

Empathy and stereotype: the work of a popular poem

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'Perspectives on Dementia Care', 5th Annual Conference on Mental Health and Older People, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK, 3 November 2005.

Certain texts, images and statements have repercussions which resonate far beyond their starting points. Such has been the life of a poem which was first published in 1973¹, variously titled 'Kate' or 'Crabbit Old Woman' or 'Open your eyes'. While preparing to write this chapter in early 2005 I carried out a web search, inserting the phrase 'Crabbit Old Woman', and found no less than 1840 entries listed for the poem. These included training sites, weblogs, christian advice and healing sites, articles in the nursing press, parish newsletters, public examination materials, a site promoting 'Polyarchy' or 'Beyond Statism', disability websites, information on urinary incontinence for health practitioners and sites simply listing favourite poems. These sites were mainly from the English-speaking world, the US, Canada, Australia, the UK, Ireland and South Africa but also included a Dutch weblog².

A consideration of the origins and continuing appeal of the poem provides an insight into what provokes and engages interest in the lives of frail older people. 'Kate' (the title I prefer) has played and still plays an important role in discussions about the quality of care available to older people in late life. The verses contrast a representation of identity as the past life lived with a present identity defined by mental and physical frailty. Today I will be considering the contribution of the poem to understandings of late life infirmity, uncovering what work it does in generating empathy towards those who seemingly are unable to communicate their feelings and wishes. However, I go on, to consider the frail ageing body, the presentation of a life course and implications for identity interpretation, to arrive at a more critical appraisal of the work the poem does. Ultimately, I argue that the poem's ability to provoke an emotional empathic response is significant and to be valued. However, in addition to its immediate emotional impact a reading of the poem generates more complex issues which link directly to debates about the social relations of care practice.

A poem and its origins

The poem follows in full. Interestingly, though it has appeared in a wide variety of publications for well over thirty years it remains unchanged, passed from hand to hand so-to-speak, without interference or elaboration in content or form.

Kate, or Crabbit Old Woman

What do you see nurses

What do you see?

Are you thinking

when you are looking at me

A crabbit old woman

not very wise,

Uncertain of habit

with far-away eyes,

Who dribbles her food

and makes no reply,

When you say in a loud voice

'I do wish you'd try'.

Who seems not to notice

the things that you do,

And forever is losing

a stocking or shoe,

Who unresisting or not

lets you do as you will

with bathing and feeding

the long day to fill,

Is this what you're thinking,

is this what you see?

Then open your eyes nurse,

You're not looking at me.

I'll tell you who I am

as I sit here so still,

As I use at your bidding

as I eat at your will.

I'm a small child of ten

with a father and mother,

Brothers and sisters who

love one another,

A young girl of sixteen

with wings on her feet,

Dreaming that soon now

a lover she'll meet:

A bride soon at twenty,

my heart gives a leap,

Remembering the vows

that I promised to keep:

At twenty-five now

I have young of my own

Who need me to build

a secure happy home.

A young woman of thirty

my young now grow fast,

Bound to each other

with ties that should last:

At forty my young ones

now grown will soon be gone,

But my man stays beside me

to see I don't mourn:

At fifty once more

babies play round my knee,

Again we know children

my loved one and me.

Dark days are upon me,

my husband is dead,

I look at the future

I shudder with dread,

For my young are all busy

rearing young of their own,

And I think of the years

and the love I have known.

I'm an old woman now

and nature is cruel

'Tis her jest to make

old age look like a fool.

The body it crumbles,

grace and vigour depart,

There now is a stone

Where I once had a heart:

But inside this old carcass

a young girl still dwells,

And now and again

my battered heart swells,

I remember the joys,

I remember the pain,

And I'm loving and living

life over again,

I think of the years

all too few - gone too fast,

And accept the stark fact

that nothing can last.

So open your eyes nurses,

Open and see,

Not a crabbit old woman

look closer - see ME.'

As part of the furniture of the old age industry, 'Kate', is easy to overlook. Its ever-presence as a non-academic source, humbly vernacular in form, suggests that it has no obvious value beyond the immediate feelings it provokes on reading. Though it provokes mixed reactions its very persistence over several decades suggests an interesting disjuncture between everyday practice and perception and the theorising which gerontology has elaborated during the same period. A key contributory factor to an apparently unbroken popularity is the story of its origins, a story which almost always accompanies the poem wherever it appears and which, like the poem's own words, is virtually unchanged since those early days:

The writer of this poem was unable to speak, although was seen to write from time to time. After her death, her locker was emptied and this poem of her life was found (Searle, 1973, p. 8).

and more recently:

Get the hankies ready...this one'll get ya!

Crabbit old woman's life has ended in a nursing home. While the nurse is packing her meagre possessions, she finds a poem written to the staff of the hospital by the apparently senile and mindless old lady (Rexanne.com, 2005).

