.

More notably, MacLeod's women exemplify a fierce masculinity that defies traditional gender roles. In fact, even when objects are gendered as feminine, such as the boat in the story "The Boat," which is named after the wife of the aging fisherman, they take on an abrasive and violent persona, which is consistent with the overarching masculinity of his stories. Despite appearing to adhere to a traditional binary gender model, MacLeod shows himself as a postmodernist in his movement towards a new gender. He works within the conventions of masculinity as a means of offering a new

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approach. MacLeod's characters, both men and women, admire strength, resilience and fortitude – traditionally the hallmarks of manliness – in all genders and thus create new genders that effectively accommodate the impositions of their environment. A close reading of his texts will provide evidence for this argument.

The women in MacLeod's texts contribute to a gendered performance. Butler claims that part of the performance depends on the audience, describing the feedback given by the individual's culture. In existential terms, this means that the Other provides the definition of the self. MacLeod's women have a large range of independence and power within their own gender, but they tend to perpetuate the gender roles needed to continue the traditional life of which they are part. The mother in "The Boat," for example, resents her husband's love of books, considering them a waste of time and frivolous distractions, and she becomes enraged when her daughters take after their father's interests in life outside the fishing village (117). She prizes the conventions of their family life, resenting progress and change, but she is also notably aggressive. MacLeod manages at once to depict female strength while still suggesting that it has ever been thus for these families. He is subverting gender binaries but doing so in contexts that are rigorously traditional, offering change through characters who themselves fiercely resist it.

Like Beauvoir's characters, MacLeod's men largely define their gender with their bodies, and so, as they age and deteriorate, issues of the self and personal change are particularly acute. Because of this dependence on the body, the aging character is particularly vulnerable and perfectly positioned to change and grow in a Bildung tale of development. In *Men and Masculinities* (2006), Stephen Whitehead discusses the postmodern aging male who is poised to contemplate personal growth:

There may, for some men, be dignity and opportunity in ageing, while for others

the years from fifty onwards may signal a deep and lasting existential crisis,

compounded by insecure work conditions, health problems, crisis of confidence over

sexuality and relationships, and deepening recognition of their own mortality. (200)

Whitehead continues to suggest that men are susceptible to insecurity that is tied directly

to the body: "For if masculinity is about occupation, vigour, activity, mastery and

overcoming space, then ageing is the inevitable process that puts under question such

dominant representations of maleness" (200). If aging challenges masculinity, MacLeod

uses his aging men to challenge the culture that has imposed that masculinity in the first

place. The males flounder under the pressure of their jobs and bodies while the women

replace them as representatives of the masculine values which have driven the men's

action until now.

MacLeod's men are predominantly large, strong and rough Maritimers who rely on

their bodies for their livelihoods. They are fishermen and miners, their bodies described

by MacLeod in detail as they age and succumb to the physical nature of the seemingly

predestined male roles that define who they are. This masculinity is exemplified in the

title story of the collection, *Island* (2001), a story of a woman who lives alone in a

lighthouse. In "The Road to Rankin's Point," a young man is paired with his aged

grandmother as they both face unknown futures. "The Boat" offers a snapshot of place

and gender as key factors in identity. Close readings of MacLeod's fiction allow for an

appreciation of the impact of existentialism on late-life Bildungsromane, but particularly

of the connection between Beauvoir and MacLeod. MacLeod's major contribution,

however, is not simply a male answer to Beauvoir's gendered experience, but a new

masculinity in the form of both traditionally recognized genders rather than one.

There is in MacLeod's work, moreover, a subtle style that demonstrates existential

preoccupations that are prevalent in contemporary late-life fiction. While his characters

deal with the great existential question of self, they also challenge, in postmodern ways,

the traditions and cultural assumptions that have shaped their lives. For MacLeod's

characters, gender and tradition are akin to the environment. They fight against its

unrepentant and relentless nature but depend upon it and work within its restrictions.

Historiographic metafiction critiques the past – and in MacLeod's case, traditional gender

roles – while using its style. In MacLeod's work one sees a reoccurrence of characters

lamenting the end of a particular era. Traditions in work and family life are failing for

one reason or another, and it is at this point of transition that characters experience an

existential coming of age. Furthermore, Hutcheon's notion of the "ex-centric" – the

postmodern trend towards those people and places at the margins of society – is apparent

in MacLeod's articulation of regionalism and its relation to gender identity formation.

"The Island," for example, features a woman moving from femininity to masculinity to

androgyny, seemingly grappling with Butler's idea that gender is fundamentally

unnatural. What MacLeod is offering in "Island" and other stories is not further probing

of gender conventions but rather evidence of a new form of women's masculinity.

Through a close reading of his texts, I will establish the growing female masculinity in

MacLeod's work that is somewhat at odds with the increasing sense of suffocation of

masculinity felt by their male counterparts. The intimate, homosocial nature of the male

community in *No Great Mischief*, for example, demonstrates the hopeless sense of male

destiny for MacLeod's men, while the virtues of the masculine tradition of strength and resilience are prized by the woman of "The Boat." Finally, an analysis of "Island" will show how abandoning an expected feminine performance in favour of one that is both masculine and, at times, androgynous, can be liberating for a female protagonist.

The Masculine Symbolism of *No Great Mischief* and "The Boat"

No Great Mischief is MacLeod's only novel, and it appeared a decade after his last collection of short stories. It is an example not only of male models of small-town regionality, but also of late-life reflection and growth. It is the story of the MacDonald clan, a family of physically and emotionally resilient men, and is narrated by Alexander MacDonald, who tells of the end of his family's masculine legacy. Alexander moved away from the Maritimes and became an orthodontist, leaving the mining and fishing life and fulfilling his family's hopes. He tells his tale as a middle-aged to late-life man with the wistful distance of one who has grown out of his family traditions and places. His life choices are shown to contrast those of his family. Alexander's parents and one of his brothers die crossing the ice to the island from the mainland when he is only a toddler, and he is raised by his grandparents. When another tragedy takes the life of a cousin with whom he shares a name, he takes a break from his studies and joins his brothers and cousins to work in the mines. It is in this environment of physically and emotionally demanding work that we come to understand the men of the MacDonald clan.

MacLeod describes the nature of this life of rural tradition and masculinity through the bodies of the men. The conditions underground in the mines eradicate light and the men's knowledge of day or time, symbolizing their blind commitment to their gendered

occupations. MacLeod posits the homosocial environment as a microcosm of hyper-masculinity, as the men's work, play and disagreements are tied directly to their bodies. Alexander describes his brothers cutting the callouses off their hands:

> Where the dead skin had been cut away, the flesh was first white and then pink when it came in contact with the deepened pulsing of their blood. On the next morning when their hands gripped the axes or chains or ropes from their lobster traps, the callouses would begin to build again. My brothers were always careful not to cut so deeply as to cause their blood to flow. (184)

The hardening of the men is emotional as well as physical. They refrain from emotional exploration or dialogue, but instead have accepted the difficulty of the lives they lead. The familial and regional expectations of the men demand that they take up their occupations and gendered performances willingly and without challenge. The mines themselves symbolize the lack of freedom and choice for the men, and as they snipe at each other and lose sense of the outside world, the reader understands the strain of the gendered expectations felt by this community of men. MacLeod's men and, as I will examine, women, subscribe to a strong maritime code, one of masculine regionalism that looks dubiously upon those who come from elsewhere and particularly those who choose to leave their communities. The men's big, rough hands and bodies are prized because they are seen to signal manliness, honesty, and oneness with the earth. To deny the expectations of their bodies and their communities is shown as suspicious and dishonourable behaviour.

As MacLeod's men age, they also demonstrate an existential move towards a revised subjectivity marked by the subtle ways in which they challenge expected gender roles.

Whitehead discusses the aging male body and its relationship to change: "Masculinity is not static and unchanging over a male's life; it changes just as the body is transformed through ageing" (200). Discussing the shifting notion of the gendered self in postmodern culture, he states,

> Yet, despite its inevitability, such a process was perhaps more predictable for past generations of men than for present. For the dominant discourses around aging appear to be undergoing some profound shift, ushering in new and possibly less restrictive ways of thinking about age and the body, both women's and men's. (200)

In accord with Whitehead's insight, MacLeod's men tend to take on reflective and nostalgic personae that embody a subtle femininity as they age. The women, meanwhile, who have lived for so long alongside the heady masculinity of their communities, often replace the male models of fortitude and resilience.

The environment provides a regionally masculine context for both genders in MacLeod's narrative. For MacLeod's men and women, their identities are confined to the physical world of the Maritimes. Alexander's brother Calum demonstrates this insistence on a regional self in his pitiful existence in a seedy Toronto apartment. He lives out his days there until he breaks with this contradiction and makes a final trip with Alexander, home to die. It is painful for Alexander to see his brother living as if he were one of the family's wild collies pent up in a cage.

Throughout MacLeod's writing, the male characters – along with the occasional female character – live and die with the rocks, water and dogs of their villages. As they grow older, they succumb to their increasingly frail bodies, typically ending in highly dramatic deaths that tear apart the very bodies that defined their lives. This is symbolic of

their abdication of masculinity, as though they relinquish their manliness when their bodies are destroyed. Even before their deaths, however, the aging male characters often appear to be unsure how to reconcile the aging body and the imperative of pushing that body to maintain a masculine identity. Death appears to save them from the indignity of dying quietly – indoors and unable to work – even in the violence of the act itself. Despite the emasculating destruction of their bodies in death, the male characters are spared another emasculation, that of witnessing the body becoming useless in old age.

While MacLeod's work is full of nostalgia and regret, there is also strength and resilience found in the lives and stories of the characters. The elderly grandmother of "The Road to Rankin's Point" states that, "No one has ever said that life is to be easy. Only that it is to be lived" (150). This sentiment is existential at its core: we have no choice but to make choices. The suggestion is that one must go forward even in the face of difficulty, and while this embodies the modernist existential tradition, MacLeod also employs postmodern techniques to undermine these tenets. There is a postmodern irony in MacLeod's ultimate treatment of the strong bodies of his men: that the commitment to tradition that the men and women forge through lifetimes of isolation and physical hardship is in vain. They are only fodder for the land and sea they endeavour to conquer. The masculine ideal, therefore, is not sustainable.

Despite the hardship that befalls MacLeod's men, they continue to make life choices even within the challenges of their gendered experience. There is an element of hope in their relentless move towards the future. They commit to their gendered performances with fierce loyalty, despite the fact that their lives are rich with stories of tragedy and despair. In "The Boat," the fishing vessel of the protagonist's father and all the physical

manifestations of the job signify manliness. The father's existence depends on his ability to ready his boat for fishing, and the year comes when the protagonist, the only boy in the family – another example of a father/son pairing in MacLeod's work – watches his father become ill and old "all at once" (118). The preparation of the boat falls on the shoulders of the son and the mother. The boat is named after the mother, a stern and stubborn beauty whose maiden name was Jenny Lynn. The *Jenny Lynn* arguably represents the expectations that the mother has for her family. She is entirely unsupportive of her husband's love of books, discourages her son from staying in school, and is humiliated by her daughters' wish to leave the village. In this way, the mother has defined the father; he is caught in a gender trap.

Later, it is disclosed that the husband never wanted to be a fisherman at all, but at his wife's bidding he maintained the male occupation he shared with the men of his village. Day after day, he returns to a boat named after his unflinching wife. Reverence for the boat speaks to the strength and masculinity of the mother. The father, meanwhile, becomes more and more flexible in his gender. His preoccupation with literature and support of his daughters' urban pursuits suggest a dreaminess and emotionality that is typically reserved for female characters. His wife's insistence on an adherence to a traditional gender code for all members of the family is a prevailing theme in the text. Her disappointment in her daughters' refusal to stay in the village and marry into the fishing life, while not the dominant narrative thread, is more evidence of her strict expectations. The protagonist, meanwhile, learning of his father's true nature, states:

I thought it was very much braver to spend a life doing what you really do not want rather than selfishly following forever your own dreams and inclinations. And I knew

that I could never leave him alone to suffer the iron-tipped harpoons which my mother

would forever hurl into his soul because he was a failure. (122)

This is a prime example of the expectation of regional masculinity, passed on from

generation to generation. The notion that it is brave, which can be read as manly, to

adhere to a predetermined masculine life, and that to follow one's desires is thought to be

selfish, speaks to the tight and suffocating bind of tradition felt by MacLeod's men.

A code of honour forces men to stay the course of expected occupations, and to do so

for others in order to maintain familial responsibility. The notion of personal pursuit is

thought to be selfish, decadent and indulgent. Finally, the son promises to give up school

and fish the seas with his father "as long as he lived" (122). He does so until the day his

father is knocked from the boat by terrible winds, his body to be recovered a week later.

The manner of the father's death, at the hands of the sea that sustained his identity, both

underlines the role of the body in the masculine model and provides further evidence of

MacLeod's use of postmodern irony:

His hands were shredded ribbons as were his feet which had lost their boots to the

suction of the sea, and his shoulders came apart in our hands when we tried to move

him from the rocks. And the fish had eaten his testicles and the gulls had pecked out

his eyes and the white-green stubble of his whiskers had continued to grow in death,

like the grass on graves, upon the purple, bloated mass that was his face. (125)

The fact that he is thrown to the sea by "Jenny Lynn," whereupon his hands are destroyed

and he is castrated, is an ironic enactment of the patriarch's own gradual emasculation

through both his rural occupation and his aging. The boat, in this scene, functions as a

surrogate of the wife, supplanting the husband's strength while the sea robs him of his

physical manhood. The rough environment that once defined him becomes the source of his demise. In this sense, a masculine persona "kills" him, just as his career as a fisherman erased his personal sense of self as characterized by his love of books and knowledge. In this way, "The Boat" is like Beauvoir's texts that see women as defined by the men in their relationships. MacLeod demonstrates that the Other is not only women; the expectations of other men are equally constraining.

The aging father of "The Boat" offers a sad depiction of a late-life Bildung character. The existential call for change and reform is denied by his family and ignored by the father. A relenting figure, the father defaults on his imperative to choose and acts instead in what Sartre calls bad faith. He allows others to define him and goes through the motions expected of his gender. Like Beauvoir's claim, he is not born but becomes a man through his life choices. The pairing of father and son offers an example of the dual education between the late-life character and the traditional, youthful coming of age protagonist. For both men, the Bildung climax comes with the son's choice to join his father in his masculine vocation and to maintain the family honour. After the father's death, the son leaves the village, his familial obligation seeming to have been lost overboard with his father.

