

Article

A Creative Writing Workshop on Sexuality and Ageing: A Spanish Pilot Case Study

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Abstract: Negative stereotypes about old age abound in our present-day society, which often considers older people as sexually incapable or even asexual. On the other hand, active ageing ideologies foster the practice of sex in later life as a sign of healthy and active ageing. The aim of this pilot case study was to examine the impact that poetry on sexuality, ageing and creativity had on older individuals. In total eight participants, aged 49–76, participated in a workshop offered by the University of Lleida (Spain). The initial hypothesis was that the participants, following the example set by the poems, would produce pieces of creative writing in which they voiced their own concerns and experiences about sexuality in later life from the distance that metaphor grants. While some of the participants' writings engaged with the poems that deal with sexuality in older age, none of the participants' creative pieces contained explicit instances of sexual experiences. The analysis of the participants' creative pieces suggests that: first, they regard intimacy in older age as essential; and second, their unwillingness to write about sexuality in older age is partly rooted in their upbringing during Franco's dictatorial regime, in which sexuality for non-reproductive aims was constructed as immoral.

Keywords: ageing; older adults; intimacy; creativity; strict morality; sexuality

1. Introduction

Negative stereotypes about old age abound in our present-day society, which tends to value youth and beauty and consider older people as sexually incapable or even asexual. On the opposite side of the spectrum, active ageing ideologies, such as the model of successful ageing, foster the practice of sex as a sign of a healthy and successful older age [1–5]. An emerging interest in sex in later life is related to shifting understandings of the process of ageing itself in which older people are perceived as old and sexually incapable at a much later point in their lives in comparison to prior decades. As Waxman notes, “we seem more able to accept with enthusiasm the idea of sexual activity and pleasure among old people” [6] (p. 103). Research findings show that getting older does not imply the loss of interest in sex, romance, intimate touch or emotional contact, all of which continue to be significant and necessary aspects of human lives [3,7–9]. Actually, as people grow older, they have more time to spend together, get closer to each other and develop a greater sense of emotional stability, shared intimacy and mutual understanding [10]. As a matter of fact, sexually-active aged individuals report that they practise sex not because it benefits their health, as highlighted in the medicalised discourse on successful ageing, but because of mere pleasure, personal fulfilment and even a sense of spirituality [3,8,11]. Research literature also reveals that sex for ageing people may be seen as a new awakening that brings greater intensity to sexual experiences and less urgency to enjoy them [3,8].

The studies on female sexuality in later life highlight that there is a higher degree of sexual confidence in older women because they have better knowledge of their sexual needs and bodily

stimulations based on previous sexual experiences—they already know how they want to be stimulated to be aroused [11]. According to Sandberg, some post/menopausal women do not regard ageing as a stage of loss and debilitation of their functions and capacities, but as a continuous “process of becoming in which the body is set” [3] (p. 19). Today, an older woman often appears as an experienced and self-confident person who knows that growing old does not limit sexual expressions, but, on the contrary, may grant new possibilities to experiment with sex, thus undoing the narrative of decline [12]. Likewise, studies show that older men also focus less on the phallus and place more emphasis on lovemaking, foreplay and the whole sexual intercourse [3,9]. That is, their sense of the connection between sex and emotion increases with age and many older men give more importance to intimacy, closeness and touch with their partners than to genital stimulation [3,8,9].

Although the focus on sex in later life has rendered older individuals more visible and challenged the association of older age as a stage of asexuality, it has also created new pressures to conform to the normative ideals of successful ageing. Many older adults express no interest in sexual activities and romantic relationships and prefer to remain invisible, which is especially relevant to older women. Germaine Greer, Carolyn Heilbrun and other pioneering feminist scholars have extensively written about older age and the cessation of menses as a liberating stage in life from the risk of getting pregnant and the male gaze, imbued with sexual desire. According to them, reaching older age is a turning point in a woman’s life because it coincides with the onset of menopause and, thus, the end of the reproductive life course. As Greer states, a post/menopausal woman embodies invisibility and freedom from sexual objectification, which allows her to get closer to her inner being and her true self. Greer calls this stage the autumn of a woman’s life that is “long, golden, milder and warmer than summer, and is the most productive season of the year” [13] (p. 142). To Greer, the advent of menopause can be perceived as a relief to those women who were not sexually active in earlier stages in life and show no interest in sex as they grow older. Similarly, Heilbrun celebrates the midlife’s invisibility for women and calls it the “magic circle of invisibility” that leads “the land of new accomplishment and new passion” [14] (p. 27).