Other presentations fill in more detail: that the poem was found at Ashludie Hospital, Dundee; that copies were duplicated and distributed to all nurses in the hospital; that a 'young' (sic) nurse at the hospital sent a copy to 'Beacon House News' at the Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health'; and, that the author's name was not known. From time to time the mystery of the poem's origins is repeated in a rediscovery, as for example an entry on Seniors Network UK in 2003, which mentions 'Mattie's Poem', with the story that 'Mattie was a very dear family friend. She had been a very

bright 90 year-old but her body was badly ravaged by time - she died in the Geriatric Ward of a hospital in Lanarkshire in Scotland. On one of our many visits she complained about being "spoken about" and very rarely "spoken to". She disliked being talked about as if she wasn't there! She desperately wanted to be included in the conversation ' .

These intriguingly mysterious origins greatly add to the poem's effect. The story of a mute, unidentified and neglected woman who was a stranger to her carers gives it particular pathos and means that it is more than just a poem. It is a parable for ageing times with lessons about listening and empathy portrayed within the overall context of a Goffmanesque caring environment (Goffman, 1961). Literary criticism might require provenance of authorship. The idea that it might be possible on a hospital ward, typical of the 1960s and 1970s, for someone so frail to write a poem without being observed, immediately raises all sorts of doubts about the story of its origins. However, for Chris Searle teacher and radical writer, who first published the poem in an anthology of pensioners' writing in 1973, the question of authorship was of no significance:

I don't think we'll ever know. I accepted it as authentic. And it could have been that it was a concoction by a nurse, or by a relative, or by somebody who was masquerading as an old person. I find that difficult to believe, because it's stacked with life experience, which I think is one reason why it's had a kind of mythical status, since then. And it's also, because of its traditional form, it's a ballad. It has all the features of a ballad: the versification of a ballad, the strong rhyming structure of a ballad, some of the stock images, like the wings on her feet, you know, I mean, they're clichés, but they're also the stock images of romantic ballads. And the fact that it uses life itself as its structure, again, is a very traditional form, going back to oral poetry and, you know, something that you might encounter in Africa, in various parts of the world, which gives it that kind of universality, I think. And the fact that it's an old person speaking - you know, the notion of an old person reflecting, going back over their life, almost like a wise woman (Searle, 1998a).

Amongst the responses to a small survey which I carried out in 1998 while researching attitudes to the poem³ (Bornat, 2004) was a cutting from the *Daily Mail* newspaper in which the son of Phyllis McCormack, whose name is often linked with the poem as its discoverer, explained:

My mother, Phyllis McCormack, wrote this poem in the early Sixties when she was a nurse at Sunnyside Hospital in Montrose.

Originally entitled Look Closer Nurse, the poem was written for a small magazine for Sunnyside only Phyllis was very shy and submitted her work anonymously.

A copy of the magazine was lent to a patient at Ashludie Hospital, Dundee, who copied it in her own handwriting and kept it in her bedside locker. When she died, the copy was found and submitted to the Sunday Post newspaper, attributed to the Ashludie patient.

Since my mother's death in 1994 her work has travelled all over the world...

(Daily Mail, 12 March 1998).

Somehow this explanation rings true, though it immediately begs the question of how the origin story was constructed in the first place and whether the poem depends on an apparent myth for its continuing appeal. Encounters have been mixed as responses to the 1998 survey suggested. Some respondents wrote evocatively of the emotions provoked by a reading, as for example:

This poem is one of those 'Do you remember where you were when you heard that Kennedy had died?' experiences for me! It was late autumn 1986, I was on a one year postgraduate CQSW (social work qualification, JB) and I was reading an OU (Open University) reader about older people...in the university library. 'Kate' was at the front of the book. The university library is a crowded and busy place and not one where you want to be seen with tears streaming down your face, so I remember snuffling into my handkerchief and feeling

pretty self-conscious! However, whenever I come across the poem, the effect is the same. I guess I could be rational and put it down to sentimentality, but I prefer to think it's because, for me, it epitomises much of the truly shameful treatment of older people in many spheres of life, not least by services supposedly designed for them and probably some guilt for my own shortcomings (at least before I was more aware of them)! (quoted in Bornat, 2004, p. 9-10).

Another was less complimentary:

The first time I heard this was as a student nurse in 1977/8ish. It was given to us on a handout - photocopied from a nursing text (?). The last time was about two weeks ago (1998 JB) weeks ago on an early morning Radio 4 programme - I think 'Something understood' at around 6.30am. In the intervening years it has appeared with monotonous regularity in any education/training programme for nurses related to care of older people...Its popularity perhaps peaked at a time (late '70s and early 1980s) when there was a big emphasis on 'wrong' attitudes being at the root of all that was inadequate in hospital care of older people. I must say I got heartily sick of it and its sentimentality became increasingly cloying... (quoted in Bornat, 2004, p. 10).

