Naturalist Sentimentalism

Ageing Between Hopefulness and Decline in Rebecca Harding Davis’s Short Fiction

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This article examines four short stories by the American writer Rebecca Harding Davis (1831-1910), who became a nationally acclaimed writer with the stylistically innovative novella *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861). Using the double perspective of age studies and ‘naturalist sentimentalism’, the essay analyses Davis’s representation of the paradoxes of old age. Davis blends sentimental ideals of sympathy, sacrifice, and hope with naturalist themes of entrapment, the inevitability of decline, and biological determinism. Four short stories by Davis will serve as cases in point: ‘At Noon’ (1887), ‘At the Station’ (1888) and ‘Anne’ (1889) present middle-aged and older women who struggle with ageist notions of decline; ‘The Coming of the Night’ (1909) examines from a male perspective issues of retirement, care and the denigration and marginalisation of the elderly in a ‘Home for Aged Men.’ In these stories, Davis discusses the meanings of age and ageing, intergenerational conflicts, gender, and the impact of the body and social context on the experience of ageing. In drawing on both sentimental and naturalist themes and combining them, Davis’s stories reflect conflicting notions about ageing and old age in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries.

**Keywords**
Rebecca Harding Davis; old age; ageing; naturalism; sentimentalism; gender; late-nineteenth-century America
Introduction
Rebecca Harding Davis started her career as a writer in 1859, but it was her novella *Life in the Iron Mills*, published two years later, that established her as a nationally acclaimed writer, praised by authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Louisa May Alcott. What made *Life in the Iron Mills* so notable was that, for its topic, a female writer chose not the domestic sphere but the bleak and hopeless struggles of the lowest classes in American society. In giving a voice to the poor and wretched, Davis is today considered a precursor of American naturalism (Papke, 2003; Pfaelzer, 2014). However, her work faded into obscurity until the 1970s when Tillie Olson republished the novella at the Feminist Press and brought Davis to the attention of American scholars. Davis’s impressive body of works spans 50 years and includes 12 novels, hundreds of short stories and over 200 essays. A considerable number of additional short stories and essays – among them ‘At Noon’ which I will discuss here – were unearthed in 2016 when Zachary Turpin brought to light 73 ‘new’ works by Davis that had been forgotten or overlooked.

Davis’s work encompasses a variety of themes. The Civil War, the South, slavery and race form the background against which Davis sets many of her stories. She was concerned with the working conditions and lives of mill workers as well as the plight of the disabled, the ill, and the insane. Crucially for feminist scholars, many of her stories discuss women’s roles in society and women’s struggles in both domestic and professional spheres. Besides Davis’s work in fiction, her essays and her role as the mother of three children and, for some time, primary earner of the family income, make Davis an intriguing figure for cultural and historical research.

While Davis’s work has been amply discussed in relation to literary history, there is, to my knowledge, no study that critically discusses Davis’s work from the perspective of age studies. Yet Davis’s writings, both fiction and non-fiction, are of interest for their interrogation of the ways in which the elderly are ‘aged by culture’ (Gullette, 2004). Moreover, since Davis’s writing career spans five decades and since she continued to write despite her failing eyesight (Harris and Cadwallader, 2009: xviii), it is likely that her work was shaped by her own experiences of the changes that ageing brings. As Davis grows older, her stories display an understanding of age as a malleable and contingent experience, which is both grounded in a personal embodied history and part of a larger cultural and social discourse. For example, in her essay ‘The Middle-Aged Woman’, Davis identifies mature women as ‘the fittest subject for the student of human nature’ (1875: 345). It is in the middle-aged woman that Davis sees ‘an embodied history and prophecy of the social condition of the country, practical and minute as you can find nowhere else except in a daily newspaper’ (345-6). In her later writings, Davis foregrounds and criticises the social isolation, denigration and infantilisation of the elderly, the cultural values associated with youthfulness, the disgust for the aged body, and the pathologising of advanced or old age.

This article focuses on four of Davis’s short stories, in which she explores these diverse aspects of age and ageing. Three of the stories – ‘At Noon’ (1887), ‘At the Station’ (1888) and ‘Anne’ (1889) – feature female characters who are between their mid-thirties and sixties and experience ageing as a burden and shame. These
stories were written when Davis was in her late fifties. The fourth story, ‘The Coming of the Night’, is about an elderly male professor whose advanced age is pathologised and who commits himself to a ‘Home for Aged Men’ that is run like a prison by a sly and heartless businesswoman. This story was published in 1909, when Davis was 78 years old (a year before she died). In all four stories, Davis discusses the meanings of age and ageing and how they intersect with gender, the body, illness, stereotypes, and intergenerational conflicts. While my main interest lies in the representation of age and ageing in the stories, I will also draw on three essays by Davis, namely ‘The Middle-Aged Woman’ (1875), ‘The Newly Discovered Woman’ (1893), and her contribution to a collection of shorter essays, in which Davis (alongside other prominent female writers) responded to the question posed by the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, ‘When Is a Woman at Her Best?’ (1894). In these essays, Davis criticises the socio-cultural emphasis on youth, which she observes, for instance, in novelists who prefer to write about young characters, and the ‘New Women’s’ condescending attitude towards older women. In bringing together these short stories and essays and analysing them from the double perspective of age studies on the one hand and dominant movements informing American literary history during the period (naturalism and sentimentalism) on the other hand, I intend to show Davis’s entanglement in the conflicting notions of ageing and old age during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and how the embodied histories of her characters reflect, challenge, and sometimes succumb to a growing cultural hegemony that declares youth as the norm and disregards more fluid and malleable experiences of what it means to grow older. In drawing on both sentimentalism and naturalism, Davis manages to explore ambivalent ideas of what it means to be old and to open up a space in which diverse views can be negotiated.

Davis’s stories and essays were published at a time when the United States was undergoing fundamental social and cultural changes that affected the understanding of age and ageing. As Thomas R. Cole argues (2006: xxiv), we can observe a ‘movement away from understanding ageing primarily as an existential problem requiring moral and spiritual commitment, toward understanding it primarily as a scientific problem amenable to technical solution’. With the emergence of social reform movements (targeting, for example, health, poverty, women’s rights or education) and new scientific approaches to life stages in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (e.g. G. Stanley Hall’s ‘invention’ of adolescence in 1904),

old age came to symbolize not only the old world of patriarchy and hierarchical authority; it also represented an embarrassment to the new morality of self-control. The primary virtues of ‘civilized’ morality – independence, health, success – required constant control over one’s body and physical energies. The declining body in old age, a constant reminder of the limits of physical self-control, came to signify dependence, disease, failure, and sin.

