

# Dementia, Ageism, and the Limits of Critique in Thea Astley's Satire

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Identified in 1969 by Robert N. Butler, ageism is a form of discrimination that sits alongside sexism and racism. Margaret Morganroth Gullette argues that it is the “most acceptable bias of society” (189). As an irreversible neurodegenerative illness, dementia carries an additional stigma, marked as it is by feelings of anxiety and fear. Australian writers like Henry Handel Richardson would depict some of the earliest representations of younger onset dementia in *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* (notably in the trilogy's last novel, *Ultima Thule* [1929]). Yet it would not be until the later part of the twentieth century that writers like Thea Astley and Elizabeth Jolley, themselves by that time past fifty, would explore how old age and conditions like dementia are understood in contemporary Australian culture through limiting narratives of decline. With its shifts in behaviour and accompanying memory loss, dementia tests our understanding of personhood and the social norms informing how we relate to and care for each other.

Literary representation can make readers aware of cultural attitudes and the barriers within society for the elderly and specifically for those with dementia. A number of scholars have viewed literature as a means of enhancing empathetic skills. Naomi Kruger, for instance, argues: “Since language and the ability to articulate become more and more restricted as dementia progresses, it may be that fictional accounts of dementia are the only possible way we have to imagine what it might feel like to be so marginalised, bewildered, and neglected” (118). Literature can also be a vehicle for highlighting moral wrongs and social injustice. Significantly, Astley and Jolley turned to literary modes like satire in later works such as *Coda* (Astley 1994) and *Mr Scobie's Riddle* (Jolley 1983) to depict the negative impact of cultural attitudes towards the elderly. In this essay, I want to focus specifically on Astley's writing because of her attention to the intersection of gender and age. I argue that *Coda* navigates the limits of critique and depicts a woman with dementia as continuing to negotiate a sense of self as she faces challenges to her independence.

It may seem strange, even contradictory, to turn to satire to represent a condition like dementia. Yet, as Dieter Declercq points out, satire offers a way to cope with the limits of critique, that is, when “we must live in a world where suffering exists that we cannot alleviate and to which we may even be complicit” (2). Dementia is no laughing matter in the challenges and losses that are experienced by many who live with or are affected by it. Yet, aspects of play, laughter, and amusement can provide a “powerful means of coping in difficult circumstances” (Scottish Dementia Working Group, quoted in Chris Clarke and Helen Irwin 111). Clarke and Irwin note that humour “is a universal and fundamental aspect of being human” (111). Accordingly, as Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai suggest, it can assist in “test[ing] or figur[ing] out what it means to say ‘us’”(235).

Satire has a dual orientation in that it undertakes social critique as much as it seeks to entertain (Declercq 11). Berlant and Ngai contend that what might be comic or entertaining “is sensitive because the funny is always tripping over the not funny” (234). Dieter Declercq argues that satire both avoids political apathy and helps us cope with the limits of critique. He identifies it as “a resource to negotiate existential conflict between care for others and care of self” (2), arguing that it can “develop comic and ironic coping strategies that we can fruitfully adopt and adapt in the stories we tell about ourselves” (3). Traditionally, satire has both a moral

and an aesthetic function. As a genre, it guides readers' expectations and is characterised by elements of absurdity, ambiguity, the grotesque, exaggeration, moral criticism, humour, and transgression (Declercq 11). Humour becomes a corrective as much as a form of entertainment—a way of lessening anxiety or feeling overwhelmed.

Thea Astley has often been characterised as a satirist, although John Burrows feels that Astley's work lacks "the ambivalence of a true satirist" (280). Susan Sheridan views Astley as a satirist who was "always sceptical about the power of satire to change the world" ("Woman" 270). Sheridan argues that "survival and the recovery or attainment of some degree of moral integrity, are about as much as we can hope for in an Astley novel" ("Woman" 270). Yet Kate Cantrell and Lesley Hawkes suggest that Astley's writing demonstrates relentless social criticism as satire while also maintaining a "remarkable empathy" for misfits (220). Astley herself did not identify her work as satire. Rather, she remarked in an interview that she saw the world in terms of black comedy and held particular admiration for those writers who "walk . . . that very narrow edge between weeping at the horror of things and laughing. It's comic, but it's horrendous. I think to do that is dazzling" (Willbanks 34). She saw her own writing as occupying a site of ambivalence, both "a plea for charity" and a "form of protest" (Willbanks 37).

