Never Too Old To Learn or Rebel: Two *Old Ladies* (*Twee oude vrouwtjes*)[1]

By Aagje Swinnen, Maastricht University, The Netherlands

Abstract:
This article studies the literary representation of age and gender in Two Old Ladies, a short story composite written by the Dutch author Toon Tellegen. First, it investigates how Two Old Ladies refers to the narrative structure of the fairy tale and its stereotypical depiction of old women as antagonistic hags or helpful grannies. A referential reading method is substituted for a poetic one in order to arrive at a better understanding of Tellegen's fiction. Second, the analysis focuses on the conventions of the grotesque as an art form that resists dominant modes of representation and interpretation. Also, in the theories of the grotesque, the body of an old woman often functions as the prototypical grotesque body. Third, the genre characteristics of the short story composite serve to illuminate the dialogical encounter between Tellegen's different stories. The closure of every single story gets undermined by the act of collecting them. The form of the short story composite turns out to be compatible with theories of performativity. In the article, important insights of gender and age studies are called on to deepen the understanding of Tellegen's critical practice as a writer in Two Old Ladies.

Introduction

1 *Two Old Ladies*, published in 1994, is a short story composite written by Toon Tellegen, a contemporary Dutch author. It precedes Tellegen's series of modern fables about a squirrel and its animal friends, which made his writings immensely popular. Like the fables, the short stories of *Two Old Ladies* both entertain and challenge the reader. On the one hand, the strange events about different pairs of old women, which remind of the grim reality of the fairy tale world, raise a laugh. The playful turns of the seemingly uncomplicated tales catch the innocent reader by surprise. On the other hand, the reading experience of *Two Old Ladies* can be quite frustrating since the form of the composite persistently counters the possibility of discovering an underlying coherence. One keeps wondering what these tales are about and where they lead to. In the first short story for instance, two old ladies try to ruin their love by taking draconian measures like drinking to excess, eating teaspoons of shoe polish, and hiding behind room dividers. But it is no use. They cannot stop loving one another no matter how hard they try. The whole chain of events is rather comic until one arrives at the end of the story and the women start crying: "Old people must not love each other […] No!" (Tellegen 5). Where do these harsh words suddenly come from and what do they imply?

2 In this article, I study the literary representation of age and gender in *Two Old Ladies*. Tellegen's short story composite does not mirror reality, but creates an intriguing

[1] All original Dutch quotes from Two Old Ladies are translated to English by Aagje Swinnen.

alternative that invites a critical text analysis. The question arises if and how common assumptions about women's old age are rewritten in Tellegen's tales. To answer this question, I present an intertextual reading process. First, I investigate how *Two Old Ladies* refers to the narrative structure of the fairy tale and its stereotypical depiction of old women as antagonistic hags or helpful grannies. I substitute a referential reading method for a poetic one in order to arrive at a better understanding of Tellegen's fiction. Second, I look into the conventions of the grotesque as an art form that resists dominant modes of representation and interpretation. Also, in the theories of the grotesque, the body of an old woman often functions as the prototypical grotesque body. Third, I use the genre characteristics of the short story composite to illuminate the dialogical encounter between Tellegen's different stories. The closure of every single story gets undermined by the act of collecting them. The form of the short story composite turns out to be compatible with theories of performativity. In my analysis, I call on the important insights of gender and age studies to deepen the understanding of Tellegen's critical practice as a writer in *Two Old Ladies*.

1. Bedtime/Deathtime Stories

3 All the short stories of Tellegen's composite, with the exception of the 18th tale, begin with the words *two old ladies* in capitals. The identity of these elderly women, however, is no more than lightly touched upon. The ladies remain nameless and their past is never revealed so that it is difficult to distinguish them from one another. Only details of their physical appearance are explicitly mentioned. In general, the old ladies are fragile, tiny, stiff, grey, bony, bent, wrinkled and wobbly. They wear wide skirts or dresses with large pockets in which they hide handkerchiefs, soaked in cologne. In order to stay warm, the women wrap embroidered shawls around their delicate shoulders. Whether the homes they live in are big or small, in the city or the countryside, up in the sky or low to the ground, they always testify of past glory. Their rooms store up paintings, solid chandeliers, plush fauteuils, heavy curtains, oak tables, etc. In short, both the typification of the protagonists and the depiction of the setting of the events are characterized by the adjective *old*, used as an epithet with *women* in the opening phrases of the stories. *Old* does not seem to refer to old age in its chronological sense in *Two Old Ladies*. It is of no importance if the characters are in their sixties or nineties. The epithet rather calls attention to the state of isolation that comes with old age. The two old ladies live in a world that the young(er) readers do not recognize as familiar.

