Baby Boomer Female Identity in the Literature of White Women Writers

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ABSTRACT

BABY BOOMER FEMALE IDENTITY IN THE LITERATURE OF WHITE WOMEN WRITERS

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This dissertation contributes to the critical conversation on American women's fiction by examining the works of American female Boomer authors and their representations of white female identity in Boomer literature. The texts included in this study range from 2004 to 2018, offering several recent years of perspective on Boomer women. Because these books are current, few, if any, scholarly articles focus on them and their contribution to American literature, allowing this dissertation to create new theories and connect to pre-existing ideas, such as ageism. In addition, this dissertation uses some of the themes prevalent in the work of scholars who write about ethnic literature to examine the work of white women writers. For many years, American scholars have written about the “search for identity” in the work of ethnic writers; however, this same search for identity has not been pursued in the work of white women writers. This study examines the representation and/or development of white female identity through the Boomer characters written by white female authors. Lastly, this dissertation moves beyond identification based on ethnicity. Rather, it examines and seeks to understand other ways, like parental relationships, spousal relationships, cultural aspects, the decision to have children, reactions to death, etc., that define Boomer women’s identity, especially as these women characters reach a certain age and enter a different phase of their lives. Overall, this dissertation
stresses that the journey of initiation is not just for teenagers like Holden Caulfield of The Catcher in the Rye. Female Boomer characters, at a certain age, must embark on what is basically a journey of initiation in order for them to find a better version of themselves, to embrace change at an age when they are not expected to do so. If not, they remain stagnant, stifled, and trapped moving into the second half of their lives.
BABY BOOMER FEMALE IDENTITY IN THE LITERATURE OF
WHITE WOMEN WRITERS

BY
ASHLEY DIEDRICH
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Everyone is part of a designated generation based on when they are born. While every generation includes all kinds of people, individuals of the same generation often share what William Strauss and Neil Howe, authors of *Generations: The History of America’s Future, 1584 to 2069*, refer to as “peer personality.” Because each generation faces similar events and experiences, it is not surprising that they would share comparable characteristics and attributes that are distinctive to a specific generation. For example, the G.I. generation, which started around 1900, is considered the rationalist generation, and they are typically “believers in public harmony and cooperative social discipline” (Strauss 9). Another example is members of the Millennial generation, starting around the early 1980s, who are seen as placing a higher value on learning and being open and adaptive to change (337). The Baby Boomer generation, identified as starting around the mid 1940s, is known for being an authentic and idealistic generation yet self-absorbed at the same time (11). Currently, the Boomer generation has been taunted for its specific trends, values, and beliefs with the degrading phrase “Ok, Boomer,” a “derisive repudiation,” which is meant to be a “bit mocking in tone, like a verbal eye roll,” directed specifically by a young person toward an older individual (Spector). However, the Baby Boomer generation, regardless of some of the recent jeering, appropriate or not, should not be taken lightly. During their time, they have made important strides in lifestyle and cultural changes, leaving their impact on America in several different ways.
According to the US Census, the Baby Boomer Generation includes people born between 1946 and 1964. They are the children of returning World War II soldiers who married and bought homes in brand new suburbs springing across the country shortly after the war ended. In 1946, the post war crop of children numbered 2.4 million (CNN Editorial Research). However, conflicting sources argue that the baby boom began in the early 1940s. The term “baby boom” first appeared in a 1943 article from *The Times*, claiming that soldiers leaving for the war had “the same thing on their minds as G.I.’s returning from it” (Bulik). Disregarding the fertility rate as the only indicator, Neil Howe argues that “if you remember World War II, were out of college when JFK was shot, and recall Woodstock as something ‘kids’ were doing, you’re too old to be a Boomer. If you can’t recall the moment JFK was shot, nor Jim, Jimi, or Janice when they were still alive, you’re too young” (115). Regardless of the exact year set, Boomers, most of them currently in their 50s and 60s, make up a large portion of the US population as people are living longer.

While it may be difficult to identify the years defining the Baby Boomer generation, the traditional characteristics associated with Boomers, like individualism, personal risk-taking, and specific value placement, are not challenging to identify. This generation “shook the windows and rattled the walls of everything their parents had built” (Howe 115). In so doing, this generation became especially well known for “its cultivation of self” (115). They defiantly believed they did not need institutions or each other, and women of this generation were the first to view themselves “as essentially economically independent” (116). Personal risk-taking amplified individualistic tendencies and propelled “rates of accidents, suicide, crime, drug use, and STDs to unprecedented levels” (116). In addition, in the past and now, the Baby Boomer
generation prefers to divide “the world into right versus wrong, good versus bad” (117). They came of age creating the counter-culture, “whose purpose was to judge their parents” (117). Now, they lead the culture wars, “whose purpose is to judge each other” (117). Howe stresses that this strong values orientation “makes Boomers suspicious of purely material measures of life success.”

In addition to these attributes, Boomers also display some other stereotypical traits, such as narcissism, believing they know best, and an ever-changing nature. Likely stemming from their drive for individualism, Boomers are often seen as self-absorbed with high self-esteem and an inclination towards self-indulgence, giving this generation a reputation for irritating arrogance (Strauss 303). The narcissistic quality of Boomers ties closely to the idea that they believe they always know best. This generation sees themselves as uniquely intelligent (14) and believes they can offer “transcendent cultural wisdom” (303). They truly think that they can provide some “unique vision, a transcendent principle, a moral acuity more wondrous and extensive than anything ever sensed in the history of mankind” (11). While their level of self-centeredness may ebb and flow over the years, Boomers also prove to be an ever-changing group, never allowing themselves to be pigeon holed and always influencing culture. According to Strauss and Howe, Boomers have “metamorphosed from Beaver Cleaver to hippie to braneater to yuppie to what some are calling ‘Neo-Puritan’” (299). It will be interesting to see what Boomers will transform into next as they age because their persistent metamorphosis will likely continue to impact society.

Helping establish these traits, the social and cultural events and changes of the 1960s and 1970s shaped the Baby Boomer generation during their formative years. This generation is “the
heir to complex interactive social forces” that encouraged changes in marriage, family, and lifestyle choices, such as “the women’s movement, the increased participating of women in the labor force, a general cultural expectation emphasizing self-fulfillment, a lower tolerance for unhappy marriages, more liberal attitudes in churches, and the legislative introduction of no-fault divorce” (Wattenberg 21). Baby Boomers were the first to experience the contraceptive revolution because they grew up with the birth-control pill, introduced in 1960, and “a Supreme Court decision upholding abortion as a woman’s right to choose” (20). During their adolescence, this generation demonstrated a strong generational identity “associated with the rise of rock music, with greater sexual freedom and with political protest and counter-cultural movements” (O’Shea 200). Specifically for women, the Baby Boomer generation was the first to recognize that the cult of domesticity gave “way to the expectation of paid work as a central feature of women’s lives,” so it is not surprising that Baby Boomer women attended college and graduate school in record numbers (Wattenberg 20).

These cultural experiences influenced Baby Boomers and their perspective on pre-established social norms in the US, such as marriage. Unlike previous generations, Boomers believed they had options when it came to romantic partnerships and felt comfortable getting married, never marrying, and/or remarrying. For women, the once-cherished ideal that “a ‘certificate of normalcy’ would be granted by society to women on achieving marriage and having children” was chipped away by the Baby Boom generation (22). Unlike previous generations, this group has “higher rates of separation and divorce, and lower rates of marriage” (Frey 30). This less stringent view on marriage created “a social acceptance of second and even third opportunities for grasping the gold ring of a happy marriage” (Wattenberg 24). However,
discriminating factors, such as age, race, and the presence of minor children, remained an issue for women and their remarriage options (24). When discussing marriage for this generation, it is important to note that, even though they believed they had more choice in embracing different options, many Boomer women still found themselves in conventional relationships with stereotypical gender roles. For this generation, it appears to be about having a say pertaining to their life choices, not feeling forced into a specific role, even if they end up choosing a more traditional path.

In addition to marriage, the Baby Boom generation impacted family structures and households by embracing more diverse lifestyles. According to Esther Wattenberg, the combination of alterations the Baby Boom generation has made produced “new definitions of family life and a changed benchmark for what is widely perceived as ‘normative’” (20). Compared to previous generations, Baby Boomers had fewer children, and they delayed childbearing, with a tendency toward having first children after age 35 (20). In addition, Wattenberg states that a distinctive feature of this generation was “the propensity to establish child-free marriages” (20). Baby Boomers “set records for a variety of living arrangements that reshaped the definition of families and household composition” (20). For example, new census categories such as “partners of the opposite sex sharing living quarters’ emerged with this generation as well as a dynamic flow of living arrangements marked by record divorces, separations, re-marriages, and never-married women with dependent children” (20). More parents, both men and women, worked outside the home while the children were cared for outside the home, and the resistance to rearing children outside of marriage was substantially altered by this generation (22). However, it is significant to point out that, more often than not,
Baby Boomer women who decided to have children found themselves, to varying degrees, conforming to conventional gender roles. Even if both parents worked outside the home, the mother typically still maintained the home and raised the children.

Considering all the progress and change established and experienced by the Baby Boomer generation earlier in their lives, it is no surprise that their later years and retirements continue to alter society and reshape attitudes towards old age. Wattenberg argues that Baby Boomers will “go down in history as the largest generation ever to: never marry, marry, remarry, have babies, remain child-free, grow older without large families, and reach ripe old age in unprecedented numbers” (20). William Frey adds that, during each earlier stage of their lives, Baby Boomers “seem to have broken the mold in terms of their aspirations, accomplishments, and lifestyles,” implying that there is no reason to expect that this generation “will not continue to shatter precedents as large numbers of its members march into seniorhood” (28). Furthermore, the ageing of the Baby Boom generation is remarkable not only because of its size but also because “its members’ social and demographic profile contrasts sharply with earlier generations” (29). Baby Boomers are “more highly educated, have a higher percentage of women in the labor force, [and] are more likely to occupy professional and managerial positions” (30). Helen O’Shea claims that, with the ageing of the Baby Boomer generation, “new ways of experience, and theorizing, midlife have arisen,” and the focus has shifted from “the experience of being old to the process of becoming old” (200). She adds that “demographers attribute maturing baby boomers with good health, longevity and a desire to retain youthfulness in addition to the retention of their distinctive characteristics of individualism and liberalism” (200).
Even though this generation is a large part of the US population and lived through the culturally significant decades of the 1960s and 1970s, Baby Boomers now face issues of ageism, which leaves them feeling inferior and isolated. According to Robert Butler, just as sexism and racism are based on gender and ethnicity, ageism is “a form of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people simply because they are old” (*The Longevity Revolution* 40). Ageism allows younger generations to see older people as “different” from themselves; thus, they “subtly cease to identify with [their] elders as human beings” (40). In addition, Butler adds that the tragedy of old age is “not that each of us must grow old and die, but that the process of doing so has been made unnecessarily and at times excruciatingly painful, humiliating, debilitating, and isolating” (*Why Survive* 2-3). Paul Kleyman adds that “age continues as one of the last areas of openly uttered bias across the American cultural spectrum” (42), and Harry Moody explains that ageing is “a threat to our sense of ourselves” (95). As they continue to get older, Baby Boomers will, unfortunately, continue to face issues pertaining to their age. This is particularly true for Baby Boomer women, who face greater hardships and pressure from a society that values youth and has unrealistic beauty standards.

Ageism is especially challenging for women, who are judged more by their physical appearances; the loss of their attractiveness reinforces their subordinate roles in a patriarchal society. Yi-chin Shih explains that ageing is “socially and culturally constructed, instead of biological in nature,” which causes women to suffer more from the conspiracy of ageism (200). The fear associated with ageing is ever-present and used to keep women subordinate in society (201). Barbara Barnett argues that women learn that “their value lies in their physical appearance (i.e., their attractiveness to men)” (88), meaning that old age diminishes their worth. In a
patriarchal culture, ageing makes women unbeautiful. For older women, the standards of youthful beauty are unrealistic to meet, guaranteeing “insecurity and subordination to patriarchal authority” (88). Sima Aghazadeh adds that middle or old age for women is “the phase of losing the admiring gaze of others” (23), which is the main indicator of femininity in Western culture. Also, Betty Friedan’s “problem with no name,” outlined in 1963’s *The Feminine Mystique*, which originally dealt with “women’s dissatisfaction with fulfilling roles of traditional femininity alone, such as mothers and wives, without a chance to realize their other potential,” has a new meaning currently for the Baby Boomer generation (Shih 201). After thirty years, Friedan claims that the new “problem with no name” is the age mystique, the fear of ageing for women, which she concludes is “much more deadly” and “more terrifying to confront, harder to break through” than the feminine mystique (42).

In addition to the general issues of ageism encountered on a daily basis, older women struggle with their representation or lack thereof in writing where they face stereotypes and limited identities, furthering belittling them and wreaking havoc on their self-esteem. Feminist writing rarely addresses older women and ageing. Instead, women’s studies disregards age and ageing issues (Shih 201). Barbara Macdonald explains that, from the beginning of the women’s movement, from the start of women’s studies, the message for middle-aged women has been that the “‘Sisterhood’” does not include them (47); instead, younger people and men view older women “as women who used to be women but aren’t any more” (47). People do not see them living their present lives, nor do they identify with issues older women face; rather, society “exploits them, patronizes them, and stereotypes, but mainly, they ignore them” (47). Macdonald adds that older women are as unseen and as irrelevant in classrooms as they are in “a hostile
male world—a world where [they] fight not only the same oppressions younger women do, but the oppressions of ageism as well, and all without the support of the women’s movement” (48). The texts utilized in women’s studies “discuss the socialization of little girls from the moment of birth, the struggles of women through adulthood,” but it turns out that adulthood ends with menopause, leaving older women with no real or authentic representation (48). If included in a literary work, older women appear “either submissive and childlike or as possessing some unidentified vague wisdom and slightly crazy. As weak and helpless or as a pillar of strength. As ‘cute’ and funny or as boring. As sickly sweet or dominating and difficult” (51). Typically, an older female character:

has no personhood, no desires or value of her own. She must not fight for her own issues—if she fights at all, it must be for “future generations.” Her greatest joy is seen as giving all to her grandchildren [if she has any]. And to the extent that she no longer directly serves a man—can no longer produce his children, is no longer sexually desirable to men—she is erased more completely as grandmother than she was as mother. (51)

Also, the popular belief is that older people, particularly older women, do not deserve a sexual life or sexual desire as they age, even though “the capacity and desire for emotional and sexual intimacy and pleasure can be important for people throughout their lives” (Chepngenjo-Langat 97).

A way to combat issues of ageism and provide a much-desired area in literary categories is through the construction of Baby Boomer novels, a genre through which Baby Boomer women writers are now writing about issues significant to them as older individuals. Novels written by Baby Boomers provide older readers with Boomer protagonists that they can relate to. These texts explore the mature experience, depicting older characters addressing features of today’s world within modern settings. Some may argue that nothing interesting can possibly happen after
a certain age, implying that no literature can emerge from the Boomer demographic. However, Claude Nougat points out that the Boomer population pushed for and created young adult novels forty or fifty years ago, so it should not be surprising that those same Boomers, now older, are “creating a new genre reflecting the third transition – adult-to-sage (experience to wisdom)” (qtd. in Padgett). According to Abigail Padgett, Boomer literature is still fairly new but is in high demand because, through “medical advances, diet and a non-scarcity environment,” a large population of Boomers are approaching middle age and retirement, this third transition, “bright-eyed, healthy and looking for roadmaps to successful navigation of these heretofore uncharted waters” (Padgett). Because the Baby Boomer generation is so large in number, it is not surprising that Boomers, and their beliefs and wants as they enter the next phase of their lives, are impossible to ignore, encouraging them to be “scrutinized, analyzed, catered to and criticized, romanticized, ridiculed, and reviled” in literature (Bauer 6). For older writers, the Boomer genre allows them to look back at their childhoods, “their youthful idealism and ambitions, the sudden or gradual changes of heart and mind they have gone through in their lives,” in order to confront “their failures, their losses, their own mortalities—sometimes wistfully, sometimes ironically, sometimes with sadness and / or anger and / or acceptance” (7). Also, Boomer writing allows these authors to address the idea of “making it,” defining the “shadowy divide” created by ageing and “crossing it with style” (Padgett). According to Steven Kellman, Baby Boomer literature focuses on “second wind” as a reoccurring motif because it “taps into universal resistance to the human condition of dissipating energy” (418). In addition, the theme possesses demographic currency, showcasing a large group on the threshold of being pensioned, facing “the question of whether to equate retirement with resignation, with merely waiting for the end” (419).
While Boomer works encompass different genres, such as romance, tragedy, and mystery, similar to YA books, and are written by both men and women, this dissertation examines novels written by white Boomer women writers whose work focuses on white middle-aged women as they enter the next stage of their adulthood and address the development and representation of female identity. Identity is a main concept in current literary and cultural criticism. The word identity is paradoxical, “meaning both sameness and distinctiveness,” and its contradictions “proliferate when it is applied to women” (Gardiner 347). Female identity specifically is “relational and fluidly defined” (352), starting with infancy and continuing throughout womanhood. Regarding female authors, Judith Kegan Gardiner argues that the concept of female identity provides “a key to understanding the special qualities of contemporary writing by women” (348) who “express the experience of their own identity in what and how they write” (354).

For female characters, the experience of ageing is diverse and likely is not exactly the same, but the process, nevertheless, “troubles, tortures and then awakens women,” hopefully allowing them to better understand and/or alter their female identities (Shih 201). Typically, the issues of female identity presented in women’s prose and poetry are seldom complications in understanding one’s gender; more often, they are “difficulties in learning how to respond to social rules for what being female means in our culture” (Gardiner 359). Frequently, these women face the confines of stereotypical gender roles, social norms, and the trappings of the lives they established during the first half of their adulthoods. Throughout their lives and as they continue to age, white female Boomer protagonists define themselves through relationships with their partners, parents, and/or children, gender roles (typically of wife and mother) and cultural
expectations, feelings of guilt, and reactions to death. However, often seen within these texts is an “aha moment,” a moment of epiphany, where these middle-aged women finally recognize and understand who they are and where they come from. They must address this new understanding of themselves and the changes taking place due to entering middle age in order to redefine who they are and understand their new places in the world for their second adulthoods. Many of these female characters take advantage of this opportunity; some are able to embrace it on their own, while others rely on the assistance of others, typically men, to help them through. Either way, these women writers, through their novels, provide female readers with a real possibility for change and a place of connection; these middle-aged women readers are not alone in what they are experiencing and struggling with as they get older. Unfortunately, some female characters, even after seeing a chance for redefinition of their identity in front of them, push aside this opportunity out of fear, complacency, or ego.

Boomer literature builds on the already established tradition of American women’s fiction. Both women’s fiction and Boomer literature are typically written by women for women. Boomer literature is often written by older women for women of a similar age because they likely share the same concerns and fears about ageing, what life will look like after reaching middle age, and general issues about middle-age life. Another aspect that women’s fiction and Boomer literature share is that both usually focus on a central female character. In the 1800s, numerous women writers wrote about female character formation and individual self-development. Currently, the focus in feminist fiction and poetry remains “firmly fixed on individual self-transformation, on private coming to awareness, emotional experience, personal relations, subjective self-recognition and insight” (Baym xli). These works are distinctly
intended for female readers, making the female protagonist even more crucial. Women readers should feel a connection between themselves and the main female characters as they deal with similar issues in life, such as love, identity, ageing, etc. Rebecca Vnuk and Nanette Donohue stress that “if the main character could easily be swapped out for a male character, then it is general fiction” (viii) and not women's fiction, even if it does offer the same connection to female readers, especially middle-aged women. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young add that female protagonists are often flawed rather than perfect portraits of womanhood, which elicits “readers’ compassion and identification” (4). Women’s fiction and Boomer literature are also character-driven and the emotions and relationships of the female protagonists are central aspects of the plot. Sarah Sceats claims that both historical and cultural influences impact character and plot development in women’s fiction (3), and Helge Normann Nilsen adds to this idea, stating that female authors are typically influenced by the ideas and values of their times (26). Early women's texts and some modern American women’s writing also discuss a young, unmarried woman, who after initial struggles, goes on “to win her own way in the world” (Baym ix). This young woman’s journey is similar to the journeys undertaken by middle-aged Boomer female characters because they both typically include overcoming “obstacles through a hard-won, much tested ‘self-dependence’” (ix). Both the young woman and the older Boomer woman “learn that women must become people to survive in a difficult world” (ix). They also learn that women “can become people, because persons, selves, is what they all potentially are” (ix). Whether the plot addresses the career and goals of a young woman or the journey of self-discovery by an older female protagonist, women’s fiction and Boomer literature showcase obstacles for women to overcome, allowing them to grow and develop their identities moving forward into their
futures. In addition, women’s texts “aim to forward the development, in young, female readers, of a specific kind of character” (xix). The protagonists represent “instances of the character that the authors want their readers to become, while the grippingly affective reading experience is meant to initiate or further the resolve of readers to change themselves” (xix). By the end of these novels, a female character develops “a strong conviction of her own worth as a result of which she does ask much from herself” (19). She can “meet her own demands and, inevitably, the change in herself has changed the world’s attitude toward her, so that much that was formerly denied her now comes to her unsought” (19). Similarly, a number of Boomer writers provide readers with female characters who are willing to change, adapt, or grow as they enter the next stage of their lives, refusing to allow gender roles or social conventions to limit their wants, needs, ambitions, or redefinitions of themselves or their futures. The characteristics and actions of these female protagonists often influence women readers. Linda Grasso emphasizes that women’s texts, both early and contemporary fiction, open up possibility, allowing female readers to reimagine new identities and new lives. Karen Tracey builds on this idea, arguing that, when readers are engaged with characters and plots, when they can relate to and/or understand the characters and what is taking place, they may be more open to challenging and altering the conventionality that is present in the texts and in their own lives.

Another genre that likely contributes to the creation of Boomer literature is the memoirs and non-fiction texts of contemporary female writers, which often focus on the issue of getting older, offering insight on entering the next stage of life. Texts such as 50 is the New Fifty: 10 Life Lessons for Women in Second Adulthood by Suzanne Braun Levine address issues important to this generation of women, like caring for ageing parents, dealing with adult aged children,
struggling with physical ageing, and redefining one’s self after life changes, such as the death of partners or divorce. These works stress that each middle-aged woman’s journey through second adulthood is unique; there is no perfect way to approach and cope with the realities of getting older. However, these female writers make sure to stress that, while everyone’s ageing experience is different, older women should understand they are not alone. To varying degrees, most, if not all, middle-aged women anxiously try to find their way out of “a disconcerting state of not-knowing” (Levine 15) what they will do for the rest of their lives or what the rest of their lives will look like.

Typically, another concern that comes with ageing is the need to review, and possibly recalibrate, relationships, particularly those with a long-term partner. Relationships with others, family, friends, and spouses, often shape and influence women’s growth and identity throughout their adulthood, so it is not surprising that one would need to evaluate or alter connections as she ages, hopefully surrounding oneself with others that support and encourage a woman’s redefinition as she enters the next phase of her life. These non-fiction texts emphasize that connections, especially marriages, regularly change with age. For some women, this means walking away from a marriage “to escape constant conflict, deficient affection, emotional or physical abuse, simple emptiness” (147). For others, it means making changes in their lives to energize and transform their marriages (148). In the end, as difficult as this transitional period may be, these texts allow women to grow, develop, and change for the better as they age. The traditional "journey of initiation" takes on new meaning as it is experienced by older women through the telling of their stories. These stories offer these characters the opportunities for breakthrough, like “speaking truth to power, embracing new challenges, and developing a Fuck-
You . . . stance of independence and authority.” They also stress the significance of “the worldly experience, confidence and know-how” (110) that women accumulate by getting older. Overall, Boomer literature combines the fictional accounts of women’s lives seen in women’s fiction and the contemporary issues of middle-aged women discussed in current memoirs and non-fiction works written about ageing to offer female readers perspective and understanding about ageing and the possibilities of redefinition of their identities for the future.

All three genres, women’s fiction, contemporary female memoirs and non-fiction texts, and Boomer literature, reflect different aspects of womanhood and gender roles, as well as the ever-changing representation of female identity. Identity, according to some scholars, refers to “one’s psychological sense of self, to personal character traits, to a shaping ideological system, to personal history, and to the context of national history” (Packer-Kinlaw 4). Others argue that identity, especially for women, is constructed based on the categories of “true sex, discrete gender, and specific sexuality” (“Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions” 465).

Regardless of how the concept of female identity is defined, it remains an ever-present and important idea in works written by women for women. When specifically focusing on the identity of white Boomer female characters, the issue of female identity, especially as these women reach and work through middle age, is extremely relevant in providing the characters, and in turn the female readers, a better understanding of who they are and where they want to go in order to help them decide who they want to be in the future.

In addition to the general discussion about female identity, some scholars examine the significance of female identity and its relevance to society and culture. Elizabeth Fine and Jean Haskell Spear argue that a woman’s identity develops in the dialectic between individual and
society (9). Society influences a woman’s understanding of her place in society due to her gender. Female Boomer characters also experience this in several novels, and they are often pushed to accept or challenge the status quo, which, regardless of the woman’s choice, impacts her identity. Those who aim to challenge the norm often find themselves with more developed and stronger identities for their second adulthoods; they have a much better understanding of who they are and what they want. Unfortunately, those who choose to not fight the status quo often stifle their growth and ability to alter their identities for the future, which usually leaves them feeling unhappy and unfulfilled.

Another societal impact on female identity comes from relationships. Bonnie Zimmerman explains that a woman’s identity is not just defined by her relation to a patriarchal world because “powerful bonds between women are a crucial factor in women’s lives” (76). Female relationships, like those between mothers and daughters, friends, and mentors, play a pivotal role in influencing women’s identities, in positive and negative ways, both in their younger years and as they age. For ageing white heterosexual female characters, relationships with women help them understand who they are and who they want to be as they enter the next phase of their lives.

In 1955, R. W. B. Lewis discussed the white American hero as a figure “emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race,” an individual “standing alone, self-reliant and self propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources” (5). While real people are not devoid of a history or a cultural background, many contemporary American white women writers appear to perpetuate the idea of the American Adam as an individual removed
from history. One would think that culture would play a large part in female identity for women and their Boomer character counterparts, but that fails to always be the case; unfortunately, white women authors typically fail to consider their race in creating their novels, and their white female protagonists regularly fail to acknowledge the importance of their ethnicity in their identities. Individuals who belong to multiple cultures often feel torn between the identity they associate with their families and “a more fluid one comprised of a public persona strongly affiliated with the dominant culture and a domestic identity strongly tied to familial roots” (Legleitner 42). According to Rickie-Ann Legleitner, these individuals deal with internalized racism, which usually leads “to the desire to forsake one part of the self in favor of the culturally preferred Other” (43). Unfortunately, this want usually causes a disconnected sense of self due to losing one’s cultural history and heritage (43). On the other hand, white female writers and their characters regularly fail to take ethnicity or background into consideration. In early women’s fiction, almost all of the authors were “Protestant, of English ancestry, and from middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds” (Baym x), causing a lack of female inclusiveness and expressions of different female voices. Currently, more women of different races, like Sandra Cisneros, Diana Abu-Jaber, and Alice Walker, are writing and providing more diverse perspectives for women in literature; however, in Boomer literature, it appears that most female writers are white, and their protagonists are white as well, which limits the inclusiveness of the genre. Ruth Frankenberg explains that whiteness is often unmarked and unnamed (1); in society, whiteness is seen as being invisible, lacking markers of race, culture, and ethnicity (McKibbin 97). For white individuals, ethnic identity is “more representative of affinities for certain cultural practices than an important part of whites’ self-concept” (McDermott 251), making a person's
ethnic or cultural background feel optional instead of necessary or permanent. William Frey argues that the Baby Boomers are “more racially and ethnically diverse than their predecessors” (30); however, while some steps may have been taken, based on the still-present belief that whiteness is unmarked and unnamed and the lack of diversity and acknowledgement of ethnicity in Boomer literature written by white female Boomer writers, this generation does not appear more racially and ethnically diverse. Although ethnically diverse groups have always existed, in many cases, white society failed, and likely continues to fail at times, to recognize them, their culture, and their place in society. Unfortunately, while progress has been made, in general, white society still struggles with acknowledging those that are categorized as the Other, which regrettably is reenforced when white female Boomer authors fail to include diversity or stress the significance of race and ethnicity in their works.

It is also important to note that whiteness is usually associated with privilege. Due to their race, white women have as much access to white privilege as do white men, allowing them benefits, such as economic security and educational advantages, not typically accessible for people of other races. White privilege is often evident in Boomer literature written by white female writers because, almost unconsciously, the white women characters do not have to worry about money, as their financial issues are often resolved for them and/or they appear to have some level of protection from the harsh realities of the real world faced by so many others, usually those of different ethnicities. As interesting, insightful, or beneficial as their novels may be, it appears that white women authors of Boomer literature are missing a valuable opportunity in their texts to address their own heritages, to provide their white female protagonists with more ethnic awareness, and/or to include more diverse characters, all of which would offer different
perspectives on female identity and would likely benefit female readers’ understanding of themselves and the world around them. This missed opportunity raises the question: why? What stops these white women authors from diving into the issue of race and ethnicity for themselves, their female protagonists, and their readers? Is it fear, a lack of understanding, guilt, an inability to come to terms with their white privilege, or something else entirely?

While race and ethnicity may not play as large a role as expected in white female identity in Boomer literature, the idea of place remains relevant topics associated with female identity in general within literature. For example, Jennifer Browdy De Hernandez examines the function of home because it “provides the ground for a politics of location and identity,” allowing home to influence models of selfhood (23). For many older female characters, place, especially the home, plays a key role in who they are; it is the location which often best establishes their roles as wives and mothers. However, the ability to recognize the importance of new locations also strengthens the development of their identities. Moving past familiar places, like the home, allows female protagonists to see themselves behind traditional identity markers, which likely have dictated the first half of their adulthoods. They no longer must remain confined to being wives and mother; they can choose to venture to new places, which offer the possibility of redefinition and provide insight to new opportunities for female readers.

Instead of a physical place, Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt stress that language is essential in developing, representing, and understanding female identity, arguing that it is in language that “we come to consciousness, that a sense of identity is imposed upon us, for language offers us a series of subject positions, a range of discourses in which we are constructed” (xxviii). In terms of Boomer works and this connection between language and
identity, ageing female characters come to understand that the language used by them and the words used by others to describe them shape their identities and how they are perceived by others. They must choose to accept this use of language, keeping them in their already established versions of themselves, or they must select to change how they use language and push others to alter their use of language when discussing older women in order to develop their identities moving into their second adulthood.