Traditionally, satire is a mode dominated by men, who were given more licence to critique social norms and conventions. Astley was aware that adopting satire as a woman would make her seem difficult. In 1981, she discerned, "Maybe it is because I am a woman—and no reviewer, especially a male one, can believe for one split infinitive of a second that irony or a sense of comedy or the grotesque in a woman is activated by anything but the nutrients derived from 'backyard malice'" ("Writing" 4).

Astley first began writing in the late 1950s. Susan Sheridan contends that satire was the predominant mode in post-war Australian literature, with writers like Astley, Patrick White, and Hal Porter questioning an Australian culture based on "suburban materialism, conformity and complacency" ("Woman" 262). Such a culture was deeply patriarchal, with a hierarchy of gender which Astley internalised. In an interview, Astley commented, "I grew up believing that women weren't really people and didn't matter in the scheme of things," adding that she felt "spiritually neutered by society" (Ellison 56). The same culture also glorified youth. In "The Monstrous Accent on Youth," a 1968 essay for *Meanjin*, Astley concludes: "The permissiveness of our generation to the younger has created the monstrous over-rated importance of youth. Oldies . . . can tremble vertical upon trains and buses while thick-thighed youngsters cling to their seats" (91).

Astley viewed ageing for women as particularly challenging. She wrote to Robert Drewe in 1966: "Women are very sad things . . . When they reach forty-five or so their marriages are usually pretty arid and they command no respect in any sphere at all" (22). In her attentively astute biography, Karen Lamb speaks of Astley's awareness of the "double discrimination" that comes with ageing and being female (258), and whose effects are a growing invisibility that approaches "vanishing points" in Australian society. Lamb points out that Astley disliked her photograph being taken for marketing purposes because "it forced her to watch herself ageing" (Lamb 243). Responding to Don Anderson's 1985 review of *Beachmasters* in the *National Times*, Astley was vituperative: "[D]o I get the impression from your review that you resent my age? Do you feel I should have hung up my typer the moment I hit fifty? Is there to be nothing left the tottering senior citizen?" (qtd. in Lamb 259).

Susan Lever suggests that besides social subjugation, Astley also located women's limitations in their lack of control over their own bodies. Astley would view female bodies as not only unmanageable in their sexual desires, but also "decaying and unreliable" (16). The corporeal effects of Miss Trumper's ageing are described in *A Boatload of Homefolk* (1968) through risible abjection:

Her hair had escaped from its shallow bun and trickled like grey streaks of unloving down the soft sad cheeks. Her hands had relinquished their last frenzied clutch and the dentures had dropped onto the blanket and grinned up at him from her stomach. (168)

Lever argues that Astley's contemporaries such as Elizabeth Jolley and Olga Masters, who began publishing their fiction later than Astley, "present the horrors of the female body with less immediacy and anger than Astley" (17).

Elizabeth Jolley focuses on the farcical, almost carnivalesque aspects of institutional aged care in *Mr Scobie's Riddle* (1983) as well as the pressures of caring for an elderly mother with dementia in *Miss Peabody's Inheritance* (1983). While her work overlaps with Astley's through a shared focus on the gendering of care in families and the significance of female friendships, Astley's is a more confronting black comedy, marked as it is by extreme harshness, absurdity, excess, and digression. Written when Astley was sixty-six, *Coda* was intended to be her last novel; fellowship success enabled her to write two more novels, *Multiple Effects of Rain Shadow* (1996) and *Drylands* (1999). *Coda* situates a son and daughter's inability to cope with the growing dementia and vulnerability of their mother within a broader social pattern of granny dumping.