As a pilot study based on the results obtained from a creative writing workshop, this article provides a preliminary answer to the complexities of sexuality, intimacy, creativity and older age in the Spanish context. It looks into how two contradictory views on sexuality and ageing—that of the narrative of decline and successful ageing discourse—affect older individuals’ own opinions on sex and sexuality. It also shows how the strict moral codes enforced by Franco’s dictatorial regime impact on the participants’ experiences of sexuality throughout their life course from the lens of literary gerontology.

2. Literary Gerontology and Creative Writing

Due to an increased interest in gerontological studies in the last few decades, alternative approaches to older age and life experiences have become more visible in the field of ageing through the emergence of literary gerontology [6,15,16]. Literary gerontology constitutes a multi-dimensional field of research for the analysis of more internal and personalized experiences of growing old, which also allows a deeper insight into the sexual lives of older people [6,15,16]. In this line of thought, creative writing workshops and poetry workshops in particular are often used by “pracademics” not only of social, but also of medical sciences in order to foster the well-being of the older people and to have a better understanding of their ageing experiences. From a medical point of view, the reading, writing and sharing of poetry is being used as a therapy with older adults who suffer from dementia or who have gone through strong traumas, such as cancer [16,17]. From a social sciences point of view, a number of poetry workshops have been conducted in nursing homes and senior clubs in the USA and in Europe [18–21]. They were aimed at recording the life stories of the older participants in order to pass on their accumulated knowledge and experience to younger generations, to prevent cognitive decline by means of following an active ageing activity, and to foster the creativity of physically infirm older people living in nursing homes. In this case, the participants’ highly positive emotional

responses lead to a sense of fulfilment and an improvement in their sense of well-being. Finally, poetry workshops have also served the purpose of creating a sense of community among older widows living in rural areas, which has helped them to overcome possible feelings of loneliness and identity crisis. In both medical and social science cases, the literature available concludes that poetry workshops are highly beneficial for both the health and the psychological and social dimensions of older adults. Moreover, creative poetry workshops are in line with social innovation, solidarity and empathy as they help stimulate intellectual fitness and cognitive capacities and create age-friendly and better-socially adapted environments. Such types of activities can be integrated into extracurricular agendas to promote intergenerational dialogues with university students and to make ageing people not objects of study, but active subjects of research whose voices, opinions and contributions are being taken into consideration. Regarding the latter, the present article is in line with Vicente Rodríguez-Rodríguez and colleagues' study [22], which examined the view of active ageing that older adults have in Spain. In this sense, Rodríguez-Rodríguez and colleagues' article empowered senior citizens' own opinions about ageing. The present study follows the same line of thought, but with sexuality in late adulthood as the main research aim.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Participants and Recruitment

The poetry workshop on sexuality and creativity in older age was advertised to different groups of senior citizens and university students who participate in activities organized by the City Hall of Lleida and the University of Lleida (UdL). The workshop was offered by UdL Life-Long Learning centre's programme Aula Oberta (Open Classroom), which offers elective courses for both UdL students and members of the general public from age 18 onwards. A total of eight participants (aged 49–76), five women and three men, joined the course. All the participants were white, Spanish and belonged to the middle class. Most of the participants had university studies and were either studying the Senior Degree at the University of Lleida or had participated in creative writing workshops at the moment at which the course was conducted.

