
The Embodied Self: Ageism Explored in Carol Shields's *The Stone Diaries*

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Abstract:

This paper explores the portrayal of aging in Carol Shields' "The Stone Diaries" with the intention of uncovering society's ageist perspectives towards its elderly population. The research delves into an analysis of aging through the lens of gender, aiming to demonstrate that the aging experience is often more challenging for women than men. By examining societal attitudes, the study aims to reveal how elderly individuals are frequently perceived merely as aging bodies, devoid of gender and presumed to lack any physical desires.

Within the narrative structure of the novel, which includes a story within the story, the paper examines how Daisy, the aging protagonist, undergoes a process of losing her identity within the layers of her narrative. Additionally, the research explores the theme of perpetual submersion, suggesting that Daisy's sense of self is continually obscured, partly due to the heightened visibility of her aging body. Her aged and wrinkled skin becomes the focal point through which the world perceives her, overshadowing the essence of her selfhood and identity, which are either erased or dismissed. While the novel chronicles Daisy's turbulent life, this paper seeks to immerse itself in her experiences. As Daisy constructs the narrative of her life, it becomes evident that her life, in turn, shapes her story, gradually taking precedence to the extent that she becomes entirely submerged within her own narrative. Ultimately, Daisy passes away in a nursing home in Florida, a moment in the storyline that starkly highlights the pervasive ageism depicted. Her death, met with relief by her family, symbolizes the pinnacle of ageism, portraying her life as a collection of roles — mother, grandmother, aunt, wife, widow — culminating in her being perceived and remembered solely as an elderly woman, reducing her existence to nothing more than that.

Keywords: Ageism, gender, sexuality, narratives, old-age.

Introduction:

The Stone Diaries a narrative centered around Daisy, unfolds the seemingly ordinary life of a woman in a manner that skillfully unravels numerous issues along the way. The novel's strength lies in its ability to address these issues with such effectiveness

that keeping track becomes almost challenging. Rather than portraying Daisy as a heroine transcending boundaries, the novel asserts that these limits are non-existent. At the core of Daisy's life is the narratives encapsulated in her autobiography/biography, commencing at her birth and persisting even beyond her death.

Carol Shields emphasizes how an individual's life narrative is not exclusively their own; it undergoes constant revision, retelling, and reinterpretation by every person touched by the narrative. Despite its inevitability, Shields urges caution against the limitations inherent in this process of narrativizing an individual's life. The narrative often takes precedence, foregrounding the individual, and tightly intertwining their identity with it. Drawing attention to this, J. Brook Bouson, in her book "Shame and the Aging Woman," underscores the impact of narrative on an individual's identity.

The impact of being ensconced in broader societal narratives and how they can be detrimental becomes apparent in the narrative of Daisy Goodwill Flett, the elderly character in Carol Shields's 1993 novel, *The Stone Diaries*. While Daisy is undeniably influenced by the overarching stories of her sociocultural context, she also resembles a novelist constructing her own life. Engaging in a life review process, she continuously shapes her existence by narrating and revisiting multiple versions of her personal story.

In an interview, Shields described *The Stone Diaries* as the autobiography of a woman who is essentially erased from her own life, defined solely through her relationships with others, as reflected in an obituary that might read as "wife of, grandmother of." Shields, acknowledging the challenge of writing from the perspective of a woman older than herself, compared the exploration of old age to traveling to a foreign country, a concept dating back to Author Sarton in 1793. Despite her initial uncertainty, Shields successfully dismantles ageist ideas prevalent in society through the novel.

Daisy's obituary primarily identifies her as a grandmother and mentions her husband Barker Flett as a respected Canadian authority on hybrid grains. The detailed list of her descendants further emphasizes her role in relation to others. Even her daughter Alice, who refers to Daisy's death as a "blessing," unintentionally reflects the embedded ageism in society, where death is often associated with ailing and failing old bodies.

This situation prompts a crucial question about the perception of an aging body versus the aging person. The narrative raises the issue of whether society views an aging person merely as an aging body. This inquiry is essential, given that ageism often arises from a failure to recognize the individuality of aging individuals, who are either rendered invisible or hyper-visible due to physical signs like wrinkles and sagging skin. Daisy herself distinguishes between her personhood and her aging body, expressing frustration at the focus on her physical form.

She reflects on the profound loneliness of inhabiting a body year after year, constantly moving forward, and never experiencing relief from its weight, even in sleep. She perceives her aging body from an outsider's perspective, much like she views her own life story.