The seeds of the novella can be found many years earlier in the short story "A Man Who is Tired of Swiper's Creek is Tired of Life," from *Hunting the Wild Pineapple* (1979). It recounts the arrival of an unnamed elderly woman in a remote town in far north Queensland, a place marked by lawlessness and inversion, "where anything screwball is normal and often where what is normal is horrible" (*Hunting* 161). The place is a space of limbo and hopelessness, "the last hoop of reality, the untranslatable idiom of trees and emptiness" (*Hunting* 171). It is a place where the ironically named "Rosebud" drunkenly abuses the elderly as "[d]ying," "[r]otten," "[f]ilth" (*Hunting* 169). Travel for the old woman has been "fixed" by her daughter who once lived in Swiper's Creek and who persuades her mother that it is a warmer option than Goulburn in New South Wales, where the daughter herself intends to move (*Hunting* 172). Having had six children, the old woman is described as having a "vanishing body" (*Hunting* 173). She attempts to "be brave alone at the top of the lost end of the world" (*Hunting* 171). As the only person concerned for her well-being, the narrator also abandons her as he returns to Mango and his circle of friends. Moral integrity is tested yet ultimately found lacking. Astley's representation of society is bleak even as a stranger momentarily worries about the old woman's fate; the limits of critique means that her suffering remains beyond the story's conclusion. It is no coincidence that Astley places this story at the end of *Hunting the Wild Pineapple*.

Among the narrator's friends are husband and wife Brain (more about the name later) and Bosie, who appear in another story from the collection, "Petals from Blown Roses," along with Brain's new love interest, Nina Waterman. All three will reappear in *Coda*, which extends their story and consolidates Astley's interweaving of characters and place to create a complex worlding. *Coda* shifts its focalisation back and forth between Brain and his mother Kathleen Hackendorf. Despite her memory lapses and the growing confusion that marks her state of dementia, Kathleen demonstrates more awareness of her predicament than the unnamed old woman in "A Man Who is Tired of Swiper's Creek is Tired of Life."

The centrality of Kathleen's perspective reflects Astley's increasing confidence in the 1980s and 90s in mobilising strong female voices. This shift, Lamb argues, was reinforced by the fact that Astley had begun to be surrounded by women who had made their own careers within Australian literary culture (Lamb 282). Through the flawed but determined figure of Kathleen, Astley explores the kinds of challenges and losses experienced by older women with

dementia. At the same time, she exposes the specifically gendered expectations surrounding ageing and caregiving. In contrast to Shakespeare's seven ages of man, Kathleen outlines the four ages of women as "Bimbo, breeder, baby-sitter, burden" (*Coda* 114). *Coda* also questions Shakespeare's depiction of old age as "second childishness and mere oblivion" (*As You like It*, 2.7).

Further critiquing literature's role in shaping social attitudes towards old age, Astley has Kathleen disagreeing with Tolstoy's "little aphorism . . . tossed off in the Austen manner about families" (*Coda* 6). Here, Astley brings Leo Tolstoy's observations in *Anna Karenina*, "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (1), alongside observations by Jane Austen such as "A family of ten children will be always called a fine family where there are heads and arms and legs enough for the number" (5). Social comedy is the flipside to social tragedy. Kathleen reflects that "there is no grading lines in un-happiness" and that unhappiness was a form of blundering blindness: "Lucky if they landed on a bit of bat dung" (*Coda* 6).