3.2. Materials and Procedure

The course lasted for eight hours, distributed into three different sessions that took place between the months of November and December in 2018. On the first and second sessions, the participants were introduced into the topics of ageing and sexuality. Later, they read and discussed four poems by two well-known contemporary older women writers, namely Erica Jong and Lorna Crozier. These particular poets were chosen because they are representatives of the baby-boom generation and they explore the complexities of ageing, creativity and sexuality in their works, as has been examined by the leaders and organizers of the workshop in their respective doctoral dissertations. The aim of introducing the topic of sexuality in late middle age and young-older age through literature was to provide examples of openness towards such a topic so that the participants found it easier to write their own creative pieces about sexuality and ageing.

Erica Jong, one of the key figures of the Second Wave Women's Liberation Movement and an outstanding figure in contemporary American literature, is best known for her 1973 novel *Fear of Flying*, in which she openly explored female sexuality and erotic wit. Passed her midlife, she continues to write openly about female sexuality and reveals that the ageing process does not diminish women's sexual desire; on the contrary, it continues to be present in the lives of older women. In a similar vein, the accomplished and highly praised Canadian author Lorna Crozier gained popularity with the publication of the humorous and irreverent series of erotic poems entitled "The Sex Lives of Vegetables," contained in the 1985 collection *The Garden Going on Without Us* [23]. Currently in her early seventies, Crozier continues to write unabashedly about sex from a young-old woman's perspective.

Whereas the name Erica Jong sounded familiar to most of the participants because of her ground-breaking book, which the participants knew in its Spanish translation, namely *Miedo a volar*, none of the participants had heard about either Lorna Crozier or her works before. This met the course instructors' prior expectations, both because poetry usually has a smaller readership than novels and because Jong's works have become best-sellers while this has not been the case with Crozier's poetry collections despite the many prestigious prizes Crozier has been awarded for her works.

The four poems were translated into Catalan; translation was done in order to facilitate the workshop, especially considering that the older generation did not study English but rather French at school or university. The poems discussed from Erica Jong were "Middle Aged Lovers, II" and "Beast, Book, Body" from her collection *Becoming Light* (1991) [24]. From Lorna Crozier, the poems were "Getting Used to It" and "My Last Erotic Poem" from *Small Mechanics* (2011) [25], all of which deal with intimacy, love and sexuality in late middle-age and young-older age. The reading of the poems was followed by an open class discussion. Finally, the focus group members were encouraged to free write their own experiences and/or opinions regarding sexuality in the form of a poem (although all genres were welcome), since the use of metaphor allows for a more subtle and less intimidating way of expressing oneself. After concluding the creative writing exercise, the participants were asked to produce a creative piece of writing at home that dealt with sexuality, relationships and the ageing process. The aim was to observe the impact that reading and discussing poetry about sexuality in late adulthood would have on the participants. Our hypothesis was that they would feel at ease to produce pieces of creative writing in which they voiced their own concerns and experiences, albeit metaphorically, about sexuality in later life. These pieces of writing were handed in on the last session to the course instructors and read aloud individually by each of the participants in class at the participants' own request. The reading of the creative writing pieces was followed by an open discussion and the exchange of viewpoints about intimacy, sexuality, social realities and later life. An educational psychologist with ample experience leading discussion groups about sexuality joined the group discussion as a group leader. The reason was to ensure that any emotionally challenging experiences the participants might have recounted were addressed, if necessary, from a psychological point of view. The following sections describe and analyse the findings of this study and show the recurrent patterns that have been identified via the process of data analysis. Specifically, the organizers and leaders of the workshop read each of the participants' texts and analysed them individually both in terms of the recurrent thematic patterns and the choice of words. Subsequently, they met on several occasions in order to share and discuss their respective findings. The consent of all participants was obtained before the study, which was conducted in accordance with the protocol approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Lleida (El Comité de Ética de Investigación del Hospital Universitario Arnau de Vilanova de Lleida de la Gerencia Territorial ICS Lleida, Alt Pirineu i Aran—GSS) and Good Clinical Practice (GCP) standards (CHM9/ICH/135/95).