The son clearly feels obliged to fulfill his masculine destiny while his father is alive, despite the fact that it is his mother who most fervently maintains traditions. For the mother, the life of a fisherman's wife is the only meaningful life. Her daughters, "tired of darning socks and baking bread," leave their fishing village one by one to marry men from large cities who know nothing of the fishing life. These men are, by virtue of not being fishermen, not considered men at all: "My mother never accepted any of the young

men, for in her eyes they seemed always a combination of the lazy, the effeminate, the dishonest and the unknown. They never seemed to do any physical work […], they were not her people and they were not of her sea" (118). A lack of desire or ability to perform physical labour is tantamount to a lack of manliness for the mother, who represents the new female masculinity found in MacLeod's work. "The Boat" demonstrates the shifting or exchanging of gender roles in MacLeod's work. That the father is depicted as a dreamer, longing for another life, shows him not only as frustrated by the long masculine tradition of his community, but adopting traits traditionally thought to be feminine. In contrast, his wife Jenny Lynn, shown as aggressively masculine – the symbolism of the boat that kills the father as a particular example – is an example of the female character that not only adopts a masculine persona, but does so with a sense of power.

The Female Experience in MacLeod's Stories

Although MacLeod's characters are predominantly men, he maintains a keen appreciation for the female experience. Like Jenny Lynn in "The Boat," the women in his stories are consistently resilient, and they too are subject to the expectations of their gender. Two stories in particular demonstrate the late-life development of women, who take on traditionally masculine traits. In one, the woman is defined by her family; in the second, she is defined by her rejection of the role of wife and mother. "The Road to Rankin's Point" (1976) and "Island" (1988) illustrate a move towards a female-based masculinity, which values the virtues previously reserved for men while demonstrating – through postmodern irony – the sacrifices the women make in order to achieve their new gendered performance.

While a young man narrates "The Road to Rankin's Point," the story focuses on the experiences of a grandmother struggling to maintain her independence. The story is told by the woman's grandson, Calum, who is privately dying of cancer. Calum arrives early for an annual familial pilgrimage to Rankin's Point in order to convince his grandmother that she should no longer live on her own. The grandmother's farm is near a village at the edge of the sea, and MacLeod describes the treacherous and beautiful terrain surrounding the home, which stands alone with finality. MacLeod's description of the difficult road leading to the woman's home echoes the notion that, for the heroine, any act of re-identification is neither easy nor welcome. The family calls the road to the house "The Little Turn of Sadness" because it is here that the woman's young husband dies while walking in the cold. The description of the husband's body mangled by the elements and watched over by the loyal dogs reoccurs in this story. He is another male in the list of men in MacLeod's work to succumb to the weather or to a tragic accident. The grandson narrator of "Rankin's Point" claims, "I can know my grandfather only through recreated images of his life and death. Images of the frozen snow and the hot blood turned to crust upon it" (140). In "Rankin's Point," however, we follow the surviving woman, and later in the story learn how she insisted on keeping her children despite the intervention of governmental officials who believed that the family would be better off if she gave them up for adoption.

Despite the heroine's resilience, the animals in her life seem to have taken over as symbols of her masculine ideals. Her sheep, for example, which appear in the story before we even meet the grandmother herself, are described as follows:

The thick-shouldered rams, with their heavy, swinging scrota almost dragging on the

ground, move only at the last minute and then begrudgingly. Their flickering eyes

seem to say they would as soon lower their heads and charge than relinquish this stony

trail which they obviously consider to be theirs. (133)

Animals routinely embody the masculinity of the characters in MacLeod's stories,

particularly the women, who are not shown to be as physically rough as the men, but who

adhere nonetheless to masculine resilience. The grandmother's rams are a warning to

those who come to challenge her independence. They depict the aggression and

unflinching insistence on maintaining their own freedom.

Macleod enhances the heroine's masculine resilience by depicting her young male

counterpart as physically weak. Her grandson, who readers would expect to function as a

symbol of strength, confidence, health and protection, is dying, and seeks refuge in the

company of the aging grandmother. His family, meantime, expect that he is there cajoling

her into abandoning her position as head of her household. As the grandmother prepares

for the onslaught of concerned family members as though preparing for war, her

grandson trims her yellowed fingernails. He remarks,

Trimming the yellowed, unclean fingernails of my grandmother I realize that I am

admitted now to the silent, secret communication that the strong have always known

in their relationship with the weak. It is the strength and knowledge that my

grandmother has previously so fiercely exercised over her own children and in many

cases her children's children as well. (143)

In this symbolic and intimate act, we detect the irony underlying the entire story. The grandmother may require her grandson's help, but only to maintain the outward appearance of strength.

Calum's participation in his elderly grandmother's preparation is evidence that the young and healthy male takes a supporting role in postmodern self-development narratives. The grandmother knows, perhaps more than anyone in the story, the challenges of being an elderly woman. She continually resists offers of help and resolutely determines to maintain her own independence. She visits friends in the nursing home nearby, and is familiar with the fears of the residents: "What does it mean that old women in nursing homes suffer from real and imagined atrocities? And are the imagined ones less terrifying because they are not true?" (146). Despite the promise that life will be easier elsewhere, despite her age and her gender, the grandmother clings to her own freedom. She tells the family that young Calum will stay with her at the farm and care for her, not knowing that he is not expected to live much longer. He claims to have come to visit "partially at least, hoping to find such strength for the living of my life and the meeting of my death" (150), inspired by the fierce independence of his aged female relative. Calum offers an example of MacLeod's unique conceptualization of masculinity. He demonstrates a gender performance but his strength actually hinges on the female masculinity of his grandmother. This innovation is unlike Beauvoir's in that it uses postmodern irony to illustrate the performative nature of gender. The unlikely subjects of hyper-masculinity in MacLeod's writings are women. Specifically, the women prize the characteristics that are shown as constrictions on their male counterparts.

The characters of this story mingle genders and, like other contemporary late-life narratives, the old is paired with the young, as they move towards a definitive end to both of their lives. In this story of personal development, the inclusion of the two main characters' deaths at the close does not make the narrative one of decline or hopelessness. With the future determined and the end in sight, the focus in this story is on the past, and there is a great deal of reflection on Calum's part that inspires character growth. As he observes, "Sometimes when seeing the end of our present our past looms ever larger because it is all we have or think we know. I feel myself falling back into the past now, and hoping to have more and more past as I have less and less future" (153). While Calum and his grandmother share tears in "weakness," the young man's emotional maturation transform this story into one of strength. Similarly, the grandmother maintains her independence and freedom until her final hour and, in the end, she and her grandson submit to deaths not at all unlike that of her husband or other men in MacLeod's writing. On one hand, this suggests that, despite the strength that female masculinity lends to women, it is an unreliable performance for women as well. On the other hand, it is possible to read the grandmother's death as the last of her personal choices that is carried out on her own terms. This interpretation positions the woman with hope and independence to the end.

Interestingly, while this is a story peopled with family members and is about a woman defined by her role in the family, the grandmother maintains her subjectivity by keeping the family at a distance. Sartre says that the Other defines us, and Beauvoir explores the acuteness of this truth in the female experience. The grandmother knows that others – individuals whom she has had a hand in creating – define her, but she refuses to allow

them the final say. In this way she is like Meaursalt's mother in Camus's *The Stranger*. In late life she insists on defining herself. While the family leaves the farm reassured that Calum will be taking care of the elderly woman, it is the grandmother who has given Calum his final feelings of strength and identity. Beauvoir's credit as the first writer of age studies is due to her appreciation of woman as Other and of age as an impediment to freedom. MacLeod demonstrates a kind of victory in "Rankin's Point" for the aging woman who maintains her freedom and a sense of self that is separate from her family. More notable, however, is the masculinity that is recognized as a viable, traditional aspect of the woman. She can be her own woman and her own man too.

As in "Rankin's Point," the reader can see much of Beauvoir in "Island." Both these stories are situated in challenging natural environments that act as supporting characters, and one recalls that Beauvoir was an energetic hiker and outdoorswoman, interest that made their way into her fiction as well. In addition to a fierce independence on the part of both women in these stories, there is in "Island" a combination of loyalty and love and also detached sexuality reminiscent of Beauvoir's life and stories. The independent woman, and how others see her, is an experience painfully familiar to Beauvoir and now also sensitively explored in "Island." "Island" extends the rejection of traditionally feminine performances in MacLeod's work, positioning the protagonist as one who not only eschews female conventions, but opts instead for solitude found in occupation, and a masculine – and at times gender-free – persona. She is the most extreme of MacLeod's characters that challenge gender roles, and the conclusion does not suggest that her choice has made her happy necessarily. MacLeod writes of the complications of

continual self-development, commenting, as Beauvoir did, on the challenge that gender

and age posit to self-education.

The story opens on an aged woman, the keeper of the lighthouse two miles away from

the mainland. The first person ever born on the island, details of the protagonist's birth

were overlooked or confused by religious authorities when she was christened and she

was documented as having a boy's middle name, Angus, rather than her own, Agnes. The

error predicts the eventual shifting of her gender performance over the course of the

story. In this story of independence and isolation, a woman assumes the typical bachelor

life. Suggesting a naturalness to this gender formation, Macleod again turns to animals

early in the story to sum up the masculine life of farming and fishing. Describing the

calves that come from the mainland for pasturing, MacLeod writes: "stifled rams would

be brought in the same way, to spend monastic, frustrated months in all-male company

before returning to the mainland and the fall fury of the breeding season" (378). There is

an undercurrent of frustrated sexuality in this story, with the aggression and sexuality of

the animals symbolizing Agnes's own masculinization. Furthermore, the name Agnes

comes from the word for "lamb," marking the heroine as of the same hardy species as the

rams. While the masculinity of the grandmother of "Rankin's Point" takes the form of

confidence and fortitude, Agnes's masculine performance is one that prizes privacy,

solitude and the occasional sexual initiation.

Agnes's gender identity and performance moves in stages. She begins as a young

woman practicing the demure traits of her mother. She has a child, which might typically

represent a capitulation to a feminized identity, but she abdicates this life, choosing

instead to take up a traditional bachelor life in the lighthouse. Here she lives alone,

dresses in typically male clothes and does not bother to correct any correspondence addressed with her father's initials: "No one came to question the keeper of the light, and the sex of A. MacPhedran seemed ambiguously unimportant" (396). Assuming a masculine identity gives Agnes a freedom that is arguably unattainable as a single mother in her fishing village. Living and working alone also gives her access to independence, although her evident loneliness speaks to a need for Others or, in Butler's terms, an audience for her gender performance. In a highly charged sexual scene, Agnes acts on her female masculinity and makes an erotic and powerful choice when a boat of fishermen arrives close to the island. She directs them to a monster catch of mackerel that she could spot from the lighthouse, and they happily oblige with much success. While waiting for them to come ashore, she changes from her overalls into a dress. This sartorial transformation signifies that, while the heroine is pursuing her partners with a typically masculine drive, she can readily perform the long-held gender codes that would require her to don a feminine costume.

After the frenzied mackerel catch, which itself is another link between nature and testosterone within MacLeod's work, the men relax on the island rock with Agnes, who has sex with each in turn. MacLeod describes the fish, semen and the mating of dogs, nature acting as symbolism for the carnal activities: "She touched her body. It was sticky with blood and fishspawn and human seed" (403). The heroine initially imagines that she will get pregnant again, but this does not occur. One might read this lack of pregnancy as signifying Agnes's loss of womanly abilities, as she returns to being what she calls "the mad woman of the island" (406). The scenario, however, can also be read as the positive outcome of her being true to her non-normative gender, fulfilling her heterosexual desires

while continuing her independent existence. Her willingness to risk pregnancy implies the fearlessness of a new becoming beyond the womanly traditions of her upbringing.

The latter reading, however, is perhaps too celebratory. There is a great sadness in Agnes, whose name I have already used more than MacLeod does in his text. While her choices are evidence of a new movement towards greater gender flexibility, she is nevertheless a woman isolated because she is born before her time. Had she chosen to live alone, unmarried and working a typical man's life on the mainland, she would have suffered rejection from her community. MacLeod's choice of a woman as the protagonist of this story is important. Were the character male, his living alone in a lighthouse in the company of dogs, having abandoned a child to the care of his family, would not denote the same anguish that this story does with its heroine. The story is a commentary on the paths available to women should they chose to challenge conventional gender roles. Agnes is referred to as "she" throughout the story. There is in this narrative choice an implication of flexibility and anonymity. It suggests that, by virtue of being practically nameless, Agnes is free to carve out her own gender within the changing stages of her life. Adding to the existential tenet that the self is continually in transition, MacLeod proves that gender continually changes as well.

MacLeod's stories tend to prize relationships with others, but with a firm prioritization of the self. The grandmother in "Rankin's Point" demonstrates by her choices and her actions that she loves her family, but she loves herself more. She maintains that she knows her own best interests and has control over her own destiny. This demonstrates a shift from Beauvoir's texts, in which the characters suffer a great deal under the burden

of dependent relationships with others and only develop independence under extreme duress. MacLeod's characters honour others and are in many ways duty-bound within their rural contexts. There is, however, fluidity within their expected gender performances. The natures of the individuals show that they are more complex than gendered or rural ideologies. The characters learn and develop self-awareness as they age, moving beyond their gendered expectations in subtle ways. The father in "The Boat" refuses to give up his passion for literature, ordering more and more books as he grows old so that his room becomes a sanctuary of pages under which he hides from the regimented cleanliness and simple austerity of his home and village. The grandmother in "The Road to Rankin's Point" would rather die than capitulate to age and gender. Agnes in "Island" forges a path through choices that she seems to make unconsciously, but her life represents the largest gender fluidity. Agnes is notably alone, and one reading of her solitude is that it is easier to manipulate and change one's self and one's gender without the influence of others. It is ironic, however, that while Agnes is the most able to move within a variety of gender roles, she is in the end the most confused, driven mad by her isolation. This suggests a conundrum: that others play a role in one's personal development and the need for community contrasts with the community's constricting expectations.

MacLeod challenges established modes of gender by positing a female masculinity that mirrors the long-established male order of his regional narratives. His employment of irony in the description of this masculinity, whether it be the subtle feminization of men, their frustration with long-established masculinity, or the hyper-masculinity of women, acts as a postmodern underpinning of history. His characters are often depicted as at the

end of a traditional era and MacLeod uses nostalgia and history to offer a reexamination of the gender roles that have been part of their communities. The complicated self-growth of his characters reflects a changing understanding of the self and gender, and where the individual stands on the postmodern road to self-discovery.