Kathleen views her relationship with her children, Brain and Shamrock, as one of "wounded antagonism" caused by being "[u]nwanted and unwanted" (*Coda* 7–8). This too echoes earlier writing, a poem by Astley called "The Unwanted," which begins:

You are the tragedy, the human mirth,  
The lunar holocaust torn by the tides  
Of sneering lips, and little laughing eyes (*Selected Poems* 63)

The poem emphasises the cosmic foolishness and vulnerability of life. It is harsher than the ending of "A Man Who is Tired of Swiper's Creek is Tired of Life":

Birth, marriage, death, re-birth. They're the only neat endings, traditional  
culminations for living—for books, even—and what bogus, back-watery  
punctuation they are! Life is serial, an unending accretion of alternatives.  
(*Hunting* 175)

Astley suggests that *Coda* is as more about cycles of entrenched human behaviour than psychological development. The names of Kathleen's children have ironic resonance. Brian becomes Brain after the high-brow pronunciation of it by his wife Bosie. His name only emphasises his poor judgement and serial business failures, which Astley extends to "[e]ven failed despair" (*Coda* 63). Shamrock proves not to give luck to her mother; Kathleen finds her daughter more of a "sham" than a "rock." Shamrock seeks to place Kathleen in a retirement home so that she can take advantage of government compensation if they knock down Kathleen's house to build an expressway. She tells her mother, "You can't go on living there, not the way you are now, forgetting every damn thing" (*Coda* 8). She also refuses the responsibilities of care, saying that she can't cope with Kathleen's wandering.

*Coda* opens with Kathleen's declaration, "I'm losing my nouns" (*Coda* 5). This loss is more significant than loss of hearing, sight, senses, and moods, as it is through nouns that Kathleen recognises people and places as well as understands her position in the world. The most common symptom of dementia is defamiliarisation, comprising loss of memory and language, spatial disorientation, and behavioural change. Kathleen notes: "A funny thing about all this: she was starting to think of herself in the third person when she went back to where the nouns and the verbs all stayed in place in the sweetest logical sequence, as if she were some other" (*Coda* 6). Humour becomes a coping device in navigating this sense of existing as herself yet not herself: "The me of me rattles on, nounless" (*Coda* 6).

In engaging with Christina Stead's satire, Anne Pender quotes Northrop Frye: "A deliberate, rambling digressiveness . . . is endemic to the narrative technique of satire" (125). This digressiveness suits both the satiric mode and the wandering of dementia. *Coda* continuously shifts between Kathleen's fragmented memories and the present: "Although there were patterns in the past, she conceded, relationships had blurred and now there were only these brilliant sharp-edged pictures smashing against memory, bringing surf-whack aches" (*Coda* 15). Kathleen suggests that her story would be "pointillist": "A spot here. A dab there" (*Coda* 7). Dementia leaves Kathleen in an absurdist position of being cut off from her roots and disoriented.

The one continuing connection is her best friend, Daisy. Although separated from each other for most of their adult life, their occasional meetings after their children have reached adulthood are filled with laughter and complaint. Daisy remains Kathleen's ideal audience and sounding board. Their friendship echoes Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in staging human connection through two figures experiencing a similar state of precarity. Having been killed by a reversing truck, Daisy exists in the present only as an internalised dialogue for Kathleen: "She was the link, the tie, the anchorage of far-voiced comfort over endless cups of tea" (*Coda* 7).

Kathleen is a difficult, polarising character rather than a figure of sentiment. A key aspect to this is her sense of humour, which becomes a mechanism to cope with the limitations of her married life. Kathleen contrasts her capacity to appreciate the absurdity of life with her husband Ronald's increasing tenseness and lack of humour as a sales clerk. She recognises how her laughter is uncomfortable in the small community in Townsville, "her uncivil clutch at truth or truth's flippant side" (*Coda* 30). Ronald reprimands Kathleen when they move to colonial Honiara, advising that "laugh[ing] too damn much" (*Coda* 33) and being outspoken will leave her friendless and without support. She gives six-year-old Brian nightmares by telling him that his father has been eaten when Ronald disappears for three weeks, "compound[ing] his distress by telling jokes about missionaries in cooking-pots" (*Coda* 38). Here, her humour suggests a lack of empathy. This is reinforced by her punning response, "Whoops a Daisy!" in the face of Daisy's decision to marry a man who beats and keeps her "regularly pregnant" (*Coda* 30). In both instances, humour becomes a coping mechanism for a situation that she is powerless to change, but also a problematic distancing device.

