

# Picturing Midlife: Aging and the Limits of Narrative in Carol Shields's *Larry's Party*

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This paper approaches *Larry's Party* (1997) by Carol Shields as a detailed investigation into the political and representational issues at stake in writing about midlife by focusing on moments when the middle-aged Larry is described as attempting to “visualize” his life (169). Highlighting Larry’s conviction that “his life is not ... a story” (267), his engagement with visual images raises questions about the centrality of narrative to how midlife is explained and imagined in contemporary literature and culture. Margaret Morganroth Gullette’s influential theorization of midlife and midlife fiction celebrates the sequential and teleological aspects of narrative as enabling a kind of life storytelling that characterizes the entry into middle age as progress toward an improved self. Questioning this conceptualization of a life as a linear, upward trajectory, Shields’s text foregrounds the assumptions about class implicit in the “progress novel” as Larry resists the devaluation of his working-class origins that would seem to accompany the imperative that he esteem his midlife self as better than his previous selves. Associating the fixity of the visual image with other non-narrative qualities such as touch, taste, and affective states characterized by stasis rather than momentum, *Larry's Party* invites readers to question the cultural valorization of progress that continues to shape our assumptions about what it means to grow older.

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In conversation with Eleanor Wachtel, Carol Shields asserts that “the only plot that really interests [her is] ... the arc of the human life ... that arc of aging: growing older and then ... the shadowy end of life, illness and eventual death” (“The Arc” 76). Shields’s words will perhaps inevitably put readers in mind of her Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel *The Stone Diaries* (1993), which traces the life

of its central character Daisy Goodwill from her birth in 1905 all the way to her death in the 1990s; however, this comment actually arises in a discussion of her subsequent book, *Larry's Party* (1997). While *The Stone Diaries* has been the subject of a fair amount of analysis by scholars of age studies including Amelia DeFalco, Patricia Life, and Barbara Frey Waxman, *Larry's Party* has not, possibly because its engagement with “the arc of aging” seems less overt and less ambitious, in that its protagonist is only in his mid-forties when the novel ends. Like *The Stone Diaries*, *Larry's Party* is an exercise in fictive life writing that presents itself as the biography of Larry Weller, a man born in 1950, the middle of the twentieth century, in Winnipeg, Manitoba, a province located roughly in the middle of Canada, a so-called “middle power.” The novel’s persistent placement of Larry, the son of working-class English immigrants, in the “middle” of things gestures toward his relative privilege as someone who, while not exactly at the center of power, is in a position to benefit from the advantages afforded to able-bodied white men of his generation. Larry proceeds, through a combination of mistake and happenstance, from being an undistinguished youth to a bewildered young husband and father, the manager of a chain florist franchise, and from thence to a respected landscape architect with a specialty in garden mazes, residing in the Midwest of the United States. At the same time, Larry’s middling position, with its echoes of descriptors such as “middlebrow” and “middle-of-the-road,” also serves to communicate his nagging sense of his fundamental ordinariness, his troubling lack of distinction.

The tensions that characterize the concept of “the middle” in this novel are especially pronounced in the focus on Larry’s middle age. The main action of the book’s plot traces his existence from age twenty-six to forty-six, the chapters proceeding in somewhat irregular increments of one to two years, until he turns forty. After devoting an entire chapter, entitled “Larry So Far,” to detailing the “seam of panic” that this particular birthday “open[s] up” in Larry, the novel’s chronology becomes more consistent as it documents each year of his fifth decade before ending with the titular party, which takes place a few months before he is to turn forty-seven (163). As Kay Heath has argued, any attempt to understand and account for the persistent cultural panic about midlife as “the

beginning of the end, an inevitable slide into deterioration” (1) first requires that we recognize midlife as a distinct and culturally bound concept, rather than conflating it with older age under the general category of “aging,” a move that threatens to “lock age studies into a binary of young versus old [that] frequently elides the middle years from the discussion altogether” (11). If the neglect of *Larry’s Party* in the critical discussion of aging in Shields’s work is an example of such an elision, this paper seeks to contribute to its redress, teasing out the implications of the novel’s detailed exploration of what it means, what it looks like, and how it feels to perceive oneself as being in the middle of one’s life. In particular, I will focus on how the novel’s depiction of midlife is characterized by a tension between the spatial and the temporal, between seeing and telling. Larry’s habit of trying to see his life as a visual image comes into conflict with the pressure exerted on him to narrate his life as a story, a conflict that highlights the political and representational issues at stake in the creation and interpretation of both visual and verbal depictions of middle age.

Shields’s invocation of life as an “arc” not only draws upon a common conceptualization of life as a narrative, a temporal sequence of events, but also invites us to imagine what a life might look like as a spatial concept, a visual image. An “arc” calls to mind a particular shape, that of an arch, or an image more commonly associated with age, a hill, the kind of rising and descending pattern that has long characterized attempts to visualize the life course. Tracing shifts in the iconography of aging since the middle ages, historian Thomas Cole has shown how the emergence of a Protestant, mercantile culture in Northern Europe in the early modern period produced a vision of life as a career that “found its definitive ... representation in a rising and falling staircase—a shape which became the standard bourgeois image of a lifetime” until the early twentieth century (19). This image, often referred to as the *Lebenstreppe* after early continental examples, represented the life span as a period of one hundred years, divided into a series of ten steps or stages ascending toward and declining away from the pinnacle of middle age (see Joerissen and Will). Each step was surmounted by a human (usually male) figure whose clothing and demeanor were appropriate to his age, indicated by the numerals that often appeared in