Chapter 4:

In Defense of Old Boys: The Men of Michael Chabon and Nick Hornby

In *Men to Boys: The Making of Modern Immaturity* (2008), Gary S. Cross argues that

today youth are able to extend the pleasures of the cool teen into their twenties and

well beyond because that culture of consumption gives them permission to delay and

evade the self-denial of family and marriage. [...] The result is that men and boys see

the same PG-13 movies, play with the same T- and M-rated video games, and line up

for the same thrill rides at Island of Adventure. (254)

Cross is another in a growing number of scholars of gender or cultural studies who

observe what they contend to be the continual decline of the urban male into immaturity.

They maintain that urban men are opting for an immature and irresponsible life of boyish

things over one that includes the responsibility of being an adult in a conventional family.

These scholars suggest that young men are clinging to adolescent indulgences that, they

argue, must be abandoned as a prerequisite for adult masculinity.

Few dispute that there is indeed a new model of manhood. It has evolved over time,

but began to attract notice in the early 1990s, when men were increasingly seen not only

to eschew heteronormative conventions, but to prize the distractions of youth well into an

age traditionally recognized as part of adulthood. Contrary to Cross and others, I would

argue that, for some men, fluency in the language of boyhood and popular culture

represents not a roadblock to maturity, but a route towards its fulfillment. Through an

examination of father-son relationships and male-male friendships in the work of Michael

Chabon and Nick Hornby, I wish to theorize the role that popular music, style, comics,

baseball, and other hallmarks of boyhood can play in the development of the responsible, urban male, enabling a deeper engagement with others and the development of mature masculine identities. In the previous chapter, I employed Alistair MacLeod to show ways in which deconstructionist notions of gender offer potential solutions to Beauvoir's depiction of cultural misogyny as irresolvable. Here I aim expose the challenges of contemporary theories of the overgrown boy, and explore how aging male characters address existential and gender-based dilemmas by circumventing convention in the pursuit of responsible lives. For the protagonists of Chabon's *The Yiddish Policeman's Union* and *Wonder Boys* and Hornby's *High Fidelity* and *About a Boy*, the "unserious" pursuits of childhood and male-male relationships actually make possible their entrance into a more mature masculinity. The trajectory into adult manhood exemplified by these characters suggests that we should re-examine the boundaries of "boyish things" and consider whether it is useful or accurate to identify these pursuits in themselves as childish and irresponsible.

Cross implicitly identifies heterosexual marriage and family as the apotheosis of adult masculinity (1); to reject a conventional family life, it seems, is to choose to remain a boy forever. By narrowly focusing on marriage as the fulfillment of responsible manhood, Cross's analysis overlooks the heterodox relationships and family structures through which contemporary men achieve maturity. The characterization of heterosexual men as irresponsible and fearful of commitment assumes that they want the conventional heteronormative life, when this might not be the case. The conclusion of *High Fidelity* demonstrates, for example, that men and their partners can find a satisfying life, not through the nuclear family, but through the vehicle of popular culture. The relationships

forged in and through popular cultural and what are often called boyish pursuits –

whether filial or romantic – have the potential to foster and fulfill adult masculinity. For

example, men who relate to children through an understanding of sport, game, and play

are often considered good fathers. Similarly, I wish to argue, men who relate to one

another through comparably boyish pursuits are defending codes of male-male friendship

that define the changing model of the urban, contemporary male.

The narratives I examine here provide evidence of a social reevaluation of urban

masculinity, a vision of manhood compatible with the flexibility and vulnerability that

men in Alistair MacLeod's work and home environments would eschew. Heterosexual

love and family have, throughout most of the twentieth century, been the sine qua non of

adult masculinity. The men in Hornby's and Chabon's novels, however, do not resolve

their crises of self-development by entering into this context. Instead, they grow up

through non-physical relationships with other men or through the cultivation of fulfilling

identities in which popular culture plays a strong role.

The Playboy and the Man-Child: Theories on the Declining Male

In the 1980s and 90s, two new modes of masculinity that had been bubbling under the

surface of everyday life became widely recognized culturally: the personae of the New

Man and the New Lad. The New Man demonstrated emotionality and compassion in a

way that aligned him with femininity. He was given permission to be affectionate and

open with his emotions, and selflessly provided for his family. The New Lad, by contrast,

was culturally understood as a man who moved to the other end of the spectrum of

masculinity, unabashedly prizing himself above others and seeking to reward himself

with material goods and carnal pleasures, unburdened by either responsibility or guilt.

In *Masculinity and Men's Lifestyle Magazines* (2003), Rosalind Gill outlines the cultural perception that the rise of the New Lad was a replacement for the softer, more emotional New Man. Gill quotes a press release from Condé Nast from 1991: "*GQ* is proud to announce that the New Man has officially been laid to rest (if indeed he ever drew breath). The Nineties man knows who he is, what he wants and where he's going, and he's not afraid to say so. And yes, he still wants to get laid" (qtd. in Benwell, 38). As Gill claims, the existence of such widely accepted types of masculinity is not necessarily trivial: "New Man and New Lad are best treated as discourses (or interpretive repertoires, myths, or cultural constructions) for making sense of contemporary [...] masculinity" (38). Rather than replacing or displacing each other, such constructions coexist in our culture and contribute to a collage of masculinities. It is noteworthy that advocates of the New Lad, such as *GQ*, pitted themselves against the New Man, who was characterized as weak and unmanly.

When the New Lad emerged, he was positioned against feminism and depicted as a reaction to balanced gender relations. Increasingly prizing style and consumerism, the New Lad asserted himself against the rise of feminism and critiques of masculine power. While Gill acknowledges the elements of feminist backlash in the formulation of the New Lad aesthetic, she also draws on the work of other theorists of masculinity (Jackson, Stevenson, Brooks, Ehrenreich) to argue that there is more to New Lad masculinity than a reaction against feminism. The New Lad could also be understood as a response to the notion of the male as provider and responsible breadwinner. As I note in the previous chapter, MacLeod's blue-collar working men, by contrast, maintain a strict code of

masculinity that, while in keeping with some of the traits of the New Lad, such as strength and emotional reservation, also hinge on a working life that is bound to providing for family. The New Lad privileges work as a self-driven enterprise, permitting men to release themselves from traditions and commitments that men such as MacLeod's characters ultimately find suffocating.

The impact of these disparate forms of masculinity was manifested in the emergence, in the late 1990s, of fiction focused on the experiences of both single women and single men. While *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) heralded the rise of a genre of whimsical depictions of single young, urban women, Nick Hornby was hailed as the father of New Lad fiction or lad lit. Gil notes:

> The protagonists of lad lit are heterosexual men in their late 20s or early 30s who are "on the make" – pursuing women, alcohol and football, looking back nostalgically upon childhood and youth and forward apprehensively to commitment, marriage and children. Anti-aspirational, inept, optimistic and self-deprecating, the heroes of lad lit mirror precisely James Brown's vision of *loaded* [men's magazine] as "for the man who believes he can do anything, if only he wasn't hungover." (51)

Susan Faludi was among the first to remark on the specific ways in which men's identities have been challenged. In *Stiffed* (1999), Faludi observes that the ideal of the masculine provider has been challenged both by dramatic economic shifts – which made consumption, not production, the primary ground of identity-making – and by feminism, which challenged both cultural and economic aspects of the gendering of men and women (13). Faludi draws a direct connection between feminism and the new model of

adult masculinity: boys who were expected to inherit a hypermasculine legacy of being providers were entering a world of feminism (13).

Faludi claims that the shrinking role of the male provider or the loss of a "useful role in public life" is comparable to the female experience of the mid-20th century. Certainly consumer culture arrived at the male doorstop prior to postmodern times; however, the combination of a rise in the "ornamental" man (Faludi) – meaning that men were being positioned as consumers and as objects – and the diminishment of the "need" for men on a large scale, created a gender-wide sense of displacement:

> More than a quarter century ago, women began to free themselves from the box in which they were trapped [...]. Women were able to take action, paradoxically, by understanding how they were acted upon. Men feel the contours of a box, too, but they are told that box is of their own manufacture, designed to their specifications. Who are they to complain? For men to say they feel boxed in is regarded not as laudable political protest but as childish whining. (13)

Men, criticized as immature and uncommitted, are rejecting heteronormative conventions of masculinity, just as women had begun to do decades earlier. The difference is that contemporary women are now more often congratulated for eschewing expected modes of responsibility and gender-based traditions, while men are condemned as failures for the same. Women's rejection of these norms occurred, in part, in the context of a social movement, through which women actively articulated why they were making these choices and asserted their agency in doing so. Men, as Faludi notes, were culturally chastised for trying to articulate their own feelings of suffocating gender expectations.

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The new masculinities that emerged in the late-twentieth century were responses to these challenges and represent both an embrace of new gender norms and a backlash against them. Despite their difference, the New Man and the New Lad both reflect the dual character of this response. As urban men, like women, are marketable targets of consumer culture, they try to navigate their masculinity within the confines of a culture that no longer requires them to uphold historical modes of manhood. In contemporary culture there are at least two commonly recognized labels for masculinities of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century: the New Man and the New Lad. Both are described as deeply tied to feminism and the female experience, but also, importantly, to consumer culture. The rise of consumer identities is an intrinsic part of this shift in masculine identity. Not only does it reflect the decline of producer or occupational forms of identity – so important for men of a previous generation – but consumption becomes the mode through which males are able to express liberty and agency.

The male consumer has a history that goes back more than a century, but the manifestation of the materialistic man of recent years is most directly a development from playboy culture. In *Playboys in Paradise* (2001), Bill Osgerby employs Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity to explore male gendered performance. Osgerby argues that the playboy culture of conspicuous consumption and irresponsibility is not a new phenomenon of the 1980s and 1990s, but rather one that developed in the late-nineteenth century. Outlining differing perspectives on the nature of playboy culture, he contends that playboy culture represents an important step towards a less repressive gender system. Ogersby argues that the existence of a variety of masculinities allows for a constructive overlap between gay ideas and ideals, on the one hand, and those of the

straight male, on the other. As such, this development provides more flexibility in male identity. It is notable that this masculine vision of "liberty" presented by the playboy is one that sees social obligation and entanglement as anathema to freedom. It is a kind of radical libertarianism that arguably runs counter to feminist understandings of intersubjectivity and interdependence. Osgerby claims that, regardless of contemporary debates on the nature of masculinity and consumerism, the rise of the masculine consumer was part of the rise of the American middle-class, "whose habitus and value system was oriented around an ethos of youthful hedonism and leisure-oriented consumption" (x). The young male was given permission to indulge in selfish preoccupations.

The popularity of the playboy archetype itself rose dramatically after World War II, where it served as a counterpoint to the soft, fatherly ideal found in television, advertising, and movies of the time. As Osgerby notes, magazines such as *Esquire* made efforts not to appear too feminine while still appealing to a rising consumerism and sexual hedonism. Frivolous or aesthetic pleasures and purchases were associated with female consumer culture. *Esquire* and *Playboy* needed to reclaim these modes of consumer desire as masculine pursuits. In particular, *Playboy* magazine, which emerged in 1953, cloaked its sexuality in highbrow interests and wealth:

> In its celebration of a masculine universe of consumption and narcissistic display, *Playboy* testified to the growing hegemony of a middle-class male identity for whom responsibility, domesticity and puritanical abstinence were anathema, while hedonistic fun and sensual indulgence were defining virtues (122).

Furthermore, *Playboy* was unapologetically individualistic: it encouraged the notion that the male need only provide for himself, eschewing notions of responsibility and commitment to others. It was amidst this rising culture of the male consumer that the New Man and the New Lad began to develop as recognized modes of masculinity.

Cross opens his examination on the immature male by asking, on behalf of heterosexual women, where all the real men have gone. Grown men, he argues, are currently refusing to be grown-ups:

> But of course, the problem goes much deeper – from the failure of millions of
>
> husbands and fathers to commit to the financial and personal duties of marriage and
>
> family to a culture that seems increasingly ignorant of the past and unwilling to
>
> assume fiscal or environmental responsibilities for the future. Boy-men are the cause
>
> of much of the cynicism in the culture. (1)

Cross continues to offer a range of examples that direct diverse social ills to the character of the single, American male (5). He suggests that married men are more successful in their jobs and relationships than their single counterparts. This clear heteronormative bias makes a strict link between a conventional nuclear life and personal success and satisfaction (5).

A wealth of articles and books about boy-men or men-children has been written in recent years, many of which cite the same examples of the failure of contemporary men to outgrow childish pursuits. Almost all make reference to grown men playing video games[i], and many identify the eternal bachelor "Mr. Big" of the hit TV show "Sex and the City" (1998-2004) as the epitome of childish manhood. "Mr. Big" exemplified the man who refused to commit to a partner and enjoyed all the fruits of his wealth on his

own. Too often these analyses overlook the ways in which women, too, engage

enthusiastically in pursuits deemed the purview of the boy-man. The female protagonists

of "Sex in the City," for example, were proudly uncommitted for much of the show.

Similarly, women over the age of 35 dominate the casual video-game market (2007).

Cross's work exemplifies the lament for a lost masculine ideal, a lament that perhaps

explains the tendency to see "extended adolescence" as a problem exclusive to men. In a

reference to the tradition of coming of age adventure, Cross observes that "recently the

male quest for adventure has tended to lose its 'civilized trappings' with goals of service

and sacrifice to the greater good – and become instead the pursuit of the pleasure of the

adrenaline flow" (5). He argues that what was formerly the transition into manhood has

become a life of never-ending play. Certainly today's culture has given permission for

men – and women – to perpetuate youthful pastimes and perhaps more importantly,

continually to reinvent themselves. Cross's reference to the heternormative nuclear

family, and his use of words such as "duty" and "sacrifice," are arguably out-dated and

unreflective of an aging culture of men who are making an effort to try to develop their

identities under the weight of past generations' masculine expectations and conventional

models.

In *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men* (2008), Michael Kimmel

builds the case that young males have "no road maps, no blueprints, and no primers to tell

them what a man is or how to become one" (1). In addition to lamenting the immaturity

of men, Kimmel explores the culture that might have contributed to the changing

landscape of masculinity, particularly for the urban male. He observes that, in recent

years, the goal of becoming a strong, manly provider – much like the rural masculinity of

MacLeod's men – has been replaced with a more nebulous model of consummate consumer: "Many men feel 'downsized' – both economically and emotionally; they feel smaller, less essential, less like real men" (1). The rise of consumer identities is an intrinsic part of this shift in masculine identity. Not only does it reflect the decline of producer or occupational forms of identity – so important for men of a previous generation – but consumption becomes the mode through which to express liberty, agency, and masculinity.