4. Discussion

Of the eight pieces of writing we received, one was an intergenerational dialogue on sexuality and intimacy in a family context with older parents; three were short stories and four were essays, all of which dealt with love, intimacy and sexuality throughout the life course. The pieces were of different lengths, ranging from half a page to three pages long (see Table 1). One of the short stories, produced by the youngest female participant, was not centred on the topic of ageing, sexuality or love; therefore, it was discarded. Participant names have been changed in order to protect their anonymity.

Table 1. Participant Data.

Gender	Participant's Name	Age	Type of Narrative
Female	María	51	Intergenerational dialogue
Female	Tania	49	Short story
Female	Gracia	69	Short story
Male	Oscar	71	Short story
Female	Remedios	73	Essay
Female	Elena	59	Essay
Male	Julio	76	Essay
Male	Pedro	67	Essay

4.1. Analysis of the Selected Poems

Jong and Crozier's poems deal with love, intimacy and sexuality in middle and later life. In particular, the chosen poems are concerned with depicting both the advantages and disadvantages of love relationships in later life. Therefore, they do not favour any specific discourses on sexuality. Accordingly, these poems are regarded as a suitable point of departure to engage in discussions about intimacy, ageing and sexuality. The first two poems presented and read aloud in Catalan were Erica Jong's "Middle Aged Lovers, II" and "Beast, Book, Body". Both of them not only empower the female persona, but also provide room for male sensitivity. The poem "Middle Aged Lovers, II" is written from a woman's perspective who is sexually active but who does not necessarily need a man to provide for her sexual needs, as suggested by the lines: "I think I am free/of fears, /enraptured, abandoned/to the call/of the Bacchae, /my own siren, /tied to my own/mast, /both Circe/and her swine." (ll. pp. 11–20) Erica Jong depicts a strong woman who instils hope and self-confidence in a man, even if "[she] too [is] afraid" (ll. pp. 21–22). The focus of "Middle Aged Lovers, II" on a middle-aged couple who overcome both their fears of ageing and their traumatic past marital experiences to start a new love relationship encourages individuals to make the most of second opportunities of love at any age. In a similar vein, "Beast, Book, Body" depicts a successful love relationship formed in late adulthood. In her poems, Jong shows that the process of growing old is not shrouded in the mist of losses and asexuality, as seen through the lens of the narrative of decline, but reveals that sexual urges continue to be as important as they were in previous stages of life.

The third poem read in the workshop was "Getting Used to It" by Lorna Crozier. It incorporates two new themes, namely both a feeling of being lonely and that of being alone in older widows as well as the experience of love making in a long-lasting relationship. "Getting Used to It" presents a common situation in our days, in which many daughters, because of better job opportunities, decide to live away from their older mothers and cannot always afford to visit, even for New Year's Eve. The older mother seems to reluctantly accept the situation despite her feelings of solitude. However, the middle-aged daughter feels terribly frustrated and is not willing to accept a future older age marked by isolation and loneliness. In fact, she does not perceive seniority as being very distant in time, as she asserts that "[their] bodies/old, now [are] one year older" (ll. 14–15). In the end, she is partially comforted by making love to her partner. The knowledge she has acquired of her partner's erogenous zones throughout the years makes her feel reassured to expect a continuation of such tender lovemaking in their older age. Finally, the fourth poem that was read and discussed was Crozier's "My Last Erotic Poem," which uses humour to demystify the decline narrative of asexuality in later life: "Who wants to hear about/two old farts getting it on/in the back seat of a Buick/ . . . /Who wants to hear about two old lovers/slapping together like water hitting mud" (ll. 1–3, 11–12). The language employed in these lines is purposefully coarse in order to make fun of the common social perception of sex in older age as something grotesque and disgusting. The poem certainly affirms sexuality in older age, as the following lines suggest: "Who wants to know when we get it going/we're revved up, like the first time—honest—/like the first time, if only we could remember it/our old bodies doing what you know/bodies do, worn and beautiful and shameless" (ll. 25–29). Nonetheless, the poem

does not constitute a prescription of sex-making in order to lead an active lifestyle in later life: “Face it, /some nights we’d rather eat a Häagen-Dazs ice cream bar/or watch a movie starring Nick Nolte who looks worse than us./Some nights we’d rather stroke the cats” (ll. 21–24). In its stead, “My Last Erotic Poem” presents sexuality in a long-standing relationship as an activity to share love and pleasure with one’s partner, alongside watching films or petting the cats; in other words, it normalizes sexuality in older age.