the vicinity of each stage in a way that emphasized the beginning of each decade as a pivotal moment of transition (10, 20, 30, etc.). The *Lebenstreppe* was representative of a “society legitimately ordered by the divisions of a human lifetime,” an ideal that had come “under siege” by the late twentieth century when “the social meanings of life stages were in great flux” (Cole 241). Shields’s text registers this instability, evoking the persistence, albeit in fragmentary form, of some of the assumptions underlying the *Lebenstreppe* into her own era. We might recognize traces of the old staircase and its decade-long divisions in the two of Larry’s birthdays that Shields chooses to show us, his thirtieth and fortieth. While Larry is repeatedly shown to harbor the expectation that, with luck, “he’ll live for a hundred years,” he seems simultaneously disassociated from this conception of his “allotted time,” the “sequential years shatter[ing] as soon as he sets his glance in their direction” (138). With the *Lebenstreppe*’s decline in popularity, Cole senses the opportunity to reconceptualize the life course as more than simply a career; he proposes the maze as the image that best captures the complexity of a contemporary world negotiated by “shadowy, bewildered postmodern traveller[s]” who yearn to feel that they are moving toward something beyond the accumulation of wealth as they grow older, yet are “uncertain of ... direction, destiny, and self” (245).

Cole’s evocation of the maze has obvious implications for *Larry’s Party*, a novel about a maze designer that, as many commentators have already analyzed, resuscitates an “ancient association between labyrinth and life” (van Gessel 155). As Dee Goertz points out, the novel itself is “maze-like” in the “dead ends and doublings back” that characterize both its plot and its narrative structure (234). Shields herself suggests that the novel’s chapters can be read as “small maze[s] that Larry enters and then exits,” an impression reinforced by the small mazes that appear as illustrations on each chapter’s title page (“The Arc” 84). While this aspect of the novel invites us to see correspondences between its narrative and visual elements, I am more interested in how these two aspects of the text might be read against one another. Christina Ljungberg has argued that the various “diagrammatic figurations” in the novel—not just its maze drawings but its facsimiles of hand-drawn or written documents such

as the seating plan and the menu for the culminating dinner party—“transform the text into a stage on which textual activity is performed,” and disrupt the continuity of a narrative that, despite its recursive quality, also retains a plot trajectory that is broadly linear and chronologically ordered (48-49). My own reading of the dissonances between the novel’s visual and narrative elements moves beyond its inclusion of literal illustrations to consider the many instances when Larry is described as trying to “visualize” his life (Shields, *Larry’s* 169), or as contemplating an image that speaks to him in some way about his age, and that we as readers are invited to picture along with him. Ljungberg’s suggestion of a “dynamic gap” between the novel’s narrative and visual aspects highlights the way in which Larry’s impulse to “see” his life can be interpreted in conjunction with his conviction that “his life is not ... a story” (267). Larry’s disinclination to conceptualize his life in narrative terms, even as other characters urge him to do so, raises questions about the centrality of narrative to current conceptions of both the experience of aging into midlife and its cultural representations.

Writing in a special issue of *Modern Drama* devoted to representations of aging, Andrea Charise makes a case for the importance of “think[ing] of older age, and older masculinities specifically, outside the framework” of the “narrative approaches” that have dominated literary age studies and entered into the therapeutic and theoretical discourses of contemporary gerontology (156). This re-thinking is not simply a matter of shifting our attention to visual forms of representation such as drama, photography, sculpture, and painting: such visual media are fully capable of representing aging as “a process of unfolding over a span of time,” and thus do not always constitute a departure from narrative (Meagher 91). The *Lebenstreppe* itself is a visual image, yet Charise positions it as an example of a type of “conventional narrative paradigm” (161) that privileges “temporal progression as the primary mode of representing older age” (163). For Charise, forms of representation specifically characterized by “stillness and fragmentation” (her own discussion examines the form of the *tableau vivant*) offer an alternative to narrative models of aging, which, in their preoccupation with the idea of a life as a process of development that

unfolds over time, can all too often reinforce an ageist conception of later life as decline (155).

In my focus on middle age, I am interested in how Larry's envisionings articulate a critique of narrative models of midlife specifically that privilege notions of progress. As Cole points out, the figuration of the path to midlife as a narrative of "upward mobility" is an expression of the emphasis on "productivity, progress, and health" that defines the culture of capitalism (114). Shields's novel foregrounds this association, since the narrative of Larry's aging into midlife is also the narrative of the professional success that elevates him into the upper-middle class. By contrast, Larry's attempts to envision his life express his ambivalence toward this narrative, as the images through which he tries to understand his place in middle age often have a discrete or singular quality and, as such, hold themselves apart from the temporal progression characteristic of narrative representation. Moreover, the novel connects Larry's partiality for these images with other non-narrative forms of representation and perception: single words whose isolation from narrative sequence is intensified by their association with non-narrative qualities such as touch, taste, and affective states associated with stasis rather than momentum. Set against the upward trajectory of Larry's journey to middle age, these instances of singularity and stillness can be read as a critique of the socio-economic implications underlying the narrative association of midlife with progress, and, more specifically, of the neoliberal imperative to be always improving, producing, moving forward. While the association of midlife with progress has been and remains central to activist efforts to ascribe value to middle age in the context of an ageist culture, Shields's novel invites us to enlarge the available critical approaches to the study of middle age in literature, gesturing toward aspects of midlife existence that resist absorption into a narrative framework.