(Cole, 2006: 91)

Moreover, as scientific and medical achievements abounded, medical experts gained authority over increasingly vast areas of life. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English
describe, for example, how an expert culture of medical doctors replaced women’s folk wisdom and individual experience with scientific theories about the female body. This medicalisation substantiated the existing view of the female body as inherently frail, predisposed to illness and thus in need of constant protection and supervision by male health professionals, fathers and husbands (Herndl, 1993). A similar shift occurred with regard to the ageing body: W. Andrew Achenbaum (1978: 44) observes that instead of valuing the elderly’s lived experience and accumulated wisdom, scientific experts emphasised ‘the pathological aspect of old age’. For example, in 1904, the biologist Elie Metchnikoff located the cause of old age in poisonous microbes and, from this perspective, age appeared as an ‘infectious, chronic disease’ to be feared (qtd. in Achenbaum, 1978: 45). Age and ageing thus became associated with invalidism and decline, and, in line with Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, ‘[t]he retrogression and eventual demise of man was viewed as a necessary and inevitable law of nature that insured the continual unfolding of mankind’s destiny’ (Achenbaum, 1978: 51).

These predominantly pessimistic notions of old age and ageing need to be relativised, however. Cultural changes were not as unidirectional and consistent as the previous paragraph suggests, and ageing was not viewed as an entirely bleak, frightening, and hopeless affair. For example, as Achenbaum (1978: 35) argues, people continued to view the elderly as a source of inspiration and wisdom. The fact that a person had lived into old age was, for many people, a proof of righteous living and, therefore, an accomplishment. This view gave the elderly social, political and moral authority. Cole likewise describes representations of the elderly in which they appear in a positive, albeit sentimental, way, for example when ‘ministers idealized the aged and painted them as symbols of an idyllic rural and revolutionary past’ (2006: 136). However, such representations are ambivalent as they ‘masked devaluation of aging, fear of decline and dependency, and hostility toward elders’ (Cole, 2006: 136).

Similarly, public discourses on old age and ageing painted an ambivalent picture of the meanings of growing older in the long nineteenth century. For example, Corinne Field and Nicholas Syrett (2015: 5, 11) describe how pension programmes and mandatory retirement were introduced to improve the situation of the elderly during the Progressive Era, as the period of social and political reform movements in the US between 1890 and 1920 is known. These programmes were informed by endeavours to modernise social policies and render them more efficient and scientific. The new policies entailed that old age became a social category defined predominantly by chronological age. In contrast to categorisations that focus on individual criteria, such as physical capacity or social circumstances, chronological age is more precise and appears systematic and scientific. In this sense, the social reform movements were a two-edged affair: they acknowledged the elderly’s right to public support after a life of hard work, but they also brought with them a dissection of the life course into age stages, which were externally defined by social norms and ideals with regard to (economic) productivity and social participation.2

Growing older herself in these changing times and being in the habit of critically commenting on cultural discourses in her writing, Davis takes an ambivalent
position in relation to these social and cultural developments. On the one hand, she shows what Eric Link (2011: 72) describes as a keen, almost scientific interest in ‘explorations of natural law’, ‘biological reductionism’ and ‘degeneration’. These interests form the naturalist background to Davis’s work. Naturalist writers were influenced by Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, which he described in *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871). From Darwin’s notions of natural and sexual selection and the struggle of existence, literary naturalism took a sense of pessimistic determinism: Man lived in an indifferent and cruel universe and had neither free will nor agency. Following the father of naturalism, Emile Zola, who famously compared himself to a surgeon who dissects human nature, naturalist writers described their characters with almost clinical precision and objective detachment. In the stories that I will discuss here, Davis explores naturalism’s deterministic views about inexorable laws of nature which, when applied to age, suggest that ageing equals ‘natural’ decline. After all, in a world dominated by relentless struggles for survival in which only the fittest will prevail, the elderly are inevitably doomed and old age is treated as a bleak and hopeless stage in life. On the other hand, Davis also draws on sentimental traditions in her representation of old age. Sentimental fiction has its roots in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and draws on conventions established in didactic, amatory and evangelical fiction (Richetti, 2011). Writers of sentimental fiction foregrounded domestic, middle-class settings and addressed the readers’ emotions, morality and sympathy (Goodling, 2003). For this reason, sentimental fiction is often considered a women’s genre (whereas naturalist writing is typically associated with male authors). Sentimental fiction allowed female writers, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), to address delicate political issues by invoking supposedly feminine sensibilities, such as kindness and sympathy. In line with sentimental themes, two of the stories discussed in this article end happily at the stereotypical Victorian hearthside (Palmor, 2015), with the old grandmother (‘Anne’) and grandfather (‘The Coming of the Night’) surrounded by a caring family, rewarded for their sacrifices and looking into a melancholic but content future of rest and domesticity. Consistent with the sentimental representations of old age which Cole describes above, Davis associates old age with feminine qualities such as passivity, angelic kindness, and mysticism (Cole, 2006: 131, 145). Moreover, typical of sentimental fiction (Goodling, 2003; Richetti, 2011), the four stories I will examine appeal to the reader’s identification with and empathy towards the plight of elderly, middle- or upper-class characters. With their moralising tone, Davis’s stories call for integrity and social reform, for example through philanthropic activities. Nonetheless, these activities tend to fail and thus increase the suffering of the protagonists, who become ‘object[s] of pleasurable pity’ for the reader (Richetti, 2011: n.p.).