Old age is often perceived as a genderless phase, reducing women and men to mere old individuals devoid of any signs of sexuality or desires, with this shock being more pronounced in women. Barbara Macdonald highlights how women's movements may exclude women over sixty from their "sisterhood," viewing them as no longer authentic

women. Daisy, in the novel, notes that real societal issues often stem from the misalignment between men and women.

Daisy is consistently categorized by those around her as a mother, grandmother, and aunt, and these roles become more rigid as she ages. Macdonald links this form of ageism to the patriarchal family structure, emphasizing the myth of motherhood as a white American phenomenon. According to Macdonald, this myth perpetuates the idea that older women exist to serve their children, reinforcing an infantilizing perspective that erases the individuality of the mother.

Daisy's identity is shaped by various tragic events in her life, including becoming a young widow and losing her husband to suicide during their honeymoon. Shields underscores the impact of societal narratives on individuals, noting that Daisy's story precedes her wherever she goes, defining and sometimes canceling her true self. The interview with Shields further explores how women, in particular, can be oppressed and stigmatized by their stories, becoming so entwined with them that separation becomes challenging.

The novel dissects the narratives surrounding Daisy, exposing their falsehood through her own revelations or the omniscient narrator's perspective. For example, despite hearing her husband's head crashing, Daisy recalls lying on the bed for a minute before investigating, challenging the accepted version of her emotions at that moment. After her honeymoon tragedy, the narrator reveals that Daisy's life is quite agreeable and not significantly different from others, contradicting the perception that it was a defining and sorrowful turning point. Others, including her children, project their assumptions onto Daisy, assuming she must be broken up by the event, showcasing the humorous and foolish nature of their attempts to define her.

Old age is often either romanticized or infantilized, perceived as a blank space solely defined by the process of aging. In the hospital, nurses condescendingly address Daisy as a "sweetie-pie," treating her like a child incapable of making decisions. When she dignifiedly refuses to see the chaplain, the caretaker dismissively introduces the chaplain anyway, reinforcing the notion that Daisy's wishes are disregarded due to her perceived incapacity.

The narrative underscores that Daisy's identity is distinct from her failing body. Despite physical decline and diminishing memory, her individual self continues to thrive, highlighting her ability to articulate what needs to be said. When addressing the Reverend, Daisy experiences a moment of panic as she struggles to find the word "comfortable." Despite being fully conscious, she is misunderstood, with the Reverend initially refusing to acknowledge her words and later misinterpreting her polite statement as shouting. The nurse, in a condescending tone, corrects the Reverend, noting that Daisy is actually whispering.

Daisy's acute awareness of her surroundings and manners is evident, and she maintains control by articulating only her filtered thoughts. The novel skillfully alternates between the internal and external perspectives of Daisy's mind. While internally wishing for the Reverend to "Go away," externally, she politely expresses gratitude, showcasing her "exquisite manners." The Reverend is surprised by Daisy's courtesy, considering her old age and ailing body, and he finds it amazing that she can remember appropriate phrases,

likening it to the wonder one feels when a child speaks their first words or learns new vocabulary. *The Stone Diaries* effectively challenges the notion of aging as a passive, blank space, portraying it instead as an active process that involves continued narrative rather than the conclusion of a pre-written tale.

Conclusion:

Carol Shields' *The Stone Diaries* deftly exposes ageist clichés and questions accepted ideas about aging. Shields investigate the intricacies of identity, cultural expectations, and the influence of tales on a person's sense of self via the life of Daisy Goodwill Flett. Gender standards, familial responsibilities, and society expectations are all deeply ingrained in Daisy's existence. The work dives into the concept of narratives, highlighting how one's life story is not only a personal narrative but is constantly rewritten, reinterpreted, and changed by external factors. Daisy's identity is frequently absorbed by the positions that society gives her, whether that of a widow, mother, or grandmother. Shields deftly highlights the constraints and expectations imposed by ageism, especially the way society frequently minimizes the uniqueness of older people and reduces them to predetermined roles. By portraying aging as an active process, the story also questions the idea that it is a passive stage of life. Daisy is physically older, yet she still has control over her thoughts and words. Rather of representing old age as a blank area full of regret and memories, the novel presents it as a continuous narrative.

Shields also criticizes the propensity to minimize and infantilize the elderly by showing how people like Daisy, despite their advanced age, are still cognizant, able to communicate, and in charge of their abilities. The story deftly contrasts Daisy's inner monologue with her outward manifestations, emphasizing the contradiction between societal presumptions about her potential and her true agency. Essentially, "The Stone Diaries" is a moving examination of the human condition that questions social mores and prompts readers to reevaluate how they view age and identity. Shields promote a more nuanced view of the elderly through Daisy's journey, highlighting the significance of appreciating and honoring the unique narratives that endure beneath the surface of ageist presumptions.

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