

Aging theme in Contemporary Theatre: Ghost from a Perfect Place

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Abstract

Critical gerontology has become a popular topic in recent years as more literary scholars focus their attention on aging. Contemporary British theatre never stays silent about the social and cultural changes of whatever period it happens to be in. As such and in the context of critical gerontology, it approaches old age and longevity from different perspectives. Examining how Ridley approaches ageing and longevity in his play *Ghost from a Perfect Place* (1994), the primary purpose of this study is to explore how Ridley perceives ageing and youth by culturally analysing the play. Its secondary aim is to probe Philip Ridley's take on gender ideologies through the lens of feminist gerontology. In his play, Ridley brings together both the socio-cultural realms of young and old like to make viewers aware of just how different they are from one another. In the play, elder Travis and young Rio represent two different cultures that diverge in terms of their longevity and gender. To Ridley, old age in a dystopian modern world is both a time for redemption and a time to witness the disappearance of binaries of gender. That world, moreover, no longer contains any traces of patriarchal policy. Ridley finishes the play in an open-ended format, draws a clear cut cultural distinction between old and young, as well as past and future.

Keywords: gerontology, Philip Ridley, gender, longevity, *Ghost from a Perfect Place*

Aging theme in Contemporary Theatre

Imagine an old person working in a tiring job or looking for a job. How many old actors or actresses do you know? You know you're going to grow old someday, right? Do you think deeply when answering these questions, or can you answer them immediately? In fact, the answers to all these questions lie in age ideology.

Murdock (2018, p.45) underlines that “demography is not destiny,” arguing that there is a direct link between old age and politics, for there are political goals and decisions behind fertility, migration, and death. Gullette (2004, p.7) mentions the multifaceted functioning of ageism policies and expresses;

We convey age and aging in large part through the moral and psychological implications of the narrative ideas we have all been inserting into our heads since birth. Artistic and technological products – such as the stories we ordinarily tell ourselves and one other – are permeated by the pre-existing inventions of culture (2004, p. 8).

In this context, the negative attitudes of a given society towards its elderly are actually hail from how dominant culture views the world around it. For instance, Gullette accentuates how important a computer game is for creating children's perception of old age. Cosmetic surgery ads, moreover, are successful at quickly encoding old age in the human brain as terrible, with photographs taken before and after surgery – hence why we internalise aging as a negative phenomena. How do gender policies approach ageing ideologies?

Critics such as Harper (2016), Gullette (2004), and Pohl and Boyd (1993) argue that there is a strong link between gender relations and age regimes. Carney elucidates that “population aging is shaped by women's choices and oppression” (2018, p.243), whilst Ruth Ray (2004, p.119) declares that feminist gerontology should “push feminist movement forward in the world and to change the negative images of aging, especially for women.” Feminists such as Simon de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, and Margaret Gullette have all proven just how direct relationship between age and gender is multiple times over. In *The Old Age* (1972) Beauvoir draws attention to the economic dilemma of ageing women. The economic poverty of elderly women and their incapacity to work due to a lack of power constitute their two biggest woes. In *Double Standard of Aging* (1972), Sontag emphasises how older women are ignored in society because they lose their ability to reproduce. Moreover, in *The Fountain of Age* (1993) Betty Friedan challenges the depictions that ageing women are exposed to, such as them being useless or passive. Ever since the 1970s, feminists have addressed gender multiple times over within the context of gerontology. Today, feminists working on gerontology are still striving to increase the visibility of older women in society and to challenge the negativity that is attached to older women.

Ageing femininity is a crucial issue in the field of cinema and theatre – which, as the cultural, social and political mirrors of a country, address both the condemnation of old age and anti-

ageism issues. Hartley's *Here I Belong* (2016) addresses the importance of older women in society. On the other hand, the elderly master Orgon, who fell into the trap of Tartuffe in Moliere's *Le Tartuffe* (1984), Shakespeare's age and arrogant King Lear, and Martin Crimp's *Milly and Frank*, a couple over the middle age, in *Definitely the Bahamas* (1987) are all instances whereby theatre reveals the dark side of ageism.

