

Between Romantic Nonsense and Social Prejudice: Love in the Time of Old Age

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Abstract

The image that the contemporary society projects on the aged individuals is full of prejudices and clichés, seeing, among others, romantic feelings and sexual desire in the old age as shameful and foolish, or, in other words, as a sum of “inappropriate yearnings” (M. M. Gullette). Leading the discussion onto the literary grounds of Jack Hodgins’s novel “The Honorary Patron”, this paper will explore the vast array of contradictory feelings of an elderly man in love with a young beauty and the way he imagines the society perceives him and his emotions.

Keywords

ageing, Canada, Hodgins, old, romantic feelings, prejudice, society, sexuality.

“Well my friends are gone and my hair is grey
I ache in the places where I used to play
And I'm crazy for love”
(Leonard Cohen, *Tower of Song*)

The Canadian singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen is very fond of quoting a phrase apparently belonging to Tennessee Williams saying “Life is a fairly well-written play, except for the third act”¹. These words of wisdom briefly summarize a bitter truth, namely that the image of old age and ageing in the Western culture is plagued by a sum of negative stereotypes. Researchers have identified that the most common stereotypes refer to the fact that the aged are “conservative, inflexible, and resistant to change”, as one of the leading specialists in the field, Haim Hazan, notes in his book *Old Age: Constructions and Deconstructions* [6, 28]. The same author identifies two more contradictory stereotypes: on one hand, the aged are “senile” [6, 29] and not able to take care about themselves, on the other hand they are supposed to be “supernaturally wise” [6, 30] and to offer advice whenever

¹ One of his interviews referring to this quote can be accessed online under <http://www.guardian.co.uk/theobserver/2001/oct/14/features.magazine37>. Accessed 10 April 2012.

asked. Contradiction in terms appears to belong to the old age, but it seems to be somewhat of a culturally inherited feature since, as Simone de Beauvoir writes,

“[a]mong primitive peoples the aged man is truly the Other, with the ambivalence that the word implies. In masculine myths the woman, the Other, appears as an idol and as a sex-object at one and the same time. Similarly, for other reasons and in another manner, the old man in those societies is both a sub-man and a superman. He is decrepit and useless: but he is also the intercessor, the magician, the priest – below or beyond the human state, and often both together” [1, 85].

“The third act” of an individual’s life continues even nowadays to bring about the slow transition into the Otherness, and into the grey area of ageing which is, according to Barbara Frey Waxman “a subject [...] as taboo as death in this century and sex in the preceding century²” [12, 3]. Another undesired feature, adding to the misleading portrayal of the aged, is that ageing also comes with “the image of infertility and asexuality” [6, 31] attached to it, fact which is partly the key for answering why the society rejects the idea of love and sexuality in the old age. If the society views life as a theatre play, the third act should indeed bring about a conclusion, not yet another plot to be solved. Hence eros, with all its presumed foolishness and lack of temper, is not seen as pertaining to the old age. More often than not, the erotic feelings of an old person are rather ridiculed and mocked as “inappropriate yearnings” [4,20], as ageing and falling in love, or even worse, ageing and the sexual desire, come in utter contradiction with both the image of the aged as wise, as well as with the image of the aged as frail, dependant and asexuate/impotent.

The presence or absence of love during the last stage of our lives is not so trivial or insignificant as it might seem at a first glance. “Without love, the human self never develops at all” remarks Betty Friedan [2, 254], and while ageing does not mean one should stop developing, experiencing, living, there is no reason to stop loving either.