**"ANYONE'S LIFE IS JUST THAT: A STORY ABOUT THE FATE OF A CHILD":  
MIDLIFE AND NARRATIVE**

For Amelia DeFalco in *Uncanny Subjects: Aging in Contemporary Narrative*, "the constitutive circularity of narrative and time means that any study of aging must

inevitably consider questions of narrative” (12-13). Shields’s characterization of aging as a “plot” certainly corroborates the truth of DeFalco’s observation that “human lives follow a certain biological narrative trajectory that moves from birth ... toward death,” yet Larry’s tendency to see his life in images works to question the conclusion that aging subjects necessarily “understand their lives through ... stories” (xiv). For example, when Larry contemplates a CAT-scan of the inside of his father’s body, we are told that “this is how Larry thinks of his life,” not as a temporal progression of “sequential years,” but as a grouping of “slices, brilliantly dyed and intricately detailed: his work, his friends, his family, his son, his love for his two wives, his bodily organs” (138). Granted, the CAT-scan is one of the text’s images that, like the maze, finds a narrative correlative in the way in which Shields has organized her chapters to represent different “slices” of Larry’s life: “Larry’s Work,” “Larry’s Friends,” “Larry’s Living Tissues,” and so on. Yet, this aspect of the novel exists in tension with its overarching chronological structure and suggests its questioning engagement with narrative—defined as a “causal chain” of temporally ordered events—as a privileged mode of representing and imagining the self in midlife (DeFalco 24).

Over the last several decades, a focus on narrative has been a consistent characteristic of the critical study of midlife across disciplines. For example, the framework of narrative psychology has been proposed as a way of reconceptualizing the notion of the “midlife crisis” in order to account for its extraordinary persistence as “a social and psychological phenomenon” (51) despite an absence of evidence that it actually exists as anything like the universal “developmental inevitability” that its theorists have often claimed that it is (Rosenberg et al. 52). This approach maintains that the midlife crisis is, rather, “a narrative crisis in the sense that midlife events or experiences coalesce to render the narrator unable to produce a coherent, continuous life story text” (Rosenberg et al. 53). Often accompanying this conception of middle age as a time of transition that may trigger a debilitating breakdown in life story-telling is the insistence on the effectiveness of various forms of narrative-based therapy in revising the life story to restore a sense of coherence in middle age. In *The Stories We Live By*, Dan P. McAdams argues that the healing power

of narrative operates not only in situations of clinical psychotherapy but also in the stories we tell, read, and listen to in our daily lives. Accordingly, his chapter on middle age includes accounts of people who model the ability to “refine” already-established life-narratives and to develop their familiar concepts of self in the direction of greater generativity, that is, to heal the anxiety that may accompany the awareness of their own personal finitude by converting it into a commitment to nurturing future generations (207).

An emphasis on the healing properties of narrative has also characterized literary analysis focused on fictional representations of aging into midlife. Margaret Morganroth Gullette’s groundbreaking book *Safe at Last in the Middle Years: The Invention of the Midlife Progress Novel*, the most influential study of midlife in twentieth-century literature, extols the therapeutic benefits of writing and reading a kind of life-course fiction that, in the face of an overwhelming perception of time and aging as threats to selfhood, manages to reinvigorate the truism that “‘Time’ heals” (26). In the work of American and British writers Saul Bellow, Margaret Drabble, Anne Tyler, and John Updike, Gullette discerns the emergence, in the 1970s and ’80s, of the “midlife progress narrative” as a “new kind of novel” (xi) that “overthrow[s] the traditional decline view that the middle years are a time of devolution,” and instead assigns “life-affirming plots and thoughts” to characters who experience midlife as a time of “recovery and even *gains*” (xvi). As a form that not only reflects the midlife struggles of its authors but also teaches readers “strategies for constructing life stories as ameliorative sequences” that move “from conflict to resolution, from pain to serenity, from stasis to activity, from defect to fulfillment [and] from loss to recovery,” the progress novel is grounded in a conception of life itself as a narrative that unfolds over time toward decline or improvement (xiv-xv).

To some extent, *Larry’s Party* preserves certain central aspects of the midlife progress novel as Gullette defines it, for example, in the way it challenges the pervasive association of midlife with tragic decline by “assign[ing] ‘comic’ outcomes” to its middle-aged characters (*Safe* xx). Confirming Gullette’s conception of survival into midlife as a “cure” for the miseries of young adulthood, the end of the novel sees Larry at forty-six reunited with his forty-



six-year-old first wife, Dorrie, a resolution that affirms the progress novel's representation of young adulthood as a time of "radical unreadiness" for marriage (Gullette, *Safe* 8). At the same time, however, the repetition and circularity of the novel's plot and structure would also seem to constitute a departure from the concept of progress and invites readers to question some of the assumptions implicit in the framing of a life as a linear, forward or upward narrative trajectory. As Elizabeth Barry points out, the genre of the progress novel is focused on "self-determining characters ... shaped by a positive liberal version of existential freedom," and reflects the experiences of a "post-war generation" whose affluence and newly developed "social and sexual confidence" gave them the "resources for finding within themselves the way to effect a cure or a recovery for the ills that had befallen them" (18) and for telling, in Gullette's words, "stories of midlife improvement" (*Safe* 26). While Gullette celebrates the newness of the progress narrative as a revolutionary form that "dares to prize the middle years *more* than earlier stages of life" (*Safe* 5, emphasis in original), might we not see it as reproducing some of the values enshrined in the older model of the *Lebenstreppe*, which gives "clear priority to the characteristics of middle age" by figuring it as the apex of the life course, and similarly foregrounds the autonomous individual whose upward advancement is linked to "his capacity to control his body, his energies, and his destiny" (Cole 23)? By contrast, Shields's "postmodern biographical fiction" questions such figurations of the aging subject as a self-determining individual who "progresses" toward midlife (Howells 81).