In this paper, I shall investigate Philip Ridley's perspective against age and gender ideologies within the feminist gerontology framework. In *Ghost from a Perfect Place*, Ridley reflects the sharp change in the society in the 1990s. To comprehend this negative change and his overview, I specifically wish to focus on two themes: age and longevity.

Ghost from A Perfect Place

The British playwright Ridley has achieved great success with *Ghost from a Perfect Place* (first staged at Hampstead Theatre in 1994). Michael Billington interprets the play as "profoundly anti-feminist" (Sierz, 2000, p.42); where as Jenny Topper and Matthew Lloyd praise its "cathartic , stragic structure" (Sierz, 2000, p. 42). Admiring the play's content, Sierz advocates that its "best moments have a still sadness, a quiet realization of pain and loss, and of the need for courage to bear them, which is both touching and a tribute to human resilience" (2000, p.46-47). Ridley identifies feelings of pain, violence, and collapse with Travis and Torchie characters, older people, in a way. On the other hand, Rio and its gang members – young people – are more ruthless and ambitious than the elderly could ever (seem) to be.

In the play itself, Ridley confronts his audience to two different generations to reveal the distinct between them explicitly. There is a huge discrepancy between the generations in terms of attitudes, clothing, and values. The play begins with the arrival of Torchie, 76, at the house of Travis, 78. They both struggle to get to know one another at first, but they remember many memories later on, and feel complicated about it.

In *Gender and Ageism*, Hatch claims that, "When older characters are portrayed, women are more frequently depicted in negative stereotypes and shown as successful compared to older men" (2005, p.19). Here, Ridley depicts Torchie and Travis in detail thanks to is acute ability to observe others. "Torchie is sitting on a chair. She is seventy-six years old and wearing a black petticoat. Her hair is very gray, almost white. She is just finishing wrapping one of her legs in a crepe bandage" (2012, p. 3). No beauty of Ridley's Torchie is portrayed. Rather, Ridley reinforces the negative perception of the old woman by stating she is disabled and poor. Travis, on the other hand:

He is seventy-eight years old and wearing a black, shot-silk suit, white shirt (with gold cufflinks), black tie (with gold tiepin) and black leather shoes. There is a white silk handkerchief

protruding from the top pocket of his jacket and a white lily in his lapel. His grey hair is immaculately groomed. He is holding a bunch of white lilies. (2012:5)

When describing Travis, Ridley definitely states that he is more attentive, wealthier and healthier, precisely discloses his anti-feminist perception. On the contrary, the clothing styles of Rio and her gang are quite weird in the eyes of the older generation. “Her hair is blonde and yours in a pony-tail. She is very pale and thin, sickly almost, yet still – despite all the odds – hauntingly beautiful. She is wearing a gold lamé miniskirt, a denim jacket (decorated with gold sequins and rhinestones) and boots (painted gold)” (Ridley, 2012, p. 47-48). Although the depiction of the girl gang is negative, Ridley does not hesitate to emphasize their youth and beauty. For Travis, the clothes the teenage girl gang wears are cheap, and the gang has no ulterior motive. In fact, their mutual disagreement prevents them from becoming a gang even though they just try to protect themselves from male violence. Upon comparing Travis’s gang to Rio’s gang, Ridley explicitly emphasises that old Travis does not belong to contemporary society; moreover, both Travis and Torchie are perceived as a burden to society.

In patriarchal societies, the power of woman has been cursed in witch myths. Macdonald mentions the myth of “the Evil Old Woman...representing men’s ancient and unconscious fear of women’s power over death, the Evil Old Woman is the loathsome witch who cares only for herself and poisons and devours the young” (2001, p.58). Because of its lethal power, the most trusted role for older woman is being a grandmother “whose primary motive for living is to love and nourish the young.” (2001, p.58). Being as a part of male-dominated society, Ridley also chooses an old woman character who takes on a grandmother role, Torchie. She is the one who takes care of her granddaughter and is still respectful to the domination of patriarchy. As Torchie and Travis reminisce about the old days, Torchie speaks highly of Travis, a gangster. Instead of eroding his violent actions, Travis states that he is a businessman. He indicates that he is paid to offer protection services. Now both Travis and Torchie’s lives are quite peculiar from what they’re used to.