The participants showed both interest and positive reactions to Jong and Crozier’s poems, which led to open group discussions and interpretations of these writings. Such discussions also functioned as a trigger to lead the participants into the writing of their own creative pieces on sexuality and intimacy. The participants’ increased interest in the close analysis of the poems and their willingness to produce their own pieces also show how literature has an impact on our perceptions and interpretations of the relation between sexuality and age. Likewise, literature helps generate further discussion on ageing and sexuality as well as the exchange of opinions and life experiences on this topic. As Falcus states, “telling and reading stories of age does open up debate and embrace complexity, and may challenge our ways of thinking” [26] (p. 53). The power of a literary narrative of growing older also helps to better understand what ageing means in different cultural contexts and historical periods [26]. A close analysis of the participants’ personal writings reveals some shared beliefs regarding their views on sexuality, intimacy and ageing in the Spanish socio-historical context, as explained in detail below.

4.2. Analysis of the Participants’ Creative Pieces

One recurring pattern in the participants’ writings is vague references to sex and sexuality. The majority of the participants did not dare describe or write about sexual scenes, unlike the more sexually explicit poems we had previously discussed by Jong and Crozier. In their stead, they seemed to shelter their thoughts on sexuality and sex in the descriptive analysis of love, intimacy and relationships throughout one’s lifespan. That is to say that the participants tended to describe sexuality within marriage. This is not an uncommon finding, as suggested by both research on sexuality and ageing [27–30] and traditional understandings of sexuality in the Spanish context as enforced by the strict religious and moral codes dominant until the end of Franco’s regime in 1975. However, it is salient that none of the younger participants discussed sexuality outside marriage. On the other hand, both 69-year-old Gracia and 71-year-old Oscar described sexual encounters outside marriage, albeit Gracia’s piece described an imaginary infidelity and Oscar’s text insinuated the loss of virginity of a young-adult male, thus avoiding any reference to older age and sexuality. This apparent contradiction bespeaks the heterogeneity of the ageing process and the need to avoid assumptions about older age which might be ultimately ageist.

4.2.1. Sexuality throughout the Life-Course

One of the male participants, Julio, aged 76, not only described the stages of life, but he also provided different definitions of love such as self-love, parental love, platonic love and sexual love among others. Julio’s description of sexuality, as framed solely within a love relationship, came after two and a half pages in which all possible types of love had been described. His depiction of sexual love consisted of a nine-line text, which showed as minimal if compared to the one-page-long description of marital love. Despite the brevity of his description of sexual love, according to him, it is the supporting element that helps to maintain a relationship. In addition, Julio clearly stated that sexual imagination does not diminish with age; on the contrary, it can even increase in later years. In a similar vein, Pedro claimed that individuals gain experience with ageing into older age which enhances the way individuals perceive love and sexuality. Moreover, the reader of Julio’s text was also encouraged to work out his/her mental creativity in order to enhance the joys of sexuality, which, according to Julio, should be compared to an intelligent cocktail of sensations and nuances instead of regarding it as a mechanic relief of instinctive impulses. Findings in sexual research in the context of the United States are in line with both Julio’s and Pedro’s claims. As Miriam Forbes, Nicholas Eaton and Robert Krueger state,

“aging can be associated with the acquisition of skills and strategies that can buffer age-related declines in sexual quality of life, particularly in the context of a positive sexual relationship” [31] (p. 137).

Julio’s text is also salient because he was also the only participant to connect sexuality with reproduction, although he did not expand on it. The participants did not engage with feminist notions of the climacteric as liberation from the male gaze in its sexualisation of the female body and in its relationship with reproduction; nor did their texts “allow[ed] women new choices and identities [that the] entrance into a degendered phase of life” may incorporate [32] (p. 400).