In articulating naturalist with sentimental themes and values, Davis brings together standpoints that may seem diametrically opposed: narrators who speak from naturalism’s detached, scientific stance, and sentimental narrators who arouse their readers’ sympathy and mercy; storylines that are set in naturalism’s hopeless, deterministic universe of entrapped, isolated and dehumanised characters, and
sentimental plots in which there is hope and a belief in social reform. Yet, sentimentalism and naturalism, as Sara Britton Goodling (2003), Jennifer Fleissner (2004) and Francesca Sawaya (2004) have argued, are not as contradictory as one might think. In fact, they are deeply entangled, and sentimentalism can be understood as naturalism’s birthplace (Goodling, 2003: 3-4). What links sentimentalism to naturalism is, among other things, how sentimental authors deal with reformism and resignation. While, as Goodling argues, sentimentalists believe in social change and ‘compassionate action’, they also suggest that ‘submission, not an effort to change one’s circumstances, is the proper response to suffering’ (4; original emphasis). In other words, ‘sentimentalism’s uneasy marriage of reformism and resignation anticipates naturalism’s inconsistency, its failure to sustain the pessimistic determinism that allegedly forms its ideological core’ (3). It is not surprising, therefore, that naturalist authors, as Goodling argues, typically failed to ‘produce a work of “pure” naturalism’ (4). And, following Malcolm Cowley, naturalist writers were actually ‘tender minded’, believing secretly that ‘nature should be kind, that virtue should be rewarded on earth, that men should control their destinies’ (Cowley qtd. in Goodling, 2003: 4; original emphasis). Following this line of thinking, Francesca Sawaya – from whom I borrow the term ‘naturalist sentimentalism’ (Sawaya, 2004: 56) – sees the intersections between naturalist and sentimental aesthetics in the contradictory ways in which naturalism, on the one hand, attacks ‘“feminine” sentimentality’ while it feels a deep ‘“feminine” sentimentality about itself’ and unconsciously uses and appropriates sentimental strategies (2004: 57).

Davis’s ‘naturalist sentimentalism’ raises a number of questions with regard to the representation of age and ageing. From a naturalist perspective, the elderly’s entrapment, their lack of individual agency, the inevitability of decline, and the laws of biological determinism leave little room for critique or reform. If nature is indifferent and the laws of nature are inexorable, the decline that ageing entails is primarily ‘natural’ and not social. Naturalism thus reproduces deterministic visions of ageing and reiterates notions of the elderly as a burden, unfit for the unavoidable progress of the human race in which only the fittest will survive. How can such a ‘pessimistic materialistic determinism’ (Becker, 1967: 35) be reconciled with Davis’s critique of the youth cult and her claim that middle age is a more relevant age stage for poets, novelists and sociologists, as she argues in ‘The Middle-Aged Woman’? Does naturalism’s atmosphere of despair and futility offer alternative visions of age and ageing so that old age may not necessarily be equated with inevitable decline and marginalisation? When Davis uses sentimental themes and ideas, does sentimentalism support her critique or does the recourse to sentimentalism idealise sacrifice, essential goodness and passivity, thus perpetuating yet another range of problematic stereotypes of the elderly? In other words, in appealing to her readers’ emotions and experiences, does Davis’s resort to sentimentalism amplify her characters’ bleak and desperate situation or does it open up an avenue for problematising contradictory notions of age and ageing?

2) Gender and (premature) ageing: ‘At Noon’
‘At Noon’ was first published in *Harper’s Bazaar* in December 1887. The remarkable story had faded into obscurity until 2016 when Zachary Turpin rediscovered and reprinted it in *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*. The short story introduces Mrs Fitch, an upper-class, middle-aged woman, whose life seems to be an endless succession of balls, teas and other social events. Mrs Fitch has grown tired of this life which is marked by a ‘deadly dullness’ and in which time stretches endlessly both during her sleepless nights and during the day, when she watches the innumerable clocks she has collected and wonders ‘what should she do?’ (874). The story links Mrs Fitch’s boredom with signs of premature ageing: her palate declines, her figure has grown shapeless and, pushed from her throne as ‘Queen Rose’, she is now past her assumed climax, awaiting nothing but wilting and decay. When Mrs Fitch wonders ‘If she was not the Queen Rose, what was she?’ (874), it becomes clear that her physical symptoms are only the tip of the iceberg and that she lives a deeply unhappy life: Mrs Fitch’s marriage is a disappointment (it is suggested that her husband Samuel Fitch may be involved with another woman); she has no fulfilling occupation nor did she ever develop an interest in books, music or religion; she is also estranged from her son, in whose future ‘she had no interest nor part’ and who is cared for by a French nanny (874). Mrs Fitch’s isolation and what Turpin (2016: 233) describes as ‘emotional deprivation’ are so absolute that she is mistakenly called Jane or Jeanne by those closest to her, even though her actual name is Janey. Mrs Fitch is trapped by ‘A blank wall shut in every way’ (874). This sense of despair is amplified when she looks into the mirror and only sees a ‘gross and fat’ woman, who has, according to an unflattering description in a newspaper, ‘the figure of an oil keg’ (874) – a metaphor that clearly dehumanises Mrs Fitch. Even though Davis sets her story in an upper-class context – which is not typical of the naturalist tendency to depict the plight of the lower classes –, naturalist themes of dehumanisation, desperation and isolation are prominent, and Mrs Fitch’s suicide at the end of the story emphasises the hopelessness of her situation. At Mr Fitch’s behest, the circumstances of his wife’s death are shrouded in obscurity, and the narrator ends the story with a speechless scene between the nanny and Mrs Fitch’s boy, who has no clue about what happened and who will probably never find out. The story seems to shift into a sentimental mode by closing with a pitiable and innocent half-orphan, whose future will be overshadowed by silence, secrecy and, possibly, loneliness. The sentimental ending also seems to appeal to the readers’ empathy, asking them to not only pity the boy who was left behind by his mother but also to empathise with the mother whose alienation, isolation and despair left her with no other option.

In juxtaposing naturalist and sentimental themes, Davis examines the social contexts of a woman’s life with an appeal for identification and sympathy. While an outsider might condemn Mrs Fitch’s suicide as selfish and weak, the reader has been introduced to Mrs Fitch’s private thoughts and the damaging ideals of youthfulness she has internalised. We know about her incapacity to dissociate herself from the harmful surroundings that determine her life. And even though the circumstances of Mrs Fitch’s desperation will remain hidden from the other characters, the readers can critically examine the factors that shaped Mrs Fitch’s life and challenge the
problematic metaphors she has adopted as well as the values that have prematurely aged her.