In contrast to the protagonists of progress novels who come to "*own*" their lives as "plots of recovery or mastery" (Gullette, *Safe* xxv, emphasis in original), Nina van Gessel draws upon Susan Faludi's definition of paradigmatic masculinity in order to characterize Larry as "a man emphatically not "the master of [his] universe" (qtd. in van Gessel 156), one whose path through life is instead governed by "trickery, dead ends, and surprises" (van Gessel 156). That Larry's success owes as much to error and accident as to his own foresight and industry challenges the notion of life as "progress," that is, as a "controlled" and 'rational' march toward personal and professional self-realization" (van

Gessel 156). Van Gessel sees this latter conception of the life course as expressive of the “hegemonic ideal of masculinity” that has traditionally underwritten the genre of the biographical narrative, which invites its readers to understand a life story as one characterized by “decisive ... and linear progress” as well as “confident control over self and environment” (164). Larry’s circuitous “wanderings” thus highlight the limits of Gullette’s theory of midlife fiction and constitute a way of figuring his place in the middle of his life that resists the idea of decline without reproducing the hegemonic associations implicit in the concept of “progress” (Van Gessel 157).

If Shields’s text exposes certain assumptions about gender latent within the concept of progress, it also insistently draws attention to how issues of class might disrupt the framing of a life story as an upward trajectory toward an improved middle-aged self. Pointing to a curious neglect of the subject of class in critical studies of *Larry’s Party*, van Gessel urges that more attention be paid to the implications of class mobility in “this tale of how a bus upholsterer’s son becomes a respected and affluent maze designer” (162). By the time he enters his forties, Larry has abandoned his “dead end” job as a florist (Shields, *Larry’s* 83), has managed to turn his eccentric passion for hedge mazes into a stimulating and lucrative career, has found love with his second wife—a well-heeled academic named Beth—and would seem to exemplify the central insight of the progress novel, that “it’s better to be older than to be younger” (Gullette, *Safe* 5). But these achievements, while satisfying, are also deeply destabilizing for Larry, who at times feels that he has turned into a person his own parents would have difficulty recognizing. Larry’s ambivalence toward his “tuxedoed” midlife self resists the logic of the progress novel by drawing attention to how its imperative that he esteem this self as “better” than his previous selves might carry the risk of betraying or devaluing his origins (165). Responding to the charge that the progress narrative constitutes an ineluctably “bourgeois form of the life-course story ... available only to the powerful and privileged,” Gullette warns us to be “very cautious about denying the possibility of progress narrative to even the most disadvantaged” (*Age-wise* 156). In drawing attention to how Larry’s complicated class positioning accounts for his unease

with the notion that his life is a narrative of progress (or, indeed, that his life is any kind of narrative at all), I do not mean to deny the possibility of progress narrative to the only relatively disadvantaged Larry by implying that his tendency to gravitate toward non-narrative ways of conceptualizing his life is somehow an essential characteristic of his working-class origins. Rather, I suggest that the novel, in emphasizing how Larry's perspective as a newcomer to the affluent world prevents him from simply accepting its assumptions, insists on the situatedness of conceptions of midlife, such as the progress narrative, that are presented to him as natural and universal.

The idea that his life is a narrative is one that Larry encounters only after his entry into the leafy, "literate" upper-middle-class environment where he meets and marries Beth (123), but the novel refuses to align this idea with notions of progress or improvement, or to endorse it as the right or only way to conceptualize a life. Beth introduces this idea specifically as a cure for the depression that turning forty triggers in Larry and that he can only refer to as "it." Beth's attempts to draw Larry out into narrating his feelings are grounded in her belief that "'it' is like a novel with its ups and downs of plot, and anyone's life is just that: a story about the fate of a child" (168). Beth's perception of Larry's midlife anxiety as both "a chapter" and "a natural phase" of his life suggests her commitment to the notion that everyone has what McAdams calls "a personal myth, a special kind of story that each of us naturally constructs to bring together the different parts of ourselves" (12). Indeed, the fact that Larry can only describe his malaise with a single monosyllabic pronoun ("it") would seem to comport with the theory of the midlife crisis as a narrative crisis, a period whose "intense psychic pain" the middle-aged subject "cannot ... fully describe," signaling the breakdown of the ability to maintain a coherent life story (Rosenberg et al. 54).