This dissertation contributes to the critical conversation on American women's fiction by examining the works of American female Boomer authors and their representations of white female identity in Boomer literature. The texts included in this study range from 2004 to 2018, offering several recent years of perspective on Boomer women. Because these books are current, few, if any, scholarly articles focus on them and their contribution to American literature, allowing this dissertation to create new theories and connect to pre-existing ideas, such as ageism. In addition, this dissertation uses some of the themes prevalent in the work of scholars who write about ethnic literature to examine the work of white women writers. For many years, American scholars have written about the “search for identity” in the work of ethnic writers; however, this same search for identity has not been pursued in the work of white women writers. This study examines the representation and/or development of white female identity through the Boomer characters written by white female authors. Lastly, this dissertation moves beyond identification based on ethnicity. Rather, it examines and seeks to understand other ways, like parental relationships, spousal relationships, cultural aspects, the decision to have children, reactions to death, etc., that define Boomer women’s identity, especially as these women characters reach a certain age and enter a different phase of their lives. Overall, this dissertation
stresses that the journey of initiation is not just for teenagers like Holden Caulfield of The Catcher in the Rye. Female Boomer characters, at a certain age, must embark on what is basically a journey of initiation in order for them to find a better version of themselves, to embrace change at an age when they are not expected to do so. If not, they remain stagnant, stifled, and trapped moving into the second half of their lives.

Chapter one focuses on The Goddesses of Kitchen Ave. (2004) by Barbara Samuel (O’Neal), which provides a perspective on Boomer female identity by concentrating on Trudy Marino who, after twenty-plus years of marriage, struggles after finding out that her husband is cheating on her. Prior to this, Trudy sees herself as simply a wife and mother; she makes the right dinners and takes care of the kids in terms of school and activities. When she finds herself alone, Trudy initially struggles to understand what she wants out of life. As the novel progresses, she begins to understand her regrets from the past and makes plans to rectify some of them (like taking a trip to Seville or going back to school). Through her relationships with her husband, her new neighbor, her children, and her friends and her attempts to break from traditional gender norms, Trudy begins to develop an identity different from her previous self, one that allows her to be more assertive and tuned in to her personal wants and ambitions. However, she does not do this alone, for the men, specifically her husband and neighbor, play a significant role in helping Trudy understand who she is and make certain decisions about her future, indicating that Trudy is unable to fully let go of her past identity to embrace a new, more independent one.

Chapter two addresses The Bette Davis Club (2013) by Jane Lotter, which focuses on Margo Just, a middle-aged woman allowing her past and her addictions to dictate her future and how she sees herself. When Margo’s niece, Georgia, turns into a runaway bride, Charlotte,
Margo’s half-sister, tasks Margo with bringing Georgia home. Heading out in her deceased father’s classic 1955 red MG, Margo and Tully Benedict, the jilted fiancé, travel across the country. Through her relationships with family, friends, and partners and her ability to face the realities of her past and her own personal demons, Margo reconstructs her identity, allowing her to be more comfortable with the past and optimistic about the future. However, while she is independent and does not necessarily rely on a man, it is not until some of the male characters share hard truths about her and her life that Margo comes to understand that she is hiding from the world and needs to make some changes.

Chapter three discusses Still Life with Bread Crumbs (2014) by Anna Quindlen, which addresses the identity of Rebecca Winter, a former famous photographer who attempts to understand her life, who she is, and what she wants for her future. At the beginning, Rebecca struggles with her lack of relevance in the current art world and maintaining her old life. To save money, she sublets her NYC apartment and moves out to the country. Through her relationships with her parents, her son, partners, and friends, her passion for her career, and her location choices, Rebecca alters her identity, showing more acceptance about her ageing and a better understanding of her place in the world for the second half of her life. Most importantly, even though there is a man involved, Rebecca makes her own decisions and reaches a better understanding of herself on her own. This provides the Boomer reader with a very independent example of a Boomer character.

Chapter Four examines The Female Persuasion (2018) by Meg Wolitzer, which discusses Faith Frank, a feminist icon and Boomer woman who defines herself through her activism and career helping women. After her feminist magazine closes, Faith, against her better moral
judgment, teams up with a wealthy but, at times, unethical business man with whom she has a past to start a new women’s foundation. As Faith struggles to remain relevant with the changing face and practice of feminism, she must make a decision about where she stands when it is discovered that one of the outside projects of the foundation is a complete sham. Through her relationships with family, friends, and employees, the importance of her career, and her reaction to possibly losing her iconic status, Faith solidifies her identity, unwilling to give up her status as a feminist role model. She is so adamant to retain how she sees herself that she is willing to compromise her values and beliefs to maintain her specific persona, stifling any possibilities for growth or redefinition for the future.

Chapter Five examines *Clock Dance* (2018) by Anne Tyler, which focuses on Willa Drake, a traditional wife and mother who struggles to understand herself and her wants as she enters the next stage of her life. After living a conventional life for the first half of her adulthood, a random incident brings Willa to the east coast to help her eldest son’s former girlfriend and her daughter. Although she does not even know if the young woman's daughter is her biological granddaughter, Willa makes the moral choice to leave her home and new husband behind to go help her son's ex-girlfriend. Having made such a choice, she finds herself living in a neighborhood very different from the one where she has always lived, but she also encounters new, diverse friends and new-found freedom. Through her relationships with her husbands and her new friends, Willa evolves and begins to relinquish old feelings of guilt. Through breaking from conventional expectations and duties, Willa redefines her identity, aiming to no longer remain complacent with the status quo. Her decision to develop her identity for the second half of her life does not hinge on a man’s input or guidance; rather, her choices prove to be a strong
step against the controlling and condescending men of her life and a clear thrust against traditional conventions.

Examining these novels and Boomer literature in general provides a number of opportunities, benefitting both writers and readers. First, these texts offer a specific look at the identity of women of a certain age, women who have traditionally been ignored by writers. These texts also provide insight into these white women writers and what influences their understanding of female identity. In addition, the study of white female identity lends itself well to exploring the blatant disregard of ancestry and ethnicity by white female writers. Even though these white women authors come from different backgrounds and life experiences, they all have the tendency to cast the relevance of whiteness and its privileges to the side. This lack of attention to the white character's sense of his/her own race, particularly to the benefits of better understanding one’s own privilege, raises the simple question: why is race not a significant concern for these writers and their characters? Lastly, Boomer literature offers female readers characters similar to themselves, women who are experiencing the obstacles and realities of ageing in our modern society. These works emphasize that middle-aged women are not alone in their journey through ageing and everything that comes with it. These female protagonists demonstrate the possibilities for growth and redefinition offered by getting older, allowing women readers to see the multitude of opportunities that await them if they are willing to embrace change for themselves and the world around them.
The Goddesses of Kitchen Avenue (2004) by Barbara Samuel provides a perspective on Boomer female identity by focusing on Trudy Marino who, after twenty-plus years of marriage, struggles after finding out that her husband, Rick, is cheating on her. Although she thought they had a good marriage, she kicks Rick out, and she focuses on her children. Early in her life, Trudy sees herself as simply a wife and mother; she makes the right dinners and takes care of the kids. When she finds herself alone, the kids grown and her cheating husband out of her life, Trudy struggles to understand what she wants for the next phase of her life. Through her relationships with her husband, her new neighbor, her children, and her friends and her attempts to break from traditional gender norms, Trudy begins her journey of initiation in order to develop an identity different from her previous self, one that allows her to be more assertive and tuned in to her personal wants and ambitions. However, she does not do this alone; in her case, her husband and male neighbor play a significant role in helping Trudy understand who she is and make certain decisions about her future. By the conclusion of the novel, Trudy makes large strides in becoming more independent and willing to put her wants first, yet her need to rely on the input of the men around her indicates Trudy’s inability to fully break free from her previous identity.

Samuel is a well-known women’s fiction author and a Baby Boomer. Born in 1959, she came of age during the tumultuous decades of the 1960s and 1970s, which included the Second
Women’s Movement that brought women more sexual freedoms and diverse lifestyles. She fell in love with romance novels when babysitting for the woman across the street who was “a subscriber to Harlequin Presents, the classic romance category published in white covers, about men in Spain or Greece” (*Creative Writing* 2). By the time she turned 15, Samuel knew she wanted to write books, and she “wanted to do a very specific sort of writing: stories about girls falling in love” (2). After graduating from college, she recognized that women’s fiction, especially romance novels, had evolved, becoming more mature and wide-ranging. They no longer strictly focused on “castles in Spain and powerful men with brooding brows” (4). Instead, the texts showed “a modern sensibility, with characters that had been divorced or had children” (4), and they also included characters who were more realistic. While she writes several different types of books, her focus is romance, which she claims that she chose because she is a feminist and wants “to bypass the male culture of the mainstream publishing world (“The Art” 78). In addition, she argues that she wanted to write for women, to “weave legends we feel in our guts; reclaim history from a woman’s point of view; explore sex from our viewpoint and see what it meant and how we felt about it – both in terms of what it is, and what it should be” (79).

Samuel’s concentration on women’s fiction, especially the works that address middle-aged women, like *The Goddesses of Kitchen Avenue*, provides female Boomer readers with protagonists and issues that they can relate to. In her book, Nanci Milone Hill provides information about women’s fiction, the significance of reading for females, and the idea of book clubs, which typically focus on texts written by women authors and contain female protagonists; these clubs allow women to come together and communicate about aspects of women’s fiction and life that are relevant to them. Hill explains that women’s fiction speaks to women in general
because it explores topics that are important to them, such as marriage, divorce, aging, family, friendship, infidelity, and overcoming difficulties to happiness and fulfillment, and it also offers hope for the future (xi). While it may not directly involve a book club, *The Goddesses of Kitchen Avenue* showcases Hill’s point through Trudy’s connections with her female neighbors, which emphasize the importance of female relationships and the commonalities between them. When discussing writing women’s fiction, Samuel argues that many women are drawn to it because it offers relatable, memorable, and authentic characters. A female protagonist is “not a general, generic, please-everyone kind of person. She’s born into the book world with very specific, very detailed wishes, wants, dreams, goals, hopes, hungers, tastes, flaws and vices” (*Creative Writing* 46). Throughout the novel, Trudy embodies this idea through her individual ambitions. She wants to be her own person, separate from being a wife and mother, but just like many women, she struggles with her own insecurities and issues, which could prove detrimental to her goals.

21st century female protagonists like Trudy create their sense of individualism on the traits of 19th century female characters, who, according to Nina Baym, are “feminist[s] in some sense because the novels advocated an individualism that had not traditionally been a woman’s option” (xx). Even though 19th century women writers were writing before the women's movement for liberation of the 1960s, their novels still perform “emancipatory work by persuading women readers to insist on their right to personhood” (xxi). While contemporary women and female protagonists have more individualism and control of their lives compared to their 19th century counter-parts, they still face obstacles; however, these issues offer potential for change and growth, allowing for redefinition of self and, by extension, “the reformation of the world immediately around” them (20). In Samuel's novel, Trudy is offered this possibility to develop
herself and the world around her. According to Karen Tracey, many female protagonists in works of both early and contemporary women’s fiction are given the opportunity to form the right balance between dependency and autonomy, connection and independence, and passion and reason; Trudy is no different. After some trials and tribulations, she comes to understand who she wants to be and even begins to make some of her wants happen; however, to some degree, this growth comes from the assistance of her male neighbor, not just herself, which could lead some readers to wonder just how liberated she truly is; this point must also be considered as the reader realizes that, even as Trudy moves toward some kind of realization about her need for independence, she is never fully able to let go of her need to please her husband.

Because it is approachable for many women, women’s fiction lends itself well to discussing female identity, particularly identity issues that white women struggle with as they reach middle age. Over the course of their lifetimes, Baby Boomers created history and have been affected by history. They impacted social movements, family structures, and lifestyle choices in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, altering cultural norms, so it is not surprising that they would influence second adulthood and ageing. Helen O’Shea claims that, with the ageing of the Baby Boomer generation, “new ways of experience, and theorizing, midlife have arisen.” She argues that for Baby Boomers "the focus has shifted from the experience of being old to the process of becoming old” (200). This process of "becoming" stresses the point that, for Baby Boomers in the real world and then by extension in literature, reaching a certain age does not necessarily marginalize the female protagonist in the novel to the role of mother or friend because her character is always in the process of becoming something different. According to Amanda Smith Barusch, many female protagonists in women’s fiction reflect this idea and are
influenced by history and by changes in life circumstances (50). Like many Boomers entering middle age, Trudy separates from her husband. This life change causes her to question her past decisions and what she wants for herself in the future. The fact that she conceives of a future after her marriage breaks up is in itself significant because, even though she is not a young woman, she still entertains the possibility of a future different from her past.

Trudy also spends most of her adult life as a mother, an identity where women “labor under impossible ideals of perfect motherhood” (Sotirin 1), but reaching middle age forces and allows Trudy to redefine herself. With her youngest child almost out of her home, Trudy can let go of the traditional expectations that she had placed on herself when she performed as a wife and mother in order to envision an escape to Spain, where she thinks life would be different and she can make the dreams of her youth come true. Older people, especially Baby Boomers, typically challenge “identities and norms that earlier generations took for granted” (Barusch 52), reshaping outlooks toward later life (Moody 95). When she reaches middle age, just like other Boomers, Trudy considers breaking the pattern that she had created for herself by returning to her youthful dreams of traveling to Spain. She tells herself that she is going to start seeing herself as someone other than a wife and mother; to do so, she will create some agency and take that solo trip to Seville. However, creating agency and embarking on a new self suggest that Trudy can be brave enough to embrace the new version of herself and be willing to put herself first for a change, which is a radical challenge for her and may in fact be too radical a change.

At this point in her life, as she begins to revisit the dreams of her youth, Trudy can actually be considered old, too old to change her life. According to Regina Dilgen, ageism is widespread in America (63), especially for women like Trudy who have reached a certain point
in their lives when they have already accomplished what was expected of them, like having children and, in many cases, having careers. While ageism is invisible to many, not recognizing the prejudice and allowing it to continue normalizes it, perpetuating the problem. However, middle-aged female protagonists, like Trudy in *The Goddesses of Kitchen Avenue*, put a spotlight on older women who are still active and even plotting to begin again. Women do not merely disappear from the world once they reach a certain age, and their wants and needs fail to vanish as well. Even though Trudy initially feels like she is floundering after she separates from her husband and is no longer needed by her children, she evolves and embraces a different identity regardless of age. She even takes her neighbor, Angel, as a lover, emphasizing that sex is a possibility for middle-aged women. Roberta Maierhofer argues that ageing proves to be difficult at times for women, but age allows individualism to be expressed more blatantly than in youth (158), and linking gender and age offers women “a possible definition of identity, which accepts the notion that the subject is perpetually in flux” (162).

What some consider ageism is considered by others a “Second Adulthood” that offers new possibilities for growth and redefinition. This proves to be the case for Trudy, who aims to develop her career as a massage therapist, rebuild her relationship with her husband, and finally take that solo trip to Seville she has always wanted. In *50 is the New Fifty: 10 Life Lessons for Women in Second Adulthood*, Suzanne Braun Levine explains that, for middle-aged women, “life so far has been branded by responsibilities, objectives, and messages that frequently seemed irreconcilable forces: work and family. Independence and dependence. Fat and thin. Strength and accommodation. Love and success” (180). Initially, Trudy struggles with this crossroad in her life; she is unable to fully relinquish the obligations associated with being a wife and mother in
order to focus on things relevant to her, such as her career. Some women battle with two of the most common and most unwelcome losses of Second Adulthood, losing their job and getting divorced, something Trudy comes close to facing when she catches her husband cheating. Other middle-aged women, without the kids, feel “adrift” because the children gave their life structure, and without them, some women “no longer have any sense of time or place” (Lizer 203). However, the ending of a marriage, the children leaving, the loss of one’s job, as well as other possible changes during middle life offer women endless opportunities to redefine who they are and what they want for the future. Levine adds that “one of life’s delightful and empowering discoveries” for middle-aged women is “the sound of a new voice: [their] own” (33). They start actually doing all the things that they had been dreaming about and “feel more relaxed and better able to focus on their pleasure . . . and self-expression” (Levine 137). While Trudy struggles to completely tune out other influences, like her neighbor or her husband, she slowly begins to evolve and at least partially claim her own voice.

Trudy Marino’s journey to self-awareness parallels the current trend in fiction and plays written by older women to examine who they are as women of a certain age in this new world. Many older female writers detail middle-age life through memoirs and non-fiction works, offering Baby Boomer women clearer ideas of the benefits of moving into their “Second Adulthood.” According to Levine, “most women in Second Adulthood are very happy being where they are,” and “they don’t want to go back to any of their earlier stages or decades” (1). Even though women would all like to be stronger, fresher, and more admired (or at least respected) by the world we live in, few of them would like to be literally younger (1-2). While Trudy misses the security of her life with her husband and children, once she better understands
herself and what she wants, she feels more comfortable with her age and the possibilities it affords. For middle-aged women, what matters the most, according to Maria Mezari, is “reaching out and grabbing life and going on” (3). Trudy begins to especially embody this idea when she takes her solo trip to Seville, something she never believed herself capable of achieving after taking the more conventional route in life.

Trudy's journey to self-awareness is perhaps made possible by the privilege afforded her by her status as a white female in American culture. Like many of the individuals in contemporary non-fiction works and novels written by Baby Boomers, Trudy is a white woman, apparently of Irish ancestry, who has a job and even a house. However, similar to the American Adam, who is “emancipated from history” (Lewis 5), she appears to lack any awareness to an ancestral identity or familial history, which makes one wonder if contemporary women writers are attempting to write an “everywoman” type of character who blends in with any and all groups. This “everywoman” does not consider their race as a relevant trait that impacts her surroundings, economic status, or identity. Many of the characters in these novels are not wealthy, but they have privilege, and Trudy, even though she is considering divorcing her husband, does not appear concerned about what will happen to her finances once the marriage actually breaks up. This may be a fault with the writer who does not want to burden her readers with some of the facts of life in America for newly divorced women. Trudy has a job, but the novel does not place much emphasis on how Trudy will survive economically once she is divorced from her husband. This ability to ignore the economic side of life suggests that the character and perhaps even the writer cannot see beyond the white female character's privilege created by her race. Trudy does not have to worry about losing her job because she is not a
woman of color. As a white woman, she gets paid $0.79 for every $1 a white man makes. This basic fact of life in America should worry Trudy, but it does not appear to matter. Her African American counterpart makes $0.64 to that white man's $1, and the Hispanic counterpart to Trudy makes $0.56, which suggests that the African American and Hispanic characters would definitely have to worry about economic survival if they are faced with divorce. The white woman can afford to be a bit more nonchalant about it.

Economic disparity is just one of the social problems that Trudy is able to ignore because of her white privilege. Monica McDermott and Frank L. Samson explain that “although many nonwhites, especially African American, are confronted with their race on a daily basis, many whites do not think of themselves as really having a race at all” (248). Ethnic women “learn to measure [their] own lives against a battery of models provided by friends, schools, advertisements, movies, and television shows,” and these comparisons are often painful because they encourage them to see themselves as different; they can even affect the way they look at their cultures, their families, their bodies, and their future roles as adults (Gillan xiii). However, white women, and by extension white female protagonists like Trudy, often fail to recognize the importance of their own race, ancestry, or cultural background even as they cross into the lives of people of color. Trudy fancies herself blessed with friends who are people of color. Roberta is biracial, like Jade, and Shannelle is married to a Latino. Roberta, Jade, and Shannelle are minor characters in the text, but Samuel makes a point of incorporating these ethnic characters into a text in which the main character's own ethnicity or ancestry is not even considered. Once in the text, Trudy mentions that her daughter is wearing a long-sleeved T-shirt printed with a Celtic design because "she's very Celtic everything these days," and her daughter even asks Trudy if
“she could adopt [Trudy's] maiden name, O'Neal, instead of Marino” (36), her father's Italian name. At this point in the text, Samuel could have introduced the notion of Trudy's Irish ancestry and develop it further; however, she neglects this inquiry because, as Monica McDermott and Frank L. Samson point out, "whites do not think of themselves as really having a race at all” (248). This is a striking failure in the novel as the author who includes ethnic characters in the text completely ignores any sense of identity in Trudy and fails to prompt Trudy to see herself in the context of her race or cultural background.

As a white woman, Trudy appears to be open-minded as she surrounds herself with people of color. She is clearly not a racist, but she is a representative of a heteronormative white group accepted as the norm in Samuel's novel. She embraces diversity in her friends and even worships Yemaya, the goddess of African spirituality from the Caribbean among other goddesses; however, being friends with people of color and worshipping African goddesses do not encourage her to address her own ethnicity. While “cultural plurality may allow for enhancement of self,” it can also cause “one’s self to become unstable” (Legleitner 42). On the other hand, whiteness has been “normalized to such an extent that it is not racialized” (McKibbin 95), and it has been “specifically formulated . . . to lack markers of race, culture, and ethnicity” (97). More so, McDermott and Samson add that “whiteness, and the privileges associated with whiteness, remain invisible to many whites” (247-48). Trudy appears to believe that her whiteness or Irish heritage does not make up any part of her identity, old or new, which seems odd considering she clearly is not sheltered from other cultures. An in-depth analysis of The Goddesses of Kitchen Avenue must question how Trudy’s privilege affects the novel; it is
essential to understand what disregarding ethnicity or ancestry means in texts written by white women writers.

Studying or outlining the ethnicity of non-white female characters can provide them with different opportunities, new appreciation, or a fresh perspective. This is shown in the works of ethnic writers, such as Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* or Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*. These authors offer their female protagonists a path to understanding their place in the world through their own sense of who they are within a community. However, this is not available to white woman characters who typically have no sense of where they come from or have no interest in pursuing such a connection to their heritage. In this novel, as she ignores Trudy’s connection to her Irish ancestry, Samuel either suggests that ethnicity is not an important part of her work or she blatantly accepts the white narrative as the norm.

Since Boomer literature is a fairly new genre and Barbara Samuel’s works are not part of the traditional canon, little to no criticism is available; however, a few reviews of this novel exist. An unnamed reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* claims that *The Goddesses of Kitchen Avenue* is warmhearted but uneven, stressing abrupt cuts make for choppy reading; this reviewer also suggests that Samuel relies rather heavily on New Age homilies (*Publishers Weekly*). Yet, the reviewer adds that her characters are “warmly drawn and sympathetic, their problems real and believable” (*Publishers Weekly*). In an interview with Lisa Fletcher, Anne Gracie, an Australian author of historical romance novels, comments that, in Samuel’s novel, “ideas are explored,” and “beautiful language is encouraged.” Gracie also adds that *The Goddesses of Kitchen Avenue* tells a good story (qtd. in Fletcher 2). Another unnamed reviewer writing for *Kirkus Reviews* claims that the text is “well-meaning but weak and often silly” (*Kirkus*). However, Rachel Potter, for *All
About Romance, believes the book is “much more about tears than laughter” (Potter). She adds that Samuel’s writing is done well, making the book “a fully tactile experience” (Potter). The text’s “words are well chosen and evocative,” and “the emotions are there too,” allowing the reader to “feel the agony of betrayal, the bitterness of humiliation, and the frustration of goals long neglected or denied” (Potter). In addition, Potter claims “the book’s pacing is leisurely, and Samuel is able to take all of her characters on a developmental arc, chronicling their daily joys and sorrows” (Potter). Yet, while Samuel’s writing is strong, Potter claims that her content left some readers, like herself, cold (Potter). Consequently, Potter finds the novel a very frustrating read, especially because “the message of female empowerment was about as subtle as a neon sign” (Potter).

In The Goddesses of Kitchen Avenue, when she was younger, Trudy’s initial steps at creating her identity focused on breaking from social norms for women to pave her own path and escape her beginnings. In her hometown of Clovis, New Mexico, she watched other girls get married at young ages, have children, and grow fat, living the rest of their lives in “a gray between-place that seemed as barren . . . as the dry desert that swept away, vast and empty, from the edges of town” (Goddesses 72). Trudy never planned to get married, and she believed she was “immune to falling into the ordinary life of a woman, a wife, a mother” (75). She knew she did not want “a life made up of Tupperware parties and the slightly wild desperation” (72) she saw in those women’s eyes. Young Trudy attempts to focus on her need to escape the small world of Clovis to find a bigger and more challenging life for herself. At times, she even laid in her bed, “sweating in terror and the heat, trying to imagine where [she] could go, what [she] could do” (72). According to Diane Reay, class “determine[s] life-chances” (924), and Geoff
Payne and Clare Grew add that class is “deeply embedded in everyday interactions, in institutional processes, in struggles over identity, validity, self-worth and integrity even when it is not acknowledged” (909). Trudy desperately wants to leave the confines of her home, but her poor upbringing and limited opportunities make things difficult; people like her “didn’t really go to college” (Goddesses 72). Unfortunately, even though she makes it farther than she thought she would, making it through her undergraduate years at college, she does not end up much different than those Clovis women she was trying to escape from so desperately. While she does attend college and graduates, Trudy ends up married and pregnant, keeping her from graduate school and forcing her to redevelop her identity, which now embraces more traditional roles of wife and mother. For twenty plus years, Trudy takes care of the home and children, finding missing homework assignments and lost mittens and “spend[ing] at least two hours a week planning menus and shopping for” her family (10). After the separation from her husband, with her children all basically grown, she sees this version of herself as “pathetic and victimish” (111), “a mother finished . . . a wife dismissed” (12), which causes her difficulty when she initially attempts to understand her new place in the world and the need to redefine her identity.

In the novel, Trudy defines herself through different relationships in her life; one of her most significant relationships is with her husband, which initially, after she kicks him out, makes her question her past and what happened to her life. After separating, Trudy acknowledges that Rick was her “furnace,” and without him, she is “turning into an icicle” (Goddesses 9). She struggles to accept that Rick is in love with somebody else as she continues to mourn him as if he had died. She recognizes that she thinks about him and misses him every day, making it more difficult for her to move on. Trudy knows she needs to “just get on with things, be a grown-up,”
but she realizes she does not want to (67). She seems to relish in wallowing in her sorrows, possibly because it allows her to avoid moving forward with her own life. In addition, Trudy regularly feels pangs of jealousy, making her feel petty because it is such a self-centered emotion. However, Trudy is not alone in her feelings; many women in Trudy’s situation, seen in film and television, on social media, and in real life, often feel pangs of jealousy, along with other feelings, like abandonment and loneliness. As time passes, Trudy eventually begins to revisit her past choices and goals, which included not pursuing her master’s degree or taking that trip to Spain. Due to her relationship with Rick and an impending pregnancy, Trudy dropped out of college, and she is furious with herself for giving up so much to be with Rick and thinking it was “enough to keep [him] happy” (294). Initially, Trudy fails to regret her choices, but when Rick “pulled the rug out from under” her by cheating (294), she has a change of heart. She begins to recognize that Rick has not been very supportive of her personal goals during recent years. It took two years to convince him that she really wanted to focus on massage therapy, that “it wasn’t some fleeting interest” (192). After some reflection and recognition of her new reality, Trudy acknowledges that she had not been happy, and she had begun to resent all that she had given up to be with Rick. A person with “a successfully achieved sense of individual identity feels unique, whole and coherent” (Gardiner 349). Unfortunately, as much as she loves her husband and her children, prior to the separation, Trudy never fully developed her own individual identity, leaving her feeling more lost and incomplete when she finds herself alone.

While her relationship with Rick allows her to see where she came from, it also emphasizes how she currently feels about herself, a 46-year-old single woman and mother, as she struggles to understand her new reality. Even though he cheated, Trudy has a hard time “actively
hating Rick” (42). Even when he deserves it, Trudy is unable to be mean to Rick in any way because “how can you be cruel to someone you’ve been focused on taking care of for twenty-four years?” (59). Instead, she initially blames herself for not working hard enough to maintain her marriage by “worrying every second about her hair or keeping herself perfect” (39). Instead, she regularly thinks about her own flaws that could have led to the end of her marriage, things like her wrinkles, her chipped fingernails that she never painted, her unpainted lips, her lack of a “plunging neckline,” or her “sagging rear end” (39). Angela McRobbie explains that the “emphasis on vigilant attention being paid to heteronormative desirability on the part of the wife and mother . . . functions to encourage marital fidelity and hence family stability” (131). Trudy believes she is responsible for the end of her marriage even though Rick is the one who cheated. However, as time passes, Trudy’s attitude towards Rick and the separation change. She claims that Rick Marino is an idiot, and she hates him for being so threatened by her quest to find out who she might be for the rest of her life, so much so, that he ran into the arms of “a nice, nonthreatening bartender who never went to college” (163). After finally recognizing that the end of her marriage was not solely her doing, she begins to understand her need to move forward with her own life. She no longer wants to live with issues so unsettled. Gaining in confidence, Trudy tells Rick he can no longer just stop by without notice, and that she is not going to pine away for him while he is out with “‘another woman, getting laid’” (293). In addition, Trudy’s decision to go to Seville emphasizes her want to move forward and become a new version of herself, which focuses on her goals and wants.