In Defense of Aging Boyhood: Male-Male Friendships, Father-Son Relationships

In masculinity studies, the topic of male-male relationships tends towards notions of the male as emotionally immature and unlikely to foster meaningful friendships. Stephen Whitehead remarks, "Whether it be fear of rejection, vulnerability, wariness, guilt, lack of self-esteem or simply emotional illiteracy, many men appear unable to expose their inner selves to the outer world" (157). Whitehead continues that to claim that men can change this behaviour is to suggest that men are not deeply entrenched within masculinities that pertain to both their social and individual experiences. Michael Kimmel and Amy Aronson argue, however, that male friendships have long been the benchmark for friendship: "Throughout history, male-dominated images characterize the ideal of friendship. Women were incapable of 'true friendship'[...]. Stories, poems and essays exalted men's heroic friendships" (321). Furthermore, they claim, by the mid- to late-nineteenth century, male-male non-sexual relationships were described with the same language as romantic relationships.

Kimmel and Aronson note the transition at the turn of the twentieth century to a more ambivalent approach to male-male friendships, a change they attribute to the social and scientific labeling of gay men as "homosexual" and perverse towards the end of the nineteenth century. Suddenly male-male friendships, ranging from platonic to erotic, lost their normative status, becoming exceptions rather than traditions:

True friendship, in the early twentieth century and continuing to this day, would be seen as something only women were capable of experiencing. The ideal form of friendship is now typically described with more 'female' language: intimacy, trust, caring, disclosing, and nurturing. (322)

Contemporary males were thus pressured to establish new cultural discourses for articulating their same-sex allegiances.

Kimmel and Aronson maintain that male friendships in the current masculine climate tend to be based less on disclosure and more on activities such as sports and shared interests. Whitehead cites research (Williams, Franklin) that shows that male friendships continue to prosper in particular cultural groups even above those of women. He acknowledges Peter Nardi's studies (1992) which suggest that, for gay men in particular, "friendships are a defining characteristic of their lives" (158). Kimmel and Aronson similarly draw from Nardi's 1999 research into the friendships of gay men, which concluded that almost 80 per cent of gay men cite their closest friend as being a man with whom they are not involved sexually.

The current resurgence of some forms of male-male friendships deserves close examination. As young men negotiate their path towards adult male identities, there are continued questions as to how they will relate to both men and women. Kimmel notes

that "bromance," or a close relationship between heterosexual males, is fraught with homophobia and misogyny. When discussing their sometimes-intimate friendships with other men, young men continually reiterate that they are straight. In an interview on CBC radio's "Q," Kimmel discusses the extended adolescence that he refers to as Guyland wherein the motto, he claims, is "Bros before hos" (Jan 14, 2009). The loyalty between young men, as represented in popular culture, is more valuable and important than any other relationship, and is expected to be carried on into adulthood. Kimmel goes on to claim that virtually any writer or theorist who approaches men to ask about male-male friendships is met first and foremost with the claim, "I'm not gay." He asks, "So the question is, can you have intimate male friendships and homophobia at the same time?" The result of bromance, he suggests, is that, in spite of claims of closeness, there are no intimate bonds developed for fear of being perceived as homosexual.

Fiction from the 1990s describing aging men at a point of personal change often relies on varied male-male relationships. Romantic relationships with women are the catalysts for transition for the characters, but women tend to play supporting roles in the narratives. The primary relationships in the lives of aging playboys tend to be with other men who achieve a great deal of closeness while eschewing convention, unconcerned with cultural responses to their friendships. Chabon's and Hornby's works, for example, demonstrate this exploration into wide-ranging male friendships within late-life Bildungsromane. Just as MacLeod offers a new form of masculinity in his females' adoption of male-coded traits, these authors' characters provide a contemporary perspective on family and intimacy via male characters' dependence on other men. There is a sense of shared experience in these urban male characters. They acknowledge that they need not rely on

heteronormative modes of family in order to develop or become men in the Bildung

sense; their friends, fathers, and mentors will support them. While some protagonists

share much with the New Lad characteristics of indulgence, their response to male

friendships typify the New Man traits of devotion and love directed towards other men.

These protagonists return to boyhood friendships that prize loyalty and secrecy in ways

that are at once child-like and progressive.

Father-son relationships, or those that involve men at opposite ends of the age

spectrum, are also the recipients of recent scrutiny. In his article, "Has the New Dad

Arrived?" (Guardian), Kimmel explores contemporary fatherhood and its own history of

masculine ideals. In America, Kimmel suggests, fathers are now spending more time

actively parenting, but he warns that men continue to fall into a trap of being the "fun

parent." The New Lad has become the New Dad:

> In both Europe and the United States, men's increased participation in childcare also
>
> carries some dangers. [...] He takes the kids to the park and plays soccer with the kids;
>
> she stays home. "What a great time we had with Dad!" the kids announce as they burst
>
> through the kitchen door to a lunch mum prepared while also folding the laundry and
>
> vacuuming the living room. (Kimmel)

Kimmel continues that, in Canada and other countries, male participation in family life is

significantly higher, something he attributes to government-supported programs such as

paid parental leave. The key point for Kimmel, and for Cross as well, is that fathers

appear unable to parlay their involvement into something beyond play.

Cross discusses fathers-as-friends in detail, outlining the history of such relationships.

Advertising as early as 1910 encouraged men to bond with their sons over train sets. In

another example, a book published by the Boy Scouts in 1942, *The Book of Hobbies for Fathers and Sons*, encouraged fathers to relate to their sons on a boyhood level (83). For Cross, these activities were too often pursued by fathers who simply wanted to relive their own childhoods: "Hobbies offered men a chance to share in a boy-man world of escape from expectations of maturity, even in neglecting child-rearing. While childcare experts called for fathers to be manipulative pals training boys to be men, often these fathers were men just trying to be boys" (82). Similarly, Mark Simpson remarks that

Consumerism wants to make us as atomized as possible – because the more

individualized we are the better consumers we are [...]. This is why masculinity is so

fragmented today and incoherent – and irresponsible. It used to be the tradition.

Literally passed down from father to son. But we live in a society where tradition

stands in the way of profit. So bye-bye daddy. (Chaudhry)

Ironically, I would argue, the father-son bonds of today's urban men and their sons emerge as a bi-product of their individualism. These men are not cultivating such relationships as an expression of a cultural value that prizes engaged fatherhood, but rather as an unintended outgrowth of their individualistic pop cultural pursuits. In Chabon's and Hornby's texts, the characters come to their father-son relationships accidentally and sometimes against their self-serving wills. They become, by means of their fluency in boyhood, consummate mentors.

Faludi laments the loss of male usefulness, meaning the role of the male provider, and its fallout, the male consumer:

The men I came to know [...] talked about their fathers' failures in the most private

and personal terms, pointing inevitably to the small daily letdowns: "My father didn't

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teach me how to throw a ball" or "My father was always at work." That their fathers

had emotionally or even literally abandoned the family circle was painful enough. But

these men suspected, in some way hard to grasp, that their fathers had deserted them

in the public realm, too. (596)

Faludi suggests that the continued adoption of consumerism by the adult male left him

feeling untethered and anxious. Undoubtedly, this is how the protagonists of male fiction

from the 1990s felt. They adapted, however: the urban male who maintains his boyish

preoccupations is capable of translating those into reviving bonds of mentorship and

male-male friendship. Contemporary urban men create new masculine identities through

popular culture, finding the resources for relationships in the very wreckage of their exile

from traditional masculinity.

In his latest book of non-fiction, *Manhood for Amateurs* (2009), Chabon explores the

role of the father, as well as son and husband in contemporary culture. He begins the

essay "William and I," by stating: "The handy thing about being a father is that the

historic standard is so pitifully low" (11). He notes that, as a man, "all I need to do is

stick around – and the world will crown me and favor me with smiles" (18). Chabon

grants that he is taking advantage of the double standard of parenting that congratulates

men for being present at all, and that, compared to his own father who "didn't know what

the hell he was doing" (16), he is doing a fine job. In subsequent essays, however, he

notes the important role that "boyish things" – baseball and comics, for example – play in

his continued efforts to be a good father. His own father sends him some baseball cards

for his twenty-eighth birthday and despite the fact that he is not that well versed in

baseball itself, he values the historic symbolism: "What's important was that baseball,

after all these years of artificial turf and expansion and the designated hitter and drugs and free agency and thousand-dollar bubble-gum cards, is still a gift given by fathers to sons" (123).

An avid collector of comics, Chabon won a Pulitzer for his comic-based book *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000), and comics resurface in his discussion of fatherhood. In "Surefire Lines," he guides his sons through the drawing of a "girl superhero." Notably, Chabon's sons are the only of his children interested in comics. While he acknowledges that the comic world has done a disservice to women (and that he has too in his crafting of creditable female characters for which he claims to receive regular criticism), it is evident that through the language of play, specifically a kind of play that has been historically designated as "boy play," he has bonded with his sons:

> I admired the girls' work vocally. But I knew that I didn't fully understand their reasons for wanting to draw what they were drawing and not what we boys all wanted to draw. The inescapable corollary of this knowledge has often seemed to be that while I also vocally admire my daughters themselves, I don't fully understand them, either. (230)

Boy-based hobbies, in other words, are Chabon's means to relate to his sons.

The examples of boyish things represented in Chabon's essays have been largely accepted as a kind of cultural romanticism of boyhood. Baseball and comics are largely exempt from the distain directed at video games, for example, as a destructive force in the male psyche. This was not always the case, of course; the Comics Code of 1954 outlawed most comics as a morally reprehensible influence on young minds. With time, however, sport and comics – the latter of which has risen to literary heights unimagined

in its past – have become more acceptable pastimes supporting male bonding. Video games, movies, and popular music, however, other hallmarks of the apparent man-child, are routinely cited in theory and fiction as means by which adult men reject self-development. Cross's analysis subscribes to a gender-bias that ignores the huge percentage of women gamers, choosing instead to depict aging men as commitment-phobic, basement-dwelling video game addicts. This perspective risks making morally relative value judgments on what are acceptable as cultural pastimes for grown men. As Chabon notes in a recent interview with the *Globe and Mail*, "it's bizarre and arbitrary to draw designations between saying it's okay to sit down to watch Claude Rains movies with your kids but it's somehow not okay to sit down and play video games with your kids" (McGinn).

Hornby's males unabashedly indulge in music, video games, style, and frivolity. As Kimmel notes in *Guyland*, however, Hornby's men are examples of lads who have grown up (15). The urban male in Hornby's novels parlays the performances of gender and the superficiality of consumer culture into a means to develop. While both are considered artificial or constructed, Hornby finds a path to a meaningful identity. Judith Butler's claim that "[g]ender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (43-44), reminds us of the constructs of popular culture: stylized, plastic, superficial. Historically seen as lacking the depth of high art, popular culture acts, in Hornby's texts, as a symbolic parallel to the urban male gender model – both of which are presented, at least at first, as hopelessly unsubstantial. When Hornby's lads grow up, they do not abandon their boyish preoccupations. Instead, they

employ their expertise in popular culture or boyhood things to begin an adult life of deeper engagement with others.

Nick Hornby: Popular Culture as a Vehicle for Masculine Maturation

Historically, consumerism has functioned as a means of permitting men to establish their individuality. Brent Shannon marks the emergence of the consumer male as early as the late 1800s, claiming that marketers focused on misogynistic depictions of the female consumer to entice men to venture into the world of materialism. "Through this system of negative gender-coded stereotypes," he argues, "men were increasingly urged to take control of their consumption rather than leaving it to women. [...] Thus, the old equation of women as consumers and men as producers was shifted to one in which women were bad consumers and men were good consumers" (602). In modern society, masculinity and consumerism became linked and just as MacLeod's men are subjected to a male model tied to their environment, Hornby's men and their masculinities reflect contemporary, popular culture.

The urban males of Hornby's texts are depicted as well versed in, even fatigued by, feminism, and they have come to recognize that there may not be a traditional heteronormative life available for them any longer. Contrary to Cross's analysis that such men reject commitment and engagement, Hornby's characters are the masculine products of a society that prizes a preference for popular culture and individuality as central traits of both men and women. Cross laments the disappearance of "real men" ostensibly on behalf of heterosexual women, but the women in Hornby's novels appear not to want such men at all. Hornby allows that his male characters are "childless, feckless males"

(McGuigan) and capitalizes on their indulgent preoccupation with material goods and popular culture, but when they come of age over the course of his novels, they do so with their preoccupations intact.

The novel *High Fidelity* (1995), for example, depicts an urban male, Rob, who is defined by his erstwhile male friends and his expertise in popular culture. By the end of the work, he develops into a man who can engage in a satisfying, unconventional relationship through the pursuit of interests he has cultivated since his youth. Similarly, in *About a Boy* (1999), Hornby writes of Will Freeman, an aging male who is wealthy, indulgent, and well-versed in boyish things. Will's self-development is deeply tied to an untraditional father-son relationship that allows the aging urban male to bond with a young man through things that are conveyed, at the outset, as superficial.

When the reader first encounters Will, he is rating his own "coolness" in a men's magazine (6). In typical fashion, the questionnaire assigns "coolness points" for a variety of characteristics shared by what Cross would call the boy-man: sex without commitment, a collection of popular music, high-priced haircuts, experimentation with drugs, liberal politics, and experience in haute cuisine. As the narrator notes, "The bad news was that he hadn't ever had sex with someone whose photo had appeared on the styles page of a newspaper or magazine (minus two)" (6). Thus early on, the reader is led to envision Will as comically self-indulgent, an example of the New Lad. He is, as his name suggests, a free man: no burdens of family or commitments to a significant other, no job, no monetary concerns or interests that go beyond the range of his own existence. Will is independently wealthy, has few friends, and engages in the wider social world only to satisfy his own self-indulgent desires.

Hornby contrasts Will's frivolity with Marcus, the young son of a depressed, suicidal woman. Marcus is constantly bullied at school for taking no interest in the boyish things that Will maintains are the cornerstones of a happy existence: video games, television, fashion, music, and so on. Despite these differences, Will and Marcus become unlikely partners in a parallel coming of age.

It is no secret that Will has no interest in being a father figure or becoming a parent himself. At the start of the novel, when visiting friends who have recently had a second baby, he is asked if he has any desire for his own family, and he thinks to himself, "I would rather eat one of [your child's] dirty diapers" (9). Nevertheless, the young Marcus pursues a relationship with Will, who grudgingly provides companionship and becomes a relatively stable figure in Marcus's life. Notably, Will's understanding of boyishness proves to be the only fatherly resource he can provide, as he coaches Marcus in popular culture in order to help him survive his youth.