The lack of love and the rejection of any social connections whatsoever seem to be one of the main preoccupations of Jack Hodgins’s novel *The Honorary Patron*. With the plot opening in Zürich and then continuing over the ocean, on Vancouver Island, only to find the story and its characters returning back to Europe in what seems to be both an initiation journey, as well as a journey towards self

² Waxman’s book was published in 1990, hence the reference is to the 20th century, respectively the 19th century.

healing, the novel brings into the spotlight the still valid question whether one should or should not give up on everything once old. The main character of the novel, Jeffrey Crane, a former arts professor, has profoundly slid into Otherness, he depersonalized himself, and lives his life in a total and apparently safe retreat in Zürich. His long time friend Karl summarizes Crane's attitude towards life in one sentence: "Some people would make the entire world a museum if they could, then walk through it smugly nodding as if they were really experiencing life!" [7, 52]. But the silence of his "museum" does not persist. The arrival of his long lost love Elizabeth, who drags him out of his den to forcefully bring him back to his hometown in order to host a Festival of Arts, shakes his world and throws him into an unpredictable carousel of happenings and emotions. Apart from having to face his past, translated in meeting people he never believed he would meet again, such as the school bully from his childhood, now turned businessman, Blackie Blackstone, Jeffrey Crane is deeply affected by his encounter with a young and beautiful married woman, Anna-marie. He realizes soon after their first meeting that he is infatuated with her, while her fascination for him can only be explained by her inheriting her mother's admiration for him, while also projecting upon him the image of a grandfather she never met. To make Crane's moral issues even more complicated, Anna-marie's lost grandfather is Crane's youth rival, the man who married Elizabeth and who committed suicide when he found out about Elizabeth having an affair with Crane.

The place where the action unfolds plays a very important role in Jack Hodgins's novels, and *The Honorary Patron* is no exception. Zürich, which serves as opening stage for the novel, is rather, as the critic Ron Hatch notes, a "psychological [...] backdrop" [5, 80] for the beginning of this particular novel, and fits perfectly to the total withdrawal practiced by Crane. In spite of the "cursed great clocks" [7, 14] of this city, "making sure you never forget the inevitable rush of time" [7, 14], Zürich offers Crane "the hope that old age – despite the clocks – might be less humiliating when you're surrounded by the order, the cleanliness, the good will, and the elevated neutrality of this beautiful country" [7, 15]. This neutrality can be translated into Crane's desire of not being judged, either for getting old, or his past, or any other event from his life. But the "[p]eace, harmony, comfort – *Gemütlichkeit*³" that Zürich allegedly brings into Crane's life keep him away from the real and true pulse of life. Hiding in the peaceful Swiss city, fearing any kind of "intense emotional turmoil", to use the words of Barbara Frey Waxman

³ German word meaning coziness, cordiality, inspiring a sense of belonging and comfort.

[12, 96], Jeffrey Crane legitimizes “the stereotypical notion of sheltered old age” [12, 97], a cocoon that he so carefully builds for himself.

In total opposition with Zürich, which has a certain “Golden Pond⁴ mellowness” [12, 96], Crane’s small hometown on Vancouver Island is a perilous place, where he travels reluctantly, after not being able to resist Elizabeth’s invitation. Ron Hatch remarks in his essay “The Magic Present in *The Honorary Patron*” that once arrived on Vancouver Island, Jeffrey Crane “needs to immerse himself in what might be thought of as ‘the presentness’ of experience. He has been made the ‘Honorary Patron’, but what he actually needs is a way of becoming part of the place and time” [5, 90]. This “presentness of experience” takes Crane by surprise and finds him standing in awe in front of some situations he could not think as possible anymore in his life, such as falling in love again and the rediscovery of erotic feelings, but also being faced with the violence his old schoolmate Blackie puts on display. The cocoon so carefully woven around his life is suddenly destroyed, but the former professor is far from experiencing a liberating feeling. To quote a verse from a Leonard Cohen song, “Looks like freedom but it feels like death”⁵. There is no redemption whatsoever for Crane, who stepped out of living his life without undergoing any symbolical rite of passage; he simply gave up.