Such a reading risks overlooking the way in which "Larry's struggle with life" has always, long before middle age, adopted "the form of a tussle with language" in which he consistently gravitates toward the single word, as opposed to the narrative sequence, during critical periods of change (Colville 89). In the chapter called "Larry's Words," we read about Larry at thirty-two,

feeling increasingly trapped in his “wordless” marriage to Dorrie (141), and sensing that his level of verbal proficiency stands lower on the “evolutionary staircase” than that of other people (82). Accordingly, he starts keeping a pocket dictionary underneath the counter at the flower shop where he works in the belief that he can better cope with his “present difficulties” by engaging with language, not by constructing a life story, but simply by “hang[ing] on to words ... separate words that sit all on their own” such as “cantankerous, irrepressible, magnanimous” (83). Dorrie’s resentment of Larry’s expanding vocabulary combines with her old grievance about the time and money he devotes to the maze he has planted in their yard, and she eventually hires a backhoe to destroy it. Larry experiences this act of aggression as “a pummeling of words against his body: *knowledge, pain, shame, emptiness, sorrow*, and, curiously, like rain falling on the other side of the city, that oxygen-laden word *relief*. A portion of what he knew was over. *The end*” (97, emphasis in original). While these words trace the contours of a story, a movement from suffering to relief that culminates in a definitive statement of narrative closure, it is nonetheless a story reduced to a series of isolated nouns, and thus signals Larry’s resistance to framing his life in narrative terms.

Midlife, then, rather than producing a rupture in a life story in need of repair, instead intensifies Larry’s already-established tendency to engage with language in non-narrative ways, as the single words we hear him utter become increasingly shorter and more oblique: “it,” “hmmmm” (298), “ouch” (322). Georgiana Colville reads Larry’s inclination toward such brief interjections in developmental terms, as evidence of something “incomplete” and “stunted” about him (89). For his part, Larry certainly maintains a sense of himself, along with the rest of his family, as “not quite grown-up folks, but more like a diagram—pop, mum, sis, bro—of what” a family ought to be (250). This list of truncated words, combined with the evocation of the “diagram” as a kind of crudely drawn, or at least simplified, visual image indicates not only Larry’s tendency to view his life in non-narrative ways but also the degree to which he has internalized the assumption that his alienation from the concept of narrative identity constitutes a deficiency. Colville’s interpretation of Larry’s

“inarticulate” nature (89) as a sign of his fundamental immaturity aligns with Erik Erikson’s assertion that “to be adult means ... to see one’s own life in continuous perspective, both in retrospect and in prospect,” that is, as a narrative sequence of events (112). However, as Paul John Eakin warns us, the assumption that “one must be in possession of a full and ‘explicit narrative [of one’s life] to develop fully as a person” risks denying the personhood of those who lack “narrative competence” (“Narrative Identity” 181-82). Eakin refers here to people affected by “various forms of memory loss and dementia” for whom failure to conform to expected models of “narrative self-presentation” can result in “institutional confinement” (182). Clearly, not as much is at stake for someone like Larry, who is merely unhabituated to, rather than incapable of, conceptualizing his life as a narrative, and whose unfamiliarity with this concept does not cause anyone to question his possession of a relatively “normal identity” (Eakin, “Narrative Identity” 182). Nevertheless, in exploring issues of narrative identity in the context of midlife, Shields’s text invites us to question the assumption that the absence of narrative signifies the absence of maturity and to recognize the role of the concept of narrative identity in defining who counts as an adult as well as in maintaining a hierarchy that values certain ways of perceiving one’s life over others.

There is a palpable power dynamic that characterizes Beth’s exhortations that Larry understand his life as a novel, a comparison she tends to deploy when trying to cajole him into accepting the inevitability of her way of understanding things. An example of this is the letter she writes as a follow-up to her announcement that she wants out of their marriage: “Darling Larry, all this will be easier for you if you think of life as a book each of us must write alone, and how, within that book, there are many chapters” (296). The letter is the novel’s clearest—albeit humorous—indictment of the therapeutic use of the life-as-narrative trope, as Larry perceives in Beth’s effort to leave him “carefully, tactfully, *psychologically*” (emphasis in original) her conviction that if he can be persuaded to understand his life as a novel, he will be better able to manage his pain (296). Carried away by “the transports of her own rhetoric,” Beth concludes: “Let’s you and me together, turn over our separate pages. And read

on!” (297). The devastating flatness of the subsequent narratorial aside—“Yes, well. What else was there to do?” (297)—highlights Larry’s sense of helplessness in the face of Beth’s extended metaphor of life-as-book, which is exposed as a form of coercion dressed up as an invitation to adventure. Beth’s belief that all lives are essentially narratives composed of separate chapters is revealed to be nothing but a convenient means for her to characterize the end of the marriage as a natural and mutually acknowledged inevitability rather than the result of her own unilateral decision. Skeptical of the controlling impulse behind Beth’s entreaties that he see his life as a story, Larry quietly asserts his resistance by locating his midlife subjectivity in a series of images that question the relentless forward and upward movement of the progress narrative.