A poem's role and positive effect

The last contributor links the poem's popularity to a particular time, the 1970s and 1980s and suggests that its popularity may now be waning. This would not seem to be the case. However the contributor is right to highlight that particular period as significant for developments in gerontology. 'Kate' was very much a product of that particular moment, responding to and reinforcing the emerging recognition of the significance of biography and identity as chapter 5 describes. I will look at 'Kate's' significance in that context now, before moving on to consider the poem's positive and negative contribution to perceptions of frail older people.

Chris Searle is an important link in the chain which led to the poem's recognition by a wider audience than simply the nurses for whom it was intended. Having been sent the lines following an appeal to local newspapers, pensioners' organisations and the left press for contributions to a book of poems by and about older people, he published them, untitled, alongside others from Jack Dash the London dockers' leader, and other less well known pensioner poets (Searle, 1973). Searle already had something of a reputation, as a radical teacher and promoter of poetry. In 1971 he had been sacked from his teaching post in an East End school, for publishing a book of children's poems, *Stepney Words*. The students came out on strike and an eventually successful campaign for his reinstatement began. During this time he, and poetry as protest, became well-known figures on the artistic, educational and political landscapes (Searle, 1998b, ch. 2).

In an interview in which I asked him to give his appraisal of the seminal success of 'Kate' he acknowledged the poem's powerful message for carers, but rather than focusing on their personal responsibility, he preferred to emphasise:

...the system that doesn't give the nurse time...And it's a fact that Kate within the system is not being treated as a human being. And the nurse is doing her best, but the nurse herself is being forced to reify her, because of lack of resources, the lack of time, and because the whole notion of ageing has become so systematized that the humanity is being squeezed out of it (Searle, 1998a).

'Kate' provoked a response from a nurse, in the form of 'The Nurse's Reply'. This pastiche of the poem talks to 'Crabbit Old Woman' with a plea to be understood as pressured yet feeling workers, though there's an underlying message which suggests complaint, complicity, and powerlessness⁴. Nevertheless 'Kate's' impact, in the years which followed the poem's exposure through a variety of publications, did seem to affect attitudes, as most of the respondents to the small survey suggest. Gerontologists who were also educationalists and trainers identified the potential of 'Kate' to induce reflection and empathy amongst students and colleagues. UK gerontology's early adoption of biographical perspectives meant that the poem was always likely to join

the repertoire of learning materials and consciousness-raising stimuli (Johnson, 1976; Carver and Liddiard, 1978; Bornat, 1989).

Chris Searle describes the process set up by a reading of 'Kate' as 'imaginative empathy', which, he suggests, uses 'the imagination as a source of bonding and human connection'. He sees the poem as having enduring power, saying that he has used the text with groups of older and younger people, as well as children from diverse backgrounds: 'Pakistani, Yemeni, Caribbean children and they can all identify with it' (Searle, 1998a). That the poem still has the power to evoke strong emotions, even guilt amongst readers is evident from the web search:

I love it because it makes me stop and think each and every time I read it...Remember this poem when you next meet an old person, who you might brush aside without looking at the young soul within. We will all, one day, be there too!! (<http://www.tblog.com>)

and

At times we all lose patience with the elderly. This should help us to have more sympathy and understanding of all residents. (NB this page also included the 'Nurse's Reply' JB) (mrmom.amaonlin.com).

also

Every time I read this I fill with emotion. I feel disgusted with my own lack of patience and my ignorance of old age. My Aunt has an old saying that we better hear loud and clear, 'What goes around comes around'!
(www.fromdebbieskitchen.com).

If Chris Searle is right and 'Kate's' powers lie in its evocation of imaginative empathy then it might be useful to consider what positive contribution it continues to make, in terms of current theory and practice. To do this I am going to look at a number of themes linked to debates in social gerontology: ideas of personhood; opportunities for critical reflection; the personal and the political; and emotional labour.

Personhood

'Kate' doesn't speak, is apparently confused, needs help with feeding and bathing and apparently makes no demands of her carers. Her 'carcass' is unresisting: it 'crumbles'. However, though her 'battered heart' is a 'stone' it can remember and feel emotions. She might be someone with dementia, or rendered aphasic following a stroke. From whatever cause it appears she cannot communicate verbally and so is unknown to her carers beyond what they see of her apparently failing body. The idea that within the mute individual there is a voice with a history which, again in Searle's words, speaks in 'a kind of everywoman poem' (Searle, 1998a) is the poem's strongest message.