Jeffrey Crane is, in a way, a man who is placed at the border between being a very extraordinary creature, as well as a sour old man. On one hand, he is the famous arts professor who embodies success and fame, but on the other hand he is a man who has given up completely to his connections with the society. Love is something Jeffrey Crane has long ago banished from his life, too. He enjoyed “shedding” [7, 15] off his wives, has no children and no family, preferring the more comfortable company of his housekeeper: “I have Frau Steiner, who is content to let me vegetate in my library chair” [7, 15]. What seems to be a choice of freedom is rather a defeated attitude, a desire to stay safe and avoid any possible (sentimental) complications. Also, it is his way of being complacent with the social rules for an appropriate conduct at an old age. But the journey to Vancouver Island, apart from its role of bringing back a multilayered structure of memories and regrets, brings with it an unexpected rediscovery of both sentiments and sexual

⁴ *On Golden Pond* (1981) is a movie telling the story of an ageing couple. It features Katharine Hepburn and Henry Ford. More information about it can be obtained online under <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0082846/>

⁵ From the song „Closing Time” (1992). For a comprehensive archive containing the lyrics of his songs please see websites such as <http://www.elyrics.net/song/l/leonard-cohen-lyrics.html>. Accessed on 10 April 2012.

desires. Crane's "journey into the chaos of the present" [5, 96] turns into a path towards self healing, which finds the past blending into the chaotic present, and the professor is trapped between his re-awakened feelings for Elizabeth and his infatuation for the young Anna-marie.

Crane's "journey to the chaotic world on the western fringe" as Waldemar Zacharasiewicz from the University of Vienna characterizes it [11, 108], makes him realize he has lost both his creativity, as well as his sexuality. Therefore, his doubts are somewhat of a legitimate nature when he finds himself in the middle of the pseudo-artistic society from the festival. Both a stranger and an estranged individual, he is attracted by the "moody Nordic beauty Anna-marie" [11, 109] as a moth to the flame. His passion for this young woman is far from rejuvenating him; he rather feels he is losing his minds:

The salt air, he thought, was beginning to rust out his brains. Being old and tired and disoriented by travel and by a busy schedule was no excuse for starting to believe a pretty young woman was not a pretty woman at all but a talking metaphor! [7, 117]

His feelings are accompanied by a constant negotiation between himself and the world that takes place exclusively in his mind. He is all of a sudden a teenager again, not certain what his feelings are about, or how legitimate his feelings are. He resorts to the image of his housekeeper back in Zürich to find a sort of fixed star to guide his emotions: "With her strict notions of what love should and should not be, Frau Steiner would be horrified to hear of this" [7, 189]. Another important voice, holding much authority, is that of Franz, his life-long friend:

If Franz should hear of this somehow [...] would he be tempted to think: aha, a happy ending? 'Our stuffy old fellow is behaving like someone forty years younger; the moral fossil has awakened at last to contemporary life; our retired and retiring professor is about to finish off his days in bliss, in the company of this young woman of incomparable charm. Fallen amongst the lotus-eaters, he will never return to his home' [7, 189].

The double standard that Crane applies to himself is obvious in this passage. He is, in his own distorted evaluation, an outdated item, on the brink of disposal, while Anna-marie is such a perfect creature. The subtle mockery in the imagined words of Franz actually reflects Crane's own insecurity, and the warning about him never coming back home is a reminder of how safe he felt in Zürich, compared with how lost and estranged he feels in the town of his birth.

Various other voices appear during the novel, challenging Crane's feelings for the young woman. An equivocal persists, though: at times the writer himself chose not to make it clear if Crane is imagining what the people are saying, or the people are actually voicing those vicious remarks about Crane's infatuation to Anna-marie:

A young fellow working in charcoals looked up at Crane and Anna-marie, and could be seen thinking: Now there's a happy old fellow, pleased to have such a pretty granddaughter on his arm. The fat woman in a burgundy halter paused in her assault upon an ice-cream cone to think: That old coot must be rich to have such a pretty girlfriend – or else he's especially virile, or else he's a Somebody I Ought to Recognize. [7, 194]

Nevertheless, in his own manner, Jack Hodgins chooses to bring a subtle, but harsh criticism to a society which rejects from the start to give an elderly person any possibility to experience love again. Prejudice is the main barrier raised in front of the aged, since a relationship between a younger person and an elderly one is not seen as legitimate or normal.