‘At Noon’ both illustrates Davis’s interest in the topic of female age and elaborates on public discourses about women’s ageing and the shame and despair women experience when they grow older. Davis’s essay ‘The Middle-Aged Woman’ (1875) is an important source to understand how Davis positions the topic within a larger social discourse. In the essay, Davis argues that it is not the youthful, innocent girl but the middle-aged woman who represents an ‘index’ of American society (345). She may not be a preferred subject for poets and writers, Davis concedes, but it is in this figure that she sees a chance to look at ‘the unromantic centre of an unromantic world’ (345). In focusing on the middle-aged woman in both her essay and her short story, Davis identified what she considered to be a problem in the country, namely the lack of positive images that present older women as valued, respected and skilled. This notion reappears in ‘At Noon’, where newspaper articles only focus on Mrs Fitch’s looks and mock her appearance, thus powerfully shaping how Mrs Fitch understands herself. Mrs Fitch’s life and suicide thus appear as the symptom of a larger, deeply problematic cultural discourse.

As Sari Edelstein (2017) argues, a cultural tendency towards age consciousness and a fear about ageing became particularly prominent for women living in the late nineteenth century. For example, a market for anti-ageing products emerged which took for granted that women had internalised rigid age norms, such as the social value of youthfulness and the notion of ageing as decline. In this sense, Mrs Fitch’s story bears a striking resemblance to a narrative told in a pamphlet for an anti-ageing product, which was published by A.J. White, the proprietor of a drug company, entitled ‘Look on this Picture – and on This: How We Shall Look When We Grow Old’, as part of a marketing campaign in 1889. White’s pamphlet opens with a particularly harrowing story of a young, unnamed woman who, as she matures, finds her aged looks ‘insufferable’ and commits suicide because she cannot bear the shame of old age. In the woman’s alleged farewell note to her husband she declares that ‘A woman’s life is in her youth and good looks … I have been a rose leaf on a summer sea’ (White, 1889: 1). With the physical signs of her ageing (i.e. the first streaks of grey hair), she admits that she ‘cannot bear it’ and therefore kills herself to ‘escape’ from her inexorable fate (White, 1889: 1). The moral of the pamphlet’s story is that there is no real escape from biological ageing, unless one commits suicide and dies young or manages to trick biology with anti-ageing products, holding off for a while the inevitable decline. Importantly, while the pamphlet attributes the cause for the suicide only to the biological dimensions of old age, Davis’s story highlights the social factors which increase Mrs Fitch’s sense of despair, such as an unhappy marriage, a lack of purpose, and the obsession with external appearances shared by both public opinion makers and private individuals.

A similarly problematic public obsession with women’s age flourished in the Ladies’ Home Journal in 1894. The editor of the journal, Edward William Bok, asked twelve ‘women of judgment’ – among them Rebecca Harding Davis herself, along with Julia Ward Howe and Mary E. Wilkins – to respond to the question ‘When is a woman at her best?’ In his foreword, the editor identifies a sustained public interest in
this question, which, as he argues, ‘has never been satisfactorily answered’ (Howe et al., 1894). In repeating the question, the journal contributes to emphasising the question’s assumed relevance and thus furthers the public discourse on the fraught relation between women and age. Davis, in her reply, commented critically on the ludicrousness of defining the ‘best age’ in women’s lives. According to Davis, ‘every woman is at her best in body and mind at the age when she is most fully occupied with her true work in the world, whether that be art, cookery, lecturing or child-bearing’ (Howe et al., 1894: 4). Davis thus considers the ‘best age’ as contingent on a woman’s personal fulfilment.

Davis makes a similar argument in ‘At Noon’. She also draws our attention to the question of personal fulfilment and the power of social circumstances. Davis’s protagonist Mrs Fitch has been deprived of all of the social factors needed to lead a fulfilled life. Instead of nourishing her ‘inner growth’, Mrs Fitch has turned into a ‘woman of vanity’ who is left with no resources to understand that old age may also involve positive aspects (Cole, 2006: 134, 152). In her reply to the Ladies’ Home Journal’s question, Davis seems to worry particularly about the discourses that reduce women to objects of public admiration and visual scrutiny: ‘No body or mind at any age can be in healthy condition which is perpetually busied with examining and exhibiting itself before the public’ (Howe et al., 1894: 4). From this perspective, Mrs Fitch’s declining appetite, her lack of drive, her ‘muddled’ brain and her ‘fleshly body’ may be understood not primarily as symptoms of premature physical ageing – as Mrs Fitch believes – but as the result of a culture’s harmful obsession with youthfulness and vain self-scrutiny which makes women lead unhealthy, unfulfilled and empty lives in which they feel older than they actually are. Thus, instead of limiting the discussion of age and ageing to biological explanations of inevitable decline, Davis shifts attention to the impact of social circumstances and the power of discourses that influence how women think about themselves.

We may wonder, however, if this critical insight would have prevented Mrs. Fitch from committing suicide. Does it make a difference that the problem lies in the social discourses and circumstances and not in biological laws? The story itself, even though we can understand it as a critique of social ills, does not offer an escape from the protagonist’s dilemma. While the sentimental ending asks us to empathise with Mrs Fitch and view critically the harsh judgments that have ultimately destroyed her, her death is not redemptive. There is no solace, for example, in religion (the story emphasises that Mrs Fitch’s Bible lays ‘unopened’ on the table), nor is there a warning to other women in the story, such as the two shop-girls in the penultimate paragraph, who chatter and laugh outside on the street, ignorant of the fate that Mrs Fitch endured and that may await them as well. In this sense, ‘At Noon’ remains true to naturalism’s bleak and pessimist worldview, in which the forces of social circumstances are overwhelmingly deterministic.