A similar cruelty is shown to her daughter Shamrock. When Shamrock shares her decision to take a gap year to find herself, Kathleen responds mildly: "Where will you look, dear?" (*Coda* 57). She shows no maternal care when Shamrock returns home after experiencing sexual exploitation at a commune. As with Kathleen's movement into marriage after a failed relationship with a merchant seaman, Shamrock moves from a failed alternative life to marrying an ambitious lawyer who enters parliament. Kathleen ruthlessly dubs him the 'minister for transports' (*Coda* 58). Unable to understand Shamrock's desire for a traditional white wedding, Kathleen views her daughter as simply "flaunt[ing] herself" (*Coda* 59) and believes Shamrock is ungrateful, given that Kathleen has bankrolled the event to the point of taking on a three-year debt.

Free indirect discourse means that much of the novella is given over to Kathleen's satiric voice. Astley introduces Brain's perspective not only as a counterpoint from the child's perspective, but also to demonstrate repeated patterns of behaviour. Brain's marriage is as limited as that of his parents, spawning two over-indulged boys, Bimbo and Chaps, whose nicknames reinforce a sense of superficiality. His wife Bosie's lack of understanding of Brain mirrors that of his mother. Astley presents Brain's attraction to Nina Waterman as more of an "escape than a fornicatory goal" (*Coda* 87). Echoing his mother's offkey humour, he and Nina laugh at the incongruity of postwar gluttony in Germany. Reprimanded by a waiter for smoking in a German restaurant, Ronald responds, "Lots of smoke in Auschwitz. Why does one cigarette

upset you?” (*Coda* 93). His shared laughter with Nina tests the limits of critique, exceeding cultural sensitivity. Their mockery of a fellow Australian traveller on the train also approaches cruelty. Yet it is this sense of humour that connects Nina to Kathleen: Nina “liked Brain’s zany old wool-gatherer of a mother the moment they met” (*Coda* 135).

Kathleen suggests that “[t]he more I remember the more I’m loaded with this sense of responsibility, the conviction that somewhere along the line I went horribly wrong” (*Coda* 107). She goes to live with Shamrock and Len for a couple of months and looks after their third child, Bridgie. Yet she defends her right to enjoy early retirement, echoing the old woman from “A Man Who is Tired of Swiper’s Creek is Tired of Life” who demands a right to be tired (*Hunting* 171). Kathleen views Shamrock’s wedding purely in quantitative, negative terms: “Kathleen remembered unremembered birthdays, her often lonely Christmases, the presents unthanked, casually treated” (*Coda* 117). She and the teenage Bridgie momentarily bond in their unwantedness when Kathleen thwarts Shamrock’s holiday plans. Following Kathleen’s request to stay with Brain and Nina for a short period, Brain contemplates Nina’s suggestion that Kathleen might help out at their restaurant: “He was beginning to understand at last the healing quality of being needed, just at that point, though he didn’t realise that, when his mother was tired of being used” (*Coda* 135).

Astley presents Shamrock’s feelings of frustration towards her mother as understandable in light of their history. Brain’s alternative feelings of guilt are also historically layered, beginning with his distancing from his mother when she attends the same college as him. Astley depicts Kathleen’s time living with Brain and Nina as challenging for both mother and son. Kathleen feels trapped and wonders if she is receiving “second-hand kindness” (*Coda* 150). Her incontinence leads to feelings of embarrassment and a desire not to be a burden. On the other hand, Brain begins to resent his mother’s continued presence and believes “chauvinistically” (*Coda* 151) that it is the daughter’s responsibility to look after ageing parents. He realises that his mother’s “oddities were increasing with age” and her “indifference to convention” run counter to his and Shamrock’s envisioned lifestyles (*Coda* 152).