Another female participant, Remedios, aged 73, explained different stages of love throughout one’s lifespan in her writing. To her, youthful love makes us stupid, yet we are happy fools. As time goes by, people start to become more critical about love and the person they are in love with. In later years, according to Remedios, love becomes an expression of companionship, confidence and the sharing of experiences and thoughts.

Other participants also affirmed that love and sex are important elements in a person’s life. However, they also observed that sexual urges decrease when people grow older. Nevertheless, according to research on sexuality, age is only one factor—alongside attitudes towards sex, education, illnesses and medication among others—that affects sexual desire in later life [27,33]. Many of the participants attributed sex to the overall physical and emotional health of an individual. According to some of them, love does not have age, whereas sex does. In fact, the majority of the participants structured their pieces of writing by describing different life stages: youth, adulthood and later life. We interpret this need to first refer to love and sexuality in youth and adulthood before reaching the topic of sexuality in older age as a sexual life review of sorts. In such sexual life reviews of sorts, sex and sexuality were mainly attributed to youth and young adults, whereas the later stages of life were characterized by an increased sense of friendship between partners, emotional stability, self-knowledge and self-transformation. Sexuality was not non-existent; in fact, the majority of the participants implicitly or explicitly referred to a sense of transition or transformation of sexual desire and sexuality.

Likewise, Stončikaitė’s [8] study on ageing and sexuality as reflected in Erica Jong’s middle and later works reveals the writer’s changed vision towards sex, which becomes less phallus-centred and more focused on emotional closeness and mutual understanding between the partners. This sort of connection becomes more intensified in later life as the partners discover alternative forms of intimacy, which leads them to both sexual and inner transformations [8]. In Jong’s later works, therefore, ageing is not seen as a sign of frailty or the narrative of decline, but rather a rediscovery of new bodily sensations that strengthen intimate relationships and grant more self-confidence [8]. Similar findings have also been found consistently in qualitative research on the topic of sex in the lives of older adults, which reveal that, as people grow older, intimacy becomes more meaningful and fulfilling. Older adults report more satisfactory relationships because of an increased sense of intimacy, emotional closeness and openness to each other [8,27,34,35].

4.2.2. The Spanish Socio-Cultural and Historical Context

The participants’ cultural background hindered their openness to write about sexual activity and sexuality. Both directly and indirectly, they made references to a social and political environment based on the strict Catholic worldview regarding sexuality and sexual expressions. During the sessions, the participants confessed that their upbringing and sexual education had been greatly influenced by Franco’s dictatorship (1939–1975). The ruling elements of such a dictatorial regime were censorship and the power of the Catholic Church. As a result, sexual education was simply non-existent and the topic of sex, especially female sexuality, was completely censored. Namely, Franco’s Regime promoted a model of femininity based on passivity in which sexuality became a private matter reduced to the home sphere [36]. Actually, the female body was seen as a contaminated and sinful element: a woman was not the owner of her body but rather an object owned by her husband. Wives in Franco’s times were thus expected to please their husbands and be submissive [36]. However, the strict moral codes enforced by the Catholic Church also implied that certain sexual practices, such as “oral

and anal sex” were considered “illicit” for women [37] (p. 433). As a result, many married men resorted to prostitution in order to free themselves from the inhibition resulting from such strict moral codes [36]. The mass tourism of the late 1960s and 1970s and the arrival of foreign visitors from Sweden, Germany and France, who suntanned in the Spanish coastline, also had a great impact on Spanish men and offered a new outlet for their repressed sexuality [38].

Only a few students decided to narrowly depict and carefully voice out some scenes that portray sexual acts. Besides the effects of the strict moral codes prevalent throughout Franco’s dictatorial regime (albeit they gradually became more blurred since the 1960s), the participants’ reluctance to produce creative pieces about sexual activity in older age may also be related to their willingness to conform to social expectations or even asexuality in later life. In other words, the participants may fear being labelled “dirty old men” or “dirty old women” [39].