### PICTURING MIDLIFE

Beth’s comparison of human lives to books in order to put a positive spin on the end of the marriage returns us to the scene where she makes the same comparison in order to jolly her husband out of the midlife sadness (“it”) that he resolutely does not want to be jollied out of. Sensing Beth’s desire that he be “burstingly confessional ... so that she can reverse the direction of his thoughts,” Larry refuses to comply, signaling his resistance to the “swiftly applied intellectual therapy” through which Beth intends to lead him to recovery by shaping his words toward her idea of a satisfactory narrative resolution for this “chapter” of his life (168). For his part, Larry does not imagine “it” as being anything like a novel:

When he wakes in the middle of the night, three o’clock, four o’clock, he is immediately alert to the presence of “it” in the room, so close he could reach out and take it in his hand and marvel at the faithfulness and constancy of an “it” that has chosen him and now resolutely hangs on. “It” has the size and hardness of a walnut, a woody, fibrous shell with a few raised ridges, and a sense of packed hollowness within. (168)

Appearing as it does in the chapter devoted to Larry’s “panic” about being forty, this inscrutable image suggests Larry’s anxious desire for reassurance of his own uniqueness in the face of a homogenizing cultural script of middle-aged

masculinity. If the midlife crisis can indeed be seen as a story, Larry's sense of being trapped within "the hackneyed parentheses of predictability" (165) indicates that it is not a particularly "good story," as certain scholars of midlife have suggested (Rosenberg et al. 51), but a bad one, "trite [and] trivial" (Shields, *Larry's* 166), and "dull" (164). By contrast, the imagined walnut comes as a bit of a surprise. There is no mention of walnuts anywhere else in the novel, and the question of why Shields has chosen this particular image as the embodiment of the enigma that is "it" implicates readers in Larry's puzzled groping toward understanding what he is feeling. For example, Wachtel would seem to have this scene in mind when she comments that this episode in Larry's life "feels like a mid-life crisis," but that in the end she "couldn't really get a grip on what it [is]" (Shields, "The Arc" 84). Cast in the language of touch ("feels," "grip"), Wachtel's interpretive struggles highlight qualities of the walnut image itself—its materiality, its tactility—that differentiate it from the narrative metaphors through which Beth encourages Larry to view his life. Shields's evocation of the imaginary walnut's size and texture invites readers to speculate not only about how it feels to the touch but also what it looks like, and thus connects it to all those moments in the text when Larry thinks of his life in visual terms. The image characterizes Larry's midlife confusion not as part of a story to be continued but rather as a kind of presence to be dwelt with, touched, pictured, and pondered.

In its self-enclosed singularity, its resolutely non-verbal quality, and its isolation from the flow of narrative, the walnut image hearkens back to Charise's exploration of ways of imaging the aging subject that are characterized by silence and stasis. Shields's text problematizes its own novelistic depiction of Larry's life by inviting readers to engage with an image that "playfully defies the impulse" to situate it within a sequential narrative (Charise 157). Shields's interest in exploring the possibilities of the "aesthetics ... of living stillness" (160) that Charise associates with the form of the tableau vivant comes across even more clearly in a later chapter where we learn for the first time of Larry's ability, at the age of forty-two, "to assume and maintain ... a physical position of rare stillness ... for an hour or more without twitching or scratching,

composing his limbs so that he becomes a benign, amiable statue” (205). For Charise, texts (both visual and verbal) that emphasize the body’s aging as “an individuated, static state” enable a form of resistance to the “gravitational pull of decline” that is so prevalent in cultural imaginings of older age generally, as well as to the “ingrained impotence plot endemic to representations of male aging” specifically (169). The vaguely testicular image of the singular walnut evokes the humiliations of impotence and bodily deterioration that Larry does experience and that are minutely documented in the chapter “Larry’s Living Tissues.” At the same time, his midlife encounters with and embodiments of stillness offer momentary respites from the logic of progress that has dominated discussion of midlife fiction, the imperative that he understand his aging into midlife as a dynamic process of improvement, one that would possibly require him to devalue his origins and his past selves.

Shields’s text keeps those origins firmly in view as it explores representations of midlife that incorporate the fixity of the single image, describing and implicitly inviting readers to picture the cards that Larry receives for his fortieth birthday from various family members and old friends. By evoking a type of popular cultural artifact—the birthday card—that, as S.R. Ellis and T.G. Morrison have shown, often traffics in stereotypes, particularly about growing older, the novel can be seen to test the limits of what the static image can contribute toward the representational vocabulary of later life. As visual media that emphasize stillness over the temporal progression of narrative, these cards do not uniformly reflect Larry’s age to him in ways that are straightforwardly consoling or constructive. For example, the card from his mother features a “richly coloured montage of armchair, pipe, highball glass, and Irish setter” (Shields, *Larry’s* 172). The image on the card is a kind of generic still-life of complacent midlife masculinity whose general aura of affluence is similar enough to Larry’s own circumstances to reinforce his depression and shame at having “done well” (163). However, in its particular details, it is sufficiently off the mark to make him wonder “how [his mother] imagines his life” and to emphasize the gulf that his professional success has opened up between them (172).