The idea that in late life, at its most frail and uncommunicating, the individual is still identifiable was developed most compellingly by Tom Kitwood, who developed the idea of 'personhood' as a basis for care practice. Kitwood notes that in the 1970s there was, in the UK at least, a move towards a more psychological understanding of dementia. He suggests that negative, physically determinist diagnoses were, at around the time 'Kate' came into view, beginning to be questioned by researchers who sought to present a more humanistic psychology of dementia (Kitwood, 1997, p. 55). Others, subsequently, have sought to establish how the self in the sense of 'a personal singularity' (Sabat & Harré, 1992, p. 444) persists and argue that inability to 'present an appropriate self' is caused '...not in the neurofibrillary tangles and senile plaques in the brains of the sufferer, but in the character of the social interactions and their interpretations that follow in the wake of the symptoms' (p. 460). Pia Kontos, even goes so far as to suggest that personhood, when interpreted in terms of 'embodied selfhood' continues into late dementia and gives examples of spontaneity and innovation amongst the people she observed (Kontos, 2004). Since 'Kate' first appeared, awareness of dementia has grown and with it a much less medically derived understanding of the condition. 'Kate's' focus on the hidden person speaks to new generations of care workers and family members, and communicates well with the new literatures, research outputs and practice manuals, which seek to affirm individuality and combat the isolation which unaware responses can impose (Gibson, 2004, pp 211 &ff).

'Kate' confirms personhood, while challenging her carers to consider their role in contributing to its concealment. What Kitwood has also referred to as the 'malignant social psychology', consists of a view which defines dementia solely in terms of neurological decrement. Using a mapping technique he argued that carers' very actions depersonalised people with dementia, by neglectful and dehumanising practices (Kitwood, 1997, pp 45-49). He initiated what Faith Gibson describes as 'the new culture of dementia care' ((2004, p. 203). I go on to look at the implications of this for carers in the next section.

Opportunities for critical reflection

While 'Kate's' story offers an opportunity to develop imaginative empathy with someone who is imprisoned both physically and socially, it also has another side. Some of the quotes taken from websites, and from contributors to the small survey, display guilt and concern about the impact of their ignorance on frail older people. 'Kate's' predicament is caused by her nurses' lack of awareness, lack of empathy, imaginative or otherwise. The poem thus offers opportunities to carers for critical reflection on their own attitudes and actions. 'Kate' it seems with her everywoman's life stages was not so different from those around her. A warning perhaps, against using typifications, such as 'good' for the co-operative and 'bad' for those whose behaviours disturbed the lives of workers and other residents in Gililand and Bruton's study (1984). Or the staff who, at 'Murray Manor', the location for Gubrium's classic study of a US nursing home, preferred to use labels, such as 'agitated', 'disorientated' or 'confused' to categorise individual patients' (Gubrium, 1997, p. 49; first published 1975). Similar labels, 'feeder', 'time consumer' and 'trouble maker' were still being noted twenty years later by Debora Paterniti in her study of a nursing home (Paterniti, 2003, p. 73). 'Kate' is pointing out that she is not just a 'crabbit old woman', not just a body in a bed.

In a study of caregiver resistance to work with older people, Simon Biggs, suggests that an 'intrapsychic archetype or image' tends to be called up where a younger person is unable to identify with the experience of ageing, or fears what they understand to be their own possible future. Such images can be negative, and may even lead to inhumane care practices. Arguing that older people have different life

tasks to younger people, he suggests that lack of awareness of such 'projects' will discourage empathy and the 'replacement of elders' projects by those of the professional' (Biggs, 1989, p. 55). Biggs' conclusion is that empathy will only develop once professionals come to recognise the different needs which older people have and are able to engage with stereotypes which counteract negative impressions. 'Kate' offers this possibility to her readers. While her external image may be difficult to identify with, it seems she has an individual history, strong emotions to express as well as insight into her, and her carers' predicaments. It is this evocation which continues to spark a response in carers and which provokes appropriately critical and guilty reflection.

Linking the personal with the political

Chris Searle's initial motivation in collecting and publishing poems by pensioners was to support a campaign, in the early 1970s, which focused on material inequality and oppression in old age as much as personal and individual exclusion. In those early days, 'Kate' took on a decidedly political role. Indeed the poem opens Gladys Elder's angry argument about older people's lives in her study, *The Alienated* (1977). Setting the tone, J.B. Priestley in his 'Introduction' describes the book as 'a report from the battlefield' (1977, p. 10). 'Kate' feels appropriately positioned in such a context.

Writing in the first issue of the journal *Ageing and Society*, Townsend takes up the cause of older people in his seminal critique of a society which '...creates the framework of institutions and rules within which the general problems of the elderly emerge...and are manufactured' (Townsend, 1981, p. 9). Previous explanations of old age, he argues, took an 'individualistic' (p 6) approach, accepting the problems which people faced as inevitable failures of adjustment to prevailing norms and expectations. His blast against residential care was to have significant repercussions in relation to policies for and theorising of old age. The social model of disability, developed shortly afterwards, presents a similar structural approach to explaining as well as politicising the exclusion and minoritising of disabled people (Oliver, 1990; Finkelstein, 1993). It focuses on the structures which determine and control people who have physical, and mental impairments. Barriers, structural, attitudinal and environmental, imposed on disabled people, it is argued, lead to discriminatory and

oppressive practices with medically-derived categories and diagnoses. Disability is thus a socially constructed and politically maintained identity conferred by society and not the result of individual impairment. The disabled people's movement, armed with the social model, seeks to change that identity, to reclaim it as a positive image. Some gerontologists, Christine Oldman for example, argue that the social model of disability can be similarly useful to older people. Echoing Townsend she argues, 'Despite the rhetoric of independent living and cosmetic changes towards citizenship and empowerment, older people are subject to social care practices that are based on the medical model and often overtly or covertly ageist' (2002, p. 798). However, she is not willing to include 'physically impaired older people' arguing that 'It would probably not be appropriate to apply the model to older people with mental impairments' (p. 799).