By the conclusion, Trudy’s relationship with Rick comes full circle with a reconciliation between the two, providing her the ability to redefine who she is individually and with a partner.
When Rick and Trudy begin to reconnect, she initially feels comfortable just being friends because she would have a hard time imagining a life without him in it. However, she is tempted at one point to let herself “take this beautiful, sexy man upstairs” to her room, to fall back into her old routine and the old version of herself, but she recognizes that she would “be right back to square one” if she did (128). According to Neil Howe, Boomers, like Trudy, are “redefining” middle-age life and retirement, pushing for new opportunities and options that previous generations did not have (Howe); Trudy begins to embrace this possibility for redefinition. As time passes, Trudy begins to feel like a new version of herself, but it is not until she and Rick truly reconcile that she feels “alight with possibilities . . . hope . . . for the first time in months” (268). Her potential for happiness and her identity remain connected to Rick because being with him is as close to heaven as she can be and her love for him “goes down through the soles of [her] feet,” “through the marrow of [her] bones” (243). However, getting back together with Rick causes Trudy to slightly regress in her progress in developing her own individual identity. Initially after reconnecting with Rick, she believes she should cancel her solo trip to Seville, which emphasizes her inability to fully develop an identity all her own. Instead of worrying about her own wants and needs, Trudy sees a chance for them, which she is unwilling to let pass. Adding to this regression, even though Rick was the one who cheated, after reuniting, Trudy reverts back to blaming herself for their marital woes, stating that she was pulling away from him and she was not a very good wife at times. Trudy has the opportunity to truly redefine her identity for the second half of her life, but she falls short due to her inability to fully develop an identity separate from her partner.
While Trudy’s relationship with her husband is likely the most significant relationship in terms of Trudy’s identity, her connection with Angel, her new neighbor, helps Trudy recognize her sexuality and the possibility of finding new relationships or lovers. While Angel is fifteen years younger than she is, Trudy feels her “limbs fill with sunshine” and feels “giddy as a sixth-grader” (38) as she realizes she is attracted to him. However, she worries that he is “too young, too beautiful, too everything” for her (130); Trudy feels guilty for even entertaining the idea and questions how foolish it is to even think of a liaison with someone so much younger than herself (224). This feeling stems from belief that “older women who display behaviors seen as overtly sexual by their communities are more likely to be viewed as behaving inappropriately” (Chepngen-Langat 96). Even more so, being older makes her feel like she is no longer as physically appealing as she once was, Trudy worries that she is “imagining that he is attracted” to her (134). Kari Lizer points out that some older women do date younger men to make them feel younger, but for some, the experience only makes them feel older (245). Yet, after everything with Rick and her own insecurities, Trudy believes her time with Angel and his kindness towards her does her “wounded soul some good” (Goddesses 130), causing her to feel “light and relief” (243). In addition, spending time with Angel makes her recognize and appreciate a new feeling in her body, “a sense of wanting someone else,” which gives her “relief from wanting the one [she] cannot have anymore” (134). Roberta Maierhofer adds that the acceptance of one’s own sexuality “is a step towards female self definition” (166), emphasizing the significance of Trudy’s time with Angel in developing herself as she moves into second adulthood. Trudy sees her behavior as decadent and unlike her, but she feels that her time with Angel is quite wonderful and proves beneficial for her personal growth (Goddesses 239).
In addition to helping awaken Trudy’s sexuality and hope for a romantic future, Angel proves essential in aiding Trudy to understand who she wants to be and what she wants for the next phase of her life. Angel makes her feel like “somebody again” (294), not just a wife and mother, but someone with her own wants and needs. When she sleeps with Angel, Trudy’s “orgasm splits [her] in two” taking her to “the other side of [her] life,” dividing her into the “Trudy who was and the Trudy who will be” (198). After this significant sexual experience, Trudy recognizes that she can never fully go back to the way things used to be, the way she used to be. Unfortunately, like many women, she struggles to retain this new sense of self, especially when faced with the possibility of returning to the status quo, something she had been yearning for prior to her experience with Angel. When a possible reconciliation with Rick appears, she claims she cannot go on her trip because she needs to work on her marriage. However, Angel quickly attempts to reestablish Trudy’s new independence by asking Trudy who she would be if she gives up all she is for love, stressing that “a true love lets the lovers bloom” (289) and does not hinder either partner from being himself/herself within a relationship. Levine explains that “with increasing clarity about what we need to do for ourselves, we find that our relationships with others need some adjustments” (17). This proves correct for Trudy’s relationship with Rick, as well as with Angel. Even though she puts an end to their physical relationship, Angel feels no anger or jealousy; rather, he continues to support Trudy and help her understand the woman she is inside, “the one who has been hiding” (291). To help Trudy better understand herself and her possible future, Angel stresses she is “so many things,” and that Rick loves her, the new Trudy, so “let her free . . . do not send her away. Not for any man” (Godesses 290). According to Maierhofer, accepting one’s new place in life is “a step from silence to narration, from negating
to accepting one’s own feelings and needs” (159). Trudy’s personal development supports this idea; she is finally speaking her mind and aiming to fulfill her own goals. However, Trudy’s need to rely on Angel’s guidance and her quick reaction to give up new plans for the possibility of reconciliation with Rick further emphasize her inability to fully develop her own independent identity, which may be one of the weaknesses that serious readers find in romance novels in which women characters often drop everything for love.

While she is shaped by her romantic relationships, Trudy also spends a good part of her life identifying as a mother, but this begins to change after the separation and as her children get older, making her feel less needed and unsure of who she is. Trudy loves her three children and devoted herself to raising them. She “gave a lot to [her] kids” (Goddesses 316), and she sacrificed her own ambitions, like earning her master’s degree, because she never really had time with all her responsibilities. Similar to other women who become mothers and allowed that to become their dominating identity, Trudy is seen as “such a mom,” wearing “dowdy skirts” with her “hair up in a bun” (286), paying little attention to how she dresses or looks. Trudy struggles with the fact that her two oldest children moved out and started their lives. However, she still has her daughter, Annie, living at home, who will be graduating soon. Annie is still very much a teenager, and she often spends most of her time not at home, and she eats at school, at her restaurant job, or with her boyfriend, leaving Trudy on her own with no one to mother. Kari Lizer argues in Aren’t You Forgetting Someone? that, after the children leave the home, mothers deal with phone calls going unanswered and texts not being returned, which is supposed to be “a good sign” of children moving into adulthood but causes mothers to become frantic (32). Nora Ephron adds that when mothers reach middle age they are still a parent, but their “parenting days
are over” (63), which usually causes identity issues for older women, including Trudy. When Trudy attempts to get more involved in Annie’s life, Annie tells Trudy to “‘get a life’” (Goddesses 110), which makes Trudy question why she is not moving forward with her life. The answer of course lies in her failure to construct an identity separate from her role as mother or wife.

Even though her role as a mother is changing, Trudy eventually begins to understand that, having raised her children, she now has more time to rediscover herself and what she wants. After the separation, she recognizes that her connection with her kids is changing because they are practically grown and no longer need her. She initially struggles with the fact that the mommy part of her life is over. However, after some time, this idea no longer grieves her, and instead, she wonders what life will be like in the future. In 50 Is the New Fifty, Suzanne Braun Levine claims that, when mothers let go of their children, they “find [them]selves” (89). Being free from the responsibilities of motherhood offers women, including Trudy, more options, more time, and more possibilities. Trudy wants to find out what her new life looks like and relishes in thinking about new opportunities, like studying Spanish in Spain. Initially, Annie is resistant to the change in her mother, but Trudy quickly points out that “‘not everyone thinks your mother is over the hill’” (Goddesses 133), and that she has “‘a right to live as a woman’” (133). Instead of “‘putting [herself] on a shelf’” (132) to make her children comfortable, Trudy aims to embrace her new life and develop her new identity beyond the confines of motherhood.

Beyond her relationship with her children, Trudy’s identity also develops through her connections with close friends; Trudy’s relationship with her childhood neighbor, Lucille, leaves a lasting impact on Trudy, but it is not until after the separation that Trudy begins to fully
embrace Lucille’s teachings while also understanding her own wants in becoming a new woman. When they first met, Trudy had never seen anyone like Lucille in her life with a “bracelet of bells around her ankle,” her “long gray hair tied in a braid,” and a “face as wise and lined as a river goddess” (73). Lucille’s zest for life, filled with “exotic clothes” and “great love affairs,” influences the young Trudy, teaching her to dream and prodding her to imagine the life she most wanted (73). Lucille becomes Trudy’s friend and her mentor, “the single most influential person” Trudy had met in her life (73). She even fosters Trudy’s desire to study Spanish and travel the world by leaving her money in her will to allow Trudy to move forward with her plans.

However, reality sets in after she meets Rick and gets pregnant, and Trudy is unable to fully embrace the life or the identity she initially planned. Maierhofer argues that women “can often be faulted for not having taken action, for having repressed their own wishes and needs in favour of others” (159). In order to care for her family, Trudy pushes her own wants and wishes to the side, believing she will never get the chance to travel or do any other things she planned to do. Most of her adulthood showed her that she wanted to be Lucille, but she lacked her courage; when she was young, she was unwilling to break from social expectations to embrace other possibilities in her life besides family. This fails to be surprising, considering that many women feel the societal pressure to make their spouses and children their sole priorities. Entering middle age, women, including Trudy, begin to understand that they lost control of their lives if they ever really had it to begin with (Levine 16). After her husband and most of her children leave, Trudy finally comes to terms with the fact that she did lose control and herself a long time ago, which is further emphasized by Lucille’s ghost, who pays Trudy a visit to tell her it is “‘time to take [your life] back, kiddo’” (Goddesses 4). After several trials and obstacles, Trudy acknowledges she has
a little bit of Lucille inside her, such as “a sense of adventure and passion for new things and new places” (258), which she is more eager to embrace as she works to redefine herself for second adulthood.

In addition to Lucille, Trudy is close with three women, Jade, Shannelle, and Roberta, and each helps Trudy understand herself and develop her identity; Jade shows Trudy the importance of being strong, especially during difficult times. Jade is in her thirties and dealing with her recent divorce from “a two-bit hustler who has a way with women” (30). Life has been hard on her, and she wears a “mask of toughness” to protect herself (20). Even though she initially struggles to stop caring for her ex-husband, she moves a thousand miles away from him and “resolves not to let him get to” her (30). Besides telling Trudy that “it helps to say fuck a lot’” (21), Jade aims to feel normal again by moving forward with her life. She takes a position as a foster-care liaison, helping individuals in more dire situations than her own, and by training to be a boxer, which allows her to get out her feelings of anger and frustration. Emotionally and physically, Jade wants to be strong, and by the conclusion, when she is able to move forward with her life, even get in the ring with another boxer, she feels “powerful and alive” (235).

Besides being a model of strength for Trudy, when Trudy asks if all the hardships were worth it, Jade argues “how could I be where I am,’’ a new place with new opportunities, if not for the challenges (85), furthering motivating Trudy to push through the obstacles and hardships to find a stronger version of herself. Elizabeth Abel argues that novels that address friendships between women reveal that “identification replaces complementarity as the psychological mechanism that draws women together” (415). Trudy’s friendships with other women play a crucial role in her development and stress the importance of female connection to women readers.
Besides what she learns from Jade, Trudy begins to understand the importance of reaching for her goals after witnessing Shannelle’s drive and sacrifices in order to become a writer, causing Trudy to reevaluate what she wants for her future. In her early twenties, Shannelle, married with children, longs to be a writer and escape her white trash upbringing. She argues that writing satisfies her “on some level that nothing else can” (*Goddesses* 15). Unfortunately, her husband is jealous of the writing, and he keeps saying they have so much that it is selfish for her to want more. Shannelle appreciates and recognizes they do have a great life, but she just feels like she gives a lot to her family, so it does not hurt anything for her to have something that is hers, quintessential “room of one’s own” syndrome. She is sick of everybody telling her what she is and should do and be. She believes that, if she gives writing up, she will not be her anymore, so she nevertheless persists, arguing that she has to give it everything she has so that, when she is older, she can say she did her best. Trudy initially thinks that Shannelle is “going to get her heart broken” (62), but after witnessing Shannelle’s strength and determination to fulfill her goal, regardless of any obstacles, she realizes that, if Shannelle can be that brave, so can she. Trudy acknowledges she would have been happier if she would have kept going to complete school and travel as she originally planned. She claims that not following one’s own ambitions “‘haunt[s] you every single day if you don’t do it’” (231). By the end, Shannelle’s need to establish her own career and follow her own aspirations inspires Trudy to realize her own goals, like taking that solo trip to Seville.

Beyond Shannelle’s influence on Trudy’s future ambitions, Roberta, through her strong commitment to her husband, helps Trudy understand her need for romantic love in her life. Roberta recently lost her husband of sixty-two years, Edgar, whom she loved “more than God”
(17). He was sick for a while, but she had “to let him go” (8). Even though they had their share of dark times, Roberta claims “there is not a single minute” (144) she does not think about her Edgar, and she believes that her life will be “nothing without him” (8). While watching Roberta mourn, Trudy recognizes how “hollowed out” Roberta is, like Edgar took “a big chunk of her with him” (63). Trudy sees how important Roberta and Edgar were to one another, but she initially “walked away,” “blocked her,” or “changed the subject” (66) when Roberta attempted to speak with her about her relationship with Rick. However, observing Roberta, her relationship with Edgar, and her behavior after Edgar’s passing, Trudy understands her need for romantic love and what it takes to commit to someone. Trudy must find a balance between committing to a partner and keeping a sense of herself and her independence. Otherwise, she will likely fall back into past behaviors and relationship patterns, stifling her growth and potential for the future.

Trudy’s relationships with her friends are significant, but her lack of connection with her parents emphasizes the importance of Trudy’s own family to her, especially as she struggles with changes to her immediate family structure since kicking her husband out. In addition, it also stresses Trudy’s disconnect from her ancestry, which further accentuates the lack of importance she places on her race and Irish culture. While Trudy lives in Colorado, Trudy’s parents live in Clovis, New Mexico, which does not allow for frequent visits. Neither Trudy nor her parents appear overly eager to visit more often; they typically only “check in once a month” (61). The last time she saw them was three years ago, and no one was in “any hurry to schedule a new date” (61). Ironically, Trudy mentions that her mother-in-law, a stereotypically mean figure, is “a lot warmer—and closer” than her own mother, who “spends her time complaining about [her] lot in life” (60), likely one of the reasons Trudy stays away. Adding to that, her parents represent her
poor upbringing, something that Trudy seems to be trying to get away from her whole life. According to Maria Mazziotti Gillan and Jennifer Gillan, “most basic to our identities is our sense of origins” (xiv), but Trudy is detached from her parents and home, clearly creating a disconnect between her and her Irish ancestry because, even if she does not seem to be aware of this, her parents represent her ancestral connection to Ireland. Her irreparable relationship with her parents affects her own sense of herself as Irish in America. Maria Mazziotti Gillan and her daughter, Jennifer Gillan, claim in the Introduction to Identity Lessons that women of different races and cultures “feel loyal to [their] homes and families” (xviii). This loyalty, however, does not exist for Trudy whose relationship with her parents is not very good. Judy Kutulas claims that, even though people from the Baby Boomer generation were raised to conform, the “many revolutions of the sixties altered their personal trajectories,” and this is especially true for white, college-educated, middle-class Boomers, like Trudy, who had more opportunities than people from other cultures to break from familial commitments, responsibilities, and expectations (Kutulas 682).

Predominately through relationships and her attempts to reject social norms and traditions, Trudy builds a new identity as she enters the middle stage of her life. Throughout the text, Trudy questions how she could be “‘so old and not know anything’” (273) about herself and what she truly wants out of life, which provokes her to start looking at her life and her choices. Knowing she does not want to be just a secretary or just a wife and mother anymore, Trudy stops resisting the idea that change is necessary and important to her growth as an individual; instead, she begins to see the benefits of a new life and a new her that allows her time to indulge in her own interests, “to learn new things” (130), and “to worry only about” herself (98). Trudy finally
sees the chance for reassessment and redefinition of her life where she can “do anything,” “go anywhere,” and “be anybody” (123). She finally begins to love this new vision of herself as “a woman who can set out on her own, see what she wants to see” (259), and once in Seville, Trudy recognizes that this is all she ever wanted. Life provided her with riches, children, a husband, and a greenhouse, but without her own independence and identity, something she was able to establish and redefine moving into her second adulthood, her “life was unbalanced” (324). However, the process of growing as an individual and achieving “self-discovery can feel like selfishness,” which, for many people, is something to be ashamed of, so they back off (Levine 104). Trudy frequently believes she is selfish for wanting to make changes to her life and redefine her identity; she worries about her children’s reactions, especially Annie’s, and how it might negatively impact Rick. These feelings of guilt are a part of what holds Trudy back from fully embracing the new and independent version of herself. In addition, as much as Trudy grows and develops herself and her life, her need to rely on Rick’s or Angel’s guidance hinders her from evolving into a fully independent identity. However, fully redefined identity or not, she still has a strong level of “protection” due to her status as a middle-class white woman; she never, even with the possibility of divorce, worries about financial concerns, and she remains unbothered by issues of race that would monopolize the lives of ethnic women.
CHAPTER TWO

THE BETTE DAVIS CLUB

_The Bette Davis Club_ (2013) by Jane Lotter offers a look at Boomer female identity by concentrating on Margo Just, a middle-aged woman allowing her past and her addictions to dictate her future and how she sees herself, but a chance incident sets her on a cross-country adventure, which offers Margo the opportunity to deal with family and relationship issues and embrace a happier and healthier version of herself. When Margo’s niece turns into a runaway bride, Margo, along with the jilted fiancé, sets out to bring her home. Through her relationships with family, friends, and partners and her ability to face the realities of her past and her own personal demons, Margo starts her journey of initiation in order to reconstruct her identity, allowing her to be more comfortable with the past and optimistic about the future. While she is independent and does not necessarily rely on a man, it is not until some of the male characters share hard truths about her and her life that Margo comes to understand that she is hiding from the world and needs to make some changes.

Born in 1952, Baby Boomer Lotter is a little-known women’s fiction writer, having only published one book, _The Bette Davis Club_. She is part of a group of female authors that are creating texts classified as Boomer literature, works relevant to middle-aged Boomer women and their experiences. Before passing away in 2013, she worked as an editor, freelance writer, and proofreader (“Jane”). Lotter wrote greeting card jingles, blurbs for real estate magazines,
articles for community distribution, and a regular column in a local paper in Seattle (“Final Chapter”); regardless of the style or type, she found time to write while being a stay-at-home mom (“Final Chapter”). When treatment failed to cure her metastasized uterine cancer, Lotter, like other Boomers, proved unwilling to sit idly by, so she turned to fiction and finished writing a novel she worked on for about a decade (“Final Chapter”). She refused to let the cancer stop her because “she wanted to keep writing. She wanted to have a late-life career as a novelist” (“Final Chapter”). Further emphasizing her Boomer determination, when no one would publish the book, Lotter published it through Amazon’s self-publishing service, Kindle Direct Publishing, with help from family and friends (“Final Chapter”).

Since Lotter only wrote this one novel and Boomer literature is still a moderately new genre, no scholarship is available; however, a few reviews of the novel exist. Amanda Kassner explains that The Bette Davis Club is “a really fun read” because there is “a little romance, a little mystery, and a lot of old-time Hollywood references” (Kassner). In addition, the protagonist’s struggles are relatable, and the adventure she takes is extraordinary (Kassner). Another reviewer, Ceillie Simkiss, claims the novel was “a ride from beginning to end,” offering something “a little bit wacky and a whole lot of fun” (Simkiss). However, she explains that, initially, the characters are not likable because they seem ridiculous, but as the story continues, the character development is amazing, allowing readers to see each character’s growth, and the characters become more realistic (Simkiss). Deanna Lynn Sletten agrees that the novel was a “delight to read,” explaining that the characters are written with expertise and the storyline “keeps you turning the page” (Sletten). According to Mike Finn, The Bette Davis Club is “a fun, original road-trip novel with surprising emotional depth” (Finn). Margo Just’s backstory “adds
emotional weight to what could have been just another light comedy” (Finn). Looking at the novel from a different angle, an unnamed reviewer from *Universe in Words* claims that “Lotter slowly unpacks what’s truly behind the glitz and glam of the Hollywood world. The rush for money, the profit over quality-mentality that Hollywood seems to be dominated by nowadays . . . without the book becoming moralizing” (“Review”). In addition, the text addresses the major role that addiction, to drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, plays in a person’s life (“Review”). In her review of the novel, Ardis Atkins states it is “fun, fast-paced, and fabulous” and keeps the reader wanting to read further (Atkins). She adds that this work is not just a fluffy piece of literature, offering a “great balance between screwball comedy and sober introspection” (Atkins).

Boomer literature is a relatively new literary genre that is typically written by middle-aged women for middle-aged women. In most cases, works in this genre include stories focusing on older characters in contemporary settings addressing obstacles and experiences Boomers are currently facing in today’s world. Boomer literature often discusses the changing goals and ambitions of older individuals in their second adulthoods. It also aims to challenge common stereotypes of ageing, especially for women, and expectations of what is age-appropriate. With a longer-living population of Boomers, it is not surprising that they would want media and literature to reflect their own interests and concerns; they want characters they can relate to and empathize with. In addition, Boomer literature appears to be particularly significant for middle-age women who likely spent most of their lives stifled by conventional gender roles and traditional social expectations; this genre demonstrates the possibilities of growth and development for Boomer women’s lives and identities.
Boomer literature provides an apt location to address issues about identity, especially for middle-aged Boomer women. According to William Strauss and Neil Howe, whatever age bracket Boomers have occupied has been “the cultural and spiritual focal point for American society as a whole” (301), making them continually relevant even as they move into the next phase of their lives. Many Boomers started out as “feed-on demand Dr. Spock babies, then grew into the indulged Beaver Cleavers of the ‘50s, then the college and inner-city rioters of the late ‘60s, and finally ended up as the young family-values moms and dads of the ‘80s” (Howe), but as they enter the second half of their lives, Boomers, especially women, face new challenges and new opportunities for redefinition. Through their adulthood, and moving into the second half of their lives, Boomers were and are on a “quest for ‘self’” (Strauss 302). While some may choose to stick to the status quo, fearful of change, others are eager to embrace the opportunity for transformation and growth. This is especially true for a number of Boomer women who may have fallen into the trappings of conventionality during the first part of their adulthood; they became wives and mothers and then did not know where to go from there. In Margo's case, she initially is not seeking any kind of alteration to her life; unhappy as she is, she is complacent and unwilling to put forth the effort to make any changes. Instead, the “quest for ‘self’” is thrust upon her when her niece decides to jilt her fiancé and run off with important documents. In order to keep the whole thing quiet, Margo's sister hires her to bring her daughter back and gives her their father's 1955 MG TE to make the trip. The story then becomes a classic American automobile trek across the country not by people who are being chased by the police, as in *Thelma and Louise*, but by people in search of something important, and all of it is connected to Margo's past, to her father's car, his writing career, and Margo's memories of him and what his choices
meant for her. Curiously, Margo makes this journey into self-knowledge at a very advanced age, so this is a peculiar journey of initiation; however, her middle-aged status makes her a relatable female character for women readers to connect with.

Boomer literature also provides an appropriate place to discuss ageism, an issue that many middle-aged Boomer women face. In the real world, older people face discrimination because of their age. According to Roberta Maierhofer, there is a particular focus on female ageing, which has become “a paradigm of American culture” (158). Unlike men, women appear to face more hardships because of ageing, causing them to question their appearance, their behavior, and their general identities. This is because ageing “questions the definition of identity,” emphasizing what is essential and what is changeable (158). To assist middle-aged women in better understanding themselves and the possibilities of redefinition, women’s fiction provides relatable protagonists who find themselves in similar age-related situations as older female readers. In a number of works, female characters find “strength to express themselves to the outer world” (159) regardless of their age. This happens because the female protagonists turn “toward the self” (159) in order to understand their pasts and their hopes for the future. For women readers, these fictional accounts offer optimistic possibilities and emphasize that age provides opportunities to “liberat[e] the self” from “narrow social boundaries” (166). Margo does not have to worry about “narrow social boundaries” because those boundaries have never concerned her. This is after all a woman who fell in love with a gay man and remained true to him for life, even mourning his absence as she drives through the country in chase of her niece and her father's movie script. Margo's turn toward the self involves her opening up to information that she has always denied herself. She has to figure out why she drinks, what it is
that makes her “destroy things” (Lotter 300) and, by extension, why she cannot let herself be happy. By successfully turning toward the self, Margo has the opportunity for growth and a more optimistic future, while also providing a positive example for female readers that, as scary as change can be, it can also bring rewards and benefits.

For most of her life, Margo Just identifies as an orphan, someone with no real connections or a sense of being wanted, causing her to seek out unsuitable partners and find solace in things, like smoking and drinking. Karl Zender argues that there are two forms of identity, “the one a person is born to (‘received identity’) and the one . . . she creates (‘achieved identity’)” (64). Unfortunately, Margo allows her “received identity” to stifle and limit any hope of an “achieved identity” for most of her adulthood. Throughout her life, often due to the deaths of her parents when she was young, she feels lonely and clueless, not truly knowing how to navigate life; she has no real family to turn to as she grows up, so she has no one from whom she can seek guidance. In addition, she often feels damaged due to her upbringing, causing her to feel self-conscious and underserving of any good things that happen to her, which also emphasizes the likely reasoning for her poor life choices. However, while she recognizes that her “whole life is trouble” (8), she fails to acknowledge her role in all of it and her inability to let go of the past. In her younger years, she felt like a naïve young girl, but even in middle age, she retains her “‘girlish innocence’” (20), particularly in her ability to face the real world and her own personal demons. Because she gives up her job, and basically her whole life, to take care of Finn Coyle and she is unwilling, just as he was, to sell any items from her architecture salvage business, which was originally owned by Finn, her world currently revolves around “‘money—the lack of it’” (102), causing her to feel lost and that every day of her life is an emergency. Her
inability to recognize the realities of the past and let go of her attachment to Finn keep Margo “stuck in the past, stuck emotionally” (253). Amanda Smith Barusch argues that individuals’ “possible selves are influenced by history and by changes in life circumstances” (50). This proves especially true for Margo who feels as if her past hardships, including her banishment to England, and family issues dictate her life and choices. Unable to initially pull herself out of her self-imposed “woe is me” attitude, she claims she is “the survivor of a shipwrecked life,” someone with no support or hope for a better future, making her feel as if she has “nothing left to give” (Lotter 9).

An important foundation for Boomer literature is American women’s fiction. Rebecca Vnuk and Nanette Donohue explain, in addition to being written by a female writer, women’s fiction typically focuses on a female protagonist where “the main thrust of the story is something happening in the life of that woman” (viii). Also, these works are often character-driven with special attention given to the main character’s emotions and relationships. Vnuk and Donohue stress that the main appeals of women’s fiction are character and story line because “readers identify with women’s fiction characters” (x). These characteristics of women’s fiction are the same as those found in Boomer literature; the significant difference is that Boomer literature focuses on middle-age women and their life experiences rather than younger women and their lives. Elaine Showalter explains that women’s fiction usually includes a search for identity, which leads to self-discovery for many women (13). Regardless of age, the quest for understanding about oneself proves to be crucial to female identity development and a sense of fulfillment, but this journey, regularly depicted in Boomer literature, proves to be particularly important for older women who, entering middle age, finally have an opportunity to redefine
themselves, to be who they want to be, after living within the confines of traditional gender roles and social conventions for so long. Writing about the work of 19th-century women writers, Nina Baym argues that understanding women, their needs, and their lives “allows for sympathy, common action, and by definition changes one’s personal mindset” (xv-xvi). Baym's book focuses on the work of women writers who were writing at a time when very few women could even read, but she argues for the significance of stories written by women because, according to her, women’s fiction advocates individualism and performs “emancipatory work by persuading women readers to insist on their right to personhood” (xx-xxi). Baym connected the work of early women writers with the possibility that women readers would somehow be encouraged to demand their rights. In 2013, when Lotter published *The Bette Davis Club*, women had already demanded their rights, but the significant message from Baym's text remains the suggestion that by reading about the lives of people like themselves, women readers would learn important things about themselves, possibly offering a different perspective, a new appreciation, or encouragement to make a change. Patricia Meyer Spacks builds on this idea, emphasizing that “a special female self-awareness” (3) emerges through women’s literature, regardless of time period. In 2013, Margo Just learns that her journey to personhood includes her ability to demythologize her memory of her father and, by extension, her willingness to understand why she fell so madly in love with a gay man who could never love her in the way she wanted to be loved. Lotter’s novel provides female readers with relatable issues and struggles, and Margo’s ability to overcome her self-imposed limitations and grasp on to a better and brighter future offers women readers hope and possibility for their own growth and development, especially for
those that are moving into their second adulthoods. This emphasizes Karen Tracey’s argument that characters have purpose, and plots are “not just stories to while away the time” (2). Instead, stories, like those depicted in women’s fiction and Boomer literature, may “wield the cultural power to change reality” (2), particularly for middle-aged women.

Margo Just is already an adult by the time she begins her journey to self-discovery, so her trek across America in her late father's car cannot be read as a traditional bildungsroman. She is not Jane Eyre or Esperanza from The House on Mango Street. Her formative years have effectively passed her by without providing her a clear understanding of who she was in her own world, so she is a woman of a certain age with limited understanding of why she behaves the way she does, which includes choosing to fall in love with a gay man and then remain friends with him even after she learns that he prefers men. She tells herself that smart and engaging dialogue with a man is “extremely erotic” because “cleverness is an aphrodisiac” (Lotter 202), but she ignores the fact that her dedicating herself to a man who cannot love her leaves her without love, unable to move forward in her life. She effectively sacrifices her emotional development as a woman and any real chance for her own happiness when she chooses to stay true to Finn. Barbara Macdonald points out that older women are often willing to sacrifice their own happiness because society stereotypically defines them “as needy, simple-minded, and helpless” (49) and makes their lives invisible, but she suggests that women’s fiction offers opportunities for clarification and better understanding of female second adulthood. This is what Lotter's novel provides when Margo must get into the car with her niece's jilted fiancé and chase her niece across the country in order to retrieve the items that her niece stole from her own mother. This automobile trip across America in chase of her niece becomes Margo's journey of
initiation into her self, even if she performs this task at a very advanced age, showcasing that women can make changes in their lives and develop their identities regardless of age. Novels such as *The Bette Davis Club* are necessary in order to help middle-aged female readers understand that they do not need to settle for anything in life, even if they feel stuck in a life that they did not choose for themselves or felt that, from one reason or another, they could not, or should not, escape from.

Margo Just's journey to self-awareness, as well as the stories of other middle-aged female protagonists in this study, builds on the current trend in novels written by older women to examine who they are as women of a certain age in this new world. Numerous memoirs and non-fiction texts written by older female writers outline the positivity of later life experiences, providing Baby Boomer women with the benefits of ageing and transitioning into a new phase of life. A main idea stressed by these authors is that second adulthood offers a path to better understanding what is important in life. In *50 is the New Fifty: 10 Life Lessons for Women in Second Adulthood*, Suzanne Braun Levine explains that the second half of life provides “the promise of moving ahead” to find and understand what matters (16). It is important to note that these writers want female readers to recognize that there is “no right way to do second adulthood” (181). However, there are rewards for women who are willing to embrace and grow from the changes that come with getting older. Levine claims that these women will finally be in charge of themselves (18). This is exactly what happens to Margo at the end of the novel after she lets go of her obsession with her father's work and allows herself to love a man who is not gay. She takes charge of her life, but to do so, she must reach an understanding and sobriety. Once in charge, Margo can let go of social pressures, norms, and responsibilities. Kari Lizer, in
Aren’t You Forgetting Someone?, claims that second adulthood allows women to do exactly what they want and, more importantly, not do anything they do not want to do (137). As more women free themselves from former responsibilities, like for example raising children, they have more time to do what interests them. Boomer works, like The Bette Davis Club, and texts like these memoirs continue to express the importance of development and redefinition of middle-aged female identity in order to avoid missed opportunities and unfulfilling second adulthoods.