At the same time, it is Marcus's persistence that fosters Will's re-evaluation of his own preference for remaining disengaged from others – young and adult alike. As the narrator explains, Will "had imagined entering their world, but he hadn't foreseen that they might be able to penetrate his. He was one of life's visitors; he didn't want to be visited" (105). Although Will engages with another person reluctantly, his relationship with Marcus does lead him ultimately to grow up. Hornby's choice of Will's stimulant being a younger male reflects the author's wish to explore changing manifestations of today's family and male relationships.

Hornby also alludes to Will's own childhood, with a disappointing father whose only legacy was the steady income from one hit Christmas song. Hearing the song playing in

the subway, Will finds himself thinking of Marcus: "[T]here was more than a whiff of the Freeman household in [Marcus's] flat," the character observes, "you got that same sense of hopelessness and defeat" (134). It is the protagonist's discovery of this parallel between his childhood and Marcus's that leads him to acknowledge that "if he had any decency in him at all he would have to take Marcus under his wing, use his own experience of growing up with a batty parent to guide the boy to a place of safety" (134). It is this very sense of similarity between Will and the young boy – a childhood commonality – that leads the New Lad to become a responsible adult.

It is also the commonality of boyhood culture that nurtures the relationship. While Hornby shies away from having Will and Marcus discuss their troubled home lives, he has modes of popular culture expose the boy's mother, Fiona's, inability to help her son navigate his boyhood. While Fiona has tried to school Marcus in the music and fashions of her generation, Will is quick to point out that avoiding current popular culture is tantamount to exposing the boy to bullying and ostracism.

The novel ends with Will sharing Christmas with Marcus, Fiona, and other characters who have come to be Will's family. When Fiona suggests that Marcus loves Joni Mitchell and the boy rebels – "I bloody hate Joni Mitchell" (286) – the protagonist feels assured of the youth's survival. The implication is that Will and Marcus are able not simply to survive, but will flourish into engaged, responsible men – not despite their juvenile interests, but precisely because of them.

Will and Marcus's mutually supportive father-son relationship, like their parallel comings of age, is underwritten by cultural references that foreground boyhood bonds. Moreover, contrary to MacLeod's men, for whom convention and labour are integral to

their manhood, the affluent Will demonstrates that the urban man, indeed the urban father figure, need not be an actual working father at all. He should, however, understand boys and the popular culture in which they are, as a community, enmeshed.

In his first novel, *High Fidelity*, Hornby extends the boy culture mentality of the father-son relationship into the realm of non-heteronormative adult encounters. Hornby uses his irresponsible protagonist, Rob Fleming, to explore the possibilities for popular male culture – in this case, music – for enriching and sustaining non-heteronormative partnerships. Rob is a struggling, middle-aged music aficionado whose interest in the subject verges on obsession. His ambitious live-in girlfriend has just left him and his record shop, where he keeps company with two equally dysfunctional males whom he refers to as "the musical moron twins," is failing. When the reader meets Rob, he is already aware of his many shortcomings – his wasted life, his lack of fashion, and his absence of ambition. In short, he is the perfect Bildung character. It is, however, his seemingly unproductive passions that lead him to explore more fully his male-male friendships, the relationships that ultimately foster his self-realization as a mature adult.

Hornby employs music as a tool for drawing out Rob's existential self-development. Music is described as being at the root of Rob's personality; he muses early on that he is a bi-product of his obsession. In Rob's view, his very existentialist angst is inseparable from his art "What came first – the music or the misery?" he asks, "Did I listen to music because I was miserable? Or was I miserable because I listened to music?" (25). Later, describing how particular music makes him feel, he remarks, "sentimental music has this great way of taking you back somewhere at the same time that it takes you forward, so you feel nostalgic and hopeful all at the same time" (63). This description of his

emotional state is quintessentially existential in that it links reflection to action: for existentialists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, being aware of the past with an eye to the future was key to self-development.

While music offers Rob's ultimate development, his obsession also underlies his stalled potential. He and the employees of his shop are anti-social and awkward, often resorting to boyish teasing: "We got to adolescence and just stopped dead; we drew up the map and left the boundaries exactly as they were" (151). Rob himself worries about his station in life and the role that music plays in his avoidance of realizing his potential as a grown man. He does not yearn for better pay or children or any other markers of a traditional family life, but he frets that he seems not to have grown up, and that music might play a role in his stunted development.

As with Will's ultimate use of boy culture to foster his own maturation, it is Rob's interest in music that ultimately draws him out of the juvenile morass in which he has spent years wading. Both of Rob's main gestures of re-invigoration – his hosting of an event at the record shop and his re-launching of his previous career as a dance disc-jockey – are rooted in the music that defined his youth. As Rob notes after the event at the record shop, "For an afternoon I was working in a place that other people wanted to come to, and that made a difference to me – I felt, I felt, I felt, go on and say it, *more of a man*, a feeling both shocking and comforting" (288). Hornby thereby suggests again, as he had with Will Freeman, that a male's boyhood interests can both preserve his masculinity and encourage his self-realization as a male adult.

In an analysis of *High Fidelity*, Barry Faulk notes that Rob's happy ending with his girlfriend Laura, rather than following the traditional path towards marriage, is actually

rooted in Rob's rise to greater responsibility through his love of popular culture. As Faulk notes, Laura turns her energy not toward a model of monogamous commitment, but to "establishing Rob's confidence within his vocation and career. [...] She demonstrates her capacity to join Rob in the role of rock curator" (157). The relationship, in this sense, is established much as the male-male relationships, with the core bond being a mutually inspiring form of popular culture. As Faulk notes, "The narrative of *High Fidelity* is vitally concerned with supplanting such a view of rock appreciation as arrested development by transmuting it into the element that holds the heterosexual couple together" (158). While a male's juvenile fandom can challenge heteronormative patterns of maturation, Falk proposes, Hornby also demonstrates rock music's potential to bring a heterosexual couple together. I would argue, however, that Laura is not primarily invested in rock music, but in helping Rob develop. She recognizes that the way to help him achieve his full development is through assisting him in turning his love of music into a productive, long-term engagement.

For his part, Rob begins to understand that personal happiness and growth hinge on the needs of others. Early in the novel, when Rob attempts to return some albums to Laura that he had given her previously, she argues that he had only bought them for her because he thought that she *should* like them. At the time, Rob is baffled by this act but, in the final words of the novel, he states, "I start to compile in my head a compilation tape for her, something that's full of stuff that she's heard of, and full of stuff she'd play. Tonight, for the first time ever, I can sort of see how it's done" (323). Through this shift in perspective, Rob's stunting obsession becomes a symbol – indeed, a means – of the modern, urban male's maturation. Hornby suggests that it is neither un-manly nor

unmasculine to nurture boyhood interests into late adulthood, because they have the potential to play a role in developing a life interwoven with others. While they eschew marriage, Rob and Laura become mutually engaged in popular music, content to nurture shared interests rather than adhere to convention.

Michael Chabon: Male Intimacy Replaces the Heteronormative

Kimmel's discussion of bromance highlights extremely close male relationships that avoid any form of intimacy that might be construed as homosexual. Where Michael Chabon's men challenge this notion is in the devotion they have to their male friends. While Kimmel's bromances might have their own form of devotion, for Chabon, these relationships are not centrally circumscribed by homophobia. The author delves into queer-straight friendships and nonpaternal adult-child kinships that problematize the assumptions reinforcing the heteronormative family model.

This strategy of de-normatavizing the traditional family is apparent, for example, in Chabon's *Wonder Boys*. In this novel, protagonist Grady Tripp is an aging playboy who is a disappointment to himself and others. Tripp is a romantic incapable of being faithful, and a writer whose last book was a distant memory. The two characters who most affect Tripp on his quest for self-fulfillment are his young pupil, James Leer, and his oldest friend and editor, Terry Crabtree. Both fall outside conventional male models of masculinity, eliciting in Tripp his capacity for friendship and mentorship and revealing him finally to be not just an aging boy, but also a responsible man.

At the outset of the novel, Tripp's wife has just left him, and his mistress (who is also his boss) is pregnant, and yet amidst these challenging male-female relationships, it is his

strong connection to his boyhood friend that resonates most deeply with the reader, illustrating the priority that male-male friendship takes in Chabon's work. The late-life development of his male characters relies on a fluency of boyhood loyalties.

In preparing to meet up with Crabtree after some time, the protagonist notes his dread, but the actual occasion results in an emotional response: "He reached up with both arms to embrace me and I held on to him for an extra second or two, tightly trying to determine from the soundness of his ribs whether he loved me still" (7). This admission of love, paired with physical affection, appears contrary to the fear of intimate bonding that Kimmel noted in contemporary male culture. Chabon further undermines Kimmel's assumption of homophobia by having Crabtree's queer identity arise as an accepted footnote to their friendship. Tripp loves Crabtree, and his narrative forays into their boyhood and the evolution of their friendship illustrate the large role that his friend plays in his life. The two share knowing looks and speak a boyish language of nicknames, resentment, and loyalty. Rather than a reflection of contemporary, urban open-mindedness, however, Chabon constructs these signifiers of male-male love as rooted first and foremost in boyhood friendship.

Part of Tripp and Crabtree's bond arises from a shared humiliation. Robert Strikwerda and Larry May discuss comradeship in *Rethinking Masculinity* (1996), noting that strained shared experiences such as war, camp, or voyages provide an environment that allows for self-disclosure and intimacy men would not normally engage in (112). At the outset of their adolescent friendship, Tripp and Crabtree share the humiliating experience of plagiarizing another writer's work. This shared crisis forms the foundation of a quick friendship and an uninterrupted relationship over a lifetime of marital and career turmoil.

In his nonfiction work *Manhood*, Chabon explores the impact of "the woman" on male friends. Chabon notes that the sadness a man feels when a woman enters his friend's life is that he has come face-to-face with the fact that his friend is indeed a mystery: "You have no access to that innermost kernel of him, and you never did" (110).

In *Wonder Boys*, it is not a woman but the young James Leer who not only comes between the two boyhood friends, but also offers Chabon the opportunity to probe the contemporary aging playboy as a kind of father figure. In his scholarly study, Cross explores the notion of dads who are "play pals" (82), those fathers who take pleasure in youth simply to relive their own youth. With Tripp and Leer, however, Chabon offers a more complex conception of the adult/youth relationship. Tripp is at once a mentor for Leer and a fellow sufferer. They are co-adventurers, coming of age in tandem. As a queer, suicidal talent, Leer does not fit the typical role of the heroic coming of age character, but instead mirrors Tripp's quest for self-development. By offering Leer as a friend for Tripp, a vulnerable and sympathetic counter to the traditional young male, Chabon underscores the necessity for a shift from the heternormative and conventional coming of age, and prizes the fluency of youth for the aging male.

Leer comes between Tripp and Crabtree when Crabtree, who has long been Tripp's editor, becomes interested in Leer not only romantically but also as a new and young talented writer who might revive his career. Leer inadvertently commits the ultimate contemporary male betrayal while drawing comparisons to the modernist female experience. Beauvoir's books were often concerned with the threat that youth posed for an aging woman. Chabon positions Leer, who supplants Tripp in youth and talent, as the key to the black box of Crabtree's heart, and a threat to Tripp's prized relationship. Here

Chabon has an opportunity to demonstrate the flexibility of male-male friendships and mentorships as the male relationships overlap. His text challenges the notion that friendships, romantic relationships, and the experience of age need occupy definitive spaces in one's life. He takes the contemporary male model of bromance and explores the true intimacy and subsequent pain that male-male friendships can involve. Furthermore, Chabon suggests that these are growing pains, and the path to responsible adult male development relies on an acknowledgment of the role played by boyhood friendships. When Tripp finds Leer and Crabtree in bed together, he is jealous, but not of the sexual relationship. What is clear is that there is a possibility of intense intimacy in male friendship that need not be related to heteronormative relationships, but that can result in the same tendencies found in romantic partnerships. The contemporary urban male experiences the anxiety of aging and being replaced in the same way that women have traditionally been portrayed, Chabon suggests, but the male intimacy is not necessarily romantic. Men need male friends, Chabon's characters illustrate, and they often love them deeply.

By the conclusion of the novel, Chabon strays into heteronormative territory, as Tripp marries and has a child, and Crabtree fades from the novel altogether, despite being such a transformative character in Tripp's development. In his latest novel, however, Chabon tests the virtues of Cross's model of male masculinity and maturity and extends the value of boyhood for the aging male. In addition to a male-male friendship that is in keeping with Chabon's preoccupation with close platonic male relationships, *Policemen's Union* argues for the importance of occupation in the development of male identity outside heteronormative convention. While MacLeod's men, in their homosocial labour

environments, are deeply tied to the nuclear family, Chabon's character Meyer Landsman suggests that the urban man need not be engaged in work out of familial duty, but rather as a means of self-development and satisfaction.

Chabon initially offers traditional heteronormative life as a successful contrast to the failings of his protagonist. Ultimately, however, he challenges this, and grants his protagonist a satisfied life outside convention. Detective Meyer Landsman has much in common with Grady Tripp, but his boyhood friend and cousin, Berko, contrasts with Crabtree in his traditional lifestyle. Berko is a heterosexual family man. As newly divorced Landsman faces a future without children, Berko's wife, Ester-Malke, continues to bear children, which is highlighted as a notable absence for Landsman. Like Tripp, Landsman is shown as a man graced with real talent for his given profession, but who has squandered his health and youth, consoling himself with alcohol. Landsman's final transformation into an engaged adult male is dramatized in part against the backdrop of Berko and Ester-Malke's family, which, by the end of the novel, is struggling for happiness while Landsman at last achieves some measure of personal satisfaction. Although his personal and romantic life remains unresolved, Landsman regains his manhood by means of professional achievement, redeeming himself by solving the central case of the novel.

Berko and Ester-Malke, along with their children, are Landsman's family. In the intimate portrayal of the relationships they share, Chabon eschews the heteronormative family model. Landsman describes the traditional family as a shipwreck and as survival: "That's what a family is. Also the storm at sea, the ship, and the unknown shore. And the hats and the whiskey stills that you make out of bamboo and coconuts. And the fire that

you light to keep away the beasts" (309). The experiences of Berko and Ester-Malke expose the fragility of the happiness and fulfillment promised by heterosexual marriage. What Chabon shows in the end, through Landsman's prodigious skill at his job, is that his contribution to family life need not rely on any heteronormative constructs.