3) Ageing bodies and different age-selves: ‘At the Station’ and ‘Anne’
Davis’s preference for a bleak, naturalist view in ‘At Noon’ shifts towards a more sentimental tone in her two subsequent stories on ageing women, ‘At the Station’ and
‘Anne’, which Davis published within two years of ‘At Noon’. Sentimental undertones can be identified, for example, in the fact that ‘At the Station’ offers redemption through religion, which is an option barred for Mrs Fitch. Moreover, both stories highlight passive waiting, sacrifice and silent suffering. ‘At the Station’ rewards these traits, while the ending of ‘Anne’ is more ambiguous. Naturalist themes of determinism, inexorable laws of nature and hopelessness surface in these two stories when Davis stresses that the (female) body cannot be transcended or escaped. Once again, the juxtaposition of naturalist and sentimental notions creates a nuanced background against which Davis negotiates differing notions of ageing: on the one hand, she presents characters who view ageing and decline as the inevitable result of the laws of nature; on the other hand, she suggests that ageing may be a more fluid and malleable process, which is shaped by social circumstances and individual life stories.

Davis intertwines sentimental and naturalist themes in her focus on the ageing female body in ‘At the Station’ and ‘Anne’. Sentimental fiction, as Karen Sanchez-Eppler argues, is an ‘intensely bodily genre’ because it asserts that identity and personhood are inextricably linked to the body (qtd. in Goodling, 2003: 3). Sentimental fiction also explores the negative sides of embodiment, namely what it means to be ‘imprisoned, silenced, deprived of personhood by that same body’ (Sanchez-Eppler qtd. in Goodling, 2003: 3). While sentimentalism, as Goodling (2003: 13) argues, ultimately attempted ‘to transcend the body and biological markers’ so that readers were able to empathise with characters of other races or classes, naturalism dismissed the possibility of going (or even looking) beyond the body. Instead, naturalism emphasises that people cannot escape their (monstrous, disabled, sick or racialised) bodies, which are determined either by biological or social circumstances (Goodling, 2003: 3). With these assumptions, ‘naturalist sentimentalism’ also speaks to the questions raised by the aged or ageing body: is ageing determined by the inexorable laws of biology? To what extent do social circumstances age people? And who or what determines a person’s age – society, nature, the individual?

‘At the Station,’ published in *Scribner’s Magazine*, portrays sixty-year-old Miss Dilly, who has been living a life of passive waiting and inactivity for twenty years since her brother, Colonel James Holmes, decided to move West and left her at an inn next to a railway station. Miss Dilly thus has been living in a hamlet that Davis describes as the most ‘commonplace or ignoble … corner of the world’ (1), and Miss Dilly seems to have adapted a little too well to the place – indeed, she, too, is described as ‘commonplace and ignoble’ (1). Moreover, we learn that she is ‘a pudgy old woman of sixty [with a] shapeless body …; a face like that of an exaggerated baby, and round, innocent blue eyes’ (1-2). We soon learn that Miss Dilly is the kindest, most lovable woman, who bravely endures her double fate of having been abandoned by her brother and of being afflicted by ‘a mysterious pain, commonly known to us as neuralgia’ (2). The attacks – or spells – come regularly and Miss Dilly bears them alone and without complaint. Miss Dilly interprets her attacks in a revealing way. She links her torment to her (forced) relocation to the lowlands, suggesting that if she were allowed to live in the mountains, where she feels a
spiritual connection to nature and her family (who have all passed away), her pain would disappear. Since she promised her brother that she would wait, however, she is tied to the lowlands and the pain that comes with it. In addition, Miss Dilly links the prospect of moving back to where she belongs with rejuvenation. If she could return to the mountains, she would ‘get young again’ (4). While moving back to the mountains may rejuvenate her, her current situation of inertia, immobility and endless, unproductive waiting prematurely ages her. These impossible circumstances of her life have written themselves on Miss Dilly’s body and behaviour: she is described as ‘an old hen’ who broods over the men (‘her boys’) of the village, and she has a ‘wondering old baby face’ and ‘withered cheeks’ (4, 5, 12). Thus, her dependence on her brother and the social circumstances of her life have shaped how she experiences ageing and how others perceive her.

Davis continues to underline how Miss Dilly’s ageing body is shaped by the circumstances she lives in, and, more specifically, by the interpretations and judgments of others. When a train stops at the station, Miss Dilly meets a mysterious prisoner, who is her brother but whom Miss Dilly fails to recognise. After the departure of the train she feels though that something has happened, and she starts praying more intensely for her brother’s return. The people in the hamlet notice a change in Miss Dilly’s appearance, and two men compare her to a plant that is ‘ripenin’ fur the end’ (14). Even though Miss Dilly laughingly rejects the notion that her end is near, the men’s reading of her appearance reaffirms the notion that Miss Dilly’s endless waiting may have worn her out. Thus, similar to Mrs Fitch, Miss Dilly is trapped in a life defined by lack of productivity and passive waiting from which she sees no escape. Moreover, both women’s bodies are scrutinised by others and interpreted as evidence for the women’s (alleged) physical decline. In this sense, their bodies are not primarily shaped by biology and the laws of nature; rather they are largely defined by the social discourses and individual life stories in which they are embedded. Davis’s representation of Miss Dilly’s age thus interweaves physical and social factors, and therefore Miss Dilly is doubly trapped.

For Miss Dilly, there seems to be no escape other than a miraculous rescue by her brother, who eventually appears on Christmas Eve, like Jesus Christ. The fact that Miss Dilly is saved appears as a nod to the sentimental tradition, in which sacrifice, faith and loyalty are, at times, rewarded. In this sense, the ending echoes what Cole (2006: 145ff) calls a sentimental vision of ‘civilized’ old age, which glorifies waiting, passivity, and domesticity. Thus, in contrast to Mrs Fitch, Miss Dilly’s passive waiting has an important additional dimension: it is presented as a type of saintly goodness and loyalty and is closely tied to her intense faith in God and hope for salvation.

Yet, the ending may also be read in a different way: her brother’s arrival indicates that Miss Dilly may after all regain her health and possibly her youthful strength when she returns with him to the mountains. Miss Dilly’s old age and fragile health are thus, potentially, not a fixed, irreversible status but malleable. From this perspective, one might argue that Davis anticipates a concept the age scholar Kathleen Woodward suggested in the twenty-first century, namely that ‘at virtually any age and as we grow older we all contain different age-selves’; youth and age are
thus not ‘irreconcilable opposites; rather they are intertwined’ (Woodward, 2006: 165). Such a reading does not entirely separate the aged body from environmental or biological forces, but it suggests that the laws of nature are more flexible and that decline might be reversed.