4 Seldomly, narratives are centered on the adventures of old ladies, as is the case in Tellegen's short story composite. As characters with a specific function in a schematic plot, they mostly form a part of fairy tales (Dingeldein and Ranke). In fairy tales, too, elderly

women do not get a name nor have a past. They live in isolation and embody magic art. On the one hand, old women can use this magic art negatively. In the narrative function of marplots, they do everything that lies in their power to sabotage the hero in the achievement of his/her quest. As wicked witches or vice stepmothers, they are incarnations of evil – a denotation that results from Christianity. The prototypical, dangerous hag in fairy tale land is the witch from "Hansel and Gretel." She fattens up the imprisoned little boy in order to eat him for dinner, but ends up in the oven herself. She is outright malevolent by nature and only death can put an end to her power. On the other hand, old women can make use of their magic art in a positive way. In the function of helpers, they may facilitate the mission of the hero by offering him/her guidance. In the shape of kind granny or wise crone they use their witch craft to provide for a miraculous instrument that will help solving the initial conflict of the tale – a reference to women herbalists in pre-Christian, popular belief. A famous example of the wise old granny is Mother Holle who rewards the diligent girl with a layer of gold while her lazy sister will never be rid of the indelible pitch she is covered in.

5 The prominence of the characters of the old ladies already raises the anticipation of reading fairy tales. In addition, other characteristics of Tellegen's short stories remind of fairy tale conventions. First, the events of the short stories often balance between the real and the surreal. In the 10th tale, for instance, the one old lady creeps in a waste disposal bag waiting for the refuse cart to come. That way, she wants to give the other old woman her freedom back. Or, in the 29th story, the one elderly woman persistently pretends to be a bumble-bee as the other lady had requested at her deathbed. Second, the characters have no psychological depth. You only get to know them by the actions they are involved in. Since Vladimir Propp published his morphology of the folktale in 1928, there is no discussion about the crucial importance of events for the definition of the genre. Fairy tales are exciting because spectacular and predictable actions occur at a high pace. A change of character only happens under influence of external circumstances. Third, the recurring opening formula *two old ladies*, reminiscent of *once upon a time*, and the uncomplicated plot structure of the short stories suggest that Tellegen's composite is meant for readers of all ages. That impression is even reinforced by the illustrations of André Sollie that accompany the tales. But do all these familiar features of the fairy tale genre suffice to get a better understanding of *Two Old Ladies*? And do the old ladies in Tellegen's stories conform to the stereotyped roles of elderly women in fairy tales? I will elaborate on these questions by means of the 36th story.

A Change of View: The Referential versus the Poetic Mode of Reading

6 At first glance, the 36th short story of *Two Old Ladies* consists of a simple narrative structure. An initial conflict is worked out in a logical and chronological organized series of events. The conflict has to do with a crisis in the relationship of two elderly women. The story of one woman, who no longer tolerates the other being old, bent, and wrinkled is told by an uninvolved narrator. She desires a partner with firmer, younger-looking skin and starts looking for objects that will obstruct any visual contact between them. First, the one old woman builds some kind of fence between the left and right side of the table, which enables her to enjoy her dinner without the disturbing sight of the other. Second, she begins wearing goggles with blackened glasses – an even more radical change in their living together. With the problem solved in this way, the two old ladies can die peacefully. The ending can be read as an alternative to the *happily ever after* in fairy tales. When summarizing the story like this, it turns out that the narrative is reduced to its skeleton. The quest of the one elderly woman for a specific object is not told nor shown. The reader only learns that she brings a packet home with goggles. No other characters are introduced to sabotage or support the one old lady in her quest. As such, both the action and the characters of the story remain rather rudimentary. Despite this simplicity of form, the tale is more incomprehensible as one would expect. The initial conflict (the refusal of the confrontation with the aging body of one's partner) and its solution (wearing goggles with blackened glasses) are far from plausible and reasonable. The tale is characterized by an oddness that is different from the peculiarity of the world of the fairy tale.

7 If the significance of a text does not become fully clear, it is worthwhile to change one's reading method. I will no longer focus on the seemingly realistic chain of events of Tellegen's 36th story, but on its organization as a poetic unity. The composition of the tale is firmly rooted in the semantic cluster that is formed around the opposite words *seeing* and *being blind*. These oppositions are reinterpreted by the exchange of metaphorical for referential meanings. The story transforms the idiom that *love is blind*. This common turn of phrase refers to *but love is blind and lovers cannot see the pretty follies that themselves commit* of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, which means that an amorous person is blind to the failings and shortcomings of his desired one. However, in Tellegen's tale, the idiom *love is blind* is interpreted literally. The one old lady is obsessed by the physical decline of her lover's body. The radical solution lies in the elimination of sight. The woman decides to wear blackened goggles. As such, she prefers blindness to vision in order to save her relationship. This surprising ending indirectly points out the significant difference between young and old love. While falling in love is connected to the seeing ability, like

in *love at first sight*, the love of the two old ladies is vibrant in the dark. Figuratively, *being blind* means being so credulous that one's hopes are easily deceived. The reader of the 36th story does not easily accept the blackened goggles as a valid solution to the problem that the old ladies are faced with. The solution simply is too extreme to be convincing. Obviously, the play with the idiom *love is blind* is not a depiction of an exciting event, but stimulates reflection. One starts wondering what the idea behind this word play could be.