When Kathleen returns to her own home she discovers that Shamrock has emptied it out and bought her a villa in the retirement home of Passing Downs. Karen Lamb records how Astley collected advertisements for aged-care facilities, particularly ones hawking “resort-style activities” (292). On hearing that Shamrock’s husband Len has put down Brutus, the dog Kathleen inherited from Daisy, Kathleen remembers Bridgie’s shared story of Len’s affair with his secretary: “Sham had allowed the wrong animal to be put down, she thought, and began to giggle at the admitted irony” (*Coda* 166). In naming the faithful old dog Brutus, Astley plays on the misalignment of betrayal and fidelity. Satire allows Astley a means to present the horror of Shamrock unmoved at her mother’s distress while its ironic comedy provides a coping mechanism for Kathleen and the reader.

The foyer of Passing Downs confirms Kathleen’s fears in “relat[ing] more to a hotel chain than a caring system” (*Coda* 167). She jokes about her room being “Charnel number 5” (*Coda* 168). Refusing to submit to institutionalisation, Kathleen escapes and heads north to Magnetic Island where she first met her husband. She tells a stranger, first mistaken for Daisy, “It’s time to go feral. Tribes of feral grandmothers holed up in the hills, just imagine it” (*Coda* 184). The image of feral grandmothers undoes the stereotype of old age as a life of quiet, domesticated femininity. It resonates with “Hell’s Grannies” (1971), a sketch in *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* which depicted “a new kind of crime” on English streets, elderly women attacking respectable citizens, attacking young men and stealing their motorbikes and painting slogans, such as “Make Tea Not Love.” The band of feral grandmothers suggests a resistance movement against a gendered ageism.

In her disorientation, Kathleen returns to scraps of poetry “something scribbled decades back” (*Coda* 186): “thoughts pointed to the pole-star of the mind, move into light” (*Coda* 187).

She adds, “Young, I magnify!—the island moving in across the prow!” (*Coda* 188) As Susan Sheridan discerns (*Fiction* 127), the poem is one penned by Astley when young, titled “Magnetic” (*Selected Poems* 125). Reinforcing Lever’s argument around the female body, it speaks of “calms / Beyond great longing,” a time past the currents of sexual desire when it will be more possible “to find / The self’s bright centre” (*Selected Poems* 105). Such a centre is one defined by “foam” yet hopeful (*Selected Poems* 105). Astley ends *Coda* with Kathleen’s declaration of happiness, “God! . . . What a marvellous day!” (*Coda* 188). Her epiphany is marked by situational irony; the reader is well aware of the precarity of Kathleen’s situation, even as she refuses to acknowledge it.

As Markson and Hess discern, most literary representations tend to focus on elderly women’s suffering rather than on their survival (140). Astley’s portrait of Kathleen is different. It is one of unruliness rather than passivity. Daisy likewise refuses to be a victim, determined to leave the house while still carrying her few valuables out of fear of burglars. *Coda* demonstrates the loneliness, isolation, and invisibility facing women in old age. It represents the failing body through Kathleen’s incontinence, and her attendant sense of shame and powerlessness. It also represents the guilt of family members (through the figure of Brain) as they attempt to navigate the limits of their care and the resulting negative impact on family dynamics. As a satire, it signals the limits of critique. There are no easy solutions. Ugly and difficult feelings are prominent, while moral failings are all too apparent. Kathleen’s humour is a coping mechanism but also revealed as callous to others. *Coda* foregrounds the absurdity of Kathleen’s situation even as it presents her as a figure struggling to maintain her personhood and her independence.

As a satire, *Coda* entertains its readers even as it protests the harsh realities of ageism. It presents one positive relationship, the friendship between Kathleen and Daisy, although the reader has no access to Daisy’s perspective. This friendship is a bond of strength that exists outside of patriarchal diminishment and subjection. Kathleen’s final decision to live in and enjoy the present, the “marvellous day,” also suggests a form of resilience that makes *Coda* valuable as a vehicle for navigating dementia. As *Coda* demonstrates, satire is a somewhat ambivalent but apt form to explore the limits of cultural critique. It presents a valuable portrait of the way the experience of dementia is gendered and an alternative genealogy to Shakespeare’s *Lear* that is geopolitically nuanced and still (unfortunately) as relevant and insightful today as the period it addresses and in which it was published.

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