The hyper-masculine persona of the American detective functions as an effective backdrop for Chabon's more subtle consideration of male-male affections. Policing has long been a homosocial occupation for men, and relies on conventional notions of masculinity based on physical strength, bravery, and force. Chabon does, in fact, apply such tropes to Berko and Landsman, who, in dialogue and physical description illustrate conventional manliness. While Chabon offers Landsman's ex-wife, Bina, as a superficial contrast to tradition in her role as Berko and Landsman's boss, he is, in the end, faithful to the direct connection between Landsman's masculinity and his occupation. Landsman regains his manhood, which stood to be threatened by Bina's position or Berko's seemingly satisfied life, in his solitary solution of the case at the heart of the novel. In solving the case, Landsman is permitted to feel manly and accomplished. Despite his personal failings, Landsman's skills as a detective are never in doubt, and this fact keeps him grounded in a historically manly gender model. He is identified primarily with his job: "[T]he truth is that Landsman only has two moods: working and dead. [...] When there is a crime to fight, Landsman tears around Sitka like a man with his pant leg caught on a rocket. It's like there's a film score playing behind him, heavy on the castanets" (2).

Where Chabon bends convention is in his approach to fatherhood and heteronormative family life. At the centre of the case are stories about Berko's and Landsman's fathers, both of whom failed to sustain deep connections with their children. Landsman's

alcoholism and depression are rooted in his father's suicide, while Berko struggles with

his father's inability to be kind or compassionate. These ineffectual fathers of the

previous generation highlight the ways in which Berko and Landsman, both participants

in their conventional and unconventional families, are active in fatherly roles. Landsman

longs for a child and yet does not adhere to a nuclear family, even at the conclusion of the

novel. While Landsman may grieve the absence of a child of his own, showing his

fatherly tendencies, he does not directly lament the ending of his marriage. Landsman is

the godfather of Berko's children. Chabon insists that they are his family, and that this is

a sustainable and satisfying role for Landsman, although he does occasionally stray into

envy of his closest friend having so many children.

There is something reminiscent of boyhood in Chabon's choice for Berko and

Landsman as police officers: they continually chase, hide, play a game of sorts to solve

the puzzle that is the crime. While police work is undoubtedly an occupation that

demands maturity, there are in it elements of boyishness that serve to highlight both

Landsman and Berko's kinship and the important role of boyish things in adult life. In

Men and Masculinities (2004), Michael Kimmel discusses the genre of cop movies that

have frequently relied on a similar formula as *Policemen's Union* to serve a particular

model of masculinity. He claims that the 1980s offered a new form of police narrative

that moved into the genre of the buddy film:

Whereas most Hollywood films stress the relationship between the hero and a love

interest, the cop action film replaced the woman with another man for a contemplation

of male bonding in the face of danger. Romance was pushed to the side and masculine

concerns were brought to the fore. As buddy narratives, these films focused on the

relationship between two men and the contrast of their often opposing types of masculinity. (185)

Berko and Landsman demonstrate this form of contrasting masculinity in their differing roles within traditional and unconventional family structures, while the nature of their occupation serves to illustrate their intimate boyhood bond.

Where Chabon's characters differ from the standard buddy film, however, is that, even within a traditionally hypermasculine framework, there is an intimacy that speaks to a progressive masculinity. Berko and Landsman do not shy away from a close bond, as Kimmel suggests contemporary young men do. They are honest confidants, aware of the smallest details of each other's life, and show unabashed concern for one another. The characters are sensitive to each other's aging, and their transitional and existential crossroads. That they are boyhood friends, that "cops and robbers" has grown into an adult profession, does not detract from but contributes to the maturity that Landsman brings to his personal discovery and coming of age.

Cross, Kimmel, and others address an apparent continual decline of the adult male, citing the desire of adults and parents to cling to youth. A recent weeklong feature in the Canadian newspaper *National Post* titled "Grow Up" (Gunter) charts the refusal of urban adults to embrace, or at least acknowledge, their age. Lorne Gunter cites Auberon Waugh – the founder of a magazine called *The Oldie*, which started in 1992 as "an antidote to youth culture" – who argued that people were refusing to grow up because they had lost their faith in God. This is reminiscent of Sartre's claim that, because there was no God, individuals were burdened with freedom. The subsequent fear that we were on our own to make choices and take blame, Sartre argued, caused anxiety and what came to be known

as existential crises. Gunter writes, "If I had to define the transition between adolescence and adulthood, I would have to say it is the point at which you become contented — deeply, fulfillingly contented — without having to be entertained, stimulated or thrilled."

What these continued references to immaturity miss is the role that "boyish things" might play in adult contentment. A commitment to the marks of youth does not necessarily suggest a resistance to age, but rather a recognition of the complexity of individual development. Gunter, like many others, falls into moral judgment by claiming, "When you can fully appreciate an aria as much a rock rift, pleasant conversation as much as a pulsating dance floor, you've arrived [at adulthood]" (Gunter). The enjoyment of high art, Gunter proposes, is an expression of maturity.

Chabon's men recognize their age and know that they are at a stage of development and change. Tripp refers to himself as "blind minotaur" (275) suggesting that he feels like a classic monster who is not simply lost in a maze, but who is read by others as a threat. While his early actions are representative of a man in the midst of a midlife crisis, by the end of the novel he is satisfied with his life, bereft as it may be of adventure. Landsman, too, is under no illusion of his aging stature, and the fact that his job and town have reached the end of their tether by the conclusion of the novel comes as a relief. These men, however, maintain the values of their boyhood, in friendships and occupations, and arrive at mature development in large part because of them.

The aging playboys of Hornby's and Chabon's novels successfully transfer their fluency in popular culture and boyhood into mature roles in unconventional romantic and filial relationships. In a culture that often condemns continued interest and pursuits of their adolescence, these men demonstrate the viability of "boyish things". They offer

their own ways of navigating the maze of existential angst in the aging male experience,

prizing friendship and occupation above cultural expectations of nuclear success.

Notes

[i] See Kay S. Hymowitz's article "Man and Sillyman: How the Model of American Masculinity Became a Stoner with an Xbox " in a recent article in *Wall Street Journal* (23 September, 2008).

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have argued that modernist existentialism has had a substantial influence on contemporary fiction concerning the self-development of the aging individual. More specifically, my exploration suggests that a close consideration of the impact of gender and age on personal development complicates key tenets of existentialism. The existentialists of the first half of the twentieth century recognized the value of exploring their philosophic view through storytelling and, while there are a number of scholarly works on contemporary gender and age studies, it is in fiction that I have found the most compelling evidence of the mark modernism has left on current inquiries into late-life self-development.

Both existentialism and the late-life experience have often been characterized by a sense of hopelessness and pessimism. More recently, however, age-studies scholars have made efforts to explore the positive possibilities of personal change and life-long self-development. Most notably, Margaret Morganroth Gullette, identifying a cultural tendency to associate age with decline, has advocated for stories that recognize in the aging process an opportunity for hope and new life transitions. In my dissertation, I have revealed the unexpected and often tenuous implications of late life from the canonical existentialism of Sartre, Camus and Beauvoir to the postmodern gender-based explorations of the late-life Bildungsroman. I wish to conclude by foregrounding the crucial role of fiction writing in the articulation of existentialism's relation to the late-life Bildungsroman. To do so, I will first summarize my key findings and then demonstrate my conceptual extension of these insights in my own creative fiction.

The Hint of Hope in Canonical Existentialism

Traditional Bildungsromane, or coming-of-age narratives, usually offer a formulaic

arc whereby a life crisis works as a catalyst to move a character into a self-learning

process. The stories of aging characters, in contrast, contain transitions that are more

subtle and reflective. As Charles Taylor contends, Western culture continues to move in a

self-reflective direction, a process that began – for existentialism, at least – in the work of

Søren Kierkegaard. His primary contribution to what would become existentialism was

the recognition of the move from aesthetic to ethical development, a process that

arguably coincides with youth and age. Kierkegaard's fiction and philosophy suggest that

the young self is preoccupied with indulgent and self-serving diversions, while the

developing or maturing individual recognizes the value of an ethical and responsible life.

This conclusion accords with Taylor's suggestion that an indulgent life is one focused on

"outer" preoccupations, while potential change and mature development is hinged on an

"inward" or reflective approach to the self. Inward preoccupations, both anxious and

hopeful, are depicted regularly in stories of aging development, arising in large part not

only from the philosophical concerns of Kierkegaard, but also those of Sartre and

Beauvoir.

Sartre's key departure from Kierkegaard's position involves the disengagement of the

self from God, thereby establishing independent agency for the individual. One is alone,

Sartre contests, and thus has only oneself to hold accountable for one's actions. It is here

that we see the strongest ties between existentialism and late-life Bildung narratives.

Sartre argues that anxiety is rooted in recognition of one's responsibility, not just for

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oneself, but also for others. In later life, the number of one's dependents is potentially larger, while one's role as a caregiver for others often increases, and thus feelings of anxious responsibility are likely greater for the aging individual.

Beauvoir's major addendum to Sartre's position was her observation that the existential claim that all men are free is flawed in its failure to explore factors such as gender and age. Her close examination into the female experience, considered by many as at once groundbreaking and offensive, exposed women as being defined as Other within her male-driven society. Beauvoir's fiction depicts the experience of aging for women as polarizing and lonesome. Demonstrating that the dominant social order in the West forces women into unnatural formulations that leave them at a disadvantage, Beauvoir famously declares that "one is not born woman, but becomes one" (*Second Sex* 301). This insight breaks the backbone of Sartre's existentialism – his claim that all people are born free and that nothing about their futures is predetermined. As Gullette observes, Beauvoir was also the first person to uncover cultural ageism.

In addition to contributing to gender and age studies, Beauvoir exposed the perceived weaknesses of her culture by using both theory and fiction. As Sally Chivers notes, "One of de Beauvoir's greatest (and mostly overlooked) accomplishments is her ability [...] to inhabit different discourses in order to explode them" (5). Beauvoir's use of fiction speaks to her philosophical preoccupations, while she employs stories and anecdotes to enrich her non-fiction texts. She further taps into her own late-life experience within her fiction, which struggles to demonstrate hope in age. Chivers acknowledges Beauvoir's depiction of age, observing Beauvoir's disappointing claim in *Coming of Age* that elderly writers risk repeating themselves in fiction rather than availing themselves of an ever-

developing well of experience. There is evidence of Beauvoir's point of view in her story "The Age of Discretion," which features an aging academic who can no longer make original work. Gullette might contend that this exemplifies ageist pessimism. However, Beauvoir's fiction and non-fiction feature women who reflect on their aging experience. By exposing readers to the challenges arising from the constructs of gender and age, her work suggests a hint of hope for a positive revision of the aging process. Her stories offer development narratives of the aging, applying existential tenets of life-long development to the female experience in particular.

Gender Revisioning in Postmodern Fiction

Beauvoir's theories on gender and age offer feminist revisions of the existentialist philosophy of the time, while her fiction analyzes the aging female through language that is both personal and widely recognizable. The twentieth century was marked by a growing awareness of the malleability of gender that offers a traceable line of influence from the fiction of Beauvoir and other modernist women writers to the later performance theories of gender scholars such as Judith Butler. This perspective on gender has recently received reconsideration in stories that challenge the feasibility of separating masculinity and femininity from a core notion of identity. Masculinity studies, for example, points to a fluid diversity of male identity models in contemporary fiction. The range of models that I have addressed extends from the rural masculinity of characters in MacLeod's fiction to the more urban male models created by Chabon and Hornby.

As I have demonstrated, the recent trend of pegging men as irresponsible for displaying interest in childhood activities and eschewing nuclear models of commitment

(as argued by Gary Cross) echoes the suffocating expectations that women have endured

due to culturally defined gender models. In studies of recent fiction, scholars have often

demonstrated authors' lack of empathy for the male experience, particularly for

contemporary men trying to initiate their own development in the face of the dominant

male models of the past. The challenge for men who are aging within our current cultural

climate is that, if they withdraw from convention and seek their own means of self-

definition, they risk being labeled unmanly. Contemporary culture continues to encourage

men to act in traditional ways, taking on conventional responsibilities lest they are

considered overgrown boys. And yet, in current late-life fiction, the actions of male

characters are often not severe; sometimes they simply choose passivity. Sartre called

such seeming inaction "bad faith," describing it as a form of non-choice in the face of

responsibility. As I have suggested, however, this is not necessarily flying in the face of

an existential call to action. Rather, it demonstrates a form of inward reflection

characteristic of late-life development. Male characters in these recent prose works tend

to behave less rashly, often reconsidering cultural expectations and eventually choosing

to follow paths that suit their own development.

In MacLeod's texts, the stoic, rural masculinity of the men is echoed by a strong

masculinity in the female characters. Such female masculinity, Judith Halberstam argues,

challenges the grip that the male gender has on the concept of masculinity:

> the very existence of masculine women urges us to reconsider our most basic
>
> assumptions about the functions, forms, and representations of masculinity and forces
>
> us to ask why the bond between men and masculinity has remained relatively secure

despite continuous assaults made by feminists, gays, lesbians and gender-queers on

the naturalness of gender. (45)

Here Halberstam's wording suggests that men benefit from "securing" masculine models.

My dissertation demonstrates, however, that masculine conventions are not guarantees of

men's gender security; in fact, these same conventions are depicted in diverse fictional

works as forcing some men to adopt what they perceive to be unnatural gender

formulations. More specifically, such conventions are shown to curtail not simply gender

flexibility, but more broadly the liberty to act outside the traditional narrative of the

nuclear family model. Any gender definition that becomes widely accepted as normative,

I would argue, risks binding individuals to circumscribed choices and self-development.

Offering a variety of examples from diverse genres and media, Halberstam claims that

the masculine female has existed as a historical fixture, "a character who has challenged

gender systems for at least two centuries" (45). Similarly, MacLeod's stories are

traditional in many respects, as are the North American rural lifestyles they represent, but

at the same time, masculine women frequent his narratives in a manner that does not

appear forced. Rather, in accord with Haberstam's insights, these females fit naturally

and necessarily within their environments. That said, many of MacLeod's stories also

acknowledge the pressures of conventional feminine models for women. In "Island," for

example, the character Agnes may be a masculine woman, but her manly traits are

recognized as so extreme that she feels compelled to remove herself from the local

community. Evoking sympathetic self-analysis, Macleod uses the character to highlight

the discrepancies of contemporary rural culture, and to promote a more flexible

conception of gender. In his late-life Bildungrsomane, age itself exposes the false cultural segregation of essential gender models.

Gender, Age, and the Influence of Children in *Between*

My research into existentialism and its relationship to gender models and age in fiction has led me to build upon my own experiences as a female author, and it is with the preoccupations of my research that I embarked upon a book of stories of transition, *Between* (2006). With this collection, I wished to contribute to past authors' interrogations of preconceived notions of gender and age specifically through the lens of contemporary existentialism. With *Between*, I also chose to extend the gender/age analysis to consider the impact that children have not only on the notion of adult males and females, but also on life-long self-development. Here, I wish to focus on *Between*'s exploration of the historic and contemporary complexities of mothers' relationships with their sons, with their female friends, and with other mothers who choose to work outside the home.