Wister & Cosco declares that, “In both urban and rural settings, social isolation and loneliness affect increasing numbers of older individuals and have been associated with depression and mortality” (2020: 54). In that context, loneliness is a very real problem within gerontology. In Ridley’s play, Travis is proud of his book about his own life called “The Man with White Lily.” When boasting about the book he wrote, he admits that he did not mention what he didn’t want to remember; nevertheless, Travis had to face his past. For both Travis and Torchie, their old memories and where they live are heydays to them. For Torchie, those days were fine because she had lead a happy life with her husband and daughter. Travis was a respected gangster, and many women had a thing for him. Ridley’s older characters articulate their longing for the past, in a sense, their youth, throughout the play. In this context, old age has driven them away from society and isolated them.

Travis and Torchie dream while comparing the heights of the past and the hell they live in today. As they pretend to be in the movies together again, Travis remembers Torchie's little girl, Donna, who is 13, and horrified. In the past, Rio's grandfather was beaten up by Travis's gang for failing to pay for his projector. Since Travis didn't get paid, he abuses 13-year-old Donna, Torchie's daughter. He asks Donna not to tell anyone about this. Travis, who was later caught by the police, goes to another city and leads a different life because he betrays all the criminals. Donna gives birth to her baby under the pressure of her family, but she dies immediately after birth. Donna's father, who cannot bear the pain of her daughter's death, commits suicide and enters a vegetative state. After Ridley reveals Travis's secret, to some extent, he normalises the torture that Rio and her gang have inflicted on Travis.

According to Cecil et al., "Ageism, a negative stereotype, prejudice, and/or act of discrimination directed towards elderly people, is not only endemic in Western societies but is escalating" (2022: 210). Increased prejudices can result in violence. Ridley reveals this distinctly in the play. The play takes on a different dimension when Rio comes home. Rio tries to lure Travis into the bedroom; alas, Travis has no desire to have sexual relations with Rio. Although Rio states that he has to do it for money as the leader of a gang, Travis refuses to give both money and sexual intercourse. Realizing that Travis won't pay, Rio calls the gang members, Miss Sulphur and Miss Kerosene, for emergency help by turning the lights on and off.

Bourdieu (1993b) claims that ". . . youth and age are not self evident data, but are socially constructed, in the struggle between youth and the old" (p. 95). The differences between youth and age are actually a kind of indicator of social change. In the play, Miss Sulphur 17, Miss Kerosene 12 and Rio form a gang to survive, protected from male violence on behalf of "Saint Donna." Miss Kerosene is disturbed by Travis's gaze, and Rio stops her as she is about to gouge Travis's eyes out. Ridley reveals the discord between the elderly and the young, and even the hatred of the young towards the elderly:

Miss Sulphur Why're you letting him get to you like this, girl? It's just a man.

Miss Kerosene He keeps looking at me with that ... that look.

Miss Sulphur What look?

Miss Kerosene That ... old person look.

Miss Sulphur What old person- ?

Miss Kerosene Like I'm the shit on his fucking shoe. (Ridley, 2012: 58-59).

Miss Sulphur Ignore it, girl.

Miss Kerosene I can't! Okay? There was this old cow on the estate where I used to live.

She used to look at me like that – (At Travis.) I'll do to you what I did to her!

In *Look Me in the Eye*, Cynthia underlines the hatred of the young from the elderly. They are cruel to the old because they believe that they "cannot be that ugly and wrong... cannot be the

woman with gray hair” (2001, p. 56). They, in a sense, hate their image in future, so to destroy that image becomes more natural. Ridley also explicitly displays this point in his character, Miss Keresone. One day, Miss Keresone sneaks into the house of the old lady who sells paper flowers. When she counters to the old woman, she takes an iron stick by the fireplace and hits the woman repeatedly on the head and face. Miss Keresone feels delighted as she describes the murder scene. For Miss Kerosene, not only the old woman’s gaze, but the house is disturbing, as well as her furniture at home. Here Ridley depicts the torture scene elaborately which increases the emotions of the audience and also reveals the youth gaze on the elderly. Not only does Ridley mentions the worthlessness, inability and fencelessness of the elderly, but he also emphasises how different the lifestyle and values between young and old are.