8 The 36th story indirectly refers to the invisibility of women's old bodies in contemporary culture. Today's canonical beautiful body is young and firm, not old and flabby. It is precisely the desire for this ideal of a young body that forms the catalyst of Tellegen's story. The one old woman is repulsed by the aging body of her partner. She cannot stand watching her wrinkled and sagging skin. This rejection of the other woman's old body which the reader experiences as cruel and painful, is a common practice in western society. For this reason, all kinds of products like anti-aging creams, botox injections, and facelifts are successfully put on the market. They promise to slow down the physical decline that the passing of time automatically results in. Marketers and plastic surgeons promote the makeability of the body and, as such, sell the illusion of eternal youth and beauty. The preservation of a youthful presence is more vital to women than men, since they are to a greater extent identified with their bodies. Anti-aging measures have to prevent them from becoming unattractive, or invisible in the heterosexual matrix. Aging women experience a realistic fear for replacement by younger women. Therefore, the American feminist essayist Susan Sontag launched the still relevant term *the double standard of aging* in 1972. Men can age without losing attractiveness or status. Women cannot. However, Tellegen's 36th tale not only incorporates the idea that women become invisible as soon as they age, but also transforms it. First, the negative response to women's aging bodies is not expressed by a man, but by an old woman herself. Second, the rejection of the wrinkled body of the lady is explicitly connected with the affirmation of the elderly's sexual lust instead of its denial. The one old lady makes it clear that she yearns "to caress the slender legs [of the other elderly woman] upwards with her fingertips, along the hip and straight to the front" (Tellegen 78). Third, the solution of the story's initial conflict is rather surprising. The one old woman does not expect the other old lady to change. On the contrary, she herself takes responsibility for the deadlock in their relationship and decides to wear blackened goggles. She assures her partner: "Of course, you cannot help it. It is totally my fault. I know that for sure. I wish I had other thoughts on my mind. Yet, I have these" (Tellegen 79).

9 Simone de Beauvoir writes in *La vieillesse* that one becomes old by looking through the eyes of others who resent one's aging appearance (301-302). Suddenly, the mirror reflection no longer overlaps with the internalized self-image. The disapproving gaze of the other stares back. In Tellegen's story, the look of the other is blocked by means of the blackened goggles. Like Oedipus, the one old lady redeems her guilt by choosing blindness over vision. This drastic choice is a strange method to reconfigure one's feelings of resentment and the question arises whether it is an effective one. Because of the elementary characterization of the story's main characters, the two old ladies seem to be interchangeable. As soon as the one elderly woman rejects the other's aging body, this rejection has the effect of a boomerang. The blackened goggles not only hinder the sight of the partner's body in decline, but blind the one old lady to her own aging process as well. She is blind to the truth, namely that she is aging as much as her partner. In the perspective of the one elderly woman, the other lady may have regained the appearance of youth, but she herself remains as old as before. In short, one could interpret the two old ladies as two sides of the same coin, which might explain why the second old lady never rebels against the first one who starts wearing the blackened goggles. At the end of the story, the other old lady lies awake and feels blessed. This rosy ending is no more than the disguise of the failure and denial of old women's self-acceptance. The one who is obsessed by physical decline, awaits a frustrating old age. And what can be more frustrating than sharing the bed with a partner who literally does not want to see you? Tellegen's 36th tale, for this reason, can be interpreted as a parody on the invisibility of aging women's bodies and of their sex drive by rewriting the turn of phrase that *love makes blind*.

10 The play with the words *seeing* and *being blind* is not only the cornerstone of the story's construction, but also characterizes the relationship between the tale and its reader. At first, the absurd and light-footed features of the story blind the reader. She recognizes the structure of the fairy tale, its stereotypical portrayal of one of the old ladies as ugly and repulsive, the cruelty in the behavior of the other elderly woman, and the modified happy ending. During this referential reading, the reader repeats as it were the blindness of the protagonist to the deeper ideological meaning of the events. As soon as she changes her referential reading method for a poetic one, she can successfully illuminate the many implications of blindness in the text. And then the blindness of the characters in Tellegen's tale results in the seeing of the reader. The story prompts her to reflect on the different layers of the text. In some of the stories of *Two Old Ladies*, Tellegen takes the poetic features of his art one step further. This means that he completely distances himself from using events and