A careful observer of the physical traits of the others, Jeffrey Crane does not spare himself a thorough analysis either. The difference in comparison to the analysis he performs, for example, on Elizabeth, is that he draws a grotesque image of himself, with emphasis on the decay of his body, whereas for the lady who was the love of his youth, he only notices the beautiful features that never changed. Trapped in his own "labyrinth of distorting mirrors" [6, 33], his self portrait is biased since it is rendered through the lens of ageing, which reveals no advantages, only decay and sadness, turning his present image into a pale echo of what he was in his young days:

He had not expected, for instance, that the white plague which had conquered the hair of his head would spread down the sparse tufts of his chest to turn even the leaping dark hairs of his lower belly to a snowy bush. Some sag in the chest muscles was no surprise, of course, for a man who did not go out of his way to exercise; nor was the slight bulge of his abdomen, once flat and hard. But there was a disappointing paleness in his skin, and a looseness of everything – a disconcerting suggestion that all that he was seeing had been hung from his skeleton with no expectation of permanence: a topcoat hanging on a restaurant rack had as much hope of remaining where it was. [7, 226]

While Crane's image of himself is such a pitiful one, he manifests an almost religious admiration for Anna-marie. In his eyes she looks like an angel, and beyond the adoration of a man for a very beautiful woman, Crane voices the admiration of old age for the beauty of the youth. There is a beautiful, yet painful duality of image, reflected through how pure he sees Anna-marie to be, and the sad, somehow hilarious portrait he created of himself:

Was it possible that her appearance had seemed almost familiar to him from the beginning? He was looking, surely, at one of the Brueghel angels. [...] But here came his Brueghel angel, white shirt beating like sails, dancing across the rocks and running up the gravel with a handful of coloured stones for his admiration. "Look! Have you ever seen anything so pretty?" [7, 170 – 71]

Of course he has never seen anything like this before, maybe with the only exception of Elizabeth. But Crane "[has] been successfully trained – taught to notice only the bad differences between [him]self younger and now, not the similarities, or the improvements" [3, 6]. A perfect creation of a society subdued to what Margaret Morganroth Gullette called "age ideology" [3, 7], Crane is not able to acknowledge himself according to an objective reality. Hence, his constant obsession with what the others think, his insecurity when it comes to feeling and expressing his feelings. Shame becomes a sort of alter ego that tends to take control over his personality: "He felt [...] an unpleasant tinge of shame. [...] The man he had been even ten years ago would not recognize this shy fool he's apparently become" [7, 170]. Too much anchored in the past, with no proper instruments for handling the present correctly, Crane feels helpless in front of both Anna-marie, but also her young colleagues from the theatre group. Focused more on how ridiculous he is because of his age, Crane misses out an important part of his experience. Instead of enjoying the company of the young, he opens them the door towards mockery by his own insecurity.

Literary critics, such as Waldemar Zacharasiewicz, consider that "[Jack Hodgins] took great risk in boldly choosing a retired professor of art history as his protagonist" [11, 106], but the carefully constructed plot hides more than just a simple story of an old man travelling back to his hometown after more than forty years of absence. There is no coincidence in the choice of the character's age, as the accurate social criticism is orchestrated behind the lines of Jack Hodgins's novel, condemning the lack of understanding for otherwise very profound and beautiful human feelings, as well as the segregation of old and young, with all the

barriers which are built between these two stages of life. Seen through the eyes of Jeffrey Crane, veiled in the ambiguity of the subject voicing various prejudices, love and sex in the old age appear to be biased, despised and mocked to such extent that the person daring to experiment such “shameless” feelings will be drowned in ridiculous. Although “[a]ll too many of the elderly are left without any physical closeness and sexual tenderness in their old age”⁶, that meaning that they are denied a very important part of what defines human beings as such, the society is still not prepared to acknowledge eros as pertaining to the old age.

Moreover, for Hodgins, in opposition to, say, Philipp Roth⁷, ageing does not imply pornography and total decay, but he sees it rather as a period of one’s life that should not be treated in any different way than the previous stages. This opinion, voiced in the novel *The Honorary Patron* through Elizabeth Argent, argues that one should not give up on social involvement, or love, just because one is not young anymore. “You’re only sixty-six years old. Why do you act as if you’ve already stepped outside of life and don’t have to do anything any more but wait?” [7, 28]. Jack Hodgins’s well-known optimism surfaces in this novel, too. A believer in the second chances, he pushes his characters to look at life in the old age as more just the “God’s waiting room” [7, 272], especially when there are still so many things to do, to feel, to experiment.