‘Anne’, a short story that Davis published in Harper’s New Monthly in 1889, continues to explore the meanings of malleable age for the protagonist, Anne, who is introduced to the reader when she is taking an afternoon nap. In her dream, she is in love with George Forbes, a former love interest, and she is ‘throbbing with youth and beauty’ (226). When Anne wakes, she looks into the mirror and sees, however, not a girl of sixteen, but ‘a stout woman of fifty with grizzled hair and a big nose. Her cheeks were yellow’ (227). Appalled by the look of her ‘stout old body’, we learn that Anne’s soul, in contrast, ‘flamed with rapture … “I am here – Anne! I am beautiful and young”’ (227). This sense of dissociation – between the material reality of her fifty-year-old body and the dream-body of her sixteen-year-old earlier self – spills over to other areas of Anne’s life. As Sharon M. Harris notices (and as with Mrs Fitch’s name in ‘At Noon’), there is a confusion about the protagonist’s name (1991: 228). Anne is known to her family, servants and business partners as Mrs Nancy Palmer – a plantation owner and successful business woman ‘of masculine intellect’ (228). Nancy is the diminutive form of Anne, and the fact that she is called by this name foreshadows that she is not taken very seriously by her family, as we learn later. Mrs. Palmer prefers to refer to herself as ‘Anne’, which one might interpret as a wish to counter the belittlement that ‘Nancy’ implies. The issue of Mrs Palmer’s name adds another layer to her estrangement, which also becomes manifest in her relation to her adult children Susy and James, who consider their mother’s professional success a matter of ‘lucky hits’ and who belittle her ‘childish outbreaks’ (229). Anne, in turn, is bored by the trifles her children find interesting and is annoyed by Susy’s watchfulness, which stifles Anne and suggests that Susy considers her mother frail, invalid and confused. Anne feels ‘happed and dosed and watched like a decrepit old crone’ (234), and she knows that her children do not recognise her intellectual needs. Moreover, Anne’s isolation from like-minded peers, who share her interest in art and appreciate her business savvy, decreases her sense of value. In ‘Anne,’ Davis thus contrasts the achievements of an older woman with the worldview of a younger generation, whose narrow views do not fathom the complexity of their mother’s talents, triumphs and private longings. Thus, Davis’s heroine is alienated from both her social context and her ageing body.

The disconnect between generations is an issue that Davis commented upon repeatedly. In her essay ‘The Newly Discovered Woman’ (1893), for example, she criticises the ‘New Women’ for their ‘loud boasting and swagger in public’ (Davis, 2014: 408). She deplores the fact that the younger generation ‘has a pitying contempt for her grandmother whose life was spent in her nursery and kitchen, and whose Bible and Cook-book constituted her library’ (Davis, 2014: 407). In ‘Anne’, the protagonist, even though she is not a domestic woman at all, feels a similar pity and disrespect from her children; at the same time, however, and quite similar to Davis’s stance in her essay, Anne also looks down on the lifestyles and attitudes of the younger generation.
Parallel to the intergenerational divide, Davis continues to explore Anne’s conflicted relationship to her aged body and self: on the one hand, her ‘old clumsy body’ is intolerable to Anne; on the other hand, she feels another ‘creature within her’ who is ‘vivid and beautiful and loving’ (232-3). Anne remembers a moment when she had observed a similarly paradoxical experience with her age: having been ill with ‘nervous prostration … she had in an hour suddenly grown eighty years old’ (233). This conflation of different age-selves is thus not entirely new to Anne. Now, with ‘the blood of sixteen … in her veins’ (233), Anne decides to leave the stifling life with her children in order to enjoy the rest of her years elsewhere. On the train, she runs into Forbes, the man of her dreams, and experiences a profound disillusionment: Forbes turns out to be ‘a mere shopman of literature’ (241). When the train has an accident, Mrs Palmer is rescued and taken back home to her children, who coddle and pet her ‘like a baby’ (242). Despite Mrs Palmer’s ‘quiet, luxurious, happy life’, which, as the story suggests, she will lead in the future, she continues to be distressed by recurring doubts, a sense of estrangement and a longing for a life filled with art, music and intellectual exchange.

This distress becomes apparent in the recurrence of the ‘strange creature’. We are told that it was ‘as if some creature unknown’ to the children looks at them from Mrs Palmer’s eyes. The repeated appearance of this unknown, inner creature that disrupts the integrity of the protagonist’s self can be read in a number of ways. According to Harris, for example, ‘Anne’ is a story of ‘psychological realism’ about ‘a woman’s split personality’ (1991: 228). Harris argues that Davis criticises Mrs Palmer’s lack of honesty to herself and her silly self-deception in dreaming about a different, more exciting way of life, instead of appreciating the riches she has (1991: 228). This critique is indeed a recurring theme in Davis’s work. However, I want to suggest that there might be another reading of the ‘strange creature’, whose appearance Davis describes in such vivid detail, as the dissociation of Anne’s aged body and youthful mind. If we look at the story once more from the perspective of ‘naturalist sentimentalism’, Anne’s conflicted attitude towards her aged, alienated body resembles what Goodling (2003: 3) has referred to as ambivalent notions of embodied identity, which become manifest in fears about being trapped in a monstrous, disabled or invalid body. While Anne does not consider her body monstrous or disabled per se, she is shocked and horrified by what she sees. Moreover, she is treated by her children as if she were an invalid. Anne wishes to transcend her body and to invent a new life for herself when she decides to leave her home. But she has to realise that such an escape is impossible. The story closes when Anne says to herself: ‘“Poor Anne!” as of somebody whom she once knew that is dead. Is she dead? she feebly wonders; and if she is dead here, will she ever live again?’ (242) Thus, at the end, the narrator suggests that Anne feels dead in a living body. Moreover, we are told that the notion of life after death is a questionable vision to Anne. Therefore, solace in religion is not an option either.