characters as central plot-building elements and elaborates on a single metaphor. For instance in the 20th tale, two old ladies are chatting peacefully on the windowsill. Suddenly the wind lifts them, so that they slowly make their descent to the ground. An old man strews breadcrumbs to the elderly women when they are landed. Another tries to chase them away. The last sentences of the tale hint at an explanation of the strange events: "Grey ladies. In autumn" (Tellegen 43). The color grey refers explicitly to the old age of the ladies who are often compared with grey doves. The actions presented in the tale become familiar when interpreting the ladies as birds instead of human beings. Like pigeons, the elderly women evoke contradictory responses in the people they meet.

2. The Abasement of Eros and Thanatos

11 It has become clear that a referential reading is not the most productive strategy to analyze *Two Old Ladies*. Thus I return to the seemingly realistic events of Tellegen's tales, but refer to theoretical insights regarding the semiotics of the grotesque. All the stories of *Two Old Ladies* are thematically structured around the abstract and elevated concepts of Eros, the urge to live, and Thanatos, the fear of death. In the translation from these themes to narrative actions, abstract theory is put into concrete practice and connected with the lowness of corporeality. On the one hand, Eros is expressed by means of the explicit sexuality of the ladies: they constantly kiss, caress and bite each other's ears. On the other hand, Thanatos takes the form of shriveling, being tired, sleeping, and, eventually, dying. Mikhail Bakhtin calls the lowering and intertwining of abstract themes *abasement* that he ascribes to the festive aesthetics of carnival popular culture (qtd. in Van den Oever 61). The fairy tale shares its interest in scatology, sex and violence with the grotesque technique of abasement; although this interest is eliminated from the bourgeois fairy tale versions that today's readers are most familiar with. Like I already discussed, Tellegen's 36th story focuses precisely on the tension between Eros and Thanatos. The turn of phrase *love makes blind* is interpreted literally and linked with sexuality and bodily decay. Not only within the stories do Eros and Thanatos get systematically intertwined, but also in between the tales. Because of the specific structure of *Two Old Ladies* as a short story composite, the categories of Eros and Thanatos lose their absolute value. Tellegen's composite is not a collection of various tales with clearly marked endings and closures, but forms a regenerative cycle. For each pair of old ladies that die in one particular story, a new couple appears at the beginning of the next tale. Therefore, the opening of every new story implies the rebirth of the main characters.

12 I will now examine and clarify the integration of the technique of abasement in Tellegen's poetic word play of the 24th tale.

The Grotesque Body-drama: Inseparable Fingers

13 The 24th short story is situated right in the middle of *Two Old Ladies* and begins with the following dialogue:

The one lady said: "I regret that one cannot keep something from someone who dies."

> "What do you mean?" the other lady asked.
> "Well, neither hand, nor foot, nor nose."
> "But you might keep hair or nails?"
> "No, that does not count," the one lady said. "No, I mean something inseparable, or how can I put it, either way, it is not allowed." (Tellegen 50)

On the one hand, the word *inseparable* refers to the nature of the relationship between the two ladies. They are so devoted to each other that the thought of being left behind makes them feel sorry for themselves. In the sense of *always together* the adjective *inseparable* returns in many of Tellegen's tales, for instance "They were happy, they thought, and inseparable" (18). On the other hand, the term *inseparable* is connected with its opposite *separable* and projected on the dead body. The one old lady wishes to keep a body part that can be separated from the corpse of the other old lady. By body part, she means neither hair nor nails that are easily separated from a human body. On the contrary, she wishes for parts of which the separation from the body would imply this body's mutilation. This kind of violation of a corpse is prohibited in both the world in- and outside the story. In Tellegen's original Dutch text, the word *inseparable* is neologized, since its equivalent *onafscheidelijk* only exists in the first definition of the word and cannot be used in connection with things like body parts. As such, it is a so-called *non-grammaticality* that draws attention and invites an analysis that exceeds the referential reading (Riffaterre qtd. in Van Alphen et al. 41).