The Honorary Patron is a novel which has its life firmly rooted into reality, touching upon conflictual situations within the contemporary society, from the situation of the aged to the situation of the educational system, to issues concerning the communities of small forgotten towns, fighting for their survival. But beyond this affirmation of a harsh social reality, Hodgins manages to introduce elements of myth and magic and makes them appear as natural as they can be. As David Jeffrey, one of the most appreciated critics of Hodgins’s work notes, “Hodgins locates these elements more in the personalities and imagination of its characters than in his own authorial voice, the central range of which is typically preoccupied, engagingly, with an intensified realism in the recording of voice, plot, and, above all, character” [8, 12]. Therefore, it is no surprise that the characters of this novel are people that one could expect to meet on the street, or to have as neighbours, but at the same time they have certain features that transform them into characters best described as larger-than-life. This is the case of Blackie Blackstone, the bully from Crane’s childhood, who has not dropped his habits once he reached adulthood.

⁶ See more on the subject at http://www2.hu-berlin.de/sexology/ECE6/html/erotic_behavior_21.html. Accessed on 10 April 2012.

⁷ I have in mind here Roth’s *The Dying Animal*.

Anna-marie herself, a rather fragile creature, appears to be an angel descending from a Bruegel painting, and that the trip she and Crane take leads to a rather mysterious location, covered in fog and governed by a Gorgon-like hostess, Marisa Boreski. Crane himself appears to benefit of these “points of luminous intensification, magnifications of the ordinary” [8, 12], while at the same time he is presented as a mere human being, subjected to the same pains and troubles as anybody else. A poor Ulysses in never ending search of himself, Crane is trapped between the charms of Anna-marie and the suggestion he can read between Marisa’s lines of him being a ridiculous old man.

Under these conditions, love could not be spared of the infusion of mythical and magical characteristics. In Jack Hodgins’s novel, feelings are exacerbated; the inner dialogue is extended till on the verge of insanity, cheeks blush with more colour than expected and the remorse is more painful than ever imagined. The almost mystical place run by Marisa Boreski where Anna-marie attracts Crane like the forbidden gaze into Medusa’s eyes, finds the former professor unable to separate anymore spiritual love from hormones, and he is on the verge to completely and somehow predictably lose connection with reality:

He must not, here, abandon himself to his imagination.

Yet he could not do otherwise. He might smile into Marisa Boreski’s painted face but he could see his hand slide down the back of Anna-marie’s knee, down the length of her calf, down over her heel – could see both his hands caress the foot, and lift it, to his tongue, could feel the foot in his hands. He might look out into that grey wall of fog, pretending to imagine the hidden world that frustrated the tearoom owner, but could hear breathing in the dark, could hear whispers, could hear the swishing murmurs of clothes being shed. [7, 183]

Love on Vancouver Island seems to have the same vigour as the trees and the persistence of the second growth, which is, again, another recurrent theme in Hodgins’s novels. A firm believer in second chances, deriving probably from the constant evidence of the second growth that nature affirms so stubbornly in his part of the world, Jack Hodgins gives the old professor Crane a chance to a second life, in spite of the prejudices of the others and professor’s own fears.

The novel carries yet another beautiful metaphor, revolving around the idea of second growth triggered by love. On one hand, there is an old, dying hometown that Elizabeth loves and tries to save. On the other hand there is Jeffrey Crane, as old and tired as the town itself. Both are on the verge of giving up, but are forced

by Elizabeth to hold on for a little while longer. In spite of her efforts to do her best in organizing the festival which would bring a new life into the town, her endeavor does not prove entirely successful. In case of Jeffrey Crane though, clear evidence is given towards the end of the novel that she succeeds in determining him to embrace life again and to give himself a second chance for a second growth. And who knows, maybe a second chance for their long lost love.

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