Christine Oldman's reluctance to include mentally frail older people within the theorising matches a similar weakness in the social model and, by extension other exclusively structural explanations, that Deborah Marks has identified. She points out how a focus on disability as a 'positive identity', owned and shared, can exclude those with, for example, chronic illnesses who don't see themselves as disabled or impaired. And, a focus on the right to work and to independence risks excluding those who are unwilling to adopt such a lifestyle (Marks, 1999, p. 88). She further points out that with its focus on structural barriers, the theory is unable to encompass personal narrative and the experience of bodily impairment with its strongly causal social structural argument. Indeed key members of the disabled people's movement have expressed critical views of more personal accounts of disability on the basis of their subjectivity and tendency to pathologise (Marks, 1999, p. 183). Colin Barnes, for example argues that 'Social researchers have yet to devise adequate ways of collectivising experience' and that 'experiential research alone has hitherto to yield any meaningful political or social policy outcomes' (2003, p. 10). Marks counters this with the argument that the 'dualism' of a view which counterposes the individual against society neglects the reality of the mutual integration of the personal and the social (Marks, 1999, p. 183). Another researcher, Margaret Lloyd, has also pointed to the limitations of the overly deterministic features of the social model of disability, arguing, from a feminist perspective, that it has led to the neglect of 'subjective experience and individual difference within subgroups' (2001, p. 726).

The theory of structured dependency and the social model of disability rightly point to the need to examine and critically confront society's role in the creation and manufacture of disability and old age. However, the tendency to exclude or discount personal experience and emotional responses means that the the role and contribution of individual agency in an over-structured interpretation is given insufficient weight and value.

'Kate's' continuing campaigning appeal is the bridge it offers between the political and the personal. She bolsters a critique of the system which confines her, with a very personal and understandable account, linking her present predicament to her past experience. She overcomes the limitations of an argument, the social model, with its focus on structural barriers and oppressive practices and, speaking directly to her carers, appeals to their sense of morality. In so doing she links to an older tradition of campaigning, going back to the projects of Gladys Elder and Chris Searle who sought to build alliances and to promote empathy and comprehension between frail older people and their care workers. In its evocation of a recognised shared experience, the care setting, it provides the basis for attitude and practice change without disempowering the care worker by denying them the possibility that they might be human too.

Identifying emotions in care work

Of course, as we now know, 'Kate' was written by a nurse, a carer who presumably was in close daily contact with frail, possibly mute, older people. 'Kate' is therefore speaking with more than one voice. She's the old woman whose life has come to be confined her bed area in a typical Nightingale style ward. But she's also the nurse who knows that there is more than just a body, a 'carcass', in what 'Kate' outwardly presents or in what others construct of her. 'Kate' speaks to these nurses but with words that have a certain weight to them. Her demand to 'See me' and 'look closer' is not so much a call for attention, it is also accusation and warning. The text of the 'Nurse's Reply'⁴ suggests that nurses heard the accusation. The lines 'But nurses are people with feelings as well' and 'There are many of you and too few of us' suggest not so much empathy as defensiveness. 'Kate's' author may have been moved to write because she was aware that such an attitude is often used to mask poor practice.

However, she would also have known that the nursing care of older people then, as now, carries little prestige. There were few extrinsic rewards for staff on long-stay wards in 'Kate's' time, when the pioneers of the geriatric specialty were only beginning to bring changes in attitudes amongst doctors, nurses and hospital administrators (Ogg et al, 1999; Jefferys, 2000). Today's care work in the privatised setting of the care home similarly offers little in the way of professional status and reward, with few opportunities for career development and skill recognition.

The risk in 'Kate's' double-edged call, both a recognition and a warning, is that she fails to acknowledge these emotions in the care worker. She asks for emotional labour from her carer but doesn't seem to recognise that the situation is difficult for nurses too. Twigg, in a discussion of the concept 'emotional labour' argues that this, '... involves emotion on both sides' and that 'Careworkers develop strong feelings for their clients and these can be a source of difficulty as well as reward' (Twigg, 2000, p. 164). She argues that careworkers, and others in service relationships, often value opportunities to express emotions with 'banter and flirtation' (Twigg, 2000, p. 162). What is more difficult of course is when the emotions are troubling and deep.