In line with Ramírez-Macías’ findings [36], Remedios, aged 73, claimed that the view a person has of sexual relationships is very much influenced by the education that this person has received, social structures and the political and religious environment. The influence of Franco’s regime and the strict Catholic principles are also well reflected in Oscar’s, aged 71, short story. He writes about a young country boy called Llorens who experiences his sexual urges for the first time. Oscar subtly depicts the boy’s sexual experience with a young girl who seems to invite him to discover his sexuality through innocent games. The boy touches the girl’s long skirt and discovers her soft and tender skin hidden under her clothes. Already nervous, he continues his discovery by gently touching the rest of her naked body until the girl and the boy reunite in a pleasant swirl of sensations that culminates in sexual ecstasy. Even if the boy does experience his sexuality for the first time, he is unaware that that game was, actually, his first sexual experience. Due to his strict religious upbringing among monks in a convent where carnal pleasures are seen as sins and not even talked about, he lacks sexual knowledge and experience. The fear of God, the religious mysteries and respect towards the monks keep the boy away from asking “complicated questions”. Oscar’s fictional account of the sexual discovery also shows the absence of any formal sexual education during Franco’s strict regime. However, the freedom with which Oscar relates such sexual discovery as well as the sexual agency of the female character differs from the strong sense of morality imposed by both the regime and the Catholic Church. In this sense, Oscar’s break from the normative attitudes that were socially imposed in his youth suggests three important considerations. First, it is a reminder of the potential diversity of older adults, as people belonging to the same age group do not necessarily share the same internalized values [40]. Second, the reversal might also be true, as individuals of different cohorts may share the same values [41]. Third, individuals’ values change with age [42].

4.2.3. Passion and Desire

Although references to sexual acts are vague, the participants do not deny sexual expressions in later years. This implies that even though the body is not always physically capable of sexual intercourse because of a number of health reasons, other forms of sexuality are considered.

Elena, aged 59, states that age does not diminish sexual urges or capacities. According to her, sexual acts can be even more intense in comparison to younger days because the knowledge of oneself becomes greater, which leads to tenderer and more satisfactory intimate expressions as well as an exchange of new sensations. Nevertheless, she admits the existence of physical barriers such as the lack of lubrication in women and erectile dysfunctions in men that make difficult sexual experiences in older age. Elena’s thoughts are in line with research on sexuality in later life which, as mentioned in the introduction, shows that the quality of sexual performance does not diminish with age. Moreover, Elena’s piece aligns with Jong’s middle and late works, which reveal alternative ways of exploring sexual practices in older age [8,9].

The imagination is, however, not always described as an added value to alternative forms of sexuality. In fact, in older age sexuality may be reduced to the imagination, as described in the short story that Gracia, aged 69, wrote. In Gracia’s story, the older female protagonist invents a lover with

whom she imagines to have both passionate and tender encounters in order to save her life-long marriage with a husband who, in older age, is not interested in any kind of sexual intimacy: “In bed, nobody like Paco to get in the bed, give his back to me and start to snore in less than three minutes, while I thought of you and my next trip to Paris.” The fictional husband’s lack of interest in any kind of intimacy with his life-long wife may be due to many different reasons, as the text does not provide any explanation behind the husband’s behaviour. One of such reasons could be the fact that this is a loveless marriage in which the couple does no longer feel romantic love for each other, but simply follows a routine [43], as described in the text:

Paco set me ... in the dishwasher routine; the routine of the TV (he, football in the living room. I, films in the drawing room); of the trips to Benidorm with Imserso ... of going out for a snack (vermouth) on Sundays—only Sundays—at midday.