14 To specify her longing for inseparable body parts, the one lady recalls a moment from her childhood. At a particularly cold night, her favourite dog froze to death. Its corpse seemed to be made of china. When she tried to lift it, the frozen dog accidentally lost an ear – an analogy with the fragility of a porcelain cup. The memory of the frozen dog inspires the other lady right away. When frosty cold has come, she secretly sneaks out in the evening and waits stark naked for her body to grow numb with cold. In the morning, the one old lady finds her corpse and tries to caress it. But the stiffened body slips from her hands. Fingers, ears and feet come off the corpse and fall on the ground. Before the undertaker arrives, the one lady hides two fingers of her partner in the pocket of her fur coat. She plans to put them in a jar on the mantelpiece where one would expect to find flowers or small statues. The undertaker searches for the missing fingers among the "frozen garbage" (Tellegen 51) and blames the grabby polecats for their absence. Once again, the meaning of the story's bizarre events can be

deduced from the play with one single word: "'Cold,' the undertaker said. 'It is so cold!' [...] 'It is much too cold, humph.'" (Tellegen 51-52). The first definition of the word *cold* has to do with low temperatures. In Tellegen's tale, it is wintry cold outside. Also, *cold* refers to the body temperature of the corpse that is ice-cold. In its second definition, *cold* means heartless. But the women of the story are not unkind at all. On the contrary, they show great concern for one another. The second lady does not want the first one to be left out in the cold – figuratively – once she will no longer be around. She takes the desire of her partner for *inseparable* body parts seriously. Therefore, she goes out in the cold – literally – to die.

15 The fingers of the dead old lady in the jar begin to decompose. They change color and shape, which the one lady mistakes for resurrection. She has to force herself not to take them out of the jar so that she can hold them close to her cheek. In her imagination the fingers are still part of her deceased partner who invisibly is seated on the mantelpiece and watches over her. In other words, the fingers function as the figure of speech *pars pro toto* – Latin for a part for the whole. Occasionally, the one lady regrets her choice for fingers. An ear in the jar would have made it easier to declare her love to or to use for a love bite. When interpreting the structure of the story as a palimpsest, the hypogram *relic* is interwoven in the texture. The concept of the *hypogram* denotes an underlying word around which a text revolves (Riffaterre qtd. in Van Alphen et al. 141). The detection of a hypogram can support the analysis of a narrative. It is no coincidence that in the beginning of the 24th story the other lady mentions hair and nails as separable body parts. A relic is a bodily remains such as teeth, bones, hair or nails to which supernatural powers are attributed. In popular religion, one ascribes soul and spirit to relics. Also, the Catholic Church accepts and stimulates the worship of holy relics, even though the devotion of body parts is in conflict with the belief in the significance of the immortal soul.

16 In the 24th tale the fingers of the one old lady are bodily remains that decompose. By associating these remains with the notion of the relic, their meaning is elevated. The fingers are able to put new life into the deceased elderly woman and, in so doing, make the abstract idea of immortal love concrete. The text turns out to confirm that the old ladies are truly *inseparable*. In other words, a so-called body-drama that is centered round the exposure of the grotesque body replaces the conventional narrative structure (Bakhtin 32). The corpse of the old lady is of crucial importance for the story. Yet, death has multiple meanings. First, it is strongly linked with resurrection. The dead lady reappears in the eyes of her partner thanks to the fingers that are secretly kept in a jar. Second, death has no individual character. It is not introduced to portray a psychological crisis of one of the characters, but enlarges the

universal feeling of being inseparable and connects it with corporeality. Moreover, the body is no longer depicted as an organic whole. Some of its parts can almost function independently.

3. Acting One's Age: the Ban Against Old Foolishness

17 The analysis of the 24th story of *Two Old Ladies* shows that the main characters are head-strong persons who are not afraid of expressing their wishes and acting accordingly. They intentionally break the prohibition on the violation of a corpse. One of the ladies commits suicide so that two fingers can be divided from her dead body and kept as a treasure. The theme of the ban against the separation of dead body parts refers, in guarded terms, to the taboo on the implicated devotion of the women for one another. Different pairs of old ladies who love each other are in the centre of Tellegen's tales. Physical intimacy forms a crucial part of their relationships and should not be overlooked. Stories are a specific means of representation in which ideologies, circulating in our social reality, can be uncritically repeated or subtly altered. In my opinion, gender and age ideologies intersect in *Two Old Ladies*. For this reason, the focus with respect to content is shifted from the psychological portrayal of the main characters to the fundamental conflict between the workings of ideologies and the aspirations of the individual. What do we understand by gender and age ideologies?

18 From the nineties onwards, the American philosopher Judith Butler has extensively and brilliantly written on the mechanism of gender ideologies, for instance in *Gender Trouble*. She argues convincingly that the biological category of sex – in itself a category that stems from human thought – is used to legitimize cultural differences between men and women. The female sex lays the foundation for the development of a female gender identity resulting from a woman's physical attraction to the male sex. Vice versa, a so-called successful male gender identity is based on the desire for the female sex. All sexual expressions that do not conform to these rules of the heterosexual matrix are considered to be abject. The continuation of ideologies depends on the repetition of normative behavior. In Butler's opinion, gender is a performativity instead of an ontology, and as such has more to do with doing than being. The essentialist core of femininity and masculinity is nothing less than a cultural myth. A woman learns to behave according to what is expected from her gender – a rewriting of De Beauvoir's famous quote that *one is not born, but rather becomes a woman*. The same goes for masculinity. It would appear that ideologies are almighty and unchangeable. Nonetheless, the repetition of gender-normative behavior offers the prospect of the subtle alteration of ideological gender scripts. Each form of conduct that deviates from prescribed gender roles has a subversive potential.