What 'Kate' may be doing is legitimising the feeling and expression of emotion in a care setting. Of course nurses, and other care workers are affected by the accounts they hear of past lives, often with positive results for their care practice. Chris Searle and 'The Nurse's Reply' could both be right, perhaps the system prevents empathy and the recognition of emotion on the part of the carer, hence 'Kate's' continuing resonance. Yet there is another side to this and that is the perspective of the general public, those onlookers in the care relationship whose parents, friends and relatives could be 'Kate'. The weblogs provide an insight into their take on how the careworker is viewed. Rexanne, asks the visitors to her website to, 'Please take the time to read this beautiful poem and reflect on what your life will be like if you should find yourself spending your final days in a sterile institution, cared for by *personnel* (her emphasis). This is a good reminder to visit our family members who are confined to nursing and convalescent homes' (www.rexanne.com). Unless care workers take up her message and respond to their own feelings as well as to the emotions they see or sense are being expressed, 'Kate's' role may help to confirm expectations amongst the wider public that careworkers are lacking in empathy and prone to abuse. Taken out

of context, and away from the nursing audience for whom the poem was originally intended, it seems, 'Kate' may have quite the opposite influence to what was intended by her author.

So far I have suggested that 'Kate', survives by evoking strong emotions. The poem establishes personhood where this may be absent. It encourages critical reflection on the part of nurses and relatives too, and it encourages solidarity and empathy based on a shared understanding and mutual recognition of feelings rather than focusing solely on the barriers between frail older people and their carers. The poem lasts because it is describing a situation which is still recognisable in different settings, residential, nursing and in people's own homes. It continues to have universal appeal, amplified and personified by the ever-repeated story of origin.

However, in my final section I want to trace some other aspects of the work which 'Kate' does, aspects which may be regarded as less than wholly positive in their impact.

A poem's less positive effect

In this final section I will go on to look at three different ways in which it could be argued that 'Kate' has a less benign impact on her readership. These relate to the experience of the ageing body, the presentation of a life course and implications for identity presentation.

Experiencing the ageing body

In establishing the poem's provenance in terms of its impact and appeal it may be that we overlook other aspects of the work it does. One possibility is that in constructing an identity for someone unable to communicate verbally it is distancing the here and now with its focus on the past. As we read we are presented with a mask of ageing (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1990) which contrasts with the images presented of a younger woman. In this way 'Kate' distracts the reader with its stereotypical view of frailty, concealing the embodied experience of an older person. Any sense that 'Kate' might have pride in an aspect of her appearance, a preference for particular articles of clothing or jewellery or an awareness of her body as a sign of survival is absent from the narrative offered in the poem. As possible confirmation of this, Öberg and

Tornstam's study of 3000 Swedish men and women aged between 20 and 85 found that, contrary to most gerontological theorising, older women showed a surprisingly positive sense of their own bodies and conclude that, 'Our data...failed to show the presumed increasing discrepancy between "'feel age"' and 'chronological age' (1999, p.641). Heikkinen takes this argument further, with data from a study in which a group of people over 80 were reinterviewed at 85 and asked to reflect on their experience of ageing. She concludes that being human means experiencing the world in relation to the body, in late life the body becomes more dominant as 'Age and illness bring along a whole host of annoying companions that are "part" of us'. These ailments change people's experiences and their 'meaning horizon' (Heikkinen, 2000, p. 479). As the group aged, their bodies became objects of concern she observes.

In the contrasting of 'Kate's' old and decrepit body with her identity as a younger woman we're given no sense of her awareness or concern for her body, nor of the experience of its changing nature. Her 'bodiliness' is restricted by the negative values which are attributed to her. Her body is ' a carcass', it 'crumbles' and lets her down. The narrative we're presented with invites us to look beyond these unattractive qualities to focus on the younger woman rather than dwell on or acknowledge the present or even the future person. In so doing it denies the embodied experiences of the older, frailer person in the present.

The stereotyping of a life course

'Kate's' life course runs along conventional lines, though the tendency towards extension in the younger years and compression at later stages has the effect of emphasising her physical generativity at the expense of other socially-oriented achievements or tasks at other age stages. 'Kate's' life has no further delineation after the age of 50. The way in which 'Kate's' life course is sketched out suggests that the person who created her might have had a rather narrow understanding of the events of an older woman's life, most especially life at middle age and later. The writer, rather like Freud has '...repressed the subject of old age, which was to remain concealed, a well-kept secret' (Woodward, 1991, p. 151).

'Kate' it seems was not a public person. She lived within her family and her story is of loss yet the evidence from social gerontology tells us that other ties, particularly

friendship, have special significance in later life, and indeed at earlier stages too. Friendship offers cohort solidarity and support at critical stages, as Jerrome suggests. She emphasises the particular qualities of what she sees as women's later life friendships, their being 'more extensive and meaningful' and based in 'emotional intensity and self-disclosure' (1995, p. 204-5). Miriam Zukas, a psychologist who used an oral history approach in her study, found that many of her interviewees identified different types of friendship. Often these were deep and lasting commitments to other women which were quite separate to the friendships which married women shared with their husbands and partners. She also found, '...a supportive and caring role towards older women with whom they had very regular contact...and that, as women grow older, they fulfill this caring role for each other more and more' (Zukas, 1993, p. 77).