The husband’s lack of empathy for his wife, who longs for physical contact, suggests that the husband is being (sexually) self-centred in the same way that most men were in their youth [44]. Virility was a particularly relevant trait of masculinity in Francoist Spain, as “the image of a sexually powerful male suited the regime’s self-promoting ideology” [45] (p. 193, authors’ translation). Lack of male adaptation to the new needs of his ageing wife is also connected to the gendered upbringing of the older generations in Spain, who were raised in a socio-historical context dominated by strict religious moral codes in which the pleasure and desire of women were both not considered and constructed as immoral [36,37]. As Rafael Torres claims, in Francoist Spain “the decent wife, the truly honest one, had to repress all feelings of arousal and pleasure while her husband possessed her, usually in the darkness and with the nightgown on” [46] (p. 96, authors’ translation). The reason behind such a strong repression of women’s sexual pleasure was, on the one hand, the Catholic belief that sexual intercourse was only acceptable between husband and wife and with the sole objective of reproduction [45] (p. 157). On the other hand, sexuality and the consequent reproduction it entailed—as contraceptives were only legalized in post-Francoist Spain in 1978 [47]—was portrayed by the Regime as a moral obligation of all married women towards the growth of the nation [38].

5. Conclusions

This article has provided a case analysis of a creative poetry workshop that was offered as an elective course for both students at the University of Lleida and for the general public. The aim was to get a better understanding of the perception of middle and later life sexuality and intimacy through creative writing inspired by two well-known contemporary women writers, namely Erica Jong and Lorna Crozier. While some of the participants’ writings engaged with both Jong and Crozier’s respective poems as regards sexuality in older age, none of the participants’ creative pieces contained instances of sexual experiences in older age. Such an omission was partly discouraging given the open discussions about older age and sexuality encouraged by the workshop leaders and the poems themselves. An explanation for such an omission can be found in the participants’ pieces of writing on love, intimacy and sexuality, which revealed that they felt uncomfortable writing about personal sexual experiences in older age. In its stead, participants wrote about either general encyclopaedic information regarding sexuality throughout the life-course or provided examples and anecdotes, which were not always related to sexuality as specifically experienced in older age. The unwillingness to openly express personal sexual accounts is partly related to the strict norms regarding sexuality and gender during Franco’s dictatorial regime in collaboration with the Spanish Catholic Church, which had a major impact on the participants’ sexual experiences in their young adulthoods. Other studies about sexuality in older age conducted in Spain [48,49] also relate the older participants’ beliefs about sexuality in older age to the socio-historical context of Francoist Spain in which they were born. However, such studies differ from the present piece of research in terms of both methodology and data collection. Specifically, the originality in our article lies in the introduction of both poetry and creative writing as a means for the participants to be introduced into the topic and express their views on sexuality from the safe

distance that the use of metaphor grants. On the other hand, the participants' shyness in depicting sexual scenes with older characters (with no difference according to age group) may also have to do with notions of respectability and fears of breaking with socially-established expectations of behaviour in later adulthood. Nonetheless, the use of literary analysis, discussion and creativity did not have the expected impact on the participants. Namely, the participants neither revealed their own personal experiences of sexuality in older age, nor did they imagine fictional stories with sexual or even sensual encounters between two aged characters. This notwithstanding, the fact that none of the participants denied the experience of sexuality in older age is salient, as it breaks with the myth of asexual senescence [50]. In addition, the analysis of the participants' writings suggests that the participants do not feel forced into sexuality by the active ageing discourse, either. On the contrary, they navigate in a middle ground in which sexual intimacy is believed to be important but not regarded as prominent or essential. We believe that the failure of literature to strongly impact the participants' written responses is due to the limited amount of time—eight hours in total—that Aula Oberta (Open Classroom) allows for. Research studies on the beneficial use of literature and creative writing in older individuals are usually conducted in old people's homes for much longer periods of time, as the workshops are scheduled within these institutions' daily programs of activities. Apart from the limited amount of time, another limitation of the present study is the small group of older adults that are all middle-class, white and educated. In the future, it would be interesting to verify if more extensive creative writing workshops, taught in senior universities and countries with a similar socio-historical background as that of Spain, have a stronger impact on participants' openness to discuss their experiences on sexuality. Moreover, similar workshops with more participants coming from more diverse backgrounds may provide us with different findings and expand our gerontological knowledge in relation to creative writing and sexuality.

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