Several of the non-fiction texts and the Baby Boomer novels concentrate on white female protagonists, offering little, if any, discussion about ethnic or cultural matters; characters, similar to the American Adam, who is “bereft of ancestry” (Lewis 5), rarely, if at all, recognize their race or heritage as a relevant factor impacting their surroundings, economic status, or identities. While nonwhite writers typically deal with some sense of hybridity due to their backgrounds, an often disjointed experience (Legleitner 43), white people have “an unmarked identity” (McDermott 248). According to Monica McDermott and Frank Samson, whiteness is “normative, an unexamined default racial category” (248) and has become “synonymous with privilege” (245). This is of course clearly evident in The Bette Davis Club because, even though Margo lives in genteel poverty and often bemoans the fact that she is about to lose her business and her home, she rarely ever considers the fact of her privilege as a white woman in America. She may be poor, but she has wealthy relatives who come through for her in the end, and her whiteness allows her entrance into places where ethnic characters could never have entered without fear for their lives. Molly Littlewood McKibbin explains Margo's lack of self-awareness when she states that “American whiteness is understood to be invisible” (97). She argues that “contemporary writers effectively racialize whiteness by positioning multiracial subjectivity as
something that includes and challenges whiteness” (95). Martha Cutter supports this idea, stating that “whiteness needs a dark or nonwhite other” to better classify it (5). A thorough study of The Bette Davis Club must ask how Margo’s privilege influences the text; it must concern itself with what ignoring ethnicity or ancestry means in novels written by white women writers.

In a novel written by an ethnic writer, like Toni Morrison’s Jazz or Diana Abu-Jaber’s Arabian Jazz, the author provides her main character a path to understanding her place in the world through her own sense of who she is within a community. Examining or defining her ethnicity can provide the main character with different opportunities, new appreciation, or a fresh perspective, but this is not available to the white woman character who has no sense of where she comes from or, apparently, any interest in seeking such a connection to her “roots.” By failing to make their white female characters’ ancestry or cultural background a crucial part of their identities, Lotter and several other white female authors demonstrate that ethnicity is not essential to them or their work, which further perpetuates the “invisible” nature of whiteness and the idea of privilege that is associated with it. Due to their white status, these white authors and their white female characters do not have to concern themselves with race, offering a somewhat insensitive portrayal of life for non-white readers. That is, of course, if non-white readers are even willing or interested in reading the work of white writers that fail to take into account the importance of race in terms of identity and life experiences.

Because Lotter and other white female authors in this study fail to recognize the significance of their ancestry or the importance of creating female protagonists with well-addressed heritages of their own, the question of why arises. Why is race or ethnicity not important to these female writers when it often is very crucial to the writing and understanding of
ethnic authors and their works? One possible reason behind their behavior and choices might be the reality of having to come to terms with the realities of white privilege. Linda Martin Alcoff states that race is often seen as “a social construction without biological validity,” but it is “real and powerful enough to alter the fundamental shape of our lives” (8). Acknowledging the privilege associated with one’s white race may exact a price, something more often psychological than anything else for white individuals (7). Having a too white feeling and a repudiation of white privilege can, according Alcoff, “disable a positive self-image as well as a felt connection to community and history, and generally can disorient identity formation” (7).

Maybe these white female authors are not willing to face or acknowledge what their race and ethnicity truly provide them, not even through their female character development, because they know that their lives as they know them would greatly change and their own identities would be critically altered. Maybe they are not willing to take the risk or pay any kind of price to be more self-aware and/or socially aware even if it appears self-serving or short-sighted.

Unsurprisingly, Margo fails to utilize race or ethnicity in her identity or in developing herself for the second stage of her life. There is no real discussion about where her parents are from, besides California, or what their ancestry is. In terms of her parents, Margo focuses more on their career choices, their relationship with one another, and their untimely deaths. There are a few references to Margo’s mother’s English background when Margo is exiled to England after her parents’ deaths to live with her aunt. She appears to make a small connection with England when she adopts a British accent, but she claims to have only “picked up an English accent to simply survive” the hardships of boarding school (Lotter 26). Throughout the text, on a few rare occasions, she argues that she is an American, but she also acknowledges that she is “an uptight
Brit’” (58). As she ages, Margo, even living in New York, appears to surround herself with other people similar to herself, other white people. More importantly, it never seems to occur to Margo, or Lotter, to surround herself with people who are different from herself, which limits Margo’s opportunity for growth. Jennifer Harvey claims that “gender makes white racial identity less significant for white women in some fundamental way” (100). However, as seen through her long-standing relationship with Finn and her want to help Vera, she is supportive of the LGBTQ+ community, so Margo is capable of encountering and valuing the “other.” What she does not seem capable of doing is examining her own roots, her own ancestry, to figure out what it has to offer to her sense of self. Margo’s disconnect from her race further perpetuates the invisible nature of whiteness.

In *The Bette Davis Club*, Margo defines herself through different relationships in her life; one of the most important connections is with Finn Coyle, a closeted gay man who initially enchants her. Judith Kegan Gardiner explains that identity is “both formed and manifested through social relationships” (349). This is accurate for Margo and her relationship with Finn. Regardless of any warning signs or negative consequences to her own growth or development, Margo devotes herself to him. The deaths of her parents and being shipped away to England likely did not make Margo “‘a promising candidate for a healthy relationship with anyone’” (Lotter 278), but Finn is like no one else according to Margo; he enchants her with his funny and teasing ways, and she enjoys “his intelligence, his wit, his fine voice” (201). Prior to Finn, Margo has few, if any, real connections. With her parents gone, the only family she has is her half-sister, Charlotte; however, they never really had a strong relationship, especially because Charlotte’s mother refused to allow the half-sisters to connect. It is not surprising then that
Margo gravitates to someone that pays her some attention. Before Finn, no one ever tugged at her heart the way he did, and no one ever made her “feel so at peace” (206). For the first time in years, she felt like she had “come home” (206) and, finally, “someone saw” (200) her, making her feel whole, which makes Margo’s devotion to him less and less surprising, even though he can never fully give her everything she needed. Gardiner adds that a young woman spends her younger years “looking for the man through whom she will fulfill herself” (350). Even with the twenty-year age difference and indications of his homosexuality, Margo believes she has found that person in Finn. She adores him “beyond all explanation, beyond all reason” (234); being with him was the thing she wanted most in the world, so much so that she agrees to marry him, setting herself up for a limited and unfulfilling romantic relationship. However, even after calling off the wedding and attempting to find other amorous connections, Margo fails to commit to anyone else because none of those men compare to Finn, compare to her dream of him,” leading her to “look for solace in places you will never find it,” alcohol and drugs (267). Her behavior supports Gardiner’s claim that “the quest for female identity seems to be a soap opera, endless and never advancing, that plays the matinees of women’s souls” (348).

While likely unintentional, Finn keeps Margo trapped in the same version of herself for quite some time, allowing no growth; however, Margo eventually recognizes that she confined herself by her own unwillingness to let things go and to put herself first. Even though Margo does jilt Finn, leaving him “standing alone and embarrassed in front of the judge” (Lotter 17) on their wedding day, and claims that she would not go back to him, no matter how much she adored him, she thought she would die because she “still loved him, and always would” (206). Even after the end of their engagement, she fails to stay away from Finn; instead, they forgive
each other. Even though Margo’s devoted relationship with a gay man may seem unfulfilling or unusual, she is not alone. Many women find companionship through non-traditional relationships; more straight women are discovering a true connection with gay men. According to Deborah Thompson, this type of love is “begging to speak its name,” and these women are slowly “gaining visibility, and even respectability, in both mainstream and other media” (41).

Margo soon recognizes that she “never grew tired of Finn” (Lotter 267); even if she stayed away for a while, she always came back because she “would not, could not” cut herself off entirely from Finn (266); she feels they are family. Margo's choice to love Finn is not as shocking as some people would think because many heterosexual women “experience a greater sense of comfort and trust in their friendships with gay men than in their friendships with heterosexual individuals” (Russell 763). This may be due to the belief that straight women often feel more comfortable discussing important romantic aspects of their lives with gay men because, unlike other women, who could be seen as competition, or straight men, who are part of the romantic situation, gay men typically do not pose a threat; they are not after the same men as straight women. After leaving him at the altar, Margo becomes even more attached to Finn and begins spending a great deal of time with him, looking after him when he gets sick, casting her life and needs to the side, and refusing to focus on her own identity. After Finn dies, she acknowledges that, while her relationship with Finn did not ruin her life, for too long, she strongly believed that everything she was, good and bad, came from “once being very young and from loving Finn” (Lotter 187). Margo finally understands that she geared her life around trying to hold on to someone, to a part of her life she loved, even though Finn, being gay, could not love her back in the way she needed. It may have taken a long time, but Margo finally begins to see that her needs
are relevant; however, it is likely that, even though she does love Finn, he offers her a way to ignore her own issues and demons from her past that she refuses to face; he is a distraction, something that she can give all her attention to, so she does not have to worry about herself or her problems.

Margo’s relationship with Finn leaves her stifled and unfulfilled for most of her adult life; however, her chance encounter with Tully Benedict, her niece’s jilted fiancé, offers her the opportunity to redefine herself and her plans for the second phase of her life. Margo likely remains so devoted to Finn because their relationship is comfortable and unthreatening and allows her to ignore her own personal problems. Often, gay men’s “lack of motives to mate with women or to compete with them for mates enhances women’s trust in gay men and openness to befriend them” (Russell 763). This also suggests that the potential for a real romantic relationship could prove intimidating at times; her dedication to Finn allows Margo to keep other men at arm’s length throughout most of her adult life. However, second adulthood offers new opportunities for Margo to find an authentic romantic connection because, as Amanda Smith Barusch suggests, “love is different in later life—both emotionally and physically,” offering women new opportunities for growth and a better understanding of themselves (51). Initially, the goal of finding Georgia unites Margo and Tully, keeping them in close quarters on a cross-country adventure. However, Margo believes they are “hopelessly mismatched” as they continue to argue and frustrate one another at the onset of their journey (Lotter 34). He makes things worse when he makes comments about her bad habits, smoking and drinking. Yet, she finds herself warming toward Tully as they spend more time together; Tully tells her about “his interests, his philosophy of life” (144), while she shares stories about Dottie and aspects of her
financial troubles. As their relationships develops, Margo begins to feel “the gradual stirrings of desire, a longing for human connection” (186), the same type of connection she hoped for when she first met Finn. Her relationship with Finn failed to fully aid Margo in developing her identity, but her connection with Tully helps her better understand herself, especially when he admits that he is also a recovering alcoholic, which helps her begin to acknowledge her own personal issues. Despite their differences, including age, Margo feels “a strong urge to walk—ride—on the wild side with Tully Benedict” (143) as she begins to care about him more and more. She recognizes that she and Tully are “twins . . . soul mates . . . life’s underdogs . . . the defeated, the conquered, the vanquished,” simply they are “made for each other” (314). While Margo’s decision to marry later in life may not have been fully within her control, her choice, nevertheless, supports Boomer stereotypes, where “they married later, had fewer children, and were more likely than previous generations to spend at least part of adulthood alone” (Kutulas 683).

While her connection with Tully proves beneficial, Margo’s relationship with her mother and her inability to recognize the realities of her past hinder her ability to create a healthy and well-adjusted identity, causing her hardships throughout the first half of her life. Judith Kegan Gardiner argues that “female identity formation is dependent on the mother-daughter bond” (349); this “core identity sets the pattern according to which the person thereafter relates to other people and to the world” (350). Unfortunately, with the loss of her mother at the age of eight, Margo’s development is stifled, likely causing her need to hide from reality and her inability to truly connect with others. However, she holds on to superficial aspects of what she remembers of her mother. For example, like her mother, Margo wears her “hair short and uses a minimum of makeup” (Lotter 43). She also finds pleasure in knowing she shares similar traits with her
mother, like her “mother’s full mouth and good skin” (43). Margo appears willing to acknowledge some of her mother’s issues, the idea that her mother was unhappy and that she wanted to be married and work again. Yet, she struggles with fully accepting that things eventually wore her mother down to the point that she “made up her mind to go for a swim” (52) and drowned in the ocean, an event that completely changes Margo’s life. However, it takes Margo’s own epiphany about herself late in life to fully accept the idea that her mother did not just suffer from being unhappy; her mother was a probable alcoholic, which added to her difficulties and likely aided in her suicide. Her mother’s decision negatively impacts Margo, causing her dad to bring her to live with his other family where she faces more hardships and is never really able to heal from the loss of her mother, which causes her more problems in her future.

While her relationship with her mother causes several issues throughout her life, Margo’s relationship with her father and her misunderstanding of him and his own struggles leaves her feeling disconnected and unmoored throughout the first half of her life; however, late in life, after she better comprehends her father, Margo is able to move forward with redefining herself and her future. Margo is very proud that her father, Arthur Just, wrote screenplays and worked in Hollywood. She likes to remember him as “elegant, laughing, full of life” (28) at the wheel of his favorite automobile, but the Red Scare and the blacklist caused his career to suffer, leaving him, according to Margo, writing for television, which he hated, just to pay the bills. The idea that Arthur Just hated his work at the end of his life strongly influences Margo’s view of the past and hinders her ability to see her father for who he truly was. After her father dies from a heart attack, Margo goes to live with her great-aunt Fiona in England, but that does not last long. Soon
after being packed off to England, she is sent to a wretched boarding school because Fiona is unable and unwilling to care for her niece; however, this event further cements Margo’s feelings of abandonment and isolation that color the first part of her adult life. For several years, Margo claims that she put “a lot of energy into not thinking about [her] parents,” into not thinking about how the deaths of her parents caused her childhood to come to “an abrupt and heartbreaking end” (49), but Margo never really stops thinking about her parents and how their deaths changed her life forever. As she gets older, Margo holds on to the skewed memories of her past, believing, for example, that her father hated the television show, Spy Team, that he created and wrote for, arguing that he was embarrassed by it and “he had to get himself drunk just to write it” (132). In reality, she later comes to understand that writing for the television show did not kill him; instead, it was “‘other things,’” like alcoholism (321). Eventually, after coming to terms with her family issues that she had always obfuscated or ignored, Margo acknowledges that “the truth never came easily to [her] father, and it doesn’t come easily to his daughters” (153).

In addition to her parents, Margo’s relationship, or lack thereof, with her sister, Charlotte, confines Margo to an isolated identity; neither sister is capable of civility when they meet. Instead of behaving well, they argue about what happened even though neither one had any control over the past. Fortunately, after growth on both women’s parts, the sisters come together to forgive one another and to redefine themselves and their relationship. As children, tension was high between the two because Margo was the product of an affair. Charlotte would not lend Margo “a bobby pin, never mind a dress” (12) because Margo was considered to be “‘Daddy’s fave’” (19). Unfortunately, things only get worse as both sisters get older; their relationship becomes even more detached. As adults, Margo envies Charlotte’s ability to “travel the world,
eating in expensive restaurants and staying in posh digs” (14), and she believes she is an 
embarrassment to Charlotte. While they are half-sisters, Margo feels it is more “like one-eighth 
or one-sixteenth” even though they are the only siblings each has, which means that, for Margo 
and Charlotte, there is “precious little family left” (15). In addition, Margo struggles with the 
idea that her own mother might still be alive and her “‘whole life would have turned out 
differently’” (24) if Charlotte’s mother had divorced their father, which would have greatly 
altered Margo’s life and identity. Charlotte only reaches out to Margo when she needs 
something, and this time, she specifically wants her to go after Georgia, Charlotte’s daughter, 
and bring her back. This request is supposed to bring Georgia back to get married and restore the 
screen play that she took, but it proves beneficial on a different front, allowing the sisters to 
connect. In the end, Charlotte shares that, when she was younger, she hated the way her mother 
treated Margo, which made Charlotte feel “‘a load of guilt’” (311) since Margo was just a little 
girl. Charlotte even comes out to see Margo in New York to apologize and because Margo is her 
family. Margo’s understanding of her sister’s own hardships helps her heal and create a new 
optimistic identity moving forward into the second half of her life.

While it takes time for Charlotte and Margo to connect, Dottie proves to be a true friend 
from the start by helping Margo understand her relationship with Finn and how it impacts her 
identity. Dottie is Margo’s only female friend, and Mardy S. Ireland explains that female friends 
“can be especially helpful in establishing and maintaining a positive sense of female identity” 
(10). This proves true for Margo, who continues to rely on and benefit from Dottie’s support and 
guidance throughout most of her adult life. Since the day when Finn introduced them, Dottie 
continues to be Margo’s “oldest, dearest, and . . . kindest friend” (2). Throughout all of Margo’s
ups and downs, Dottie never tried to make her feel inferior or ashamed; instead, she always encouraged Margo, acting like Margo’s sister. Even though Margo received more attention from Finn than from women friends, Dottie quickly points out that Finn is “so far in the closet, he thinks he’s a coat hanger” (228). As difficult as it is, Margo eventually recognizes that “everything Dottie has said about him was true” (234), but she remains “still bewitched,” “still enchanted,” “still enamored” with Finn (229). Women, like Margo, are often drawn to gay men due to “open and intimate conversations,” “more social and emotional support,” and “a greater interpersonal connection” (Russell 763). Being a good friend, Dottie explains that none of this is Margo’s fault, and that she is not the first woman to ever fall for a gay man. It just means Margo joined The Bette Davis Club, a metaphor for any female “who gets a crush on a gay fellow, dates a gay fellow, or . . . marries a gay fellow” (232). However, Margo remains adamant about marrying Finn regardless of the situation even when Dottie politely points out that Margo’s decision “means settling for something less than a satisfying union” (232). Perhaps because she finally listens to her friend's advice, Margo has a change of heart on her wedding day; even though she loves Finn, she is “getting cold feet” (262). Eager to hear this news, Dottie tells Margo to “fly” and “save yourself” (262), causing Margo to fully realize her situation and the need to do what is best for herself.

In addition to helping Margo understand how her relationship with Finn influences her identity, Dottie continues to aid Margo after Finn’s death by pushing her to recognize who she has become and what she really wants for her future. Dottie is, in fact, Margo's only friend, which proves fortuitous because Margo needs a friend. Even though she does not realize the importance of Dottie and though she is at times not a very good friend herself, Dottie remains a
good friend and helps Margo. This is significant because, as Mardy Ireland states, “friendship is one vehicle of adult development in which . . . a woman expands the meaning and texture of her female adult life” (11-2). Time and time again, Margo’s friendship with Dottie proves beneficial in Margo’s understanding of herself when she was younger and wanting to marry Finn and when she is older and unwilling to let go of the past. Dottie is quick to point out that Margo is not taking care of herself, likely because she is depressed. She explains that Margo “‘never really recovered’” (276) after all that business with Finn, and when Finn got sick, Margo “‘sought him out anew’” to look after him to the point where she was “‘practically living with him’” (276), causing her to give up her job and her apartment. Dottie helps Margo understand that she “‘gave up so many things because of Finn Coyle’” (277) because Margo and Finn had “‘a shared madness’” (278). Dottie's friendship provides Margo an honesty she could not get anywhere else and she was not capable of finding on her own.

While Malcolm Belvedere’s association with Margo is not as long-standing as her relationship with Dottie, Margo’s connection with Malcolm provides her with an epiphany, allowing her to reevaluate her past and who she wants to be in the future. After meeting at what should have been Georgia’s wedding, Malcolm, the most powerful studio head in Hollywood, reaches out to Margo about selling her father’s Spy Team script. Margo feels that Spy Team meant only one thing to her father, a paycheck. However, Malcolm notes that, if Arthur Just had wanted his work destroyed, he would have done so himself, but he did not; he left it behind, implying that perhaps Arthur “‘took more pride in Spy Team’” than Margo credits (294). Margo, however, is not willing to let go of the idea that the ludicrous television series killed her father, so Malcolm feels compelled to tell Margo that “‘it was drink that killed him . . . he was an
alcoholic. Everyone in the entire industry knew that about him”’ (294). He even mentions that “a fondness for drink runs in the family”’ (294), implying that her mother had also had a drinking problem. Initially, Margo is unwilling to listen to Malcom or entertain the information he shared, but not long after, Malcom’s words “scorched” (299) Margo down to her soul and finally make her face the realities of her past and her own inherited issues to escape the same fate as her parents.

While Dottie and Malcom help Margo to understand herself and who she wants to be, two minor female characters, Vera and Kay, also assist Margo in better recognizing who she is and her past struggles. Vera helps Margo begin to acknowledge the limitations placed on Margo by her past and her unwillingness to let it go. While in Palm Springs searching for her niece, Margo feels uneasy when Vera forces her into a dance contest in exchange for access to her niece’s room at the hotel. The contest initially makes her feel awkward and self-conscious; it proves especially uncomfortable because it causes a flashback to her days with Finn, making her remember that he was the only person who made her feel graceful. However, when she finally acknowledges that she was “‘confused, upset, ambivalent about things that happened in [her] past’” (123) after prodding from Vera, Margo finally feels at ease and no longer conflicted; instead, she feels like she is “about to do something right for a change” (124), making her feel more like herself. Kay, on the other hand, helps Margo face one of her personal demons, alcohol, and begin to understand that she is an alcoholic. Margo sees Kay being rude to a waitress in Palm Springs and immediately pegs her for an affluent white woman who abuses the hired help. She has words to that effect with Kay and leaves, but then, Margo meets Kay again in a totally different environment when she visits a museum in Chicago. This time, Kay is Margo's guide in
a museum, which causes Margo to rethink her opinion of Kay. When Margo attempts to apologize, she provides the excuse that she “wasn’t feeling well” (183), but Kay refuses to let Margo get off so easily, claiming that she “can spot a lush a mile away” and that Margo’s illness feeling and/or behavior stem from drinking (183). Kay continues to point out that Margo refuses to talk about her alcoholism because it means she would have to face it and tells Margo she is not alone; there is “plenty of help out there” (183). Kay’s words push Margo to start considering issues that continue to affect her life.

Probably because the only man she loved was gay, Margo does not have any children of her own; however, after connecting with Tully, she becomes stepmother to Tully’s daughter, Emma, offering Margo another opportunity to develop her identity for the second half of her life. While most women Margo’s age are dealing with children leaving the home, Margo is just beginning her role as a mother. In her relationship with Emma, Margo is careful not to appear as if she is trying to replace Emma’s mother, but she does hope to be Emma’s friend. She claims that she “couldn’t love Emma more” if she were her own child, and having Emma in her life allows Margo to “know it’s possible to find heaven on earth” (325). Her new role as a mother also helps Margo understand her new world where she “no longer believe[s] in telling half-truths” (325). Rather, after everything she has been through, she believes “in giving as honest an answer” as she can because if people spent more time being honest with each other, “there would be less unhappiness in the world” (325).

In addition to her relationships with partners, family, and friends, Margo defines herself through her personal addictions of smoking and drinking, utilizing them to identify as a victim who does not need to take responsibility for herself. Margo began smoking at just nine years old
when Charlotte gave her a smoke. Even though she eventually quits and does not smoke for a long while, hardships, such as Finn’s death, cause her to start up again and she regularly needs a smoke. However, she claims she is quitting again soon, which she often does. Drinking, however, is a more serious matter because she finally acknowledges that she is a heavy drinker, even though she tells herself that she really is just “‘a social drinker, occasionally’” (302). Throughout the novel, she often finds herself in desperate need of “a drink: gin, brandy, eau de cologne, anything” (39), but her “drug of choice is a dry martini” (242). At times through the novel, Margo even considers lying down in the dirt to kick her feet and cry like a baby to relieve the tension caused by being without a drink. Overall, Margo needs “to smoke and drink and do unhealthy things” because it is all that is “keeping [her] going” (93). She refuses to recognize that her life is the result of poor choices made on her part, hindering her ability to redefine herself and obtain a healthier and happier future.

After experiencing an epiphany about her life, Margo finally quits smoking and drinking, which leaves her more open to different possibilities and a brighter future. Once she realizes her recollection of the past is skewed, Margo is quick to want to make changes and no longer allow the past to dictate her future. After her epiphany, Margo takes her first step towards real growth by throwing her cigarettes into the garbage. Margo also recognizes the number one requirement for being a drunk is self-pity, something she is quite good at, and admits she is “‘powerless over alcohol . . . powerless over lots of things’” (308). She decides to give up cigarettes and liquor and believes it is time to give AA another shot. She ends up attending Alcoholics Anonymous two nights a week. In the end, after a lifetime of obstacles and hurdles, a number of them placed in her way by her own bad choices, Margo becomes “the poster child for escaping the hellish jaws
of alcoholism” (323), and she acknowledges that “the best thing about falling apart is you get to put yourself back together” (323).

Predominantly due to her relationships, as well as facing the realities of her past and her own personal demons, Margo constructs a new identity that is healthy, happier, and more optimistic for the second half of her life. Gardiner stresses that female identity is “typically less fixed, less unitary, and more flexible,” allowing women to change, adapt, or evolve over time (353). At fifty years old, Margo “expected to have attained a degree of maturity, some worldly wisdom” (Lotter 143) that eluded her in her younger years. However, for many older women, including Margo, that is not always the case. They continue to struggle with issues and hardships regardless of age. Levine explains that, even while older chronologically and physiologically, middle-aged women “are younger in terms of time spent outgrowing who [they] were before [they] began figuring out some things” (9). Through her relationships, especially through her connection with Tully and her interactions with Malcom, Margo finally admits to herself “‘the actual bloody awful truth’” (Lotter 303), recognizing real aspects about her father and family that made her feel “so adrift” that she wanted to “destroy things” (300), including herself. After facing the truth about her mother's suicide, her father’s alcoholism, her isolating relationship with Finn, and other aspects of her past that kept her trapped and unable to face her own demons and wants for her life, Margo feels “‘kind of happy’” (317) and better than she has in years; she plans on not “focusing on the past—[her] own past anyway” and is “looking to the future” (324). Her new outlook and new identity emphasize “the fluidity of identity through the passage of time,” that human life is “a continuity” (Shih 200), and leave her feeling at “peace with so many things” (325), particularly due to now having a home of her own, a man of her own, and a child
of her own. Through Margo’s story, Lotter offers female readers an opportunity to better understand themselves and who they truly are and want to be. Similar to other works of women’s fiction within the Boomer genre, *The Bette Davis Club* emphasizes a woman’s ability to grow, adapt, and redefine her identity to obtain a better and more authentic life.
Anna Quindlen’s novel, *Still Life with Bread Crumbs* (2014), addresses the identity of Rebecca Winter, a former famous photographer, who attempts to understand her life, who she is, and what she wants for her future. At the start of the text, while struggling with no longer being relevant in the art world and with the realities of ageing, Rebecca must also take care of her ageing parents and deal with her dwindling bank account. This awareness of economic issues is not available in the other texts studied in this dissertation, but Rebecca worries about money constantly. To save money, she makes the horrendous sacrifice of subletting her NYC apartment and moves out to the country where she faces new challenges and begins to understand that she cannot run away from her problems. She can no longer hang onto the person she once was or allow self-pity and the woes of ageing overtake her. Through her relationships with her parents, her son, her partners, and her friends, her passion for her career, and her location choices, Rebecca begins her journey of initiation to alter her identity, showing more acceptance about her ageing and a better understanding of her place in the world for the second half of her life. Most importantly, even though there is a man involved, her decisions and better understanding of herself do not directly tie to him.

The term women’s fiction is often used to refer to the works by and about American women published between 1820 and 1870. In her book about 19th-century women writers, Nina Baym explains that, regardless of different settings or incidents, these authors provided stories
about young women who, after losing emotional and financial support from their guardians, go on to make their “own way in the world” (ix). While making their “own way” may simply include domestic comfort and a companionable husband, the real success for these women is their ability to overcome hardships through “a hard-won, much tested ‘self-dependence’” (ix). Unfortunately, due to the “popular” nature of these works, and the fact that they were written by women, many scholars have a tendency to overlook the significance of women’s fiction; it is often dismissed as non-literature (xv). However, Elaine Showalter stresses that women’s fiction can “sustain the most rigorous tests of aesthetic judgement and literary quality” (xxv), and Karen Tracey emphasizes the significance of women’s fiction, stating that it can act as a “voice and instrument of social change” (8). Scholar-approved or not, women’s fiction offers characters and plots that female readers can connect with, allowing women to “live many different lives” (Hill xi) or to better understand their own lives. According to Baym, 19th-century female protagonists represent “instances of the character that the authors want their readers to become,” and, ideally, the reading experience will ignite or further persuade readers to change themselves (xix). Women’s fiction provides insight into the lives of women and their identities, offering a better understanding of themselves and the world around them. In addition, at times, women’s fiction aims to go beyond the representation, confines, and/or impact of gender; instead, according to Linda Grasso, it also may discuss race, class, and sexuality, adding depth to readers’ and scholars’ understanding and interpretation of gender (155).

While women’s fiction was popular for female readers, especially young women, during the 19th-century, currently, memoirs and non-fiction texts about ageing, the other side of the spectrum for women, are being published more and more. These works are part of a recent
contemporary trend in fiction and plays written by older women to examine who they are as women of a certain age in this new world, allowing women to see the positive possibilities of getting older. While many people would assume that older women would do anything to be young again, according to Suzanne Braun Levine, that fails to be the case. Her book, *50 is the New Fifty: 10 Life Lessons for Women in Second Adulthood*, stresses that, while being younger does come with advantages, there is truth in the adage that age brings wisdom. Older women have a better sense of who they were and where they came from, offering the chance to make wiser choices about their identities in their second adulthoods. In addition, Levine’s work emphasizes the opportunities and the ability to prune away at expectations, responsibilities, and even “people who no longer apply” (45), options available in second adulthood, which allow women to understand what matters to them. Women are no longer confined to specific rules or roles; they can choose to be who they want without worrying about pleasing others. In *A Life After Sixty: A Spiritual, Physical and Emotional Journey*, Maria Mezari adds that adventure and growth are not connected to a specific time or age in life (91); women can and should continue to challenge themselves and aim to fulfill their goals and ambitions. This is especially important for women who spent most of their adult lives confined to social norms and expectations, often sacrificing their own wants and needs.

By combining the efforts of 19th century female writers and the ideas put forth in contemporary memoirs, a new and much needed genre is created, Boomer women’s literature. Baym stresses the idea that 19th-century female protagonists represent “instances of the character that the authors want their readers to become,” and, ideally, the reading experience will ignite or further persuade readers to change themselves (xix). This continues to be the goal of
contemporary women’s fiction, especially Boomer literature, which encourages women to recognize new opportunities to redefine who they are and what the rest of their lives will look like. While women’s fiction of the past frequently addressed the issues of marriage and domestic life for young women, Boomer literature discusses concerns relevant to middle-aged women, who struggle with aspects of getting older and how that impacts the rest of their lives. Though many consider ageing stereotypically brings a loss of identity, in reality, it allows women to take stock of their lives in order to develop and make changes (Maierhofer 158); this idea is a key component to Boomer literature and the creation of its female protagonists. Roberta Maierhofer explains that ageing for women offers “the chance to liberate themselves from their closely defined roles within a social norm,” providing them with more opportunities than they had when they were younger in order for them to “define their roles in society anew” (158). Female characters initially come across feeling a sense of helplessness or inability to imagine a solution to their problems, providing common ground between the protagonists and the readers (159). Eventually, in most cases, by looking back at the first half of their lives, these female protagonists may confront their own past inactions and their own failures in order to define their own points of view, offering hope and encouragement for women readers (159). For women who truly feel confined by social norms and expectations, reading about similar women who were able to make changes for their betterment can be especially liberating. It is also important to note that ageing also allows women to reconstruct their identities in terms of sexuality; for some women, they can finally accept their own sexual potential, which makes them stronger and happier (166). By relating to other women’s journeys, even fictional, through Boomer literature,
contemporary Boomer women may find the strength and courage to picture a new version of themselves for their futures.