In their study of late twentieth century family and community, Phillipson et al similarly emphasise the importance of friendship for '...confiding and providing reassurance...' (Phillipson et al, 2001, p. 132). However they distinguish family support from friends' support, the former being more practical and immediate, while the latter being more emotionally and socially significant. They also point out that friendship tends to be more important amongst middle class than amongst working class older people and even more important amongst single people or childless people.

Coleman et al, go further to question whether friendship has significance for 'the present generation' of older people. They suggest, from their longitudinal study of meaning in late life, that family provides a stronger source of identity than friends, though they accept that friendship does meet certain needs. Given the centrality of family in the lives of some very old people they argue that loss of family can be 'devastating to self-esteem' and that those whose contacts are more broadly based may be better able to survive the effects of change in their lives (Coleman et al, 1998, p.414).

Friendship may have different meanings and roles as people age. Undoubtedly family provides the strongest continuities in most lives, however a life without any friends is surely unusual and 'Kate's' is certainly remarkable in this respect.

In addition to friendship there are other aspects of 'Kate's' identity and role which are missing. We don't know if she worked outside the home, what her interests were, if she travelled or, significantly for Scotland, what her religious or political views may have been. We have no sense of the importance of her role as a daughter to her own parents, as a carer of her husband nor as a parent, continuing in that role into late life, though research evidence suggests that parenting continues to be significant to older people and to their older children throughout life (Bornat & Peace, 1996). In short, 'Kate's' story is a narrowly stereotypical narrative, which contains rather than elaborates her life.

'Kate' may well have been devised by someone who had opportunities to observe closely and to remark the interests and concerns of frail older people in the course of her work, noting the prevailing importance of family relationships to the presentation of identity and the significance of the emotions, feelings, rhythm and purpose of younger life stages. To that extent the poem succeeds in its task of providing a voice for someone who is silenced. It would however be unfortunate if this account of a life were to be seen as typical or normative. As a starting point for further explorations and expressions perhaps, but it cannot be the whole or only story of someone like 'Kate'.

Implications for identity construction

In a study of patients with dementia in an Israeli hospital, Golander and Raz, observed how other residents and carers 'deconstructed rather than reconstructed' biographies for people whose personal narratives were not 'well known or reliable'. They suggest that in this reconstruction, 'individual agency is imitated and prescribed and fragments of past biography are magnified to serve as "personality leitmotifs"'. They refer to this as 'dubbing' and 'normative control' (Golander & Raz, 1996, pp 278-284).

Similarly in 'Kate's' case, I've been suggesting that her life has been conventionally portrayed and that there is more than an element of normalising implied in the account which is offered. Golander and Raz observed this as a process in their study. However, while they point out aspects of social control and determination, they also suggest that there are positive aspects to the label 'demented'. On the nursing ward people with dementia are allowed to live in their own reality which they describe as

an "escape attempt". Nevertheless, they go on to argue, who that person feels themselves to be, their sense of "I" is not available so is interpreted by other non-demented residents and by carers from what are understood to be the intentions of people with dementia (Golander & Raz, 1996, p. 283).

Because 'Kate' is apparently speaking for herself, her author is absent. This may be an important gap when it comes to seeking an understanding for the way she is presented in the poem. What 'Kate' doesn't explicitly reveal is how that understanding of her predicament may be filtered through the personal and social histories of the people she is addressing, the nurses.

The poem evokes awareness of distance between old and young, but there may be other differences which impose additional layers on that separation, take for example the issue of gender. 'See ME', 'Kate's' last words are resonant of Barbara Macdonald's call to younger feminists to *Look Me In the Eye* (1983, pp 25&ff). The accusation that 'Kate' inside her body is invisible to the younger women nursing her recalls demands by older feminists such as Barbara Macdonald and others not to be ignored or excluded by younger women (Curtis, 1989; Stacey, 1989. Her experience of the women's movement of the 1970s was that as an older woman she was rendered unequal, because, '...the present attitude of women in their twenties and thirties has been shaped by patriarchy to view older women as powerless, less important than the fathers and the children, and there to serve them both; and like all who serve, the older woman becomes invisible' (Macdonald, 1983, p. 40). She demands a gaze which brings her out of her invisibility to younger women, to be recognised and valued for what she has, the identity of an older woman. Even within the solidaristic campaigning of the women's movement, ageist distancing was still a factor which as Bridget Riley argues, disturbs and challenges the idea that there is any shared notion of 'women' (1988).

What I am warning against, in this final section, is the assumption in 'Kate' that there can be anything unspoken or unexplored in the empathy which the poem evokes, no assumptions based in shared understandings based in gender or any other difference for that matter. In reading this fictional 'Kate', as in understanding or interpreting any real-life Kate, we need to be aware of the presuppositions, histories and perspectives,

gendered or otherwise which we readers and listeners bring to the encounter. With her 'everywoman' narrative there is a danger that this could be suppressed.