19 Butler's theory can systematically be applied to age as an important crucial difference in today's society, like Margaret Morganroth Gullette has done in *Aged by Culture*. Neither the calculation of exact chronological age (the number of years a person has lived) nor the diagnosis of biological age (one's physical health) matters, but the accumulation of instructions for proper behavior that measurable age is attributed to. Once again, it was the French feminist De Beauvoir who first paid attention to the cultural meaning of age in *La Vieillesse*, her history of old age. Influenced by the ideas of existentialism, she observes that one ages in the eyes of the other as I mentioned before. Because the determination of age is inevitably connected with this perception of the other, age is fundamentally social by nature. An age identity is always rooted in a specific matrix, constituted by the dichotomy between young and old. On the basis of arbitrary, so-called biological evidence, generations of human beings are played off against one another. Youth automatically gets the best of it in the youth-obsessed culture of the West. In imitation of Butler's gender theory, age is interpreted as a performativity. Being thirty-two years old, for instance, really means that one has to behave as is expected of someone in her thirties. These expectations relate to the way one organizes one's private and professional life. Mary Russo calls the conformation to age-related behavioral rules *acting one's age* (*Scandal of Anachronism* 27). The repetition of age-normative conduct invites small manifestations of subversion. Within age studies these subversive age acts are characterized as *anachronisms* (Russo, *Scandal of Anachronism* 21). Anachronistic faults undermine persistent age ideologies from within. Old women's anachronistic conduct assumes the proportion of a scandal, because it is associated with the exposure of the aging body. And the display of elderly women's bodies is strictly taboo. Not surprisingly, in Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque, the prototypical grotesque body is the body of the pregnant hag (Bakhtin qtd. in Russo, *Female Grotesque* 29).

20 The short story composite is distinguished from other genres by the double function of its tales, as Rolf Lundén has pointed out (60). On the one hand, the stories are separated entities with a specific dynamics. On the other hand, they are integrated in the totality of the composite. Therefore, the genre is characterized by a permanent interaction between textual strategies that move the stories away from one another and bring them back together. These formal characteristics imply a high degree of reader involvement in the text. The reader constantly needs to detect similarities between the stories without losing sight of the heterogeneity of the totality. The discontinuity of the short story composite involves the potential to modify, rewrite and even contradict the independent stories within the borders of the unity. Subversion is to be found in the repetition of the tales. As such, the genre of the

short story composite is complementary to the theory of performativity. Because of the possible diversity of the stories' content, a dialogue between different world views might originate. For this reason, some theorists are convinced that no other fictional genre can come closer to the complexity of real life. Besides the fairy tale and the body-drama, the short story composite is the third genre, mentioned in this article, which has subversive potential. The sociological approach of the fairy tale shows how this particular genre openly sympathizes with the underdog and in so doing questions the given social structure. Hence, fairy tales could stimulate readers to think critically and act in emancipatory ways. Body-drama's are inherently rebellious as well, because they undermine the conventions of mimesis and text analysis. At the same time, however, both genres depict old women in a problematic way, respectively as witches that can never take on the position of protagonist, and as grotesque abject bodies.

21 In the next paragraph, I clarify how age- and gender-normative behavior is regulated "from above" in the 7th and 42nd story of *Two Old Ladies*. Also, I examine how the specific shape of the short story composite facilitates the subversive potential of the narrative. The 7th and 42nd stories are so-called *anchor stories* (Lundén 124), since they are of crucial importance for the significance of the composite in general.

An Overt Display of Power: In the Closet

22 The two old ladies of Tellegen's 7th tale want to change their everyday life and decide to make a journey. Soon they find out that the outer world has undergone a profound transformation: "the people have become gloomy and resentful" (Tellegen 15). This change is never explained. It remains unclear whether the elderly women themselves have altered or their surroundings. Chilled to the bone and mud-covered, the ladies are discovered, picked up and carried off. A Kafkaesque interrogation scene follows their arrest:

> "What were you doing there?"
> "Nothing."
> "Nothing?"
> "Nothing. Simply embracing one another."
> "There?? In that mud?? You??"
> "We love each other," they whispered. (Tellegen 15)

First, the interrogator is surprised to find a pair of old ladies near the fence of a wasteland. Second, he is shocked by their overt expression of intimacy. In order to discourage the relationship between the elderly women, the interrogator gives a demonstration of exemplary love. He pulls out a dusty woman from a closet and carefully removes the dust from her body with a cloth. Then, he puts her back under lock and key. Without further explanation, the

interrogator turns the two old ladies out of his office. In the interrogation scene of the story, both the logic of the legal case and the pronouncement of a clear judgment are lacking. Why does the interrogator focus on this particularly odd crime scene? The question arises whether the age and/or the gender of the elderly women challenge his expectations.