There are several contemporary female writers who write Boomer literature for middle-aged female readers. Anna Quindlen, a Baby Boomer herself, born in 1953, is a well-known author of Boomer literature. Before writing novels, Quindlen worked as a journalist, first at the New York Post and then at The New York Times (Tikkanen); she won the Pulitzer Prize for commentary in 1992 (Tikkanen). Many consider her journalist work trailblazing because she was among “the first voices chronicling the everyday challenges of American women” and what can usually be described as women’s issues (Rakoff). Quindlen’s transition into novels is not surprising due to her love of reading, which she describes as her “home,” “sustenance,” and “great invincible companion” (How Reading Changed 8). While some of her novels take their subjects from her concerns as a reporter and columnist, she is also “highly skilled at setting up and resolving a storyline” (Housham). According to K.H. Macomber, Quindlen’s “prose consistently hits the mark, describing life as we know it with remarkable grace and wit” (Macomber), and Joanna Rakoff explains that Quindlen’s “writings represent a generous and moving interrogation of women’s experience across the lines of class and race” (Rakoff). Quindlen often utilizes topics that are important to her in her writing, typically addressing “the emotional balancing acts that women face . . . work and family, parents and spouses, income and anxiety, the needs of loved ones and the imperative to take care of oneself” (Macomber).

Anna Quindlen’s work, including Still Life with Bread Crumbs, may not be a part of the traditional canon, but Boomer literature is becoming more popular and more relevant, especially to those who can strongly relate to the characters and plots. While scholars may not have
provided criticism about this novel yet, there have been several reviews, which offer insight into the writer and her text. When speaking generally about Quindlen’s work, Heller McAlpin states that her novels offer “the literary equivalent of comfort food,” and Quindlen still has “her finger firmly planted on the pulse of her generation” (McAlpin). When speaking specifically about *Still Life with Bread Crumbs*, McAlpin explains that it is an appealing fantasy and encourages the reader to seize control of his/her life (McAlpin). While it may be predictable at times, the “easy gratification of this tidily constructed, resolutely uplifting romance” proves popular with readers (McAlpin). Joanna Rakoff of *The New York Times* claims the novel is a “marvelous romantic comedy of manners” and includes “comedy in the style of Austen” (Rakoff). Quindlen focuses on a subject too rarely seen in contemporary fiction, “the life of a woman who would once have been characterized as ‘of a certain age’” (Rakoff). By doing so, she achieves “something distinctive, a feminist novel for a post-feminist age” (Rakoff). Similar to Rakoff, K.H. Macomber connects Quindlen’s work to Jane Austen’s writing because Quindlen uses “a micro-societal view to promote her take on the human condition” (Macomber). In addition, Macomber explains that the novel addresses “the frail realities that come with being a woman ‘of a certain age’” (Macomber). Quindlen provides her readers with “the assertion that women of a certain age have stories that deserve to be told. Stories that might even deserve happy endings” (Macomber). One small issue that Macomber has with *Still Life with Bread Crumbs* is Quindlen’s inclusion of nonessential details and “strings of chatty talk that are forced” (Macomber). However, Jane Housham finds the novel engaging and “immaculately constructed,” while providing “a warm message about the chance of happiness later in life” (Housham). An unnamed reviewer for *Kirkus Reviews* also finds the work engaging, yet they
argue that the text is “marred by a formulaic resolution in which rewards and punishments are meted out according to who ranks highest on the niceness scale” (“Still Life”).

While Boomer literature is new, its approachable nature means that it can be read by anyone, regardless of their educational background or their economic status, providing a fitting opportunity to discuss female Boomer identity. After the diverse and progressive decades of the 1960s and 1970s, Boomers found themselves having to grow up, which usually meant facing more responsibilities and aspects of self-denial (Strauss 312). This is especially true for women who took on the roles of wives and mothers, while also attempting, in some cases, to make it in a male-dominated work force. The political and social make-up of Boomer adulthood, particularly for white women, significantly affected self-definition, which seemed to be more about “doing and becoming” rather than being (Aghazadeh 22). In the novel, Rebecca embodies these ideas during the first part of her adulthood. She is a wife to a selfish man who fails to see the value in her or her work; she is also a mother, which keeps her from pursuing other interests or passions. Rebecca is regularly “doing,” aiming to be a good mother, a dedicated wife, and an inspiring photographer. It is not until she is forced to give up many aspects of her old life and face an uncertain future in the country that Rebecca begins to truly be. She can no longer just keep head down and hope that, if she keeps pushing forward, something will change; she must sit and evaluate herself and her new reality to develop her new identity.

For most of her life, Rebecca Winter defines herself by clear labels; she is a daughter, a mother, a wife, and a photographer, but as she reaches middle age, all of those specific markers begin to dissolve, leaving her feeling overwhelmed and lost. Rebecca misses being younger for several reasons. During the first half of her adult life, as conventional as it was, things felt clear
to her; she understood her roles and their expectations. However, as middle age brings new uncertainties, initially, Rebecca prefers “knowing what would happen next” (Still Life 31) rather than dealing with a lot of change and “obsess[ing] about mortality” and money (29). When she was young, she feels she had less to worry about, but now so many people depend upon her, causing her to feel anxious regularly. Her early adulthood brought her fame through her photography, but now she feels as if it was all an accident in some way, something that she cannot take full credit for, and her life just was not much of a story. Unfortunately, as time passes, Rebecca’s fame fades, and she is no longer well-known, making her feel that she went from living one type of life, one that felt more comfortable, particularly financially, with less concerns, to living a whole other life, where she feels she is worrying about something all the time. She constantly has questions running through her head about her future, like “what would happen next” and “how could she make a living” (173). All of this stress, at times, makes her feel like she is disappearing, and she craves what used to be, at least the ability to stay in her NYC apartment. All the changes and the move to the country make her feel like “a tourist in her own life” (179). However, even though she struggles with change, new possibilities await in the county, offering her opportunities for growth. Many contemporary writers emphasize the fluidity of identity, stressing that it is almost “ininitely negotiable” (Buckingham 2). This proves to be the case for Rebecca Winter, who begins life in conventional roles and must struggle and develop to better understand herself and her identity for the second half of her life.

In addition to female identity, Boomer literature also provides an appropriate place to discuss the issue of ageism, an issue relevant to middle-aged women. Age has been introduced as “a social and cultural marker” in society, causing individuals, particularly women, to dread
ageing and all the issues that come with it (Maierhofer 157). Many women see ageing as a “revulsion” or a “disease” (Butler 243); often, women feel powerlessness and uselessness in combating the signs and stigmas of getting older (243). Unfortunately, even in current women’s studies, women are not fairing much better when it comes to ageing. According to Barbara Macdonald, women’s studies makes the lives of middle-aged women invisible (52). In order to combat this, it is essential to “challenge negative images of ageing and the devaluation of getting old” (Shih 201). Boomer literature, especially those written by female authors, often provides positive female identity and representation. Female protagonists face similar issues, hardships, and life changes as younger women do, which offers women readers new perspectives and possibilities for their own lives and futures. Quindlen’s Rebecca struggles with ageing, financial woes, and no longer being relevant. Everyday middle-aged women can relate to these concerns, and hopefully, by observing Rebecca’s ability to overcome or work through her issues, they will gain a more optimistic outlook on their own second adulthoods.

While Boomer literature is extremely beneficial in terms of addressing female identity and ageism, white female authors often fail to address the importance of race and issues associated with ethnicity. The works of white women writers usually have little reference to cultural matters, and their white female protagonists, much like the American Adam, who is “untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race” (Lewis 5), typically ignore their race as a pertinent trait that impacts their surroundings, economic status, or identities. While writers from ethnic groups struggle with being judged based on appearances and affixed labels that always focus on their ethnicity (Gillan xvii), whiteness is seen as “generic” and usually “taken for granted” (McKibbin 97). White individuals have “no racial
identity” (McDermott 245); they are typically viewed as invisible and are treated as “the base group to which others are compared” (245). In addition, white racial identity is traditionally privileged compared to other ethnicities due to centuries of oppression of nonwhite groups. Works by ethnic authors, like Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Frances Khirallah Noble’s *The New Belly Dancer of the Galaxy*, provide protagonists with opportunities to understand their place in the world through their connection and role within a community. When an ethnic main character examines or identifies his/her ethnicity, he/she garners a new perspective, possibilities, or appreciation. However, this is not typically offered to white female characters who often have no understanding of where they come from nor any interest in finding out about their heritage. Instead, they live in a world where they perpetuate the assumption that whiteness makes them the norm because their race is invisible. These ideas are clearly evident in *Still Life with Bread Crumbs*. Rebecca surrounds herself with others much like herself; she has no diverse friends or connections with individuals of different races or life styles. She rents the cottage from a gay gentleman, but she has no real contact with him or connects with him on a deeper level than landlord and renter. While she faces struggles in her life, similar to other people, like caring for ageing parents, Rebecca faces no issues, hardships, or limitations due to her race. It seems odd that Quindlen, who is such an advocate for women, would fail to include more diverse characters, which could provide her main character with a wider view of the world. Instead, Rebecca spends her whole life, even the start of her second adulthood, stuck in a white-washed environment with very little change. Recognizing Quindlen’s lack of focus on ethnicity and its impact on Rebecca and the text is a crucial aspect of this novel and better understanding why white women writers continue to ignore ancestry and/or ethnicity in their works.
Quindlen’s inability or lack of effort to address her own ethnicity or to provide her white female protagonist with a stronger awareness of her own cultural background begs the question: do these white female authors fear questioning or examining their own ancestries, or is there something else that steers them away from acknowledging their own heritages? While genealogy tests, like AncestryDNA, and television shows, such as *Who Do You Think You Are* and *Finding Your Roots*, appear to be growing more and more popular, many white Americans seem to be reluctant to find out about their past because, in a number of cases, they are forced to face harsh realities about their ancestors; for example, a number of white people have slave holders as past relatives. Could this be part of the reason these authors are shying away from looking into their own backgrounds? Beyond struggling with possible horrible revelations from their pasts, what is keeping white individuals from wanting to know where they came from or the chance to meet relatives from other countries, such as Ireland, Poland, and Germany? One would think that knowing about one’s past and where one comes from would help an individual better understand who they are. By not acknowledging or addressing their ethnicity and by not developing more culturally aware female characters, unlike ethnic women writers, these white female authors are missing a valuable opportunity to develop the idea of female identity, particularly for white women.

Predictably, Rebecca fails to consider her cultural background in her identity or in redefining herself for second adulthood. A key defining part of Rebecca’s ancestry is her Jewish heritage, but she was “brought up in a Jewish household that never acknowledged being Jewish” (*Still Life* 197). Her mother refuses to recognize their Jewish identity, causing Rebecca to have a weak connection to her heritage and a feeling of isolation. Her father does not help the matter
much because he regularly complies with everything his wife wants and does. Rebecca knows so little about Judaism that she only remembers one thing about Kaddish. Unfortunately, it is not surprising that her mother, Bebe, having lived through World War II, would harbor feelings of Jewish self-hatred, which, according to Nathan A. Pelcovitz, were “Jews who reached intellectual maturity in the age of Hitler reject[ing] and despis[ing] the fact of their Jewishness” (qtd. in Glenn 98). However, Rebecca’s parents, especially Bebe’s Jewish self-hatred, can only be faulted up to a point for Rebecca’s disconnect from her religious past. As an adult, while not showing the same aspects or extremes of Jewish self-hatred as her mother, Rebecca never shows interest in learning more about her religion and/or starting to attend temple. She no longer needs to rely on teachings, guidance, or permission from her parents, and she likely does not need to fear their wrath if she chooses to embrace her Jewish ancestry. Oscar, Rebecca’s father, was not as zealous about the issue as Bebe, and Bebe, who suffers from dementia, is currently a resident at the Jewish Home for the Aged and Inform, something that would appall her, unaware of what is going on around her or with her daughter. Rebecca’s lack of connection to her Jewish background is a conscious rejection that may have started with pressure or instructions from her parents but was fully solidified by Rebecca’s own choice to not seek out another aspect of her identity. This is further emphasized when Rebecca is surprised to hear her son, Ben, recite the burial Kaddish in Hebrew at Oscar’s funeral. If her religion and ethnic background had been important to her or her identity, she would have raised her son with a knowledge of Judaism and, likely, a strong tie to his Jewish heritage. While he was circumcised following his birth, a Jewish custom, his connection to Judaism stops there; he “had not been bar mitzvahed” (196). Similar to other white female protagonists created by white women writers, Rebecca cannot be bothered to
move outside her bubble of white culture to better develop her identity or her sense of self, limiting her and her potential for the future. While Quindlen herself is Roman Catholic, it is interesting that she would choose to write about a woman of a different religion; however, just like Rebecca, Quindlen does not practice her religion anymore, claiming that she “doesn’t need a service or mass to get what she needs out of her faith” (Weiss). While one may agree or disagree with organized religion, it could be said that both Quindlen’s and Rebecca’s detachment from their religious upbringings further emphasizes their disconnect from their roots, perpetuating the generic nature of white culture.

In connection with white culture and privilege, even though Rebecca regularly worries about her finances due to her fading notoriety and rising bills, in the end, everything works out for Rebecca with very little fuss. During her youth, Rebecca gives little thought to finances; she has a husband to take care of her, as well as money coming in from her photography. For a long time, she lives off profits from her work, including “its satellites, the reprints and the licensing, as well as its free-floating reputation” (23). Rebecca fails to really notice how much money she brings in or how much she spends until it started to dry up and then disappeared as her career tapered off. She quickly learns that “the coin of notoriety pays with less and less interest as time goes by” (28). While she does have some awareness that not having enough money is different from being poor, Rebecca continues to have a somewhat “woe is me” attitude about her financial situation. She thinks about money constantly, afraid she will “live forever, impoverished, her career a footnote in a dissertation that no one even read” (30). In hopes of saving money, she sublets her NYC apartment and rents a cottage out in the country. Even though she does have some financial struggles, rising bills for herself and her ageing parents, Rebecca finds a way out
of her money issues with little effort. Yes, she does end up having another photography show, which could prove fruitful, but it is the selling of her father’s desk, worth $548,000, that offers Rebecca a chance at affording her old life again. It is not Rebecca’s work or self-earned money that frees her but inherited money, which further promotes Rebecca’s white privilege and solidifies that to be white is to be class privileged (Planas 186).

While she regularly disregards her race or background in terms of her identity, Rebecca often defines herself through different relationships in her life; two essential relationships she has are with her parents, Bebe and Oscar, who influence her as she grows up; however, she now finds herself switching roles with them as she must take care of them, especially financially, more and more. Unfortunately for middle-aged women, having to care for one’s ageing parents is a prominent concern, and it can challenge a woman’s efforts to redefine herself and focus on her own needs, as well as cause financial and emotional distress (Levine 104). This proves true for Rebecca who must deal with taking care of her parents, one in a retirement home and one being taken care of in the home. Besides the financial burden that befalls her as she ages and her parents age accordingly, Rebecca struggles because she never truly felt her family “deserved the name” of family (Still Life 4). After a lifetime of feeling somewhat disconnected, especially from her mother, she is expected to step up as the sole daughter and take care of everything, which likely prompts feelings of unfairness. Now, after her fame has dwindled, Rebecca contends with the cost of providing for herself and her parents even though her own income is slowing disappearing and she has no idea how to continue her work as a photographer precisely because her economic situation keeps her scared all the time. The added responsibilities associated with her parents and their care make Rebecca reluctant to visit them and further emphasizes to her that
“children aren’t meant to take care of their parents” (58). In addition, Rebecca fears getting older, like many middle-aged women. Every time she visits her parents, she is reminded of her own unwanted ageing. She dreads facing the “pink of her mother’s scalp through the flossy white hair” and “the box of adult diapers in her father’s bathroom” (66). By visiting infrequently, Rebecca attempts to outrun her worries about ageing; however, that does not stop time from marching on or stops her from fretting about “what would happen to them” or “what would happen to her” (67).

While both parents cause her to feel anxious about finances and ageing, Rebecca’s mother, Bebe, creates an antagonistic connection with her daughter, causing tension and resentment within a relationship that is crucial to Rebecca’s identity development. Grace Baruch and Rosalind C. Barnett argue that the mother is the most important figure in a child’s life (601). This is especially true for young girls, who often look to their mothers as role models, someone “who may exemplify a desirable pattern of adult life, a fate to be avoided, or both” (601).

Unfortunately for Rebecca, Bebe proves to be a poor example for her because she is cold and unable to accept her own heritage, something that causes issues for Rebecca later in life. Bebe is “dismissive,” “aggrieved,” and “unyielding” (53); she is a woman who does not truly take well to marriage and, particularly, motherhood. For Bebe’s generation, it was expected “that a girl would get married, and a married woman would become a mother” (52), yet Bebe failed to relax into motherhood, like the other women around her. Besides not being overly warm to her daughter, Bebe goes out of her way to make Rebecca aware of her disapproval and make Rebecca feel uncomfortable, which just adds to the icy nature of their relationship. When Rebecca was younger, Bebe liked to point out Rebecca’s flaws in front of others to make
Rebecca feel more insecure, and she fixated on correcting Rebecca’s use of “slang, even contractions,” which made Rebecca’s own syntax stiff and old-fashioned and kept her from developing her own voice (55). Later, after Rebecca’s divorce, Bebe continues to make Rebecca feel bad about herself. Even though the marriage between Rebecca and her husband dissolved, Bebe continues to remind her that she always liked Peter, even though he cheated on Rebecca. Bebe’s unwillingness to take her daughter’s side after Peter cheats on her blatantly fails to provide support for her daughter when she truly needs it. In addition, Bebe struggles to acknowledge, accept, or appreciate her own Jewish heritage; instead, she is “a practiced expert at the casual anti-Semitism of the wealthy assimilated New York Jew” (54). Bebe’s inability or unwillingness to identify with her Jewish ancestry causes identity issues for Rebecca. At times, Rebecca feels the need to hide this part of herself. For example, when she completes a family tree in college that acknowledges her Jewish heritage, Rebecca knows that, if her mother discovered Rebecca had come out as a Jewess, she would be very angry. As she gets older, Rebecca continues to keep herself at arm’s length from her Jewish background, likely due, at least partially, to her mother’s negative influence. In spite of feeling as if she came from a very dysfunctional family whom she considers hardly a family at all, Rebecca must, now that her mother is elderly and suffering from Alzheimer's, pay for her mother’s retirement home bills. At this point, Bebe no longer recognizes her only child; however, Rebecca is quick to recognize that the “flat, slightly suspicious look” in Bebe’s eyes would not be much different from “the way she had looked at Rebecca when she was a girl, or a young woman” (52).

While a lot of her relationship with her mother has always been contentious and provided little, if any, positive support in terms of identity development, Rebecca’s connection with her
father, Oscar, proves to be more beneficial; however, her father’s passive comments and slights, even unintentional, over the years, cause her to question her relevance. While Oscar always told people he had a good daughter and believes that Peter didn’t deserve Rebecca, he also makes her second guess herself. When she was younger, the “tone of excitement in her father’s nasal voice” when speaking to her always made Rebecca feel loved (56); however, she is sad to discover that he spoke to everyone that way, a way which made everyone like him, but it causes Rebecca to recognize that she was not “special in that way” (56); her father loves her, but he does not treat Rebecca any differently from the way he treats other people in his life. This might have made him popular with friends and co-workers, but it definitely makes young Rebecca feel less extraordinary in her father’s eyes, something that likely lingers on into her adulthood and beyond her relationship with her father. Her feelings of inadequacy that stem from her relationship with her father likely influence Rebecca’s poor choice in a husband and their eventual unbalanced relationship. In terms of her career, Oscar seems to not see Rebecca’s photography as important and sees her goals as merely financial, claiming she is made of money, which is why “‘she gave up her painting for those pictures she takes, for the money’” (121). These comments suggest that Oscar does not value his daughter’s work and would have preferred that she had chosen a more recognizable art form, like painting, to make a living from instead of photography. Oscar is a nice man and a good father, but his passive comments and snubs cause Rebecca to feel insecure at times about her life and her career, hindering her identity development.

In addition to her relationship with her parents, Rebecca’s marriage to Peter proves limiting as he attempts to stifle Rebecca’s sense of self throughout their relationship. Even after
they divorce, she struggles to understand her new identity in life, one that does not include a partner, causing her to feel lost and unsure of what the future holds for her. While Rebecca “never changed her name” (5) after they were married, signaling a strong feminist trait, Rebecca and Peter had a traditional marriage with conventional gender roles; she took care of the home and their son, Ben, while Peter earned the money. Peter, however, regularly made it clear that Rebecca should not consider herself his equal; he expected her to keep the home clean and ready for impromptu parties with his colleagues, but he never helped with anything. Rebecca always felt that “their relationship was like playing chess except that one person had all the larger pieces and the other—her—a line of sad little pawns” (102). When Rebecca begins to make a name for herself in the art world, Peter’s ego is bruised and a nastier side of him is revealed. Peter is “considerably less pleased with her success than Rebecca had hoped” (27); he hates the fact that success and fame somehow materialized for his wife but not for him, adding more stress to their already tense marriage. Due to “a blizzard of adultery, abandonment, and unacknowledged anger and envy on the part of her husband,” her marriage comes to “a sudden, almost inevitable end” (27-8). Yet, even with all the hardships of the marriage, she is still surprised, which may be due to her unwillingness to admit she does not want to move forward in life alone. It is also important to point out that Rebecca, after all the frustrations and cheating, is not the one to end the relationship; it is Peter. Rebecca likes being married to him because she likes being part of a pair; she allows so much of how she sees herself to be wrapped up in this bad marriage for too long. Like many middle-aged women who face divorce, they find themselves confused about who they are now that they are no longer a part of a couple. Ellen B. Bogolub explains that divorce for middle-aged women means “the loss of accustomed living patterns and social status,”
which causes “the destruction of a self-image and way of life” (428). As time passes, Rebecca comes to better terms with the situation; the divorce no longer feels painful but more of a “simple dislocation” (Still Life 124). However, Rebecca forgave him nothing for his behavior and actions in the end, unwilling to fully let the issue go or the feelings of being in a partnership, hindering her ability to fully move forward and develop her identity for her future.

While Rebecca finds herself feeling limited and somewhat lost after the end of her marriage, Rebecca’s relationship with Jim Bates, a local roofer, who she meets when she moves to the country, allows her to feel more comfortable in her newly developing identity due to his support and kindness; however, it is important to note that Rebecca’s progress on her sense of self, unlike some of the other Boomer female protagonists examined throughout this study, is not solely dependent on Jim’s involvement. When they first meet, Rebecca has recently moved to the run-down cottage out in the country because she can no longer afford her life in NYC. Jim, however, does not know this about Rebecca. To him, she is an artist who may be slumming out in his small town seeking solitude or inspiration. They bond over a sense of loneliness they both feel; she struggles with no longer being a relevant photographer and facing the world on her own since she is divorced and her son is grown, and he faces the day-to-day hardships of taking care of his mentally ill sister by himself. After spending time together working in the woods and getting to know one another, Rebecca and Jim have sex, which makes her feel “‘like a million bucks’” (155). Jim’s enthusiasm and appreciation of her body make her forget “the slackness at the tops of her haunches,” “the cesarean scare on her belly,” and “the creased skin of her cleavage” (156), allowing her to just relish the experience. While miscommunication and some personal hardships cause the two to stop speaking for a little while, they eventually reunite. At
that time, Rebecca learns that her new cross photographs were installations created by Jim’s sister, who recently committed suicide. However, as tough as it may be for him to see the images, Jim continues to support and encourage her, helping destroy the wall between “two dimensions and three” (231) for Rebecca, bringing her more clearly into the next stage of her life.

Another relationship that is significant to Rebecca’s identity is the one she has with her son, Ben. When he was young, her sense of self revolved around being his mother, but as she enters middle age, Rebecca must face that her mothering days are over, and she must redefine their relationship. In her book, Aren’t You Forgetting Someone?: Essays from my Mid-Life Revenge, Kari Lizer stresses that adult children provide infrequent homecomings and relentless series of leavings, forcing mothers to ease up on their “octopus-like grasp,” so their children can “run out into the world that’s so eager to greet them” (244), but this often leaves mothers feeling empty and lost since they no longer have children to mother. At times, Rebecca feels the same way. She wants to be a part of Ben’s life, but she also worries about smothering him or being too involved. Oddly enough, she admits that she could not say she loved being a mother, but she loved Ben “from almost the first time she had placed his bald misshapen head at her breast” (Still Life 52-3). When he does find the time to visit her, she hated to see him go, and she continues to want to take care of him, even if it was just sending him on his way with a check. As an adult, Ben often provides his mother with support, which helps her feel a continued connection between them. For example, he regularly reminds her that she will “always be Rebecca Winter” (196), that she will never lose herself entirely, even as things change. He also helps her find a new and more supportive agent, who helps Rebecca put together a new show, and at that show,
Ben eagerly tells his mother that “‘this is the best work you’ve ever done’” (216), making her feel good about her recent accomplishments and her ability to continue to produce solid work in the future.

In addition to her connection with her son, Rebecca finds support from her friend, Dorothea, who encourages Rebecca to break from the past to form a better and stronger identity. Dorothea, “an old school friend, a genuine friend” (169), wants what is best for Rebecca; she no longer wants Rebecca to feel trapped by Bebe’s inability to be a good mother or to be haunted by her divorce, which left Rebecca feeling lonely. Dorothea encourages Rebecca to “‘dangle a participle every once in a while’” (55) and go against the ridiculous rules and expectations established by Rebecca’s mother. Also, like many women, Rebecca, at times, struggles with breaking from gender expectations; she feels uncomfortable voicing her disapproval or anger, but Dorothea is quick to push Rebecca to admit that she is “‘just plain pissed’” (101) about things that frustrate her. Furthermore, Dorothea celebrates Rebecca’s achievements and happy moments, like when Rebecca and Jim get together, telling Rebecca that she looks fantastic and “‘it’s about time’” that Rebecca did something for herself and was happy (246). Pat O’Connor argues that “the crucial importance of friendships lies in their provision of positive and very enjoyable experiences” (19). This proves to be the case between Dorothea and Rebecca. Both women support one another and have an enjoyable comradery. As a good friend, Dorothea makes sure to help Rebecca better understand herself and what she wants for the future.

When she moves out to the country, Rebecca finds herself establishing a number of new relationships. She befriends Sarah Ashby, the owner of a local café, who helps Rebecca reignite her passion for photography, which, in turn, helps eventually reestablish Rebecca’s career. Sarah
tells everyone in town that Rebecca takes good pictures and puts up the poster of *Still Life with Bread Crumbs* in Tea for Two, her café, for everyone to see, making Rebecca feel proud of her work once again. In addition, Theodore Brinks, a local clown, credits Rebecca for being an example of adaption for him. He wanted to make a change in his life for a long time, and he believes that Rebecca provided the inspiration. Theodore even attends her father's funeral, so his support and kindness help Rebecca feel welcome in her new country environment, encouraging her to see more possibilities for her life now that she no longer can afford to live in New York. Overall, both individuals help Rebecca feel more comfortable with herself and everything she has accomplished and help foster her potential for change as she faces the need to redefine her identity.

While out in the country, Rebecca also befriends a stray dog, who helps her better understand her want for companionship and the importance of being open to change for herself and her future. Rebecca had always told herself that she was not a dog person, so when the dog first comes around, she warns him to not become too attached, and she is unwilling to give him a name because it implies “permanence and ownership,” something she is not prepared to embrace (143). However, similar to the country setting and the people who live there, the dog is able to worm his way into her heart. She finds him to be good company, and she quickly stops attempting to “push him off” (146) the bed when he comes to sleep with her; instead, she begins to make room for him there and in her life. Soon, she seriously contemplates naming him, which initially scares her because, by doing so, it would be “one more brick in a wall that stood between her and her former existence” (144). Marcella Durand explains that having a pet is extremely beneficial; recent studies show “that a pet can lower blood pressure, improve quality
of life, and relieve loneliness and stress” (40). This proves true for Rebecca. She names the dog Jack and keeps him because he is “a very intelligent dog” who knows “exactly what she needed” (Still Life 166); he rids her of feelings of loneliness and opens her up to new possibilities that she likely never thought of before.

Rebecca benefits from her new friends and Jack, the dog, but her relationship with her old agent causes her to question herself and her artistic abilities; however, her new agent better supports Rebecca, making her feel more confident moving forward in her photography and the second phase of her life. Tori Grzyjk, Rebecca’s old agent, considers Rebecca to be “old talent” (13) and does not give Rebecca much time or attention. She never really works on getting more of Rebecca’s work out in the world, causing Rebecca to feel more and more insecure about her work. Instead, she regularly berates Rebecca, making Rebecca afraid of even having to contact her. However, as Rebecca redefines her identity out in the country and becomes more sure of herself, she musters the courage to fire Tori. Paige Whittington, Rebecca’s new agent, is excited to work for Rebecca and stresses the importance of Rebecca’s work, explaining that it is both “‘accessible and mysterious’” (210). While Tori does little to promote Rebecca’s work, Paige sets up a new show for Rebecca’s cross photography, which she captured out in the country. The show is a success and further motivates Rebecca’s artistic nature and want to continue in her career as she reestablishes her identity and moves into the second half of her life.

In addition to relationships, Rebecca’s career as a famous photographer defines who she is for the first part of her adult life; however, as her fame fades moving into middle age, Rebecca struggles with the loss of notoriety and what it means for who she is. Rebecca truly hits stardom with her work called the Kitchen Counter series, which oddly came about when she “snapped
unthinkingly in a haze of fatigue overlaid with unacknowledged anger” (26) after being forced to host another unexpected dinner party for her selfish husband and his friends. He, like always, went straight up to bed and left Rebecca with the cleaning. This makes her feel “tired in that way a woman with a child and a husband and a house and a job and a life gets tired” (24). Anja Whittington explains that, for many women, finding a balance between work and family and “reducing how one sphere . . . impacts the other is a challenge” (80). While Rebecca does struggle with balancing her family and her career, often due to her demanding and jealous husband, her photography allows her more flexibility in terms of time and responsibilities than the careers of other women. Working as a photographer even allows her to accommodate her son, especially when her next series of photographs is focused on him. As her career progresses, Rebecca often acknowledges that her work is accidental, yet critics believe it to be an “iconic moment in women’s art” (24), and she becomes a female icon. Rebecca appreciates the recognition and the financial gains garnered through her work, but she often fails to consider herself the big deal that people make her out to be. She never understands or knows “why, why that, why then” (25) when it comes to her success. In reality, great success makes Rebecca less and less sure of herself as she continues to focus on developing her work. Unfortunately, as time passes, Rebecca’s fame fades as she enters middle age; she feels like she is done and “yesterday’s news” (12). She sees it coming because she sees what happens “reflected in dwindling royalty checks,” “infrequent engagements and invitations,” and “the reactions when she introduced herself at parties” (12). This change impacts how Rebecca sees herself and her place in the world. She must now face the future and decide who she wants to be for the rest of
her life. Her time in the country offers her time to reflect on this issue and provides some surprising areas of inspiration.