The second wave feminism believes that sisterhood is the power to subvert the patriarchal politics, so they focus on the importance of solidarity. “By invoking the idea of sisterhood, as Rich astutely observes, second-wave feminism, in effect, has “dismissed and excluded older women” (Bouson, 2016, p.50). In the play, the only place where gang members find peace and feel safe is their own gang – that is, their own association. Miss Sulphur hijacks a man’s money and his amber ring. Rio describes how the Amber stone was formed, and is very valuable for other gang members. However, there are insecurity problems in this solidarity between them. Travis is having an asthma attack, while Rio’s willingness to help Travis makes Miss Keresone doubt Rio. In Miss Keresone’s view, Rio humbly helps him instead of hating and hurting the man, who is both male and old. Rio’s optimistic behaviour doesn’t comply with the gang rules, as the purpose of the gang is to bring together girls who are sexually abused or forced to have intercourse – both to protect them and to make men pay for the violence they are regularly exposed to. Ridley emphasises that young women feel strong together and are angry enough to resist rape or abuse, unlike Donna. In addition, there is no room for the elderly in their gang. Travis doesn’t have the right to speak as an old man. Gang members misunderstand every word that pours out of his mouth. Although Travis complimented Rio by calling her an “intelligent girl” (Ridley, 2012, p. 81), gang members deem that it’s some kind of male deception:

Travis I was giving her a compliment.

Miss Sulphur No. You were doing that ... that thing.

Travis what thing?

Miss Kerosene That ‘man’ thing.

Miss Sulphur She knows!

Miss Kerosene Fucking look at you. Old. Past it. Tied to a chair. Only a fucking man could still think he’s cock of the walk. (Ridley, 2012, p.81)

Girls’ predisposition to violence is quite remarkable. They think about cutting out Travis’ tongue, burning his hands, and even making him drink bleach. At the same time, their language is obscene. Finally, they ask Travis to say “Saint Donna .” When Travis does not accept this

request, they start burning Travis with cigarettes. Then, Travis confesses that he is Rio's father – and the play ends. As Rio stabs Travis, Torchie walks in and Rio lets Travis go. All the young gang stands out outside to watch the fire for Saint Donna, which is quite large and imposing.

Conclusion

Ridley discloses the obvious differences between generations with his impressive depiction and observation skill. Changes in British society, young views about age, and their disregard towards old women in terms of gender roles come to life in Ridley's play.

Ridley's play is anti-feminist. Ridley creates two opposite old characters; an old grandmother who is full of love and self-sacrificing, an old man who is proud of his cruel attitudes in the past. Ridley gives a detailed description of Travis and Torchie's characters, and yet explains that Torchie is a diseased, poverty-ridden woman. On the other hand, Travis is a very well-groomed, handsome, and a rich man. However, these characteristics do not prevent him from being exposed to violence Travis, a gang member – who at the same time criticises and underestimates Rio's gang. Travis eventually pays for these thoughts with torture, and also reveals Ridley's acceptance of the variable structure in society.

Finally, the acts of commemorating the old memories of Travis and Torchie and of comparing almost every detail of their past with the time they are in indicate to us how isolated they are from the rest of society. Both are viewed as burdensome by society; and for that very same reason, Travis is subjected to violence by the girl gang. Moreover, old Travis isn't the only one who's been bullied throughout the play. Miss Kerosene, too, articulates how she beats an old woman with a metal rod, and how much she hates her because she looks different from herself and reminds her future. In that sense, Ridley wants to teach us how young Brits now despise the elderly = thereby revealing a shift in the social structure as a whole.

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