23 Once again, I rely on the grotesque stylization of Tellegen's prose to explain the absurd performance of exemplary love by the interrogator. What could the relation between love and the removal of dust be? In the 7th story of *Two Old Ladies*, the contrast between *mortal* and *immortal* is replaced by the dichotomy between *the return to dust* and *dusting*. This implies that the removal of dust is connected with regeneration and life. The woman in the closet demonstrates the immortal love between or the inseparability of the partners. The two old ladies go along with the reasoning of the interrogator. Without protest, they accept that their way of living is wrong. Resigned, they agree with their guilt. The women's sense of powerlessness and anxiety is mounting. After the interrogation, memories of their former life and love are hurting. Finally, the story ends dramatically. The elderly women die/return to dust: "They [the two old ladies] shriveled and became stooped. In their dreams, crows, rulers and children ridiculed them. One morning, they died shortly after each other" (Tellegen 16-17). Tellegen's 7th story also proves to be rooted in the abasement of Eros and Thanatos, which is expressed by means of a body-drama. The death of the old ladies, which not only means the end of their lives but of the story as well, is preceded by a remarkable phrase including crows, rulers and children. This phrase refers to the jurisdiction of the middle ages in the Low Countries. If one had to appear in court, it was common practice to be accompanied by family members or by a cock. They had to confirm or contradict the oath of the accused by respectively remaining silent or speaking out loud. The Middle Dutch expression *kint no craet*, which literally means *neither child nor crow*, forms the etymological origin of Tellegen's enumeration of crows, rulers and children. The expression implies that one is totally alone in the world. The uncanny interrogation scene is the most important event of the 7th tale. Mysterious powers that neither the two old ladies nor the reader immediately can see through rule. In a nightmarish atmosphere, the love of the couple of old ladies is dismissed. What exactly does their relationship involve? To find an answer to this question the reader has to rely on the contrastive example of the interrogator. The expression *in the closet* refers to sexual practices that do not conform to the rules of the heterosexual matrix. The two old ladies who are confronted with the woman in the closet are part of a same-sex relationship. The woman who is pulled out of the closet, however, is the love interest of the male interrogator. Strangely, he is the one who orders the pair of old ladies

to withdraw from public life. The suppression of their love leads directly to their death. The hostility that the elderly women already meet in the beginning of the story predicts this tragic outcome.

24 Now, I like to examine the dialogical relation between the Kafkaesque 7th story of *Two Old Ladies* and the 42nd or second to last tale of the composite in which the expression *in the closet* also plays a crucial role. In the opening scene of the 42nd story, two old ladies take a walk and enjoy the idyllic environment. There is not a cloud in the sky until an old man with a pot-belly disturbs the peace:

> "What are you doing here?" he asked.
> "We are out for a walk," the one lady said.
> All of a sudden, the man's face turned fiery red and he started shouting: "Go home! Quick!" (Tellegen 97)

The question *What are you doing here?* reminds of the question *What were you doing there?* from the 7th story. Like the anonymous interrogator, the man with the pot-belly is surprised to come across the two old ladies outside of the house. Their rather innocent answer to his question immediately inflames the man's anger. Determined, he drives them back home where he locks them in a closet, filled with musty, discarded, old stuff: "'In the closet!'" (Tellegen 97). To make sure that the ladies won't escape, he returns several times to the house. If the women inquire after the reason of their confinement, he makes a sneer: "'What reason? No reason! In the closet! […] What reason… ridiculous. Ridiculous!'" (Tellegen 98). Yet, the motivation behind the rejection of the two old ladies becomes clearer in the 42nd tale than in the 7th, because it produces straight away the kind of behavior that the man experiences as intolerable. The old women start kissing in the closet. Clearly, it is their sexuality that has to be hidden from view. The significance of their coming out at the beginning of the story is nullified by the imposed withdrawal in the closet. The old ladies realize that they won't survive the imprisonment in the closet and try to keep the approaching death at a distance by eroticism and memories of their full life. But to no avail: the forced invisibility results in a powerlessness that hinders their survival. Irrevocably, the story ends with the death of the main characters.