Besides her career, Rebecca’s identity is influenced and altered by location choices. Having grown up and lived most of her life in the city, Rebecca believes her sense of self is based in New York City, which proves to be an issue when she feels forced to sublet her beloved NYC apartment to save money, leaving everything that she has known behind, including her original understanding of who she is. At the beginning of the novel, Rebecca feels like “a true child of New York” (6) because she grew up almost entirely in New York City; her whole life took place in or centered around the city. She loves her apartment with the narrow foyer and breath-taking views; the idea of selling it is “unthinkable” because it is her beloved home (34), but how to financially afford it is a constant worry for her. More importantly, she feels that the apartment is the last link to the person she had once been. Unfortunately, her money woes take precedent, and she must move out to a cheaper place in the country. Initially, Rebecca finds this new environment to be lonely and unpleasant with its abundance of rustic “charm,” but her new location in the country comes with several unexpected benefits for her developing identity.

Even though she initially despises the fact that she must give up her NYC apartment for a run-down cottage in the country, Rebecca comes to see the location as a place for growth as she moves into the second half of her life. When she first moves out to the cottage, Rebecca continues to tell herself that she can go back to her old life when she can afford it. In the meantime, she will live in exile to save money and attempt to “reclaim the basic syntax of her daily existence” (16) as best she can since it has been upended by “this strange little town” (16). Rebecca tries to make the best of the situation. Besides helping with her finances, she tells
herself that living in the cottage could prove inspirational for her work because “a change of scene always brought inspiration” for her (14). Interestingly, after spending time away from the city and getting to know the townspeople, her time in the country no longer feels like a prison sentence. Instead, the thought of returning to the city gives her vertigo, and NYC itself now feels “like another country” (123). Being out in the country helps her begin to better understand her own wants and needs as she moves into her second adulthood. When she uses the lens of the country, much of her past seems so improbable, which further urges her to think about her goals and wishes for the future. This supports the idea that “individual characteristics of places,” such as the people and the type of environment, “are vital in determining quality of life” (Committee on Identifying Data 55). After all her ups and downs, Rebecca decides to leave the city behind because she finds herself “yearning for the cottage, the dog, the empty spaces, the tall trees, the solitude, the quiet” (218) and all the possibilities that the country holds for her new identity.

Through her relationships, her passion for her career, and her selected locations, Rebecca redefines herself and establishes a new identity that is happier and more open to new opportunities for the second half of her life. Maria Mezari stresses that older women, like Rebecca, can and should challenge themselves and grow because this provides new opportunities to learn new things (70). Even though she initially fights against moving out to the country and fails to see this change as a possibility to learn new things, Rebecca eventually learns to feel like she had “woken up to something that she should have known long ago” (Still Life 173). For far too long, she “denatured parts of her own existence by printing and framing and freezing them” (231), not allowing herself to develop a more authentic identity. In the past, she kept most of her life in two dimensions, understanding “what things looked like but not what they really
amounted to” (84), which perhaps speaks to the motivation behind her chosen profession as a photographer. She was a woman who could see the image but not the meaning behind it. As a photographer, she snaps a shot of an image and freezes it, often without understanding or looking for a deeper meaning other than the beauty on the surface. However, her time and reflection in the country transform her world into three dimensions; she comes to better understand herself and her hopes for the future. This supports Levine's belief that understanding that you are not who you were frees up “the imagination and mobilizes one’s resources to manage adversity and seize upon serendipity” (4). By the end, thanks to several different factors, Rebecca Winters embraces her new identity and finds comfort in her new life in the country where she lives on her own terms.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE FEMALE PERSUASION

*The Female Persuasion* (2018) by Meg Wolitzer discusses Faith Frank, a feminist icon and Boomer woman, who defines herself through her activism and career helping women; however, when entering a new phase of her life, she fails to question her past choices, her current options, and how she sees herself, as well as how the world perceives her. After her feminist magazine closes, Faith, against her better moral judgment, teams up with a wealthy but, at times, unethical business man with whom she has a past to start a new women’s foundation, yet things do not go as planned. Through her relationships with family, friends, and employees, the importance of her career, and her reaction to possibly losing her iconic status, Faith fails to embark on a journey of initiation and solidifies her identity, unwilling to give up her status as a feminist role model. She is like a Barbie doll, plastic, and she uses her appeal to hang on to her power and notoriety. She is so adamant to retain how she sees herself that she is willing to compromise her values and beliefs to maintain her specific persona, stifling any possibilities for growth or redefinition for the future.

*The Female Persuasion* is part of a growing new category of novels typically written by Baby Boomers about characters who are age appropriate for people who are also the same age, Baby Boomers. It regularly features contemporary settings and older characters addressing facets of their lives in today’s world. The creation of a genre that caters specifically to Boomers and their current needs and wants should not be surprising considering that this is the same
generation that pushed for young adult novels when they were younger. As Boomers live longer, they want reading material, as well as films and television shows, to reflect their own interests and showcase stories and people facing the same types of challenges and experiences as they are. Especially important in these texts is demonstrating that there is life after fifty, especially for women. So much of our current media and society focus on the young, what is hip and trendy, so Boomer readers want to read books about people like themselves because they know that ageing should not diminish their relevance or simply because reading about people like themselves provides them with a more interesting story.

Currently, there are a number of female authors whose work would be classified as Boomer literature; one of them is Baby Boomer Meg Wolitzer, a novelist who has written several novels, including *The Wife* and *The Uncoupling*. Her novels primarily focus on “the inner lives of women” (Franklin) and “the stories of people who feel like real people” (O’Kelly). In an interview with Lisa O’Kelly in 2018, Wolitzer explained that she is a feminist, so she writes like a feminist. In her essay, “The Second Shelf,” Wolitzer laments that literary fiction by men “tends to be received differently from literary fiction by women” (Franklin). She argues that books about women’s lives are often “treated as a niche, trivial genre, shunted to a separate section of the bookstore” (Schwartz). More so, if the books are written by women, Wolitzer stresses that they tend to be demoted to the lower shelf, meaning “their covers suggest domesticity, their spines are slimmer, and their contents are dismissed by some male readers as ‘one soft, undifferentiated mass that has little to do with them’” (Franklin), which is why it is so important for writers like Wolitzer to write novels about women characters of a certain age.
Boomer literature, including Meg Wolitzer’s novel, is a fairly new genre and is not part of the traditional canon, so there is little to no criticism available; however, a few reviews of The Female Persuasion exist. Ruth Franklin, from The Atlantic, refers to the novel as “a timely, dynamic examination of women and power that male readers and gatekeepers should take seriously” (Franklin). Furthermore, she argues that the text addresses what it means to be a feminist now, in the 21st century, when “the old barriers to women’s success have been broken down but no one understands quite what has replaced them” (Franklin). While the psychology of Wolitzer’s characterization is so deft and she makes astute observations about people and life, according to Franklin, some of the plotting feels “a little too bald; like Chekhov’s gun, almost every moment in the early parts of the book reverberates later” (Franklin). Writing for The New York Times, Lena Dunham states that Wolitzer is “an infinitely capable creator of human identities that are as real as the type on this page,” and her love of her characters “shines more brightly than any agenda” (Dunham). She adds that the text speaks to the issue of ambition, “who has it, what curtails it and what it means to reframe it” (Dunham). Dunham thinks so highly of this novel that she argues that it should be “placed on shelves alongside such ornate modern novels beginning in college as A Little Life, The Secret History and The Marriage Plot” (Dunham). Unfortunately, Dunham's praise for Wolitzer's work has not earned the novel its proper place in university classrooms. The novel is hardly ever taught, and Wolitzer's other novels are also pretty much ignored. Like Dunham, Annalisa Quinn, writing for NPR, values Wolitzer's work and sees Wolitzer’s novel as a “wonderfully solid book, luxuriously long and varied in an almost 19th century kind of way” (Quinn). However, she points out that Wolitzer can
“tone-deaf about how young people act and speak” (Quinn), and while her writing style can be both elegant and unlabored, it can come across plain at times.

A foundation for Boomer literature likely lies in early American women’s fiction, particularly due to its focus on female identity. In general, women’s fiction focuses on female life experiences, and the texts are often written for and by women. Helen Taylor argues that women’s fiction is significant to its female readers because it plays “an important emotional and therapeutic role in women’s lives” (48). Typically, these works address a woman on the cusp of some significant life change or moment of personal growth, which usually leads to some type of transformation. Linda Grasso builds on this idea, stressing that women’s fiction aids female readers by helping them to imagine new identities (158). When writing about the work of 19th-century women writers, Nina Baym explains that these texts hoped to guide “readers’ thinking about choice of a mate and married life” in order to obtain an important goal of domestic ideology: to utilize the middle-class household as “a base for a newly recognized female power, a space from which women could powerfully influence the world” (xxvii). Baym stresses that the true aim of women’s fiction was “to delineate the type of women who could construct such a base and operate productively from it” (xxvii). While 19th-century women were more likely confined to the home, it did not stop them from trying to achieve their goals, advance their rights, or develop their female identities. Currently, modern women face less restrictions and limitations in order to fulfill their ambitions and wishes, but they still continue to face obstacles in order to fully develop their identities in a patriarchal society. Nanci Milone Hill adds that female characters in contemporary women’s fiction are bound to be facing some issue, making their journeys to self-awareness more difficult and their ability to influence the world more
challenging (xii). However, the journeys that these women characters face in these texts eventually make each of them a stronger person with a more thoroughly developed identity, which is exactly what makes interesting fiction (xii).

In *The Female Persuasion*, Faith Frank embodies a lot of the feminist values of 20th-century women and the pioneering aims of 19th-century women; while she may have married and had a child, living a more conventional life at times, Faith regularly pushes to support other women and advance the female agenda in order to obtain more equality between the sexes. Her basic problem, or her Achilles heel, is that she gets so caught up in maintaining this feminist image that, when facing some issue, she fails to do what is truly and morally right; instead, she sweeps the male-created problem under the rug, stifling her opportunity to grow as she enters the next phase of her life. Rebecca Vnuk and Nanette Donohue point out that, when exploring the lives of female protagonists, women’s fiction usually focuses on women’s “many layered relationships with spouses, parents, children, friends, and community” (viii); these relationships play a significant role in the initial establishment of female identity in early adulthood, as well as an essential factor in the redefinition of identity in middle age. This proves to be true for Faith, who is impacted and influenced by her family’s adherence to strict gender roles, her friends’ life choices, and her admirers’ devotion to her and her status as a feminist icon.

Another genre that likely acts as a source for Boomer literature is contemporary memoirs and non-fiction texts written by and for middle-aged Boomer women about ageing. These works are part of a widespread trend in current fiction and plays written by older women to study who they are as women of a certain age in this new world. Hoping to better outline the positive side of getting older, many older female writers discuss middle-age life through non-fiction works like
memoirs, and provide, through these texts, a bridge that connects them to their readers of the same age who are also living through similar experiences. This new crop of memoirs about women of a certain age provide Baby Boomer readers with the benefits of whatever knowledge Baby Boomer writers have gained from growing older. In her book, *50 is the New Fifty: 10 Life Lessons for Women in Second Adulthood*, Suzanne Levine not only puns on Oprah Winfrey's statement that “50 is the new 40” but also stresses that second adulthood is all about change, “the changes that befall us and those we generate” (22). As scary as getting older can be, in reality, middle age offers the opportunity for growth and redefinition; women no longer must conform to previously established personas, life styles, or beliefs. They can move past conventional gender expectations, freeing them up to make decisions about themselves and how they want the world to see them. Other female protagonists within this study appear to benefit from the option to change as they get older, but Faith holds on desperately to the idea of not changing, keeping things, her, the same as much as possible. She is not willing to let go of her feminist icon role to see what else is out there for her or what other ways she could help women, which, unfortunately, is a detriment for Faith and any possibility for real growth. Another point that Levine makes in her book is that getting older provides “a stress-defusing outlook” (136), the ability to “pick yourself up and move on, to let stuff go, to accept what is and cherish it, to make changes and take the consequences, to roll with the punches” (185). For most women, especially those that conformed to social norms for most of their lives, this must be an extremely freeing sensation. Faith, however, fails to recognize or appreciate this benefit of ageing. Instead, she keeps forging ahead with her feminist agenda, which should be an admirable thing.

Unfortunately, she is unwilling to “make change” or “take the consequences” when faced with
the corrupt and unethical actions of the foundation; she cannot “roll with the punches” and figure out a better solution for everyone involved. Instead, she chooses to protect herself and the image of the foundation, which goes against everything she worked for throughout her life.

Focusing on female identity allows for discussions about identity matters connected to middle-aged Boomers. According to William Strauss and Neil Howe, Boomers typically have not focused on constructing a society; rather, their mission is “justifying, purifying, even sanctifying it” (Strauss 301). They are often eager to share, asked for or not, their opinions and views about anything and everything that is going on because they see themselves as “the embodiment of moral wisdom” (312), and this has not changed as they aged, feeling that, now that they are older, they know even better. In the novel, Faith Frank embodies several aspects of these Boomer traits. Being a feminist icon, she believes her opinion and input are valuable and even needed to help women. The fact that everyone is drawn to her and looks to her for advice and guidance only feeds her ego and need to maintain her image. When she learns of the unethical work of her foundation, she is more than ready to “justify” their actions and her inaction to correct the issue. Boomers have a tendency to fixate on themselves, and Faith is no different; she is more worried about what will happen to her and how people will perceive her foundation than providing the necessary assistance to the women she claimed she wanted to help, emphasizing Faith’s missed opportunity to develop her identity in her second adulthood.

For most of her life, Faith Frank defines herself as a feminist activist because of her work in the 1960s and 1970s for the women’s movement. She is described as “‘a couple of steps down from Gloria Steinem in fame’” (Wolitzer 25). Due to the natural and confident way that she speaks and because she can speak to anyone about anything, Faith becomes a crucial part of the
movement; she gives speeches and interviews, and she writes books in addition to writing for a feminist magazine, *Bloomer*. Also, in the past and present, Faith comes across as someone that is “seductive to almost everyone” (144), having a “special and separate taste that, once you’d tried it, you wanted more of” (170), and this speaks to the core of her essence, who she is at heart. Her significance as a feminist speaker lies in her attractiveness to the women and men who flock to auditoriums to listen to her speak about feminist issues, but she is using her sex appeal to draw this audience. Wolitzer does not seem to condemn Faith for her superficial attractiveness, which is a matter of genetics, not her fault, but she does present the reader with an interesting conundrum about the way in which even real feminist icons like Gloria Steinem used their attractiveness to draw in women and men to the feminist cause. Faith uses her good looks to draw a crowd to the women's movement, and as she ages, she is still concerned with her appearance and still using it. Even as she ages, people continue to be drawn to her, seeking friendship, advice, and guidance. However, the truth is that she is not a particularly original thinker or a visionary; instead, she is someone who could “sift and distill ideas and present them in a way that made other people want to hear them” (144) in order to inspire and support other women. As time passes, Faith remains a relevant figure in the ever-changing women’s movement, but she is no longer the extremely sought-after persona she once was; rather, she is seen as someone from the past, “who was often spoken of with admiration, and with a special tone of voice reserved for very few people” (27), but books sales still dropped, and she was forced to resort to the college lecture circuit to speak ardently about women’s lives. As she gets older, she aims to remain a “forceful presence” (28) and a youthful “sexual powerhouse” (28) by wearing her signature tall, suede boots and regularly visiting the salon to keep herself looking
young, which actually emphasizes her insecurities with ageing and her need to maintain her recognizable image.

Even though she begins to feel tired and overworked, Faith continues to work for the feminist agenda. When the small magazine that she published on women's issue, Bloomer, is shut down, she moves on to a new venture, a foundation, in order to benefit women. Faith wants to continue to make a difference through the same means she has always used; she is unwilling to try new things or utilize similar methods as more contemporary women’s publications or organizations, but the status quo is not working. Instead of making changes or altering her approach to helping women, Faith's new foundation basically relies on offering ineffective seminars and luncheons, which are mostly attended by upper class white women and used for the purpose of fundraising; no real work is being done for the feminist cause. Faith wants to be able to implement social change, but her ambition, her need to be in control, and her inability to make better ethical decisions make her come across in a negative and inflexible light. Lena Dunham supports this idea, arguing that Faith’s ambition and actions are “guileless” and “vaguely sinister” (Dunham). In the end, when faced with a moral dilemma, Faith has the opportunity to step up and do what is right, but she decides to keep quiet to protect her own image and the foundation. She attempts to justify this action, claiming that, without the financial support of the foundation, she could no longer help any women, but she is never able to fully come back from her bargain with the devil, and the foundation and its resources continue to dwindle, offering no real assistance to women or the movement. According to David Buckingham, identity only becomes a concern “when it is threatened or contested in some way and needs to be explicitly asserted” (2). Faith has the opportunity to make a change, to establish a new identity for herself,
but she is so unwilling to let go of who she was, the feminist icon, that she misses the chance. Instead, she ends up in “a tighter space, with a lower budget, in wild, uncertain times” (Wolitzer 45), still working, but slowly disappearing, becoming less and less useful to women and their cause, emphasizing that she is merely a water-downed version of Gloria Steinem, someone she once admired and hoped to emulate.

Another important aspect of female identity that is relevant to middle-aged Boomer women is ageism, something they regularly face and struggle with as they get older. Ageism is similar in many ways to racism and sexism; however, it differs from other isms because people everywhere, regardless of race or sex, “move from the unmarked to the marked position, from privilege to discrimination” (Lipscomb 5). It does not help that the media typically negatively portrays the elderly or fails to present them at all, but it is hard to find positive and/or realistic representations of older men and women (Dilgen 63). While ageism impacts all people, one way or another, it appears to hit women harder due to societal pressure to maintain unrealistic beauty expectations, which causes them to feel insecure and unhappy. However, it is interesting to note that, according to Cynthia Rich, ageism is not something that all women face or, at least, face to the same extent; she argues that ageism is often seen as “a bourgeois, frivolous, white women’s issue” (qtd. in Lipscomb 11), which is supported by several texts written by white female Boomer authors, including some in this study. This fails to be surprising since white women usually do not have to worry about issues pertaining to race; they have the privilege of only having to worry about the hardships and physical changes associated with ageing and the standards associated with their gender. In Wolitzer’s novel, even though she is a feminist role model and would ideally be above conforming to society’s feminine ideals of beauty, Faith
cannot escape her need to retain as much of her younger self as she can, which is especially demonstrated by her continued wearing, even as she ages, of her knee-high suede boots. In addition, Faith religiously keeps up with her beauty routine, like dying her hair, in order to keep looking as youthful as possible and because she wants to look like herself; however, she does not want that information “spread . . . around” (339), further emphasizing her concerns with maintaining her youthful appearance and her need to “‘feel okay looking in the mirror’” (340).

While ageism is an issue for many middle-aged Boomer women, numerous believe that second adulthood can provide opportunities for reestablishing their identity. One benefit of ageing is being able to reclaim one’s time. Suzanne Braun Levine stresses that taking back control of one’s own time is one of the first steps toward “doing unto ourselves” (108), offering middle-aged women the ability to do what they want when they want. In addition, these women can now put away responsibilities and social conventions to focus on something that interests them; they can have their own goal or purpose beyond getting married or having children. Unfortunately, unlike other women in this study, growing older does not bring more freedom for Faith Frank. As she ages, she continues to stay focused on her fight for equality between the sexes; she does not need to find her purpose because she has made her purpose her life’s work. This is commendable, but she becomes so obsessed with maintaining her feminist persona that she becomes blind to reality. She is making strides through the foundation, but as the years go by, less and less money and energy are devoted to causes that are actually helping women. Instead, the focus of the foundation is hosting seminars that predominately cater to middle and upper class white women with its spa treatments and luncheons.
Another advantage of middle age is the chance for Boomer women to learn more about themselves. Levine explains that the range of things to learn about oneself in middle age is as wide as it has been since these Boomer women were adolescents; so much about their relationships, their bodies, and their thinking are “under review” for possible changes (2). While Faith appears to be someone who aims to remain connected to social movements and changes, especially the wants and needs of women, she fails to join the trend of other Boomer women who take advantage of middle age to learn more about themselves. She seems to think she is just fine how she is, attempting to maintain her youth through salon visits and knee-high boots and keeping the status quo in terms of her work for the feminist agenda. Her inability to see the importance of growth limits her development and, in reality, keeps her out of touch with contemporary women, particularly those her age, which suggests there is a kink in this feminist's icon armor. Faith is too concerned with her image to be of use to women. For her, the feminist movement has been about giving speeches and changing people's mind about what it means to be a feminist, but her own life demonstrates that she is a paper thin, superficial role model for whom intellectually savvy speeches replace the gravitas of conviction. She may have tried to help women, but her more recent projects suggest that she has failed miserably at creating substantive change.

Many of these non-fiction works and Baby Boomer novels written by women concentrate on white female protagonists and have little reference to ethnic or cultural issues; like the American Adam, who is “bereft of ancestry” (Lewis 5), the characters typically appear to not contemplate their race as a pertinent trait that impacts their surroundings, economic status, or identities. While other ethnicities struggle with the “process of shuttling between identities in
order to maintain one’s multiple cultural allegiances” (Gillan xvii), white racial identity is often “invisible” or “taken for granted” (McDermott 247). According to Molly Littlewood McKibbin, acceptance of whiteness as a silent and/or generic category throughout society essentially reinforces white hegemony, limiting ethnic voices and culture (108). In addition, whiteness is typically rooted in social and economic privilege (McDermott 247). Instead of dealing with discrimination or hardships, like women of other races, being white provides the luxury of time to find oneself (Planas 187). White individuals have the opportunity to define themselves in any way they want because race fails to be an issue for them. These concerns are clearly present in *The Female Persuasion*. While Faith often has many people around her or connected to her through her work and activism, no strong diverse characters or friends seem to be present or play an important part in her story, especially the later part of her life. If any of these characters who surround Faith are anything other than white, the text does not emphasize it. Furthermore, Faith and her work appear to perpetuate the unfortunate belief that the women’s movement most often caters to white middle and upper class women instead of a wider and more diverse group of women. While her work may have started off with the best of intentions to aid all women, the foundation’s current activities, seminars filled with manicures and psychics, further stress the luxuries and privileges of being a white woman and point to how out of touch this foundation is with the problems faced by women of color. Yes, Faith hates the way things have turned out, the fact that they are not doing as much “real” work as she had hoped, but she fails to act to make things better or refocus the genuine goal of the foundation, to help all women in the fight for equality.
Probably because she is a white woman and has no real contact with women of color, the same women whom her foundation wants to serve, Faith does not feel the pressure that someone of a different race may feel in her position to push for drastic and impactful steps to enact change through the foundation’s platform. In her younger years, she does encounter and, to a small degree, work with women of different ethnicities, but her inability to do so now is not fully addressed or acknowledged. On another level, it is important to point out that is seems odd that Wolitzer, while writing a book about female relationships and empowerment, would omit more diverse characters to provide a wider world perspective for the characters and the readers. Yes, Faith aims to push the feminist agenda, but is everyone truly included in that plan?

Acknowledging Wolitzer’s lack of focus on ethnicity and its impact on Faith and the text is a crucial aspect of this novel and better understanding why white women writers continue to ignore ancestry and/or ethnicity in their works.

When discussing literature, studying or outlining the ethnicity of non-white characters can provide them with different opportunities, new appreciation, or a fresh perspective. This is shown in the works of ethnic writers, such as Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* or Lisa See’s *Shanghai Girls*. These authors offer their protagonists a path to understanding their place in the world through their own sense of who they are within a community. Simply, race is “a meaningful factor in every individual life” (Ahokas 67). However, this is not available to white woman characters who typically have no sense of where they come from or have no interest in pursuing such a connection to their heritage. Instead, they live in a world where they perpetuate the misguided belief that their race is invisible and often privileged since race is not a factor for them in their daily lives. Wolitzer, as well as several other white female authors, suggest that
ethnicity is not important to them or their work by failing to make their white female characters’ ancestry or cultural background a crucial part of their identities.

As seen throughout this study, there is a continued disregard, intentional or not, for the significance of race and cultural background by white female authors of Boomer literature. Why do they feel that their own heritages and those they could create for their female protagonists are not important in understanding and developing female identity? In her article, “Urban Violence and Failed Myths in Raymond Carver’s ‘What We Talk about When We Talk about Love,’” Ibis Gómez-Vega discusses the idea of mythology, or lack thereof, for the four white characters in the story. She argues that they have no claim to a historical past (Gómez-Vega 72) and “no connection to any traditional group of myths” (74). The four characters in Carver's story lack an understanding of their past and their ancestry, which would likely help them better understand themselves and their place in the world. Could this be the same issue that plagues many of the white women writers writing Boomer literature? Do these female writers fail to see, understand, or accept a mythology for themselves as white individuals, which in turn impacts their ability to create more thorough connections to cultural backgrounds for their female characters?

Mythology is defined as traditional stories that typically focus on origins and foundational tales for a specific group of people; they are intended to connect societies and individuals. Unfortunately, while many ethic writers address their mythology through their literary works and discuss identity issues due to their cultural backgrounds, white writers appear to continue to perpetuate the invisible nature of whiteness and its lack of mythology by regularly ignoring the significance of their race and ancestry; they do not see the relevance of their ethnicity or heritage, so why should their white female characters be concerned with theirs? How
do women characters come to understand their own identity, especially in order to redefine themselves, when they are unable or unwilling to take their own backgrounds and race into account? Linda Martin Alcoff argues that every individual “needs to feel a connection to community, to a history, and to a human project larger than his or her own life” (8), which makes these authors’ disconnect from their histories even more troubling. As advantageous as their works can be for understanding many aspects of female identity, particularly for middle-aged women, white Boomer women writers’ lack of concern with race and ethnicity appears shortsighted and detrimental to the creation and presentation of their female characters and to their female readers. It continues to harp on the myth that white people, because they constitute the majority of the population in the United States, do not need to know the mythology that makes them who they are. The fact is that this willful ignorance creates people, specifically characters, who suffer from being unmoored.

Not surprisingly, Faith never really considers her race or ethnicity when it comes to her own identity, and since she is unwilling to redefine herself for the second half of her life, she fails to make any changes in terms of recognizing her place in the world as a privileged white woman. According to Ruth Frankenberg, whiteness is “a location of structural advantage, of race privilege” (1). Unfortunately, Faith continues to embody this idea throughout the novel, paying no mind to how her privileged status benefits her and her rise within the women’s movement and society. One key aspect of her privilege is the fact that she never appears to really worry about money. Yes, she has jobs, as a cocktail waitress, a writer, a lecturer, but her later work especially is not about earning money to take care of herself; instead, it is about keeping herself relevant and in the public eye. Faith seems to never worry about bills or affording certain things. Rather,
she has a lovely home, which impresses her foundation staff, and is able to go for massages on a regular basis. However, the information that is provided by Wolitzer about Faith’s work begs the question: how can Faith afford her lifestyle through feminist activism? It is hard to believe that publishing a small women's magazine pays well enough to finance her lifestyle. The only real money issue she seems focused on is the financial backing provided by the foundation, which she is willing to do anything, morally right or not, in order to keep. However, once again, this boils down to what is important to Faith. If the foundation disappears, Faith no longer has a platform to keep herself relevant, which would leave her feeling old and useless. The focus is on Faith and her hypnotizing speaking ability and want to make a change. While at Bloomer, there is an attempt to have a diverse staff and to address diverse issues, but the work comes across formal, somewhat uneasy, and lacking real depth; it fails to fully embrace pertinent issues for everyone, not just white feminist women. As time passes, the magazine fails to keep up with the times, the ever-changing feminist agenda, and important minority issues and causes. Other publications are more willing to showcase their diverse and more radical stances on issues, such as LGBTQ+ rights, in addition to women’s issues, but Faith's magazine remains stuck in the past. After starting the foundation, Faith has high hopes of incorporating more diversity, but once again, she falls short. While she is able to provide financial support to some female African American writers, she only has one African American individual on her team at the foundation. If this organization is meant to speak for and help all women, it should include a more diverse work force to better represent and speak for all women. The bottom line is that while she wants things, like the foundation’s events and her work staff to be more diverse, she fails to bring that hope to fruition, likely because racial issues are not a priority for her. In addition, as she becomes
more willing to go against her better moral judgment, she ends up pushing more significant and
diverse things to the side, not willing to rock the boat, to keep her financial backing through the
foundation.

Faith’s financial privilege plays a key role in her approach to ageing, something that she
regularly struggles with as ageing brings the possibility of her no longer being a relevant feminist
role model. Faith is desperate to remain young looking and socially significant. As she gets
older, Faith has “nostalgia for her own lost younger self” (Wolitzer 306). She wants to be young
again, especially because “God forbid a female public figure should become craggy” (306). By
letting herself go, Faith would gamble with her importance, taking the chance that her youthful
and sexy image is what really keeps her followers drawn to her and what she says. Yet, she
acknowledges that she hates having to put all that time into maintaining her youthful looks;
rather, she feels that she could have “‘done something much more significant than sitting in a
chair being passive and wearing a plastic cape like a superhero of nothing’” (339). Still, the time,
energy, and, most importantly, money do not stop her from remaining a slave to her beauty
routine. Faith admits that vanity “‘isn’t cheap,’” and “‘it gets more expensive all the time’”
(340), but she is unwilling to let it go and to age gracefully; instead, she wants to make sure she
looks like herself, her younger self, every time she looks in the mirror. Looking young, looking
like she did during the height of her feminist fame, is crucial to Faith’s mental wellbeing and
keeping herself an important public figure. The need to feel and look young is not something
singular to Faith. Many older women want to fight against the stigmas and physical realities of
ageing because it leaves them feeling restless discontent (Lizer 238), and, according to Nora
Ephron, in her book, *I Feel Bad About My Neck: And other Thoughts on Being a Woman,*
keeping up with society's unrealistic standard of beauty takes up so much of a woman’s time when she reaches middle age (31). However, unlike a number of women, especially ethnic women, who find themselves typically at an economic disadvantage, Faith has the financial resources to combat the signs of ageing; she can get massages, she can visit the salons on a regular basis, and likely, even though it is not mentioned, she could probably resort to plastic surgery if she wanted. Her privileged status, particularly economically, due to her being a white woman further supports Cynthia Young and Min Hyoung Song’s argument that our present society “reflects the historical legacy and continuing significance of white privilege” (1072-73), further undermining the struggles and limitations placed on ethnic women and their lives.