Conclusion

By highlighting some of the issues which a reading of 'Kate' raises, I have identified a number of different interpretations, some positive, some negative. I have explored the qualities of this evergreen text and drawn on theories of oppression, personhood, emotion in care work, of the life course and of representation within the context of frailty in late life. This poem originated at a time when many of these ideas were only just beginning to inform practice yet it continues to evoke emotional responses and to be discovered anew. In this chapter I've sought to show how the a life story, compellingly told, plays a more complex, potentially ambiguous, role in accounting for relations between frail older people and their carers. While it provokes responses which include critical reflection by carers and in society generally it also has the potential to reinforce less positive messages with its emphasis on the younger 'Kate' and what might be taken as a normative account of the life course.

Since 'Kate' was written, the perspective of the carer has come to predominate with the effect, it might be argued, that the perspectives of frail older people are shifted off centre. The poem survives in a very different political environment in the twentyfirst century. In the 1970s it began its public life amongst older campaigners whose demands were directed at class and inter-generational power inequalities. Today's claims for social justice, based as they are in the recognition of difference and identity risk marginalising people like 'Kate' who fit uneasily into the dominant discourses of oppression. Her story generates empathy, but it may be that it also legitimates expressions of anger, which counteracts the idea that withdrawal or disengagement is appropriate behaviour in late life. Such legitimation promotes recognition of the emotional life of a frail older person, counterbalancing the lulling and seductive qualities of the telling of a life story. If these tensions, between present and past, frail older person and younger carer can be kept in focus then there will be a continuing and future role for 'Kate'.

Notes

1. Outline chronology

1973 First published in Chris Searle (ed) *Elders*, Reality Press, London, untitled.

1977 Gladys Elder: *The Alienated: Growing Old Today*, London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, titled 'Kate'.

1978 In V. Carver and P. Liddiard (eds): *An Ageing Population*, Hodder & Stoughton with Open University Press, titled 'Kate':

'The poem was written by a woman who was unable to speak but occasionally seen to write. After she died her locker was opened and the poem was found' p. ix-x.

1978 In *People not 'Pensioners'* published by Help the Aged Education Department, London, titled 'Kate'.

1980 In Haim Hazan *The Limbo People* Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980. Quotes the poem, 'Crabbit Old Woman' (sic) in full, on p 27 as part of his ethnography of a North London Jewish Day Centre:

'The following poem which was found amongst the possessions of an old lady who had died in a geriatric hospital, and was distributed and displayed in the Centre, provides a starting point as well as an encapsulated panorama of the whole subject'...

and n 7 explains that the poem was:

'Printed in *News Letter*, December 1974 - a bulletin issued by the voluntary services section of the Jewish Welfare Board'.

Title: 'A Crabbit OldWoman'.

2. Not only the English-speaking world however, for it has also been translated into Danish and is well known in Denmark (personal communication).

3. Having always wondered about the story of the poem's origins and resisted its powers to seduce into feeling guilty and unknowing, I wondered if others also were

ambivalent and what might be the true history of this poem. I placed a letter in the magazine of the British Society of Gerontology, *Generations Review*, and in the Geriatric Nursing Newsletter of the Royal College of Nursing. This invited people to let me know when they first remembered reading the poem and also when they had most recently seen it published or referred to in any way.

In all I received sixteen replies, one from as far away as Brisbane in Australia. Not surprisingly most of the respondents were people working in nursing contexts or who had retired from nursing. Since then and as people have come to know that I am interested in 'sightings' of the poem I have continued to receive copies of documents such as church magazines and training materials where 'Kate' has appeared.

4. The Nurse's Reply, by Liz Hogben although Bruni Abbott of Prince Henry's Hospital, Melbourne has also been cited as author, appears regularly, often in tandem with 'Crabbed Old Woman' or 'Kate'.

NURSE'S REPLY

(to crabbed old woman)

What do we see? you ask

What do we see?

Yes we are thinking when we look at thee

We may seem to be hard when we hurry and fuss,

But there's many of you, and too few of us

We would like far more time to sit by you and talk,

To bathe you and feed you and help you to walk

To hear of your lives and the things that you've done,

Your childhood, your husband, your daughter, your son

We grieve when we see you so sad and alone

With nobody near you, no friends of your own

We feel all your pain, and know of your fear

That nobody cares though your end is so near,

But nurses are people with feelings as well,

And when we're together you'll oft hear tell

Of the dear old gran in the very end bed,

And the lovely old dad, and the things that he said

We speak with compassion, and love and feel sad

When we think of your lives and the joys that you've had

When the time has arrived for you to depart

You leave us behind with an ache in our heart

When you sleep the long sleep, no more worry or care,

There are other old people, and we must be there

So please understand if we hurry and fuss -

There are many of you and too few of us.

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