In the works addressed in the previous chapters, existentialism primarily addresses concerns about gender and age. The anxieties that characters in these works feel are often by-products of developing or changing identities in the midst of shifting gender and age models. The stories in *Between* similarly challenge the way that women define each other, in addition to offering an exploration into current models of gender and parenthood. Sartre suggests that we attempt to create our identities in isolation from the definitions others have for us, even while we acknowledge our responsibilities in the lives of others. My stories attempt to take this further by addressing the complexities that

gender, age and parenthood add to the equation. By contrasting young and old characters, the works demonstrate that relationships with those at the opposite end of the age spectrum are key factors in the ways in which we define who we are for others and for ourselves. Through the lens of existentialism, a close reading of the stories "Wedding Day" and "Daycare" expose the limited cultural models available to aging women when it comes to their relationships to youth and parenting.

From Sigmund Freud to Beauvoir to contemporary texts, the loss of youth for women has been characterized as a decline and a defeat. Echoing Beauvoir's sentiments on the decline of women's self-worth in the aging years, Kathleen Woodward recently writes, "We have been trained to think anxiously and compulsively as the norm, not the exception. This is the way many women in our culture view the process of aging – as a crisis, as a process of loss which triggers anxiety" (314). In narratives of women's age and self-development, motherhood plays a critical role in these anxieties. The introduction of a child into a story often acts as the turning point in the conventional Bildung model, while the aging of a child impels a transition in the late-life narrative.

Today, women are still largely expected to adapt to motherhood in a way that mirrors their physical preparedness for the task. Contrary to Sartre's existential tenets that the individual is free to make a myriad of choices, age and gender trap the individual through cultural models and definitions. Thus Gullette notes that a female character in the role of mother "finds herself willy-nilly pressed in the middle" (110), referring to the compromised feelings of women who take continual responsibility for others while losing their own agency. As I demonstrate in *Between*, the responsibility of raising children can indeed leave one feeling "pressed in the middle," although there are particulars to this

process that vary based on the gender of the child. Furthermore, as my stories suggest, the abrupt connections and disconnections of motherhood can be countered in part through the cultivation of intimate friendships.

In the story "Daycare," the protagonist Ada takes on the maternally defined role of caregiver that embodies the modern tension between mothers who work inside and outside the home. As a childcare worker, Ada fulfills a form of occupational motherhood, positioning her in the middle of the debate around women who choose to stay at home with their children, on the one hand, and those with children who choose to work outside the home, on the other. In *The Truth about the Mommy Wars* (2006), Miriam Peskowitz notes that, despite claims that neither side of the motherhood binary will budge, women do, in fact, move in and out of the work/home continuum (21). The animosity, she argues, is actually largely media-driven. According to Toni Zimmerman, et al., media debates around women's roles as mothers and workforce contributors have diverted "the dialogue away from real issues such as affordable health care, quality childcare, gender and racial equality, fathers' roles in parenting, media effects" (204). The culture of blame that surrounds motherhood has a powerful impact on mothers: "This critique of mothering is being socially constructed on a mass scale, yet the implications of this critique are playing out in the lives of every mother and how she feels about herself, her role as a parent, and her role in the workplace" (206). Zimmerman and her co-authors ultimately agree with Peskowitz, noting that "mothers are not clearly divided into two camps; many mothers move in and out of the workplace in both full-and part-time capacities, and thus the 'Mommy Wars' debate neglects to include the experience of most mothers" (207).

The story "Daycare" addresses the conflicted sense of devotion and commitment to family often felt by contemporary mothers. As suggested by the character of Ada, the "mommy" debate creates a binary identity for mothers that ultimately pits women against each other and fails to recognize that women might have complicated feelings about leaving their children with other women or, conversely, acting as mothers for children other than their own. Ada is a woman still uncertain of her own identity, a situation exacerbated by her role of caregiver for both her own children and those of other women who have alternate careers. Early in the story, mothers are dropping their children off at Ada's house. One woman makes a hasty judgment of Ada while inadvertently articulating her own difficulty in fulfilling the dual roles of mother and non-domestic labourer:

"On the other hand, who has time? Some of us work, you know?"

Ada nodded at Mrs. Nicholson while struggling to take off the Nicholson boy's ski jacket. He stared at her neutrally.

"Oh God, Ada, I didn't mean it like that. I just mean real jobs, you know. *This* is a real job. Just that some people think we can do it all, you know? Jonathan, take that out of your mouth. Here." (71)

Mrs. Nicholson shows that, while she is herself subject to feelings of inadequacy, she nevertheless defines herself – as a mother who also works outside the home – as superior to mothers who stay at home, thereby perpetuating the very demands that foster her own identity conflict. Ada, meanwhile, harbours her own feelings of superiority and resentment for Mrs. Nicholson, but she does so by relying on her youth and parental expertise, thus similarly defaulting to a culturally constructed rivalry between women.

How mothers, and women in general, define and judge each other is a prevailing

theme of the story. Prior to having children, Ada had been hesitant about motherhood, but

"She didn't tell the other women that" (72), not only because she fears that they would be

less likely to leave their children in her care, but also, the story suggests, because it is

risky to admit to anything short of prenatal joy. What Ada lacks, the story suggests, is a

confidante, someone with whom she can have open and honest dialogue about her

shifting identity roles. The heroine is subject to the judgment of other women and, living

most of her life alone among children, she is presented as infantilized by the occupational

solitude of her career.

The fact that the heroine smokes in front of the children separates her from her

charges. While the act can elicit potential judgment from the reader, thereby

compounding Ada's isolation, it can also be read as a sign of rebellion. The same

ambiguous potential arises at the end of the story, which has Ada opening her mouth to

offer what might be advice to the children, but is just as likely a confession. The reader is

not privy to her comments, lending secrecy to her pronouncement and suggesting once

more that she has no one to divulge things to other than the children in her care. Without

a relationship with another female adult, "Daycare" suggests, stay-at-home mothers find

themselves defined and self-defining through the children in their charge, a scenario that

– as Ada's lack of agency suggests – risks infantilizing the adult herself.

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir explores an aging woman's transition from being a

caregiver to being a person with unwanted or arguably ineffectual liberty:

She finds this freedom at the very time when she can make no use of it. This

recurrence is in no wise due to chance: patriarchal society gave all the feminine

functions the aspect of a service, and woman escapes slavery only at times when she loses all effectiveness. [...] Useless, unjustified, she looks forward to the long, unpromising years she has yet to live, and she mutters: "No one needs me!" (584) Beauvoir argues that women are bound to others and then abandoned, and that neither the state of caregiver nor the abrupt isolation provides a woman with the independent agency that men enjoy.

"Wedding Day," another story in *Between*, builds on the sense of isolation felt by the protagonist of "Daycare," who struggles with a sense of guilt and inadequacy arising from a modern notion of motherhood that she herself perpetuates. Addressing the mother-son relationship model, "Wedding Day" depicts a woman who – attending her only son's marriage – finds herself moving abruptly from a culturally prescribed closeness with the man to a sense of detachment. Rather than define the occasion as a loss, the protagonist finds liberty and agency within this transition from the intimate, long-term friendship she holds with another woman. Beauvoir herself recognized the aging mother's dependence on her son: "He is going to defend her against the domination of her husband, avenge her for the lovers she has had and has not had; he will be her liberator, her savior. [...] With proud humility she recognizes the virile superiority of this man who was once her baby" (*Second Sex*, 585). In this passage, Beauvoir continues the depiction of women as both possessing unrealistic hopes for their sons and fearing disappointment should they fail. She also contributes to the cultural assumption of an inevitable rivalry between older and younger women, and mothers and future daughters-in-law in particular. "Her son is indebted to her for his life," she writes, "what does he owe this woman who was yesterday still unknown to him?", adding that a mother of a grown son is left to feel "no

longer anything more than a finished, outdated individual" (587-88). Beauvoir concludes that mothers look to their sons as gods, and feel themselves bound to be rejected and isolated like spurned lovers.

The development of the grown son in relation to the mother has been closely theorized through case studies that both situate the mother as a driving force in the son's growth and cite cultural examples of the masculine goal of maternal disconnection. Sara Ruddick, for example, in her work on maternal thinking, cites cultures in which women and men are clearly divided between caring labour (women) and masculine independence (men), noting that boys in particular develop a fear of falling back into feminine care. This fear, she suggests, compels men to "develop a fantasy of transcendence" that can range from rejection to physical violence against women. "Fearful of the dependencies in which connection begins," Ruddick writes, "they become attached to detachment, developing ideals of objectivity that turn on separation and distance" (132). Intentional or not, in the story "Wedding Day," the son Geoff's move toward a life beyond his maternal bonds is, in this view, a rejection of his mother Mad. In this formulation, the separation is the young male's decision and the transition inevitably disturbs the heroine's understanding of her own identity and usefulness.

Andrea O'Reilly notes that, as early as 1968, psychoanalysts suggested that a healthy sense of maleness required that sons "dis-identify" from their mothers. A decade later, O'Reilly points out, feminist sociologist Nancy Chodorow echoed this from a feminist perspective by suggesting that inequity in childcare institutions meant that children were cared for by women, and that boys will have to detach to "achieve a separate male identity" (218). O'Reilly observes that the space that males are urged to put between

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themselves and their mothers encourages a form of misogynistic superiority: "Given that boys are pressured to distance themselves from their mothers to forge a separate and superior male identity, it is not surprising that this identity often becomes grandiose and manic as they reach adulthood" (227). In Hornby's *About a Boy,* for example, the conclusion of the story is considered a kind of developmental victory for the young son because he detaches from his mother. In the final lines of the novel, which is written as a happy ending, he rejects his mother's tastes in favour of his own.

Ruddick explores the cultural preconceptions of motherhood and maternity, specifically the historic and contemporary tendency for boys to reject mothers, and for mothers to obligingly accept rejection. Using a Victorian poem that depicts a son decapitating his mother at the request of his lover, Ruddick focuses on the fear and respect behind the request, alluding to uncontrollable "maternal passion" (10); the mother's head continues talking, if only to show selfless concern for her son. Of note, however, is Ruddick's observation that, in examples such as this one, the mother is shown as a rival for the other woman and that, "For the sake of masculinity and 'normality,' 'good' mothers allow their sons to express contempt for their mother's feelings" (10). And yet, the mother is also cast as doting, chattering and unintelligent – an undefeatable force, thereby also fitting the stereotype of the domineering, obsessive female.

The notion that women should instantly love their sons when they are born, take to motherhood instinctively and yet, when the time is right, remove themselves to allow for appropriate male identity formation demonstrates a gender bias that is dually tied up in definitions of femininity. The depiction of mothers as fiercely jealous and pathetically

devoted only serves to vilify them and suggest that age, for women, leads to a period of

failure and loss. Cultural and fictional stories of lifelong bonds between mothers and sons

are far less common, with mothers either largely absent or appearing as controlling their

sons' lives. As O'Reilly writes, "women cannot win. When [...] the mother dominates

her son, she is so mocked and derided by the male culture that this, too, demeans and

subordinates women generally by providing the source of some of the most infamous

maternal images in Western society" (117). Women are depicted as either absent or

overbearing, while a close long-term mother-son relationship is becoming virtually

impossible to attain in a culture that discourages a bond between grown men and their

mothers.[1]

"Wedding Day" opens, "I didn't take to parenthood like anything takes to water" (45),

and continues to describe Mad, the protagonist, as a woman who, despite having lacked

any initial instincts towards motherhood, has always been surrounded by ailing men and

thus forced from a young age into the role of caretaker. Her father and then her husband

have been sickly, requiring her to be a silent, careful woman. Against her will, Mad thus

embodies a model of feminine, reserved duty. "I became latently quiet," she observes, "in

a loud adult world" (49). In discussing caretaking, Ruddick is careful not to make

generalizations about commonalities between caring for others and mothering. She does,

however, acknowledge that the role of a caretaker – mother or otherwise – is inherently

related to the sliding scale of closeness with others: "A defining task of their work is to

maintain helpful connections with another person [...] whose separateness they create

and respect. Hence they are continuously involved with issues of connection, separation,

development, change, and limits of control" (131). Mad embodies this movement

between connectedness and disengagement. She risks closeness but fears loss, as is demonstrated by her response to the death of her ailing father and her tentative behaviour around her chronically sick husband. Additionally, she prepares herself for the culturally prescribed disconnection from her adult son. She is defined as a caretaker by the men in her life until the birth of her son Geoff, who embodies the masculine model of strength and virility. Healthy and robust, Geoff not only offers a contrast to her husband and father, he negates the need for Mad's caretaking. The protagonist is at once liberated from her duties as a caregiver and left uncertain of her role.

In the final lines of the story, Mad reflects on her son's new life and the fact that it provides an opportunity for her to begin anew as well:

> Jane and Geoff were at the precipice of something new, and in a hallway photograph they looked eager and fresh-faced – [...] untouched by hard weather and late nights. I had a sort of sick feeling, something sad and full of longing. And then I heard breaking glass.
>
> "Sorry, Mad. It just slipped from my hands." (52)

Mad's closest friend, Evrin, has broken a glass while cleaning. Her words speak to the loss that Mad feels about her son's marriage, but also to the role of the friend in helping with this transition. Evrin's action seems to suggest that, while she cannot prevent Mad's sense of emptiness as her son expands the distance between them, she will try to arm the protagonist with friendship in order that she can move forward with hope.

While Geoff's identity is not the focus of the story, his strength and virility make him the model of the archetypal young man beginning his own quest of self-development. His mother, meanwhile, is at the forefront of the story, but in the shadows of her own life, her

son having slipped from her hands. As Mad observes, "Funny and gregarious, Geoff became what I wasn't. He dove into things that I avoided; he took charge but also took heart[...]. This miniature man grew strong and solid while I separated pills and waited for results" (51). Her caretaking duties bound her to her husband while she witnessed her son's successful, independent self-development but, at this stage in their relationship, the difference between parent and child signifies, for Mad, her own potential. Contrary to Beauvoir's estimations that mothers lose themselves when their children grow, the story gives a glimpse of Mad's rebound into an energetic life. She does not deify her son, but rather accepts that her somewhat slow acceptance of motherhood yielded an eventual detachment.