For Faith Frank, anything and everything in her life boils down to career, her work as a feminist activist; her whole life revolves around her connection to the feminist agenda and her relevance within the movement and society as a whole. In the beginning, Faith was noticed because she was “a good and appealing public speaker” (Wolitzer 301) at meetings for the women’s movement; her speaking ability elevated her and “made her not just speak more but do more” (301). Her “calmly pleasing speaking style” (286) is one of the main reasons she gets brought in to be part of Bloomer magazine. As time passes, Bloomer becomes less and less viable in today’s world, causing it to eventually close, which sends Faith into a “‘daze, maybe even a mild depression’” because her whole world and the value she sees in herself are based on her role in the feminist movement and her work with Bloomer (128). Suddenly, Faith is left feeling unsure about how to proceed with her life. Like many middle-aged women, she questions what she will do now, especially because, at this time in their lives, older women face “more closed doors than open ones” (Lizer 77) in terms of opportunities. Society often places value in
youth rather than the wisdom that comes with age, which casts older women to the side, making them feel useless and unwanted. This is terrifying to someone like Faith, who has been in the spotlight for most of her adult life; remaining relevant is a compulsion she cannot deny. Unfortunately, even though Faith has done a lot of good, by the time *Bloomer* closes, she comes to represent an outdated idea of feminism that focuses on issues that mostly affect privileged women just like her; her feminism does not incorporate all women, but she seems little bothered by this and not eager to change her methods to be more inclusive, which further emphasizes her sense of privilege as a white woman.

Not long after the closing of *Bloomer*, Emmett Schrader, a past lover and unethical business man, offers Faith financial support to begin a women’s foundation that would, ideally, connect speakers with audiences to address “‘the most urgent issues concerning women today’” (128). Sadly, as well intended as Faith attempts to be, the foundation fails to fully embrace its idealistic goals to aid and benefit all women; instead, the foundation focuses on middle and upper class white women by offering seminars filled with spa treatments instead of real activism. According to Alexandra Schwartz, Faith “trades her youthful activism for corporate pragmatism and establishment bona fides” (Schwartz). Clearly, the women’s foundation fails to keep up with “all the galloping changes in feminism” (Wolitzer 311). Even though she finds issue with the way the foundation is working, Faith does nothing to stop it; her main concern is maintaining her own relevance, which is still somewhat made possible through the foundation and its “work.” Instead of taking the moral high ground by making the necessary changes to the foundation’s practices to be more impactful for all women, especially after finding out about a botched project that failed to provide real aid to women in need, Faith chooses to keep things quiet and continue
with the status quo because breaking with the foundation would take away her financial backing and take away her platform, removing her from the lime light that she so desperately craves. Rather, she works to adjust her expectations about what the foundation does and settles with taking what she can get, even as she acknowledges that her “whole working life has been about compromise” (345). However, what Faith sees as compromise is really about giving in to the need to keep herself significant even at the expense of what is best for the women’s movement and all women, not just privileged white women like herself. Faith may want what is best for all women, and she even creates an entire identity around the idea, but her real aim is to keep herself in the role of important feminist icon, so that she feels good about herself. When she is given the opportunity to change, to let go of aspects of herself and/or her life that she may not be happy with in order to develop into someone even better, she fails to do so because this is what keeps her in power, running a foundation whose work is barely relevant and making one unethical decision after another in order to keep her job and her image.

Throughout her career, Faith impacts a number of people, especially women, but it is important to note that, while she does attempt to do good one way or another, she has a desperate need to be an influencer and have a large effect on people’s lives; it is what shapes and pushes her identity, which she is unwilling to change or let go of, keeping her confined to her out-of-touch feminist persona. Her life's work has been about keeping herself relevant instead of it being about doing the radical work that the women's movement promised women it would do for them. As she develops into a prominent figure in the women’s movement, Faith becomes very important to a lot of people; everyone wants to know her and be around her. However, as time passes, people are still drawn to some “indescribable thing” (286) about her, but her relevance
comes more from people’s “feelings about the past more than anything” (114) Faith is currently doing; she remains “an approachable, sympathetic heroine to women” (392), even if she is no longer writing books or speaking on TV shows. People like Greer Kadetsky, another leading character in The Female Persuasion, continue to be drawn to Faith because they all love “being led by this strong, appealing, dignified, older feminist; and they loved what she stood for” (146). They love what she did in the past and the image that remains of the feminist whom she once was. Even though her feminism is out of date, she is an icon for the movement. To keep herself significant, she embraces the role of mentor to young women, knowing “her skill at bringing out certain qualities in other women” (304) is alluring. According to Crystal Turner-Moffatt, mentoring for young women is especially important “to empower and encourage women as they often face unique challenges in the workplace” and in life (17). Faith relishes in her role as a mentor, realizing that “girls and young women actually loved her in ways that were similar to how Lincoln [her son] did” (Wolitzer 304-5). She enjoys having this large group of female followers waiting on bated breath to listen to her every word and to do anything she says. Lena Dunham adds that “it doesn’t feel like an accident that the book’s mentor is named Faith, as that is what she demands of her followers, blind and without reservation” (Dunham). Yet, in the end, Faith needs these fans more than they need her; she understands that they keep her “‘in the world’” (Wolitzer 404). Her work is no longer as helpful or impactful as it once was, especially when considering the little aid provided to poor women. Instead, what work she does accomplish supports privileged white women, like herself; she needs their continued admiration to make herself feel important and relevant. Otherwise, she is just a washed-up middle-aged white
woman, a less effective Gloria Steinem type, attempting to maintain her youth by wearing knee-high boots and working the college lecture circuit.

In *The Female Persuasion*, Faith defines herself through different relationships in her life. Two essential relationships she has are with her parents, Sylvia and Martin, who influence her as she grows up and impact her choices for her future. While her parents are encouraging and make their children “feel as if what they did, the path they were on, their whole way of being in the world, was good enough” (272), they choose to not allow Faith the same opportunities as her brother, failing to truly understand Faith and her wants in life, which leads to a divide between them. According to Charlie Cooper, “parents who exert too much control over their children could be causing them lifelong psychological damage,” such as strong feelings of unhappiness and/or unsatisfying wellbeing into adulthood (Cooper). Believing that they are protecting her, they force Faith to live at home and attend college, while her twin brother is allowed to go away for college because he is a man. The experience leaves Faith angry and frustrated; she feels stifled and limited by their decision and by her gender. More so, it makes her feel the need to get as far away from her parents as she could, so when she completes college, she rebels against her parents and the confines of being a woman by running off to Las Vegas to be a cocktail waitress where she eagerly loses her virginity, which was a cause of concern for her parents and one of the reasons she was not allowed to go away for college. In addition, it is essential to point out that, while it is understandable that Faith would be angry with her parents’ unfairness and eager to go off on her own to do as she pleases, her need to get away and stay away further reflects Faith’s disinterest or disconnect with her own ancestral roots. The text never displays Faith returning home or any kind of reconciliation between Faith and her parents, indicating that,
similar to her eventual disconnect from her brother, Faith likely remains detached from family and her cultural heritage, further perpetuating the idea that whiteness is invisible and not relevant to the creation of identity for white individuals. In the end, Faith’s revolt against her parents’ conventional beliefs expands the divide between them; however, they cannot fully be faulted for acting with the same sensibilities as others in their generation, which often conformed to gender and sexual norms. As frustrating as it is for Faith, her parents and their conservative values shape her early identity and push her towards choices that would eventually lead her to her feminist icon role. As she gets older herself, she reflects on the “unfairness” directed toward her by her parents, but she finally acknowledges that they “hadn’t known better; they were of their time” (321). As Faith better understands why her parents acted as they did, she no longer holds a grudge, but their actions set things in motion for Faith. Without feeling repressed, she likely would not have had the experiences she had when she went off on her own.

While her relationship with her parents initially stifles her, her connection with her twin brother, Philip, also stresses the confines of her early life and the limitations in her family due to her gender. As children, Faith and Philip are particularly close, which is not surprising since they are twins. Faith is considered the more studious and serious of the two, while Philip is popular and funny; overall, she worked hard, and he “slid by on slapdash charm and athletics” (271). This never proves to be an issue until they reach college age. Even though Faith is the scholarly twin, because she is a woman, she is forced to live at home and attend a college nearby; however, her brother is allowed to go away to college. This issue would likely cause a strain between the closest of siblings, but Philip makes the situation worse by stating that their parents’ decision may not be “‘totally wrong’” (274). Faith feels a sense of betrayal from one of the
closest people to her, which further motivates her to put in her time at home and escape as quickly as possible. Besides the issue of conventional gender roles to contend with, at this time in their lives, it is not surprising that Philip would want to focus on himself and his wants; he feels Faith will be safer at home, and he has more important things, like his own upcoming college experience, to focus on. According to Judith Spieth Justice and William E. Utesch, during their adolescences, many twins choose to concentrate on themselves, which often creates “relationship difficulties within the twinship” (11). Unfortunately, their parents’ choice and Philip’s eagerness to support it permanently change the twin’s relationship; after that, they are never particularly close. While Faith eventually stops holding Philip’s behavior against him, it takes years and a lot of missed birthdays and visits before she is able to move on completely; however, their relationship is never the same again. Even though losing a close connection with her brother upsets Faith, his actions further propel Faith’s need to leave her conventional home to embrace a more radical lifestyle. Her decision to leave and make a different life for herself leads her to what she would consider her calling, helping the feminist cause, which transforms her into the feminist icon that drives her, so much so, that she will do anything to maintain this image and her elevated role in the women’s movement.

Possibly due to her tense relationship with her parents and brother, Faith does not have much of a personal life; rather, she devotes her entire existence to the women’s movement. What private life she does have she keeps secretive; her need to keep things private about her life outside her work further emphasizes that all that truly matters to Faith is her feminist agenda and what it has done to thrust her into the spotlight, a place she never wants to leave. She does have lovers in her younger years, including Emmett Schrader, the financial backer for the foundation,
emphasizing her new and more radical lease on life compared to her conventional upbringing, yet she eventually marries an immigration advocate named Gerry Landau and has a child, Lincoln, establishing at least a little conventionality in her later life. Gerry is a “mild man” (268), a likely good match for someone like Faith who aims to be the center of attention; it is highly unlikely that a marriage between two individuals seeking the same spotlight would end well. Unfortunately, the marriage does not last long because Gerry dies, and she vows that she “would never marry again” (269), which is not surprising. Seeking out another husband and/or having to deal with one would take away from her work and her focus on the feminist agenda; for Faith, men are too high-maintenance to deal with or a distraction from her work, which, for her, always comes first because it is what keeps her relevant. This supports the idea that Boomers often have a “fixation on self” (Strauss 303); Faith is worried about what is best and most convenient for herself. In addition, as she gets older, finding a partner continues to be time-consuming, but it also stresses her own insecurity about ageing. Faith prefers being alone because she then does not have to worry as much about her ageing body; she does not have to fully disclose herself and her issues to anyone else, emphasizing why she often “preferred her own company” (Wolitzer 306). One last thing to note is that Faith has the option to not remarry; there are no underlying issues that would force her to remarry out of some kind of necessity, like money for example. According to Megan M. Sweeney, the desire or need to improve financial security is “an important impetus for women to remarry” (6). Many women in Faith’s situation, especially ethnic women, would need to remarry to find economic stability, even more so if they have children to care for, but once again, Faith, as a middle, even upper class, white woman, does not have to worry about money.
Even though Faith has a son, it appears that, as adults, they have little connection, emphasizing Faith’s need to go against the conventional and focus on what is the most important thing to her, the feminist agenda, but more so, her relevant status within the movement and society as a whole. As a young mother, Faith is ashamed of how much she likes when Lincoln sleeps. She feels he is a good kid, but being a mother, according to Faith, is “‘just so much work’” (Wolitzer 172). She even admits that, when Lincoln was younger, her main priorities lay elsewhere; she was a “busy mother, distracted by her demanding work at Bloomer, and her political activity” (269). As he got older, Lincoln’s increasing lack of neediness was hard for Faith to accept sometimes, but she mostly felt “relief to think that he was all right on his own,” allowing her to spend more time and energy focusing on her true passion, her feminist work (270). While their love was “mutual, established, sometimes distracted, and never in doubt” (270), Faith and Lincoln appear to see each other little and fail to have a strong connection. She acknowledges that she does not know all that much about his current adult life because “‘his life is his life’” (172). According to Sandra Scarr, Deborah Phillips, and Kathleen McCartney, most women in the labor force “work primarily because the family needs the money and secondarily for their own personal self-actualization” (1402). The first part of this statement does not apply to Faith, who seems to never worry or consider financial issues. It appears her white privilege allows her the option to work or to stay home to raise her son; she dismisses the latter option to keep her feminist image relevant, showing Faith embraces employment for her own “person self-actualization.” Like many other women, Faith cannot be faulted for wanting a career, an aspect of her life that is her own, but it appears that being a famous persona is a crucial part to her want and need to be outside the home, which causes a weaker relationship between her and her son.
Another relationship that defines Faith’s identity is the one with her former friend, Annie Silverstri, who plays a crucial role in propelling Faith into the feminist movement, where she finds her passion and a persona that she is unwilling to let go of. When they are young, both women flee to Las Vegas, seeking experience after conventional upbringings. While both take lovers, it is Annie who ends up pregnant and in need of an abortion. Watching Annie’s struggles and hardships in obtaining an illegal abortion motivates Faith into becoming a feminist activist. While Annie never wants to address what she went through again, Faith finds it important to make sure that other women never experience what Annie dealt with, causing a divide between the two women. Their friendship changes; Faith is “propelled almost exclusively by political work” (288), and Annie focuses on her new boyfriend. Eventually, Annie becomes Anne McCauley, a senator and, ironically, a devoted opponent of Roe vs. Wade. Faith is furious with Annie because of this; she feels that Annie’s actions affect “the lives of the poorest women more than anyone else, denying them help” (304). This drives Faith to work harder for women’s rights, catapulting her further into the spotlight of the feminist movement, a place she never wants to leave because it is all she is.

In addition, another significant connection that impacts Faith’s identity is the one she has with Emmett Schrader, a former lover and unethical business man who attempts to help Faith remain in the feminist limelight; unfortunately, he has no real or ethical follow through in terms of his help, and she, eager to keep a financial backer at any cost, is unwilling to fully acknowledge the ugly truth when faced with it. After an initial meeting in Las Vegas, Faith and Emmett meet again when she is attempting to get advertising for issues of Bloomer. They end up sleeping together because they are both drawn to one another, but the affair is short lived when
Emmett’s wealthy wife finds out. After going on separately with their lives, Emmett becomes a venture capitalist, wealthy in his own right. After *Bloomer* closes, Emmett offers Faith an opportunity she feels she cannot refuse, a chance to remain an important figure in the women’s movement. While she acknowledges that Emmett “‘hasn’t always put his money to good use’” and “‘he’s funded some pretty questionable ventures’” (129), Faith, in addition to her own self-interest, is eager to take him up on his offer to fund a women’s foundation because she is “overexcited at the thought of having access to the kind of money and resources that Emmett was offering” (308) and because he promises to fund special projects to further aid women and their fight for equality. Though she worries about selling out by taking him up on his offer, she proceeds forward with the foundation, but things soon take a turn for the worse. Faith is told that the foundation needs to keep things high-profile, which means providing rich white women with frivolous conferences instead of grappling with “structural issues like parental leave, child care, equal pay” (267); she may not like it, but she continues to comply, offering no real push-back to the foundation’s non-existent support of women who are not rich or white. In addition, even when it becomes “precipitously harder to get any of the ideas for the special projects” (310) past the individuals running the Schrader corporation, Faith continues to look away from the reality of her and the foundation’s situation. They are offering no real help to women, especially poor women. When she has the opportunity to do what is right, call the Shrader company on their unethical work, Faith backs down and fails to walk away from the foundation in order to hold on to her status and position in the women’s movement. Just like Jay Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby*, Faith cannot see that her dream, her relevancy, is behind her; her youth is gone and her significance is out of fashion and antiquated. Emmett offering Faith a women’s foundation helps
her continue to remain in the spotlight, even as she and her feminism become less relevant, because it is so important to her. He helps cement her identity, the out-of-date feminist icon, and hinders her ability to be open to change or growth. Emmett’s and Faith’s actions are self-serving and selfish; while they may want to help to varying degrees and for different reasons, their own personal wants seem to always come first.

While she is similar to the other female protagonists examined in this study, especially in terms of how relationships impact her identity, Faith Frank proves to be different; her story emphasizes what happens when a middle-aged woman is unwilling to change or adapt as she ages. Instead, Faith attempts to keep the status quo, remaining stifled and limited by an out-of-date feminist persona that truly is no longer relevant but she is unwilling to see that or accept that. For characters such as Rebecca Winter in Still Life with Bread Crumbs or Margo Just in The Bette Davis Club, coping with their pasts helps “define their present and open up possibilities for the future” (Maierhofer 159). Unfortunately, Faith does not feel she needs to cope with her past; rather, she wants to relive it, remain the same as she always was, but time continues to pass, and it is clear that, in real life, Faith Frank, the infamous and glamorous feminist, is “as gray-haired and fragile and bony as anyone, and as mortal, and as compromised” (Wolitzer 347). When speaking of middle-aged women, Levine explains that “thinking more deeply about how we want to live forces each of us to intensify her exploration of who she is. It is as though we were zeroing in on an essential character trait or profile that will see us through to the end” (163). While this self-exploration seems critical for older women, providing them with an opportunity to redefine and better understand themselves, Faith is unwilling to even acknowledge her need for self-reflection and growth. She believes she is just fine as she hides behind the façade of
attempting to help women and to fight for equality. In reality, turning a blind eye to the unethical behavior of the Schrader corporation, and, by extension, the women’s foundation, Faith chooses her future and her identity for her second adulthood. Instead of growth and development that would best aid Faith as she gets older and possibly truly benefit women and their cause, Faith stays true to her self-serving course, one that she believes will keep her in the feminist spotlight but actually only highlights her limitations and inability to age gracefully.
Clock Dance (2018) by Anne Tyler focuses on Willa Drake, a traditional wife and mother who struggles to understand herself and her wants as she enters the next stage of her life; however, a moment of epiphany allows her to change her life and to do what she wants for the first time. When a random incident brings Willa to the east coast to help her eldest son’s former girlfriend and her daughter, Willa finds new connections with different people, and she begins to enjoy her new friends, her new-found freedom, and the opportunities that all of these new experiences bring to her life. Through her relationships with her parents, her husbands, and her new friends, relinquishing feelings of guilt, and breaking from conventional expectations and duties, Willa starts her journey of initiation to redefine her identity, aiming to no longer remain complacent with the status quo. Unlike some other female protagonists in this study, Willa's decision to develop her identity for the second half of her life does not hinge on a man’s input or guidance; rather, her choices prove to be a strong step against the controlling and condescending men of her life and a clear thrust against traditional conventions.

Novels like Clock Dance are typically written by Baby Boomer authors for Baby Boomer readers, offering the same generation that clamored for young adult novels that reflected their lives and experiences new works that portray what later life can look like. The popularity of Boomer literature fails to be surprising as older readers want to see themselves and issues relevant to them present in what they read. Boomer literature is so important because it offers the
older population a voice and a look at the possibilities accessible in second adulthood. This seems particularly true for female readers, who were often confined to conventional roles during the first half of their lives and face harsher backlash from society due to ageing.

Boomer literature provides an apt opportunity to discuss female identity, especially for middle-aged Boomer women. Many of these women spent the first half of their adult lives taking on the roles of wives and mothers. Even with the social and cultural changes sparked in the 1960s and 1970s, women still felt the pressure to embrace more traditional roles. According to Patricia J. Sotirin and Laura L. Ellingson, our cultural landscape is “dominated by neotraditional gender ideologies that call women back to inequitable roles and ambitions” (2). Even though progress has been made in terms of women’s rights and equality since Boomer women came of age, society still continues to push for conformity when addressing gender roles. However, as more and more Boomer women are entering middle age, they are starting to see and understand that women can “begin new lives in old age” (Pearson 8); they are not trapped by choices and actions made during the first half of their lives, allowing them to redevelop and redefine their former identities.

Another benefit of Boomer literature is that it provides an appropriate place to address ageism, a relevant issue faced by many middle-aged women. The realities and prejudices of ageing often make older women feel unattractive and unwanted; they feel powerlessness when attempting to stop the physical, and even mental, changes they must face as they get older (Butler 243). While men frequently fail to consider or contend with the issues of ageing because society appears to just let them age without any constraints, women, especially as they age, are held to standards of beauty that are unrealistic and unachievable, making women feel inadequate.
Often, literary texts fail to fully approach and discuss ageism; the lack of authentic older female characters stresses the invisible nature of ageing women and their needs in life (Macdonald 52). However, Boomer literature is providing more genuine examples of real middle-aged women who are facing the realities and stigmas of old age and showing how they cope with and/or combat this ever-present issue to maintain and/or develop their identities. These works help deter negative images of ageing and provide female readers with similar stories and experiences that they themselves are struggling through, which offers these women readers new perspectives and possibilities for their own lives and futures.

Many Boomer women struggle with ageism, but numerous believe that middle age offers a chance for redefinition and better understanding of one’s self moving into the second half of adulthood. Though many consider that ageing brings a loss of identity, in reality, it allows women to take stock of their lives in order to develop and make changes. In many Boomer literature texts, older female characters are women “who have led a conventional life and who have accepted the social norms of a world dominated by men, who, without radical ambitions, quietly and unobtrusively initiate reforms in their lives” (Maierhofer 159). While ageing is often seen as scary and something to avoid at all costs, Roberta Maierhofer argues that ageing for middle-aged women, above other aspects of life, offers the chance to “liberate themselves from their closely defined roles within a social norm” (158). This opportunity for change frequently leads women to “different types of behavior in their relations to their social surroundings,” where they often become more self-confident and self-decisive in their interactions with the world and are more willing to make decisions that are not usually approved by family and friends (158-9).
Willa Drake defines herself by very conventional labels; she is simply a wife and mother, but as she reaches middle age, those specific roles, and their confinements, begin to lose their luster, and Willa begins to question what the rest of her life could be like if she finally puts herself first. For most of her life, Willa appears to be controlled by other people’s decisions and actions, which shape her into a June Cleaver type of woman; she is frequently described as perfectly “‘cheery,’” “‘polite,’” and “‘genteel’” (Tyler 268), and she makes caring for other’s needs her main priority. Willa's need to be a good caretaker could come from her childhood need to provide for others because, when she was a child, Willa deals with her mother’s inability to properly come to terms with being a traditional wife and mother. Willa's mother often left her home and left Willa in charge of caring for herself, her sister, and even her father. This left Willa confused but nevertheless in charge of her family at an early age. When she gets older, Willa cannot get out of the role of caretaker that she assumes so early in life. She does not even resist when her boyfriend Derek decides to marry when it is best for him, even at the expense of Willa’s college education. His decision pushes Willa to cater to his wishes rather than her own. As she gets older, more and more of her life is decided for her, by parents, husbands, and children, rather than by her. In addition, Willa’s own need to present herself as the perfect wife and mother produces feelings of guilt and shame throughout her life; she does not want to rock the boat or cause any issues that might make others feel uncomfortable. However, a chance trip to the east coast to help Denise, her son’s former girlfriend, and her daughter, Cheryl, proves to be a fortuitous chance for Willa to reflect on her life and her choices moving into the second half of her life. While she is initially unsure what the trip will bring, she simultaneously feels “thrilled and scared and hopeful” (118), comparing the sensation to feelings on Christmas Eve.
Not long after arriving in Baltimore and establishing a routine, Willa feels happy and acknowledges that “coming here had not been a mistake” (13). Willa regularly makes excuses in an attempt to justify her new feelings and actions in Baltimore, a place she clearly does not want to leave. Suzanne Braun Levine stresses that a middle-aged woman like Willa must “begin to write her own script” (23) for her second adulthood in order to redefine her identity and embrace new possibilities. After some time with Denise and Cheryl in Baltimore, Willa finally begins to recognize this idea, and for the first time in her life, she begins doing what she wants. According to Roberta Maierhofer, in literary texts, “this moment of confrontation with the self varies” (158) for each older female character, but it is important to recognize that, whether they take the opportunity to develop or not, this moment is provided for each of them to take advantage of to benefit the rest of their lives. Until the end, Willa struggles with truly recognizing that her wants and needs are valid and that it is okay to go against her previously established identity, which fulfilled so many aspects of stereotypical gender roles and was so engrained in her personality, but her return to Baltimore at the end of the text provides both Willa and female readers with the hope that change is possible.

It is important to point out that Willa struggles with ageing just like a normal middle-aged woman, making her a character that female Boomer readers can relate to. While she may not be as obsessed with her ageing as other characters in this study, such as Faith Frank from Meg Wolitzer’s *The Female Persuasion*, she still works to maintain her good looks through creams and hair treatments. When she goes on her trip, she worries about running out of her face cream, something that makes her feel more youthful, and not being able to get her hair done, which makes her feel polished and put together, the conventional version of herself. Fortunately,
getting involved with Denise and Cheryl in her attempt to help them get through a difficult moment in their lives suddenly takes precedence over looking good or using the right cream. Willa plunges into the task of caring for two people who are perfect strangers to her and basically forgets about herself. In Baltimore, with Denise, Cheryl, and their little dog, Willa gives herself to the task of taking care of other people's needs once again, but this time she does it because she wants to. She chooses to serve and help others because she can. Hopefully, by observing Willa’s ability to overcome or work through her issues in order to develop her identity for the second half of her life, female readers will gain a more optimistic outlook on their own second adulthoods.

Boomer novels like Clock Dance fit into the standard tradition of women's literature created by early American women writers. Elaine Showalter argues that women’s fiction has come a long way over the years, moving through “phases of subordination, protest, and autonomy, phases connected by recurring images, metaphors, themes, and plots that emerge from women’s social and literary experience” (xx). Karen Tracey adds to this, stressing that, in the past, women writers focused on the competing ideologies of their times, which acts as a foundation for the contemporary debates being addressed by current female authors (13). According to Nina Baym, novels by 19th century women writers provide insight into the lives of women and their identities, offering a better understanding of themselves and the world around them. Typically, women’s fiction is written for and by women, and it provides a character-driven story with a female protagonist in a contemporary setting. Rebecca Vnuk and Nanette Donohue explain that the main focus of the work often addresses something happening in the life of that woman, where her “emotions and relationships are key elements of the plot” (Vnuk viii). When
concentrating on the texts of 19th-century women writers, Nina Baym explains that the thrust of this fiction has to do primarily with “how the heroine perceives herself” (19). At the onset of one of these works, the female protagonist “takes herself very lightly” (19); she has no ego and looks to others to “coddle and protect her” (19). However, by the novel’s end, the woman develops “a strong conviction of her own worth” (19). She can meet her own demands, and the change in herself changes “the world’s attitude toward her” (19). While gender expectations have changed over time, contemporary women’s fiction, particularly Boomer literature, still focuses on how the female protagonist “perceives herself.” Female characters in 21st-century novels may not often begin their stories seeking protection from a scary, male-dominated world, but they still frequently find themselves struggling with other issues, like ageing, relationships, children, feelings of inadequacy, etc. Similar to 19th-century texts, current women’s fiction and Boomer literature showcase women’s opportunities for growth, to change how they view themselves and how the world sees them. It is also important to note that women’s fiction, both early and contemporary, allows their female authors to move beyond domestic plots to make statements beyond issues pertaining to gender roles within a patriarchal society; Linda Grasso stresses that women’s writing provides female writers a chance to express their political views on a variety of issues, such as slavery, discussed in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and immigration, examined in Ana Castillo’s *The Guardians* (153).

In *Clock Dance*, Willa Drake initially appears as a traditional woman. Even though she shows signs of pushing against convention in her early adulthood, she accepts an inconvenient marriage proposal and has children, embracing the customary roles of wife and mother. She continues in these roles for most of her life; this is how she sees herself and how others see her,
especially both her husbands and her children. Because she is presented as a conventional housewife and mother through the early part of her life, Willa appreciates having a husband that takes care of things, including her. By the end of the text, however, after a journey of self-discovery, Willa is willing to let go of her past, a time filled with acceptance of gender expectations for herself, and understands that her happiness matters, allowing her to find a place, physically and mentally, where she feels content. Curiously, Willa's contentment does not include romance; in fact, she walks away from her husband and marriage in order to stay with Denise and Cheryl. Rebecca Vnuk and Nanette Donohue claim that, while women’s fiction does include romantic aspects, the stories do not solely revolve around a love interest or sexual relationship. While a man may be waiting for the female protagonist at the end of her journey, in women’s fiction, he is not the main focus, and he may not play a role in the happy ending.

Instead, one of the most important features of women’s fiction is that the protagonist usually “discovers the value of loving herself” (Vnuk ix); personal growth is a common theme in women’s fiction (ix). This proves very accurate for Willa who does not conclude her story with a man as a main component to her transformation. Rather, she decides to leave her husband in Arizona and return to Baltimore where she is happier. She achieves personal growth and begins to value the things, people, and experiences that are important to her. Nancy K. Miller examines the female character's growth in women's literature and argues that it can act as a hope or blueprint for the future (37). This idea is particularly relevant when addressing Boomer literature, a genre of writing that often can and does provide women with a sense of reassurance, even hope, about their physical and mental ageing, a genre that offers a potential blueprint for the future, which typically includes possibilities for growth and change.
Another genre of writing which likely acts as a basis for Boomer literature is that of contemporary memoirs and non-fiction works written by and for older female authors about ageing. Willa Drake’s journey to better comprehend herself represents the present trend in fiction and plays written by older women to assess who they are as women of a certain age in this new world. Many older female writers discuss middle-age life through non-fiction works, like memoirs, hoping to better outline the positive possibilities of getting older for Boomer women. While many people would assume that the key to ageing is to just get over it, Suzanne Braun Levine argues that that is not the case. In her book, 50 is the New Fifty: 10 Life Lessons for Women in Second Adulthood, Levine stresses that the real challenge of middle age is not to “‘get over getting older’” (2); rather, the real obstacle is getting to “know ourselves in this new context” (2); by doing so, individuals acquire better insight into their wants and needs moving into their second adulthood. This proves true for Willa. She is initially reluctant to actually acknowledge her own wishes or ambitions as she gets older. She continues to remain in her established roles, especially that of wife, focusing on her husband’s needs more than her own. However, her time in Baltimore allows her to start seeing the possibility of a new life without the confines of her old identity. It is not that Willa wants to stop caring for people, but it is more about caring for people who truly see the real Willa and are willing to establish an equitable relationship with her, unlike her husband or children. Levine further adds that, while change can be scary, it should not be seen as an enemy; instead, change is potential, “a force that can be harnessed to shed old identities and embrace new ones, a process that over time creates many opportunities” (4). Even though Willa may not see the potential or is unwilling to embrace it right away after landing in Baltimore, her decision to even take this trip to help strangers already
showcases her hidden strength, hidden likely even to her, and her unacknowledged want to change her life and redefine her identity.