The alienating banality of the card from Larry's mother is intensified by comparison with the set of "subtly marbled postcards" that his old friend Lucy has "made herself" (172). Yet, by showing us not just the cards but also some of the context in which they are given and received, Shields's text invites us to recognize the complex ways in which even the mass-produced cards assist in Larry's efforts at picturing his place in middle age. In "Packaged Sentiments: The Social Meanings of Greeting Cards," Alexandra Jaffe encourages us to look beyond the "reproducible, generic, alienable" qualities of the greeting card, to recognize "the ways in which card buying, sending, and reading" can be seen as sites of social interaction (122). Shields's fictional representations highlight the ambiguities of the birthday card's "hybrid ... status" as both commodity and gift (Jaffe 120), characterizing these unassuming bits of print ephemera as complex amalgams of visual and verbal, generic and personal elements that offer Larry a way of thinking through his aging in other than the purely narrative terms that Beth suggests. For example, Larry's mother signs her card with a handwritten message—"Take it from me, life really does begin at forty!"—that is at once intensely personal and utterly generic, referencing as it does the title of Walter Pitkin's 1932 best-seller (172). Written in his mother's "near-illegible hand," the almost-unreadability of this statement situates it on the very border between linguistic expression and visual image and conveys the vivid physical presence (the "hand") of the person who wrote it. The birthday card's ability to register the insistent physicality of the hands that touch it comes across even more clearly in the card that Larry receives from Dorrie, which features "a curling wreath of dark greenery with a raised number 40 in the middle" (173). Evoking the textural effects of much greeting-card art, the number that protrudes above the card's flat surface echoes the "raised ridges" on the shell of Larry's imagined walnut and answers his need to imagine the life course and his place in "the middle" of it in tactile and visual terms rather than as a narrative. Looking at Dorrie's signature on the card, Larry is "startled to see that he had forgotten what her handwriting looked like" (173). As an object that not only invites his touch but also startles him, evoking a somatic response, the card is a hybrid text that speaks to Larry's midlife troubles, emphasizing an

embodiment that would seem to be missing from Beth's identification of selfhood with storytelling and her expectation that the key to his recovery lies in piecing together a life narrative.

The perceived "absence of the body in traditional autobiography" (Eakin, *How* 36) is, of course, a perennial concern for Shields in her fictional engagements with life writing. Lisa Johnson comments on the "tactile aesthetic" that Shields develops in *The Stone Diaries* as the stylistic means by which she "moves narrative toward embodiment," seeking to "reunify consciousness with our living, breathing forms" (208). In *Larry's Party*, too, "words become things with edges and flavours" (Johnson 208). In yet another example of his affinity for one-word phrases, Larry feels quite literally struck by the word "affectionately" with which Dorrie closes her brief message on his card, "an after-dinner mint of a word" that "smack[s] his heart" (173). Significantly, though, with Dorrie's card and its "raised number 40 in the middle," the only instance where the novel prints Larry's age as a numeral rather than a word, Shields playfully extends this tactile aesthetic beyond words to incorporate the numbers that, as Howard Chudacoff has shown, have become ubiquitous on birthday cards, symptoms of the age consciousness that pervades contemporary culture, and that are also part of Larry's attempts to explore non-narrative ways of imagining his life (Chudacoff 132-37).

Drawing upon Mary Poovey's characterization of numbers as "the last frontier of representation," Mary Favret considers how the numbers of biography—chronological ages, dates of birth and death, and so on—can themselves sometimes stand in for the absence of "story, history," creating a "distinct language of time" in which a life might be counted rather than narrated (9). In an example of the "enumeration" that Marta Dvorak regards as Shields's "trademark rhetorical device" (5, par. 18), Larry seeks solace during his midlife bouts of insomnia by "try[ing] to visualize his life," and a "grid rises up in his mind" upon which he plots his life in numbers, counting his parents, his wives, his sibling, his child; the countries, cities, houses, and apartments he has lived in; the cars he has owned, and so on (169-70). As a visual image associated with numbers rather than words, the grid is yet another example of Larry's habitual

impulse to conceptualize his life outside the framework of narrative. However, he ultimately finds this “counting game” difficult to sustain, possibly because the numbers begin to lose their appearance of objective neutrality and his tallying begins to resemble a narrative of accumulation and upward mobility, detailing as it does the transition from a “semi-new Toyota” to a “silver Audi,” and from a tiny “fixer-upper” property in Winnipeg to a commodious “heritage house” in Oak Park, Illinois (163). If Larry has turned to numbers in midlife to contemplate “unutterable” matters for which he “cannot or cannot bear to find words” (Favret 14), his mental accounting soon peters out, the imagined grid becoming “oddly disassociated, as though its configuration originated in a dream” (169). While this faltering might seem to suggest that Larry would be better off trying to understand his life in narrative rather than visual or numerical terms, it is ultimately a number that brings his “age forty trembles” (163) to an end (just as a number initiated them in the first place) with the “dazzling thought” that “by August he will be forty-one!”: “No longer forty, with forty’s clumsy, abject round shoulders and sting of regret, but forty-one! A decent age, a mild, assured, wise and good-hearted manly age” (181). Like the cards Larry receives from his old friend Lucy—one of them inscribed with the single word “Onward!”—this moment in the novel locates midlife equanimity in simple numerical sequence rather than a narrative of teleological progress toward the particular goal of a “better” self (172). Ending her chapter on Larry’s “midlife crisis” with this comforting realization, Shields makes visible the yearly increments that are elided when the life course is reduced to a series of decades and shows Larry happily paused in an isolated moment when the next anxiety-inducing “0” year seems reassuringly far away.