The impossibility of transcending a body in which one feels trapped is a recurring theme in Davis’s work. In ‘The Wife’s Story’ (1864), for example, the heroine Hester feels an intense longing for a different life and is punished for this desire. Like Anne, this protagonist is bound by ‘the woman’s flesh’ which overpowers
her even though she is said to have a ‘manly soul’ (Davis, 1985: 200). Neither Hester’s nor Anne’s female bodies can thus be ignored nor transcended. In this sense, as Kristin Boudreau (1992) argues, Davis dismisses Emersonian notions of transcendentalism, which imagined that one could overcome, ignore and resist the demands of the (ageing) body, positing an ideal of male self-reliance and independence. Davis shows herself sceptical of transcendentalist ideals, and she rejects this option for Anne who, ‘defined by childbirth and domestic labor, has no right to claim an existence apart from her body’ (Boudreau, 1992: n.p.). In this sense, the strange creature becomes a symbol of Anne’s dissociated sense of self and her experience of having a youthful mind trapped in an aged body.

I would like to return to Woodward’s notion of the malleability and simultaneity of age identities, in which biological age and psychological age can but need not coincide. With Woodward’s concept in mind, we might understand Davis’s story and its heroine as a comment on cultural tendencies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As historians and age scholars, such as Howard Chudacoff (1989) as well as Corinne Field and Nicholas Syrett (2015), have argued, age stratification, and thus the attempt to treat age as a social category of difference, increasingly defined social roles and responsibilities. As these scholars claim, it was no longer a person’s physical or mental abilities (let alone his or her self-image) which determined his or her social role. Instead, chronological age and thus the number of years a person had lived took centre stage. As a consequence, social norms and assumptions for each age stage were increasingly externalised and detached from a person’s individual experiences. In contrast to these social and cultural developments, Woodward’s concept of different, simultaneous age-selves challenges age stratification and its linear chronology. If we read Davis’s story against this background, we may interpret her representation of Anne’s flexible experience of age as a critique of normative assumptions about age as a stable category, which ultimately stifle a person like Anne in her self-expression and capacities. In ‘Anne’, interestingly, age is also flexible with regard to her son James, who, when he was still a baby, looked at her like an old man: ‘I shall never be as old as he is already’, Anne decided (228). Even though Davis presents age as malleable, it is only Anne who feels this way and, therefore, the generational gap between herself and her children does not close. The story thus ends with the harrowing questions of an elderly woman, who is now trapped in an environment informed by rigid age norms that define her as ‘a decrepit old crone’ (234) and an eternal invalid.

5) Retirement, care and the social segregation of the elderly: ‘The Coming of the Night’

The old Professor in ‘The Coming of the Night’ (1909) faces a similarly degrading attitude towards his advanced age as do the ageing women Anne, Mrs. Fitch and Miss Dilly. However, for Professor Paull, who is in his seventies, it is not his own family but Mrs Cross, a civic reformer and founder of a ‘Home for Aged Men’, who convinces him that he is a burden and an unproductive nuisance to his family and society in general. Mrs Cross might be read as the representative of a larger social
discourse on how to treat the elderly. Achenbaum (1978: 82) outlines that an explosion of ‘private institutions for the aged’ emerged between 1875 and 1919, when philanthropists and social reformers like Mrs Cross established institutions to assist the elderly. In her story, Davis presents Mrs Cross as a heartless, profit-oriented person, who fails to grasp the complexities of ageing and old age. Besides these references to social discourses and policies regarding the treatment of the elderly, ‘The Coming of the Night’ illustrates again how Davis interweaves sentimental and naturalist themes to represent conflicting notions of what it means to be old.

The story opens with Mrs Cross, who is trying to transform the sleepy city of Oakford into a bustling place for business. She has founded the ‘Home for Aged Men’ to ‘shut up the worn-out human lumber out of sight’ so that ‘the young people will begin to do something to justify their right to live’ (58). To Mrs Cross, the elderly are ‘dead-weights on their families’, who clutter the lives of the younger generation with their helplessness and prevent young people from being more productive and industrious (60). With these strong metaphors that compare the elderly to objects such as lumber and clutter, Davis’s narration establishes a harsh contrast between Mrs Cross’s reformist and business-oriented attitude towards the (alleged) frailty of the elderly on the one hand and the old man’s actual state of mind on the other hand. While Mrs Cross finds evidence for the Professor’s degeneration everywhere, the narrator reveals the causes for Professor Paull’s assumed frailty, which are entirely unrelated to old age: his unfinished sentences are due to his conscious decision to keep things private; his eyes become watery when he remembers the loss of his child and wife; and the tottering results from the fact that he has skipped breakfast and supper and thus has low blood sugar. Moreover, we learn that the Professor is not a burden or nuisance to anyone, neither to his family nor to the community. Instead he is a person whose advice is appreciated and needed, for example in the town’s councils. Davis thus exposes Mrs Cross’s distorted perception of this old man and, similar to her earlier stories about female characters, she highlights the elderly’s vulnerability to misdiagnosis and misjudgement.

To convince the old Professor to become a resident in her newly established ‘Home for Aged Men,’ Mrs Cross makes him feel like a burden. She quotes from the Bible, and she refers to ‘the inexorable fact of Nature’ to accentuate that ‘[w]eakness is a symptom inseparable from … age’ (61). Convinced that his old age implies all the bleak attributes Mrs Cross has enumerated to him, the old Professor accepts her proposal and moves to the Home in the morning, only to find out that it resembles a prison or hospital. Strict orders, sanitary regulations, austerity and efficiency are everything to Miss Clara Wynn, who runs the house like an autocratic despot. After a few hours in the Home, the Professor feels a sense of utter emptiness taking hold of him: ‘This was old age, was it?’ (67). Fortunately, the old Professor’s family comes to pry him away from Miss Wynn’s custody and takes him back home. Seated cosily in his chair at the hearth and surrounded by his loving family and welcome-back gifts from members of the community, the old Professor feels at home and plans ‘little things’ to delight his daughter-in-law and grandchildren (68). The story closes with
the old man considering the world ‘a big friendly home, and the world beyond death, which he had feared so much, just another, more friendly and more real’ (68).