Mad's difficulty – first in motherhood and then in her anxiety about moving beyond motherhood – demonstrates the middle ground that is the prevailing theme of the story. Contrary to offering another example of lost youth or hopelessness, the story does not suggest the depressing nature of age, but rather proposes that the aging experience is particularly difficult for mothers of males. There are, the story suggests, engaging and complex mothers who are neither in competition with their daughters-in-law nor at risk of disappearing altogether. The hope in this story lies in the possible future for Mad. She notes that, whenever her husband said "Relax, Mad. Why can't you just *relax*?", she "would laugh and try to shake it out, wiggling my arms like a rubber band. Just trying to shake it out" (51). What Mad is making an effort to "shake out" is arguably the lasting effects of a culturally determined role as mother. The more optimistic reading is that the heroine is set to rebound, like a rubber band, poised to change the role that has been carved out for her and to make choices removed from identity traits that have been

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imposed. It is not her husband, however, but her close friend who primarily aids her hopeful transition from parenthood into later life.

In Beauvoir's fiction, women other than the protagonists prove threatening, most typically acting as younger replacements in the romantic lives of her characters. In *She Came to Stay*, for example, Françoise is friends with the younger Xaviere until the latter threatens the partnership with Pierre, and ultimately Françoise eliminates the young woman altogether. Consistent with the existential belief that others define us, Beauvoir's women tend to try to reclaim their identities from others – often other women – rather than cultivate meaningful friendships. Studies suggest that close relationships between women in late life are of great importance in continued development.[2] Mothers are characteristically defined by their relationships to their children and their roles as caregivers, and thus, when these roles are no longer paramount in their lives, the result is a difficult period of change that can be relieved by intimate friendship.

In "Wedding Day," this intimacy between women is apparent in the protagonist's friendship with Evrin, a bond that exemplifies the close confidante that Ada, in "Daycare," lacks in her own self-development. Just as men's friendships, as discussed in the previous chapter, are often defined by boyhood events and youth culture, "Wedding Day" demonstrates the role of the same in friendships between women such as Mad and Evrin. The two characters conspire and giggle like youngsters, despite (or perhaps because of) the solemn occasion of Mad's son's wedding. Rather than becoming tearful at the ceremony, they appear to be in on a shared joke: "'Who was that woman crying so hard at the ceremony?' Neither of us had cried, had instead grinned stupidly at one another. I didn't know who the crier was, but her sniffling had gotten to me somehow"

(47). The suggestion is that, on a day when the protagonist's role as caregiver and mother is arguably supplanted, Evrin's presence affirms her late-life potential by reminding her of her own influence and usefulness in the lives of others.

With Mad's husband absent from the wedding due to health concerns, the female confidante attains a central profile in the story, highlighting the importance of the same-sex friendship in Mad's adult development. Moreover, Evrin and Mad are conceived as similar women, emphasizing the ubiquitous importance of such friendships for women. As Elizabeth Abel observes, it is commonality rather than contrast that is the basis of friends' closeness. "Serious novels that focus on the actual friendships of women," Abel argues, "suggest that identification replaces complementarity as the psychological mechanism that draws women together" (415). In the previous chapter, I noted that shared activity and common interests are often the basis for male friendships, but Abel suggests that this is even more evident in friendships between females (415), claiming that it is through the close nature of same-sex friendships that women are able to define themselves: "Through the intimacy which is knowledge, friendship becomes a vehicle of self-definition for women, clarifying identity through relation to an other who embodies and reflects an essential aspect of the self" (416). The intimate nature of friendship provides opportunities for self-exploration and development and, in this way, intimacy with another becomes a form of intimacy with the self.

In "Wedding Day," friendship between two women is based on commonality and a shared girlhood, while also drawing on the mutual experience of motherhood. Mad remarks, "Evrin is my oldest friend. More like a sister to me than my own sisters, and looks more like me, too. We are two who are never apart, from grade school until now"

(47). This familiarity allows Evrin to help ease the transition for Mad as she shifts beyond motherhood into the unknown that is to follow. Moving past isolationist models of identity that tend to pit women against each other, "Wedding Day" highlights the role that intimate friendship plays for older women. Notably, Mad and Evrin are both aging mothers of sons. They are bound together in a specialist knowledge that allows them to be not only girlish and youthful, but also wise and supportive. As women separate from their children and their roles as caregivers, they can turn to friendship as a means of finding opportunity for optimism and hope in a new phase of their lives. Susan Faludi has noted the need for fathers in the lives of adult sons:

> Having a father was supposed to mean having an older man show you how the world worked and how to find your place in it. Down the generations, the father wasn't simply a good sport [...]. He was a human bridge connecting the boy to an adult life of [...] responsibility. (596)

Mothers are not granted this opportunity to contribute lifelong wisdom to their sons. Culturally, the move to manhood has implied the necessity of leaving mothers behind. But what *Between* demonstrates is that, while modern women may lose an identifying needfulness as a result of this gender bias, they can maintain their identities as useful and fulfilled members of society through their roles as teachers and protectors of intimate friends.

The Future Late-life Bildungsromane

Education narratives such as those that I have explored in this study provide the opportunity to reflect upon the relationship between our culture and our notions of aging.

By the same token, the continued representation of characters experiencing self-development in late life offers the potential for understanding the impact that the aging experience has on cultural constructions of gender and age. While singular, individual experiences differ greatly, collectively they demonstrate a shared experience of loneliness. There are patterns among these individualisms that harken back to key concerns the existentialists explored in their fiction and philosophy. Like the creative works of the existentialists, contemporary narratives feature characters who suffer through self-development, but these later writings often offer optimism in the face of established social norms.

To date, literary scholars who have explored existential themes in fiction, have analyzed works from the modernist to early postmodernist eras. These examinations tend to address primarily the fiction of the existentialists themselves – namely Sartre, Camus, and Beauvoir. But also considered in the existential pantheon are works by authors such as Fyodor Dostoevsky, Franz Kafka and Herman Hesse. These narratives typically dwell on tenets within the philosophy that concern despair and characters' struggles to find their place in the world. In addition, with the exception of Beauvoir's work, the writings' main characters are often solitary males, even within more contemporary novels such as Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1999), whose existential themes have been well established (Mario, Wilson). The exploration into more nuanced aspects of existential thought such as life-long self-development, the implications of choice, and hope within relationships with others, however, are largely missing from analysis of existential literature. In this dissertation, I have attempted to bring forward the subtle and often hopeful aspects of existential thought within contemporary fiction of late life. Those texts

I chose to analyze feature characters whose lives and relationships are complicated by gender and age. But despite these challenges, the characters exemplify existential optimism, and they find ways to develop in late life through actions and choices that often eschew heteronormative expectations.

Scholars writing on age, such as Harry R. Moody, and J. Dianne Garner and Susan O. Mercer, have appropriately brought forward the challenges facing an aging community. These texts address aging men and women of a variety of backgrounds and socioeconomic positions who, for differing reasons, might feel isolated by a society that neither understands nor has the infrastructure to support such a population. There is also evidence, however, of scholarly inquiry into the rich lives available to the aging individual,[3] and likewise optimistic aging protagonists in fiction. Few scholars, however, have tackled the issues confronting aging characters in contemporary fiction, and I would argue that there has been a failure to recognize the compelling existential themes within such texts. While scholars such as Gullette have drawn comparisons between traditional coming of age and life-long development, to my knowledge, my study constitutes the first extensive scholarly work that applies tenets of existential philosophy to analysis of late-life narratives.

In my dissertation and short story collection, I have sought to demonstrate that scholars to date have not adequately taken into consideration growing evidence in literature of modern preoccupations seen through the lens of age and gender studies. I have pointed to a literary revisiting of existentialism that bends the tenets of the philosophy to recognize the varied difficulties of gender and age in continual self-

development. Additionally, I have provided examples of fiction that demonstrates potential relief for aging characters from the difficulties of their changing social roles.

As I note in chapters 1 and 2, existentialists working in both philosophical and creative genres have indeed demarcated age and gender as issues. Beauvoir in particular takes issue with what was an existing gap in scholarly work that, before her groundbreaking texts, failed to address the female and aging experience. Her summations of the loss of youth and young motherhood, however, are depicted as devolutions, illustrating aging women at times as depressives with foolish delusions. Generally speaking, the fiction and philosophy of the existentialists do not recognize the opportunities for aging women and men within life-long self-development. As I have argued, there is hope within the dramatic turns of existential fiction, but it is hard won, and women and men remain largely alone, without intimate relationships to guide them into new phases of life.

Gullette focuses on optimism in age-based fiction, and condemns what she perceives as an ageist tradition in fiction that alienates late-life characters. Her work does not take into consideration the apparent commonalities between contemporary late-life fiction and modernist existentialism. Modes of transition and preoccupations with one's place in the world are foregrounded in the fiction she analyzes, and she addresses the challenges that face aging women and men, as well as parents of adult children. She calls for a reevaluation of late-life development, and this appreciation of the continual reinvention of the self has strong echoes in existentialism that are not explored in her work. When Gullette writes of "cure stories" (xiv), she is, in essence, referring to a growing number of texts that present hope and optimism in the face of despair. I have argued that the choices

that enable "cures," or hope, are a kind of new approach to existentialism that also takes issues of gender and age into consideration as characters come of age in late life.

As I have demonstrated in chapters 3 and 4, recent prose has explored the myriad of possibilities for the aging individual within what are continually shifting modes of age and gender. Butler provides a particularly influential analysis of the constructs of gender, probing the performative nature of gender signification. In this sense, Butler echoes the existential belief that there is no essence, but that any identity is prescribed by others. I have taken her contentions that gender performance relies on an audience and that society supports or enforces modes of masculinity and femininity and have extended them to consider the role that same-sex friendships play not in the definition but in the relief of gender models. Butler's work on performativity argues for political change and resignification to subvert existing gender constructs. While this is not the focus of my dissertation, I have kept her argument in mind as I have worked to suggest that the difficulties and arguable loneliness inherent to conventional gendered and aging experiences are, as Toffler proposes, shared. The role of others in ever-shifting self-development, as Agnes in MacLeod's story "Island" suggests, can be of great importance. Sartre's early work put forward the possibility that one should reclaim the self from the definitions formed by others, a contention echoed by Butler's views regarding gender construction and performativity, but neither critic is willing to recognize the transformative effects of a companion who alleviates the despair that often accompanies aging.

In my dissertation, I have analyzed works that challenge existing gender models and others that offer hope in the rejection of conventional expectations. MacLeod's work, to

recall one example, exemplifies fiction that addresses models of femininity and masculinity, presenting a female masculinity in his characters that allows them a sense of liberty within the very same constructs that confine his male characters. His seemingly traditional characters exchange their gender modes in subtle acts of choice and through their relationships with others. MacLeod highlights the continued challenges of gender constructs while employing a postmodern irony to warn against prescribed gender definition. Chabon and Hornby's men, in contrast, are situated in urban settings in a cultural climate that condemns men for maintaining a loyalty to boyish things. Their work, I have argued, demonstrates the value of childhood friendships, presenting them as assisting men in becoming responsible adults who choose intimacy in relationships outside heteronormative conventions.

Michael Kimmel is one of the most influential scholars today studying the current challenges facing male-male friendships. In his research, he offers examples of what he considers a growing number of men who avoid responsible life and are unable to seek refuge in male-male friendships. He offers a particularly insightful articulation of what he calls "bromances," male friendships that lack intimacy due in part to an undercurrent of homophobia. However, his work fails to address those intimate friendships that are not irresponsible, but rather value boyhood history. Gary Cross's work extends Kimmel's notion, suggesting that men who do not choose a heteronormative life are regressing. These positions ignore the potential of shared gender experience outside convention. As I argue in this dissertation, male-male and female-female friendships are evidence of the hopeful choices characters make to ease the transition from existential despair to late-life development.

In my own creative writing, I have pushed the implications of this possibility further as they relate to various facets of the heternormative tradition, particularly regarding parent/child relationships. As I have noted, in the writing of Beauvoir and others, there is recognition of the strains felt by aging mothers, but not of the opportunities for liberation from the existential angst felt by these individuals, or the means of freeing people from the constructs that have defined them until their transition into late life. These opportunities exist in intimate friendships outside the nuclear relationship. While many do choose convention, they arguably still require a close same-sex confidante with whom they can share the experience of aging parenthood. Modes of gender and age continue to shift, and yet current explorations into age-based fiction do not acknowledge that the continually changing self is existential at its core. Hallmarks of mid-to-late life such as despair and angst typify existential claims to the burden of free agency. Contemporary characters of fiction find hopeful solutions within this existential challenge, such as intimate friendships in lieu of nuclear relationships. These choices extend hope and optimism that are particular to the current cultural changes in gender models. I have attempted to address what I consider a new form of existentialism – one that provides optimism and rejects culturally determined roles or essentialism by suggesting flexible gender roles and unconventional interpretations of intimacy as means of enjoying late life.

The research for this dissertation has brought forward difficulties with established models of age, gender and parenthood. Contemporary culture remains biased, for example, against the complicated nature of the male gender, as evidenced by continually narrow perspectives on masculinity and responsible male development. Further research

into the gender of contemporary existentialist fiction will hopefully highlight and theorize the impact of masculine models on late-life development. At the same time, the initial insights offered by modernist existentialism must be sustained in such explorations, even as they extend – as they should – into the realm of visual media such as television and film, where there is growing evidence of an overlapping relationship between existentialism and late life. As I hope to have demonstrated, the work of the existentialists continues to influence contemporary narratives, while offering optimistic challenges to current notions of age and gender. At the same time, certain key influences – such as the experience of parent-child relationships – have yet to be sufficiently studied through an existentialist lens, demanding new conceptual paradigms for their analysis. It is my belief that, as older men and women continue to occupy increasingly prominent roles in late-life Bildungsromane examining existential concerns, there is more than a passing potential for hopeful perspectives on the aging experience.

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[1] Within this notion of motherly duty are embedded the images of idealistic altruism and martyrdom that pit mothers against future daughters-in-law. This paradigm again positions women in a double bind of expectant motherhood and needy attachment. For more on the mother/daughter-in-law paradigms of modern, western culture, see Babette Smith.

[2] In *Handbook of Communication and Aging Research* (2004), Jon F. Nussbaum and Justine Coupland note that friendships for both genders provide opportunities to maintain community in the later years: "Conceivably, friendships endure as significant alternatives to pursue independently of diminished institutional activity and responsibilities" (292). This suggests that, when one's occupational role is reduced, friendship aids in the transition into a continually changing adult life. See also Lois Grau and Ida Susser's *Women in the Later Years* (1989).

[3] Linda Gannon's text *Women and Aging* addresses the optimistic future available to older women, while still recognizing existing cultural and socioeconomic challenges to their development. Similarly, George E. Vaillant's text *Aging Well* (2003) acts as a guide to the successful aging experience.

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