25 The pair of old ladies of the 7th and 42nd story experiences a triple sense of invisibility. First, there is hostility towards women's aging bodies. Second, the setting leaves no space for the sexuality of the elderly. Third, homosexuality is a taboo within society's heterosexual matrix. It seems as if these particular two stories preserve this multi-faceted invisibility. But if one takes the repetitive form of the short story composite into consideration, it is worth looking for an analogous story with a different ending. In the 21st story, two old ladies get a

new upstairs neighbor who is small and fat. Presumably, he is old as well, since he lost all his hair and smells like cheese – a reference to *fully mature cheese*. Whenever the elderly women have sex at night, their behavior provokes the man's aggression: "'I can hear you! Be quiet! You are too old for that.' The two old ladies whispered in each other's ears: 'Are we too old for this?' They had no idea" (Tellegen 44). The 21st story is complementary with the 7th and the 42nd, because a ban on the sexuality of the elderly ladies is declared. For the first time, the sexuality of the two old ladies is explicitly characterized as inappropriate and connected with old age. Thus, the risk of so-called anachronistic behavior is revealed unambiguously. The elderly women themselves are unaware of any provocative conduct. The controlling voice that interferes with their life style comes from above, not from within. The ladies hope that their neighbor will call it a day, so that they can resume their sexual practice. Unfortunately, they die before he dies. In light of the other stories, this tragic ending is far from unexpected. Yet, after the death of the old ladies, the story takes a surprising turn. In the second part of the tale, a new pair of elderly women and a neighbor clash in a similar way. As soon as they refuse to conform to his standards, hell breaks loose. The man smashes the furniture to pieces and spits in the ladies' faces. A moment's inattention on the part of the man enables them to steal a kiss. With this memorable kiss, the text ends. As such, the 21st story functions as a *mise en abyme*. It repeats the structure of the short story composite. One series of events is told twice but with different outcomes. The happy ending here triumphs over the death of the protagonists and silences the disapproving voice of the anonymous man. In other words, the repetitive structure of the tale makes it possible for the women to successfully, although modestly, undermine conventional age and gender scripts.

Epilogue

26 As I argued in the introduction to this article, the various stories of *Two Old Ladies* both entertain and challenge the reader. At first, they remind of fairy tales that, according to a conventional notion of this genre, easily can be read by anyone. However, by uncovering multiple semiotic layers through different reading approaches, the inherent play with age and gender ideologies becomes ever more apparent. Engaging in a poetic analysis, discerning the semiologies of the grotesque and applying the theory of performativity opens up the many layers of the stories. In *Figuring Age*, the first major publication on women and aging from a cultural studies perspective, Kathleen Woodward points out the need for an *arena of visibility* for elderly women (ix). In my opinion, Tellegen's short story composite is a wonderful literary playground that forces one to reflect on the status of women's old age

in today's western society. As such, it not only makes a complex subject matter visible but puts it on the agenda as well and questions our notions of how we would like our future to be.

Works Cited

Alphen, E. van, L. Duyvendak, M. Meijer, and B. Peperkamp. *Op poëtische wijze: Handleiding voor het lezen van poëzie*. Bussem: Coutinho, 1996.

Baktin, M. "De groteske gedaante van het lichaam bij Rabelais." Transl. W. Oranje. *Raster* 8.30 (1984): 30-41.

Beauvoir, S. de. *La vieillesse*. Paris: Gallimard, 1970.

Butler, J. *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Dingeldein, H.J. "'Hexe' und Märchen. Überlegungen zum Hexenbild in den Kinder- und Hausmärchen der Brüder Grimm." *Die Frau im Märchen*. Ed. S. Früh and R. Wehse. Kassel: Roth, 1985. 50-9.

Gullette, M. Morganroth. *Aged by Culture.* Chicago: Chicago UP, 2004.

Lundén, R. *The United Stories of America: Studies in the Short Story Composite*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999.

Oever, A. van den. *Fritzi en het groteske*. Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2003.

Propp, V. *De morfologie van het toversprookje: Vormleer van een genre*. 1928. Transl. M. Louwerse. Utrecht: Het Spectrum, 1997.

Ranke, K. *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* (entries: Abschneiden, Alte, Alte Jungfer, Alte leute, Altes Weib, Altern, Charaktereigenschaften und -proben, Frau, Hexe, Leben, Lebenswasser, Sterben, Sterbender, Tod, Tode, Todesvorzeichen). Berlin: de Gruyter, 1975.

Russo, M. "Aging and the Scandal of Anachronism." *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*. Ed. K. Woodward. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999. 20-33.

---. *The Female Grotesque*: *Risk, Excess and Modernity*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Sontag, S. "The Double Standard of Aging." 1972. *The Other Within Us: Feminist Explorations of Women and Aging*. Ed. M. Pearsall. Colorado and Oxford: Westview Press, 1997. 19-24.

Tellegen, T. *Twee oude vrouwtjes* (*Two Old Ladies*). 1994. Amsterdam: Querido, 2004.

Woodward, K. "Introduction." *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*. By Woodward. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999. ix-xxix.