### **STUCK IN THE MIDDLE: STILLNESS AND SADNESS AT MIDLIFE**

The sense of well-being and “safe[ty]” that Larry derives from the thought of turning forty-one stands in marked contrast to the sadness that is the dominant emotional register of his existence at forty. In devoting an entire chapter to the emotional disequilibrium that attends Larry’s transition into the next decade of his life, Shields revisits territory that she had already explored in

chapter seven (entitled “Sorrow”) of *The Stone Diaries*, wherein Daisy, on the cusp of turning sixty, suffers what is variously termed a “profound depression” (229), “the blues” (240), and “a nervous breakdown” (251). Like Larry’s, Daisy’s sorrow remains somewhat resistant to other characters’ attempts to account for its cause and is brought to a rather abrupt end, in Daisy’s case with the realization that she is simply “tired of being sad” (261). While both texts investigate connections between middle age and various forms of negative affect, in Daisy’s case, these feelings include not only “dejection” (229) and “unhappiness” (261) but also “anger” (229) and “rage” (251, 252). By contrast, the emotional range that Larry exhibits at midlife is narrower and more pointedly restricted to sadness. If Larry’s attempts to conceptualize his life in terms of static and singular images represent a middle age that avoids a narrative emphasis on temporal progression, I would like to conclude by exploring the significance of his sadness as the affective dimension of this aspect of the novel and an integral part of its interrogation of the socioeconomic and political underpinnings of the progress narrative.

Larry’s sense of himself at forty as “a sad man ... without the sad history to back it up” isolates his sadness as something that cannot be accounted for through a narrative logic of cause and effect (164) and highlights the political implications of the novel’s conjunction of sadness and stillness. For Ann Cvetkovich, the sense of “being stuck” that often accompanies feelings of sadness can resist the imperative to be always moving forward, characteristic of the culture of neoliberalism (17). Cvetkovich’s characterization of sadness as an “impasse,” a “dead end” (20) is felicitously congruent with the labyrinths of *Larry’s Party* and her sense of the importance of “remaining or resting in sadness without insisting that it be transformed or reconceived” offers a way of seeing in Larry’s reluctance to let go of his midlife despondency an intuitive questioning of the cultural pressure to conceptualize his life as a dynamic process of upward movement (14).

Scholars in the field of age studies have already shown themselves willing to, in Cvetkovich’s terms, “tarry” with emotions customarily regarded as negative in exploring the connections between aging and feeling (3). In “Against

Wisdom,” Kathleen Woodward argues for the “possible galvanizing effects of anger for stimulating personal and social change” in a culture that expects older people to adhere instead to an emotional standard of quietistic wisdom that ultimately contributes to their marginalization (187). In the face of such an argument, it feels rather heretical to insist on the importance of sadness, whose associations with “apathy and indifference” have made it the object of some suspicion in age studies (Cvetkovich 2). For example, Heath elevates ire over sadness when she sets Woodward’s celebration of “wise anger” in old age against Nora Ephron’s statement, in her popular book of essays on aging, *I Feel Bad About My Neck*, that “it’s sad to be over sixty” (200-01). While I take Heath’s point about the necessity for militating against the myriad ways in which contemporary culture marginalizes older people, I also wonder about her dismissal of sadness as a necessarily “self-loathing” and “solipsistic” feeling in later life (202). When Ephron says she is sad to be over sixty, she is not in fact talking about the state of her neck but about the number of her friends who are “dying and battling illness,” a situation in which sadness seems, to me, an entirely appropriate and understandable response (128). I wonder about the extent to which the commitment in age studies, particularly the study of midlife, to challenging decline ideology might have the effect of silencing forms of affect that do not appear to contribute much to this important work but are nonetheless deeply felt. In the privileging of anger at ageism as not only “saner, healthier, and happier” but also “more productive” than sadness at aging (Heath 201-02), I cannot help hearing an echo of the “neoliberal and market-based conceptions of the self that turn on productivity as a sign of one’s identity” and that contribute to the perpetuation of ageism in the first place (Cvetkovich 113). Recognition of the ways in which sadness, too, can be political enables us to acknowledge sadness at midlife as something that does not necessarily reinforce decline ideology but potentially provides a place of stillness from which to question the cultural valorization of productivity and progress and how it continues to shape our assumptions about what it means to grow older.

Shields’s novel ultimately neither fully celebrates nor fully condemns Larry’s midlife sadness but, instead, represents it with an ambivalence that invites

readers to be wary of its risks while listening to what it has to say. The narratorial aside that “what he [Larry] needs is a good slap on the ear” characterizes his sadness as merely the self-indulgence of a man too privileged to be allowed to harbor any sorrowful feelings on his own behalf (164). At the same time, in the words “sad” and “sadness” that toll like bells throughout Shields’s representation of Larry’s midlife, we might hear an etymological history that encompasses concepts of steadfastness, seriousness, and, yes, wisdom through which Larry could be encouraged to recover his dignity and reframe his situation in more constructive terms according to the ancient concept of middle age as the “prime of life” (Heath 1). Yet, this reading perhaps all too closely resembles the kind of “intellectual therapy” through which Beth (a medievalist and no stranger to etymological nuance) might seek to convert Larry’s sorrow into something more “productive,” and this should give us pause. Cvetkovich draws a distinction between theoretical terms such as “melancholy” and the more vernacular “sadness”; Shields’s insistence on using the latter, as opposed to the more clinical words such as “depression” and “anxiety” through which midlife is often framed, indicates something that ought to be inhabited and contemplated rather than treated and overcome by therapeutic means (Cvetkovich 117). In Larry’s sadness that has no history, and that can neither be accounted for nor resolved through storytelling, Shields’s text probes the limits of the relationship between aging and narrative and recognizes the importance of seeing and feeling—in addition to telling—midlife as something other than a story of progress.

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