The story’s ending at the hearthside resembles Miss Dilly’s rescue and salvation by her brother. Once again, Davis seems to favour sentimental imagery over naturalism’s bleak and one-dimensional understanding of what it means to be old. Mrs Cross’s argument that ‘the inexorable fact of Nature’ equates old age with frailty and irretrievable decline (61) is denounced as a superficial, simplistic notion. The Professor’s frailty, as we learn, can be reversed by proper care. Moreover, the fears that ageing may entail are caused by social circumstances rather than by old age itself. ‘The Coming of the Night’ seems to offer a less complex representation of age and ageing compared to the earlier stories, which raises the question to what extent gender might be an issue that affects Davis’s stories of ageing. ‘The Coming of the Night’, for example, does not reproduce Mrs Fitch’s or Anne’s sense of entrapment in what these female characters consider to be despicable, alien bodies. And while Professor Paull is also subject to misjudgements and social discourses, he does not have to endure the sustained isolation and intergenerational conflict that Mrs Fitch and Anne experience, nor is his old age equated with Miss Dilly’s sacrifice and passive waiting. Instead, when he dozes comfortably in his chair by the hearthside, his inactivity is presented as his rightly earned reward for a life of hard work. The fact that his family dotes on him is not presented as a sign of condescension by an ignorant younger generation, as in the case of ‘Anne’, but as a respectful way of treating the elderly (especially, one might argue, when this person is a man).

In ‘The Coming of the Night’, Davis thus presents a vision of life in old age that refrains from the gruesome ambiguities she negotiated in the earlier stories. In exposing Mrs Cross, Miss Wynn and their home for the elderly as inhumane and heartless, Davis voices her critique of pension programs and the socio-economic factors involved in caregiving. To Davis, the care of the elderly is not to be understood in terms of capitalist definitions of (un)productivity, efficiency and the administration of services. Instead, she suggests a type of care that is relationship-centred and based on respect and appreciation. With this representation of a ‘good old age’, Davis, one might object, leaves us with a saccharine image that refrains from more complex representations of old age. In this sense, she conceals the other side of ageing, namely the actual fears, physical suffering, spiritual uncertainties and social vulnerabilities which ageing may entail as a natural part of the ‘paradoxes of later life’ (Cole, 2006: xxv).

Conclusion

The interweaving of sentimentalism and naturalism, as I have argued in this paper, opens up a productive space which allows us to examine conflicting notions about age and ageing in Davis’s work. Naturalism’s bleak and deterministic worldview raises important questions about the links between old age and (presumably) inexorable laws of nature, the impact of biology and social circumstances. Naturalism defines old age as decline, entrapment in an alien body, confinement by social
discourses and the ultimate impossibility of escape. Sentimentalism, while it does not necessarily offer an escape route and often favours resignation, believes at least in the general possibility and necessity of change and in the reward and redemption for those who endure their earthly suffering without complaint. Sentimentalism provides a repertoire of images (hearthside), themes (the embodied nature of identity) and approaches (empathy, identification) that, at least potentially, counter bleak and deterministic visions of what it means to age. Therefore, as I have tried to show, Davis’s combination of naturalism and sentimentalism provides a space in which she examines and contests differing views of age and ageing. While ‘At Noon’ and ‘Anne’ tend to emphasise a pessimist, naturalist worldview of confining social circumstances and a lack of agency or escape, ‘At the Station’ and ‘The Coming of the Night’ lean towards sentimental themes and focus on the complexities of an embodied age identity that is prone to misjudgement and simplification. Despite these tendencies, Davis seems to shift flexibly between naturalism and sentimentalism and, in doing so, she can examine both individual experiences and larger social discourses.

In my analysis, I complemented the perspective of ‘naturalist sentimentalism’ with contemporary concepts from age studies (such as age malleability) and historical studies on an era that Achenbaum describes as ‘a watershed in which the overall estimation of old people’s worth clearly changed’ (1978: 40). Together, these approaches illustrate, in my opinion, that Davis’s work is a rich field for age scholars and literary critics alike. For Davis, ageing is a multi-faceted experience; it is, following the words of Cole (2006: xxv), ‘a source of wisdom and suffering, spiritual growth and physical decline, honor and vulnerability’. Davis’s work holds further treasures to be excavated as she discusses other topics that are of interest in age studies. A recurring theme, for example, is the notion of sacrifice, often, but not exclusively, linked with age and femininity. Other stories discuss the themes of illness and the (self-chosen) loneliness of dying, as for example in ‘Married People’ (1876) and ‘The Doctor’s Wife’ (1892). ‘The Story of Christine’ (1866) focuses on care, dementia and misdiagnosis. With these topics, Davis touches upon major issues for which we continue to seek solutions. This is one of the many reasons why Davis’s work remains relevant today.

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References


1 Jean Pfaelzer (2014: xv) lists ‘275 stories, 12 novels (most published serially), 125 juvenile stories, over 200 identifiable essays, and perhaps an equal number of unsigned essays’.

2 For example, in most countries in the Western hemisphere, a child enters school at six or seven years and a person retires at approximately 65 years. These fixed ages are externally defined and deemphasize individual capacity.

3 This mirror motif has been a productive concept in age studies (e.g., Woodward, 1986, Marshall, 2012). The mirror confronts the older person with an image that does not reflect a whole, coherent self (as in Lacan's theory) but a fragmented, disintegrated self that is rejected by the person who does not recognise or accept the mirror image. The look into the mirror can lead to a denial of ageing altogether or trigger a search for an ageless self (Lipscomb, 2016: 48). I am grateful to the peer reviewer who pointed out this striking connection to me.

4 In her essay ‘Women as Imitators of Men’ (1906), for example, Davis criticises the young, modern women, who feel superior to their grandmothers, for their belligerent attitude towards men, their vanity and ‘constant noisy boasting’ (250).

5 The theme of a woman’s self-deception recurs in the short story ‘A Middle-Aged Woman,’ which Davis published in 1904. The protagonist, Frances Shore, remembers a man whom she did not marry but still longs for. She is ‘cured’ from the assumption that she might have been happier if she had chosen a different man when she learns that the man she pined for has been married to two women. Davis ends the story with a clear moral: ‘Not until middle age – old age sometimes – do we see the difference between our dreams and the realities which God gives us’ (494).

6 Davis became acquainted with Emerson after the national success of Life in the Iron Mills. To Davis, meeting Emerson, whom she had idolised from afar, was a disappointment: Davis found that Emerson lacked ‘human sympathy’ and that she herself ‘had been merely a human specimen for his study’ (Rose, 1993: 34).

7 See for example ‘An Old-Time Love Story’ (1908), which chronicles the sacrifice of a renowned scientist for the love of his life and the family they raise together.