The author of *Clock Dance* is Pulitzer prize winning writer Anne Tyler, who is known for *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* and *The Accidental Tourist*. She has a “smooth witty style” (“Anne Tyler”), which is “transparent and alert to all the nuances of the seemingly ordinary” (McGrath). More often than not, Tyler’s work addresses aspects of family life, such as love, disappointments, loss, estranged children, and chronicles “the tensions and secrets of middle-class family relationships” (Teeman). In addition, her writing is frequently influenced by the stages of her life, having children, growing older (Teeman); she is deeply interested in endurance because she “doesn’t think living is easy, even for those of us who aren’t scrounging” (McGrath). Keeping with many other female Boomers, Tyler’s life has been quite traditional; she married and had children. She usually comes across like many of her characters, somewhat conventional, a “domestic demon” (Teeman), who, in between writing books, aims to keep her home neat and to host successful dinner parties. Tyler prefers to stay home, in Baltimore, where many of her novels are set, regularly avoiding book tours and interviews. She often sets her works in middle-class Baltimore because she likes its grit and character (McGrath).

Out of all the female authors in this study, Tyler is the most established writer. Few, if any, scholarly articles have been written about the work of the other female authors studied in this dissertation; however, several essays have been published discussing Anne Tyler's works and/or her reoccurring themes. While some critics emphasize aspects of feminism or some type of political statement in Tyler’s work, most scholars argue that her writing is typically seen as literature of daily life and domestic details; it usually focuses on family, the home, and
connections and relationships. More often than not, critics tend to discuss Tyler’s representation and discussion of family. According to Julie P. Papadimas, Tyler’s novels demonstrate the changing definition of family and its impact on individuals. She argues that Tyler’s novels address “the significance of family and the powerful influence that families exert on individuals, a force that creates a desire in them to return to the family for nurturing or causes them to reject the bonds as too confining for their autonomy and growth” (45). Mary Ellis Gibson builds on this by arguing that, in Tyler’s novels, familial influences are not just about issues pertaining to nurturing or forging some sense of maturity. Instead, the familial influences become the metaphysical (Gibson 48); family is seen in “the light of cosmic necessity, as the inevitable recondition of human choice” (48). Clearly, regardless of changing trends or social expectations, the concept of family and its connections continue to be relevant to Tyler and her work. While no scholar has written about the role or impact of family in *Clock Dance*, it remains an ever-present element in the text as it continues to influence Willa; she loves her family, but what makes *Clock Dance* different from other novels by Tyler is that Willa chooses her own family. Tyler toyed with this idea in *Ladder of Years*, a novel from 1995 in which Delia Grinstead simply walks out on her family for no apparent reason and chooses to work as a nanny to support herself. She gets involved with the new family but completely ignores her own. Delia never provides any reason for her choice to walk away from her family; it almost seems as if she does not know the reason herself. In a *New York Times* review, Cathleen Schine states that Delia “strips herself bare and exiles herself in the scrappy little town of Bay Borough” (12), a town not much different from the one where she lived. When her family finally tracks her down, Delia simply argues that she had left them because she "liked the thought of beginning again from scratch," which is exactly
what Willa does in *Clock Dance* (12). She walks away from her husband to engage with a new family and begin again from scratch.

Another aspect addressed by critics when examining Tyler’s work is the concept of change. Throughout her texts, many characters must deal with alterations to their lives, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. Mary Ellis Gibson stresses that Tyler’s characters usually face the idea of change due to “their rootedness, their entanglements, and their inherited predispositions” (49). Susan Elizabeth Sweeney adds to this idea, stating that a need for change typically appears for Tyler’s characters because of some type of obstacle, struggle, or hardship. She claims that Tyler’s characters cannot return to the way things were or seemed to be; instead, willingly or not, they must change, adjust their lives, “a process that remains always unfinished, for Tyler’s novels resist conventional narrative closure” (80). Some scholars examine the issue of change specifically for female characters in Tyler’s works. According to Virginia Schaefer Carroll, Tyler, when discussing change in some of her texts, addresses “the negotiations with self and others” (86). As seen through *Clock Dance*, the idea of change for women, particularly middle-aged women, and consultations with the self can result in the redefinition of identities and positions. While Tyler’s other characters may find themselves confronted with unwanted adjustments to their lives, Willa is excited about new possibilities, such as heading to Baltimore to help a mother and her daughter, as she finds it harder and harder to fill her time, especially with activities that are relevant to her. Through her new experiences and friends in Baltimore, Willa begins to understand that she does not need to remain stifled by her past identity and previous choices; even in middle age, she has the opportunity to embrace change,
not shy away from it, in order to grow and develop, which offers the chance of a brighter and happier future.

While Tyler continues to include and focus on female characters, scholars appear torn on her feelings about women and her representation of them. Some critics, such as Kathleen Woodward, stress that Tyler does an excellent job showcasing women, particularly middle-aged women, who are often omitted or unnoticed in literary works. As women age, they are suddenly “gone without our noticing until it is too late,” an improper and a disrespectful treatment strictly due to ageing (Woodward 101). According to Woodward, how older women are represented “should be of concern to us all in a culture where aging, especially for women, is either a scandal or a matter of indifference” (101). She praises Tyler’s focus on older women’s struggles as they age, “portraits of the unnoticed and overlooked” (112), which includes physical alterations, forced changes to lifestyles, and feelings of loss. Tyler’s middle-aged women are resourceful with lively interior lives (110). On the other hand, other scholars, like Alice Hall Petry, critique Tyler’s portrayal of female characters, claiming that, while some of her earlier novels, such as If Morning Ever Comes, appear “protofeminist,” challenging gender-based attitudes, later texts fail to follow the same concept (34). Instead, these later works, such as Earthly Possessions, showcase female characters who are troubled by their gender-based roles but are unable or unwilling to escape them (36). Many of Tyler’s later female characters reflect the idea that our society tends to recast American women in non-threatening light, positions that reenforce gender roles and stereotypes (Petry 41). They continue with their conventional lives, which revolve around keeping the house, rearing the children, and/or taking care of a husband. According to Petry, Tyler’s creation and representation of women who remain confined to specific gender
norms emphasize her lack of concern about women and the plights they face being forced to adhere to traditional gender expectations. In addition, Petry argues that some of Tyler’s female characters are presented as “unflattering, even denigrating, caricature[s]” (40) of middle-aged women, essentially victims in a patriarchal society, which further places them in subordinate roles and limits their presence and growth. In Clock Dance, it appears that Tyler returns to a female character who is willing to make changes for her own benefit, aiming to embrace her own wants and needs, but Willa still retains specific aspects of her assigned gender roles as she continues to take care of others, first her husbands and children, and then even some of her new friends in Baltimore. Readers can only hope that Willa’s return to the east coast at the end of the novel leads to more progressive and independent steps instead of continued servitude to others.

Even though Tyler is a well-known author, there is little to no scholarly criticism available for Clock Dance; however, a few reviews of the novel exist. While many critics and readers enjoyed this novel, Ron Charles, of The Washington Post, feels it has a zany premise, where the characters are “introduced and cast off the way one might rifle through old clothes in the attic” (Charles). He argues that the story feels “fusty, like an antique speculation about how people might live in the year 2017” (Charles). Charles does admit that the novel finally starts to work during the second half of the text when “all its largely superfluous foundation-setting is mercifully finished” (Charles). The Guardian’s Molly McClosky offers a less harsh critique of the novel, but she still finds some issues with the sentimental narrative (McClosky). She explains that the characters “too often cloy,” and the stakes “never feel high enough” (McClosky). However, she does point out that Tyler’s fiction does a good job focusing on “quiet lives and the seemingly minor moments that shunt people into new ways of thinking or being” (McClosky).
An unnamed reviewer for *Kirkus Reviews* finds themselves with similar feelings as McClosky; they do not detest the novel, but it fails to be a favorite for them. The reviewer argues that the story is predictable and Tyler “drags out the suspense a tad longer than the slight plot merits” (*Kirkus*). Yet, they do stress that Tyler’s “characteristic warmth and affection for her characters are as engaging as ever” (*Kirkus*). Lastly, unlike the previous critics, Kate Tuttle, for *The New York Times*, emphasizes the positives of *Clock Dance*. She explains that Tyler “sketches a well-peopled larger community, bustling with friends, lovers and bit players,” and the book is “smarter and more interesting” than it might appear on the surface (Tuttle).

Numerous non-fiction works and Boomer texts written by women concentrate on white female characters and have little reference to ethnic or cultural issues; the characters, much like the American Adam, who is “untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race” (Lewis 5), typically appear to not consider their race as an important characteristic that affects their surroundings, economic status, or identities. Ethnic women, in the real world and within literature, often grapple with hardships due to their race; they struggle with the hybrid nature of their backgrounds and prejudice based on their culture and appearance. At times, these obstacles even cause some ethnic individuals to aspire to be white (Planas 188), believing it will make their lives easier. This is because whiteness is seen “to be the norm, an unmarked, invisible, absent ethnicity” (Cutter 5) and is regularly considered the privileged race. The idea of a race being invisible proves detrimental in many ways. First, because whiteness is so normative in America, according to Molly Littlewood McKibbin, it is typically taken for granted and considered “the generic standard against which everything else is racialized” (McKibbin 97). In addition, many white individuals fail to see “the connection between their opportunities in life
and their racial identity” (McDermott 248) because their race is invisible even to themselves, emphasizing their privilege. Unfortunately, while Willa is quite kind and considerate, she fails to recognize what her whiteness and financial privilege truly provide her compared to others within the novel.

Prior to her trip, Willa surrounds herself with others much like herself; she has no diverse friends or connections with individuals of different races or life styles. While this may mostly be due to the controlling nature of her husbands, who also fail to acknowledge their own privilege as straight, white, well-off men, Willa, up until the end, does not push herself or her husbands to expand their horizons in terms of diverse friends, settings, etc. Likely, the most diverse interaction Willa experiences takes place when she is in Baltimore; she meets and spends time with people of lower financial incomes, as well as Barry and Richard, a gay couple who live near where she is staying, but her interactions are somewhat infrequent and superficial. Overall, similar to other people, Willa faces struggles in her life, like the death of loved ones, her first husband and her parents, but in reality, she has no issues, hardships, or limitations due to her race.

Based on Tyler’s background, it seems odd that she would fail to include more diverse characters and lifestyles, which could provide her main character with an even wider view of the world. Tyler grew up in the Quaker community, not a traditional upbringing for most people, and, in 1963, she married an Iranian psychiatrist, Taghi Mohammad Modarressi; they were married for almost 35 years. An interracial marriage, especially at that time in American history, could not have always been an easy situation. In the end, recognizing Tyler’s lack of focus on ethnicity and its impact on Willa and the text is a crucial aspect of this novel and better
understanding of why white women writers continue to ignore ancestry and/or ethnicity in their works. By ignoring the roles that Willa’s whiteness and privilege play, Tyler suggests that ethnicity is not an important part of her work and reinforces the invisible aspect of whiteness. Beyond possible fear of what people may find digging into their white ancestry or the lack of a mythology, could the reason these white female authors fail to address ethnicity stem from feelings of white guilt? Because whiteness has been and is often seen as the dominate race in America, are these writers concerned about incorporating ancestry or race issues because it would appear insensitive to the obstacles and struggles of ethnic individuals, as well as ethnic writers and their characters, who experience much more severe realities due to their cultural backgrounds on a regular basis? At least for Tyler, this may not be completely off base, considering Willa’s acknowledgement of feeling “too white” at times throughout her life. However, it is also important to note Tyler’s past comments about never feeling the need to be liberated when discussing liberated female writers. She argued that she could not be called or identified as liberated because she never felt imprisoned in the first place (Petry 33). Her disregard for the progress accomplished by and for women, like herself, through feminist movements speaks to her lack of awareness as a privileged white woman, which further supports her likely inability to recognize the significance of race and ethnicity, something extremely relevant to ethnic writers, particularly female authors.

Predictably, Willa fails to consider her race or ethnicity in her identity or in redefining herself for second adulthood. While she is growing up, and even into her adulthood, she never recognizes or focuses on the significance of her ancestral roots; there is no discussion of where her family comes from, and she shows no signs of wanting to learn more about her family’s
background. Even when she shows a strong interest in languages in college and eventually finds a job teaching ESL after the death of her first husband, Willa never acknowledges that her interest stems from anything personal, her own cultural background for example; instead, she is intrigued by “the origins of language in general, and what the various languages revealed about the various cultures that spoke them” (Tyler 60). In addition to not seeking out any information about her own heritage, Willa appears embarrassed to even bring Derek home to meet her family and share what little part of her background is available. More so, after going against her mother’s wishes and marrying Derek, Willa moves to California and fails to visit her family or hometown frequently, further stressing her detachment and lack of interest in her own background, which emphasizes the privilege of her whiteness; Willa, and women like her, often fail to recognize the importance that their race and their cultural heritages play in their everyday lives, which supports the idea that “whiteness, and the privileges associated with whiteness, remain invisible to many whites” (McDermott 247-48). However, during her brief visit home, prior to her marriage to Derek, Willa admits, after hearing a story from her father about being a too white and too wimpy kid, that she “often had that too-white feeling” (Tyler 68). Willa rarely plays the “woe is me” card throughout the text, but what exactly does she mean by feeling “too-white”? Clearly, at times, she seems to associate negative feelings with being white, feelings of being weak for example; her feelings might also reflect general sensations of white guilt. Unfortunately, this small glimpse into Willa’s thoughts on race ends here; there are no other real references or allusions to her thoughts on her whiteness throughout the text. One last point that emphasizes Willa’s detachment from her own heritage is her lack of religion. Growing up, Willa and her sister are raised in a Christian household; they attended church regularly. Yet, after
fleeing her home and moving to California, Willa does not appear to be practicing any religion. It is not until Derek’s death that she scrambles to find a church for the service because, prior to, “she didn’t belong to a church” (82). Overall, while Willa is a kind individual, seeking to take care of those around her, she often quietly disregards or fails to acknowledge issues pertaining to race, especially her race, and the privileges associated with whiteness.

Another aspect of Willa’s privilege is her lack of concern over money. Unlike other female protagonists within this study, like Margo Just of The Bette Davis Club or Rebecca Winter of Still Life with Bread Crumbs, Willa never appears to face any financial hardships. She seems well aware that she will always be taken care of, one way or another; no matter what happens, like the loss of a spouse, no financial obstacles are put in her way. Growing up, Willa’s mother said “they were too poor,” but her father said “they were fine” (13). In reality, money did not appear to be an issue for the family; they were by no means rich, but they had a nice home, which Willa’s mother was able to redecorate, and a car. By marrying Derek, Willa is cared for and provided for, especially financially, due to Derek’s job and a trust fund left to Derek by his grandfather. They live in a very nice home and are able to send their kids to private schools. Even after Derek’s death, a time when most women, especially ethnic women, would find themselves in dire economic straits, Willa does not have any money issues and does not need to support herself; rather, she is more concerned about “how she would fill her time” (93), stressing her white privilege and financial freedom. In addition, when she decides to return to college to finish her degree, she does not have to worry about how to pay for it. Willa even ends up taking on an ESL job after college, which she is able to do for her own pleasure; she is not required to get a job to provide for herself. More so, even with the money she earned through teaching, she
allows her second husband to take care of her, including financially, falling back into a very conventional gender role norm. In the end, Willa aims to take care of people and be helpful, but her ability to be considerate and aid others, even the opportunity to go support Denise and Cheryl, stems from the fact that she does not have to worry about money.

In *Clock Dance*, Willa often defines herself through different relationships in her life; one essential relationship she has is with her mother, Alice, who creates a hostile connection with her daughter, causing tension and resentment within a relationship that is crucial to Willa’s identity development. Alice is considered “the prettiest mother in their school, and the liveliest and the smartest” (10). While she creates fun activities for the girls and attempts to be a good mother, she frequently struggles with sudden big flare-ups, causing her to walk “out on them without a thought” (34), abandoning the family for hours or days at a time. On other occasions, when she is around, Alice is defined as “a handful” (91), shouting at her husband, slapping Willa in the face, or shaking Elaine, Willa’s sister, “like a Raggedy Ann” (23). Alice’s behavior and need to periodically flee her home and responsibilities support the idea that she likely did not want to be just a traditional wife and mother; rather, it is more probable that she wanted to be an actress based on her enthusiasm for acting in local productions, but women of her generation often felt unable to escape gender expectations, leaving them feeling unhappy and empty. In Alice’s case, she takes those feelings out on her whole family. Alice’s inability to cope with her own issues negatively impacts both her daughters. While Elaine eventually rebels and disassociates herself from the family, Willa actually comes to embody everything that Alice is trying to run away from. Willa, against her mother’s wishes, runs off with Derek before she is able to graduate college to get married; she is pregnant shortly after. According to Janneke van Mens-Verhaulst,
the relationship between mothers and daughters is “seen as an archetype of real and symbolic
generation differences between women” (xiii). This proves to be accurate in the case of Alice
and Willa. One is trapped by norms connected with her generation; she cannot seek a future that
does not involve being a wife and mother. The other has the opportunity to choose differently
than her mother, but she still ends up in the same traditional roles. The main point here is that
Willa has a choice and her mother likely did not. In the end, Alice’s damaging behavior strongly
impacts Willa’s need to take care of her sister and father when she is younger, already pushing
Willa toward a conventional gender role for herself. This is followed by Willa wanting to
become a better wife and mother than Alice, motivating her to put the needs of her husband and
children before her own.

While her relationship with her mother pushes her into a more conventional lifestyle,
Willa’s connection with her father appears to be more beneficial; even though Willa fails to visit
regularly as she gets older, she knows she is always able to rely on her father for support.
However, as kind and considerate as Melvin is, his allowing and even encouraging Willa’s care-
taking behavior during her mother’s absences further propel Willa into a traditional gender role
as she grows up. As a child and as an adult, Willa idealizes her father. To her, he seemed
“perfect just the way he was” (Tyler 10). He was “funny and kind and soft-spoken” (11); he
“never got grumpy” (11), and he “never lost his temper” (24). Especially compared to a mother
like Alice, Melvin is calm and dependable; Willa gravitates to him for a sense of security. For
her, he is “the steady one, the safe one” (160). Unfortunately, during Alice’s flare-ups, Melvin
allows, even comes to expect, Willa to take care of her sister and aspects of the home. She feeds
Elaine, helps her with school work, and takes care of her when Elaine feels ill; she also cleans up
around the house and attempts to cook; Willa is made into a little wife and mother when she is only twelve years old. This proves even more accurate when Willa starts acknowledging that her mother staying away would not be terrible. She begins “to imagine it as a permanent situation—just the three of them forever, coping on their own” (26); she believes that she and her father “could keep things going just fine” (26). Willa’s thoughts and actions are supported by Marc H. Bornstein and Diane L. Putnick’s argument that parents’ “cognitions and practices contribute in important ways to the course and outcome of child development” (61). More so, Bornstein and Putnick stress that fathers are “more likely to hold children to stereotypical norms” (65); they often encourage and reinforce gender stereotypes (65). Melvin seems like a good father; he cares about his wife and daughters, and he wants to provide the best for them. However, when he allows Willa to take on aspects of the roles of wife and mother at her young age, he forces her to put the needs of others before her own, a behavior that she continues to perpetuate as she gets older and starts her own family. More so, this behavior follows Willa into middle age, where she finds herself feeling more and more unfulfilled.

When she is younger, Willa’s relationship with her sister, Elaine, reinforces her role as a part-time mother figure and care taker; as an adult, Willa feels mostly guilt when it comes to her sister because they do not have a close relationship, which Willa, the older sibling, somehow feels responsible for. During their mother’s absences, Willa makes sure to take care of Elaine, attempting to make things as normal as possible. By doing Elaine’s hair, reading her stories, and making sure she completes her homework, Willa takes on a mother role, which further pushes her to put other’s needs before her own. Willa is quite concerned about her mother’s absences, but due to taking care of Elaine and needing to remain optimistic, Willa is unable to act or
behave how she really feels. As both siblings get older, things definitely change between them. According to Paula Smith Avioli, the intimate contact and experiences of childhood often serve to either bind the relationships between siblings or separate them (4). While siblings usually “separate geographically and psychologically as they grow up” (4), Willa and Elaine become even more separate and distant, making Willa feel guilty. As adults, the two of them have “very little to do with each other” (Tyler 84). Willa wants to “keep up some illusion of connection” (166), likely to ease her feelings of guilt, but she has a hard time accepting that “they were never going to be like the sisters in *Little Women*” (84). To Willa, their detachment from one another implies that their family is/was not happy or normal. Willa wants to keep the impression that everything is fine; her whole life is about making sure everyone is taken care and that everything looks okay from the outside. However, in reality, Willa does not miss the woman that Elaine has grown into; rather, she misses the “six-year-old sitting at a long-ago breakfast table” (265). It is easier for Willa to relate to the six-year-old Elaine than the adult, who has a sense of her own free will and who basically resigned from the family. An interesting point about Elaine is that she appears to be even more disconnected from her background and heritage than Willa; she wants nothing to do with her family. This further emphasizes aspects of white privilege as Elaine does not need the support of her family to feel connected to who she is and where she comes from. Overall, Willa’s early need to play the mother role for her sister impacts her into adulthood as she continues to focus on the needs of other people instead of her own and continues to embrace the conventional roles of wife and mother. Furthermore, while Elaine appears to care very little about having a close relationship with her family, including the sister who basically raised her, Willa finds herself racked with guilt over not having a more picture-
perfect relationship with her sister. Elaine fails to care how their relationship is perceived, but Willa is bothered by it continuously, emphasizing her traditional identity and need to keep things as ideal as possible, like a real June Cleaver.

In addition to family, Willa’s partners play a role in reinforcing her gender stereotypes. Derek, Willa’s first husband, regularly puts his own wants and needs ahead of everyone else’s, especially Willa’s, and she complies with this; he wants her to be the conventional wife and mother, but sticking strictly to these roles limits her potential for growth. Even from the start, Willa’s understanding of herself and Derek appears skewed; from the beginning, she places herself in a submissive position to him. When they first meet, she believes he is “so good-looking” and “so comfortable in his own skin” (94) something she does not feel about herself; she feels that he is better than her, so much so, that she worries that he will “find her a disappointment” (94). She feels somehow validated, as if she herself is important too, because Derek wants to be with her. In reality, she should not need or want a man to make her feel relevant or special. Unfortunately, many women have, over the years, suffered from the delusion that a man is an essential component in their lives to make them be and feel worth-while.

According to Mardy S. Ireland, many women wait to be chosen by a man because it gives them “status and definition as a ‘Mrs.’” (4). This proves true for Willa. While she does feel aspects of guilt for dropping out of college prior to graduating, she knows she would feel even more guilt for not complying with Derek’s wish that they marry as soon as possible because that is what he wants, regardless of how it impacts Willa or her plans. After basically giving up everything for him, school, her home, her plans, Willa moves from taking care of her family to taking care of Derek and his needs. She is happy to play the traditional housewife because he is “there to take
care of things” and her (Tyler 42). As time passes, Willa comes to learn to not argue with Derek, even when he is in the wrong, and that marriage is “often a matter of dexterity” (162); she feels guilty if she does not agree with Derek or causes him any discomfort if she disagrees about anything, like issues they have with their youngest son, Ian. She aims to make everyone but herself comfortable even if it means sacrificing something she wants or not saying something because it might be contradictory. Overall, Willa loves Derek and her children; she embraces her role as wife and mother, putting the needs of her loved ones before her own. However, by doing so, she fails to recognize the less than fulfilling identity that she has established for herself, especially as she gets older and her loved ones need, and even want, less attention. Being a wife and mother is important, but those two roles should not be all she is. She has a right to express and examine her own wants and needs, but until her trip to Baltimore, she seems to feel guilty about doing so.

Besides Derek, Peter, Willa’s second husband, also aims to fortify her conventional role as a wife. He has no interest in children, but he expects Willa to be a good wife that caters to his needs and wants at the expense of her own; however, his insensitive and selfish behavior is part of what motivates her to seek out changes for her identity and her life for her second adulthood. Prior to meeting and marrying Peter, Willa begins to make some changes for herself; she finishes her degree and finds work as an ESL teacher, which she loves. Unfortunately, as soon as Peter enters the picture, she quickly gives up what she wants or needs in order to please him, too easily falling back into old habits and roles. Because Peter wants to move to Arizona to play golf, Willa agrees to the move even though it means giving up her job and having no friends or family near her; once again, the needs of her spouse surpass her own. While Derek was pushy and
condescending in his own right, Peter is no better; he often mocks Willa for being “one of your bleeding-heart types” (175) because she cares about others and often wants to help. It is okay if she wants to take care of him, but she should not waste her time on other people. In addition, he refers to her as “little one,” and his patronizing behavior towards her makes her “feel sort of naïve and inexperienced” (111). According to Suzanne Braun Levine, moving into middle age, relationships with friends and family need to be renegotiated; older women are often no longer the same person they were when most of these connections began. Likely the most important relationship that needs recalibration is a marriage because, for middle-aged women, it is “right there, on the front line of our efforts to redefine ourselves” (Levine 45). As people grow and change, relationships must alter as well. If not, they will likely not last. Unfortunately, Peter is not willing to “recalibrate” their marriage; he likes things just as they are with Willa taking care of him. Initially, Willa is unwilling to see that her life and her identity need to change for the benefit of her second adulthood. By remaining with Peter, she would continue her life as she had started her adulthood, catering to the needs of others instead of focusing on herself. Peter’s distain for Willa’s impulsive decision to go to Baltimore and her unwillingness to leave when he is good and ready initially makes Willa feel guilt for not doing what he wants, but after her experience in Baltimore, Peter’s selfish behavior helps Willa understand that she is no longer happy with the status quo. She finally acknowledges that it is time for a change.

In addition to her husbands, Willa’s relationship with her children emphasizes her identity as a traditional mother; however, even though she aims to continue to care and support them, she feels guilty for not having a stronger connection with them as adults, which, in reality, is not her fault. Her sons selfishly focus solely on their own lives as they get older, but their
behavior helps Willa realize that a redefinition of her identity and her own wants is needed for the second half of her life; she begins to understand that her identity stems from more than just motherhood. When she is young, Willa dreams of having a large family, but after marrying Derek, Willa only has two sons, Sean and Ian. While her plan for a future family may not have turned out exactly as she had hoped, she feels proud of her sons. As her boys grow up, Willa’s whole life revolves around taking care of her husband and sons; she aims to provide them with a better home environment than her mother ever did, which often means making sure their needs are met even at the expense of her own. She basically erases herself to provide for them, but this causes her sons to see her only as the person who provides for them; they never see their mother as an individual. She hopes that her attempt to be a good mother and making sure her children never had “to worry what sort of mood she was in” (93) would make her a good mother, but it basically erases her as a person. Her sons never have to deal with any “irrational” behavior from Willa, but they also do not have to recognize her as a person. Unfortunately, even though Willa is the ideal conventional wife and mother, her sons grow up to ignore her, and their behavior as adults, especially Sean’s, is harsher than necessary. Certainly, children grow up and move forward with their lives, but both sons fail to fully appreciate or recognize everything that Willa did for them growing up, and they do not concern themselves with attempting to maintain some form of connection with her. Her whole adult life up until this point has been about being a wife and mother; suddenly, her children are gone, and she is left wondering what to do with herself and the rest of her life. This has to be extremely jarring for Willa, and women just like her, who have devoted their lives and identities to their families. Mardy Ireland explains that society and the feminism of the 20th century stressed “the idea of motherhood as central for defining female
identity” (6). What happens to a woman when a large part of her identity, being a mother, is suddenly done and gone? At times, Willa definitely struggles to fill her time, and, initially, she does not fully understand why things feel off for her. After her experience in Baltimore, where her son, Sean, continues to prove what a selfish individual he is, barely making time to even see his mother, Willa finally begins to see that her want/need to care and support others can be better utilized for other people and causes other than her self-absorbed kids; as tough as it is, she does not need to feel guilty about not having a strong relationship with her sons because, while she put forth an effort, they did very little. In her book, *Aren’t You Forgetting Someone?: Essays from my Mid-Life Revenge*, Kari Lizer discusses the idea that middle-aged women need places other than motherhood to give them purpose and perspective in their lives (142). It may take her a while, but through her trip and experiences there, Willa finally begins to see a need for change and acknowledges that her want to help others does not have to be wrapped up in motherhood.

While her family, husbands, and children do little to help Willa develop her identity beyond the roles of wife and mother, the people Willa meets in Baltimore, particularly Sean’s former girlfriend, Denise, Denise’s daughter, Cheryl, and Ben, a local neighbor, help show Willa that change and growth are possible and that she deserves to feel happy and fulfilled for the second half of her life. When Willa first arrives in Baltimore to help relative strangers, good-hearted or not, she comes across as a little judgmental; she is still looking at life through the lens of her old identity, someone who aims to make everything, including herself, appear perfect. While Willa comes from a comfortable life, where she is provided for and everything is well maintained, things are a little more run-down in Denise’s neighborhood; Willa’s internal thoughts about the shabby nature of the place and her negative thoughts about Cheryl’s weight
emphasize her privilege and disconnect from many aspects of real life. Willa always hopes to maintain and reflect a perfect image by how she cares and presents herself, but the real world is not perfectly put together. Since she does not have any grandchildren of her own, Willa fantasizes about how Cheryl could be a pseudo-grandchild for her, even for just a little bit, but Cheryl’s “pudgy face” and “keg-shaped tummy” (Tyler 122) do not fit the picture-perfect image of a grandchild that Willa imagines, causing Willa to feel guilty, an emotion that she seems to feel regularly about one thing or another. However, after some time passes in Baltimore, Willa begins to see the real world and the real people around her, helping her appreciate things that may not appear perfect at first glance. Denise is loud, messy, and not well put together; she definitely does not convey the ideal image of a mother, but she is a good mom to Cheryl. While Cheryl may not be “thinner and cuter” (122) as Willa initially hoped, her large personality and unique interests intrigue Willa, making her grow very fond of Cheryl very quickly. Also, Ben, through his thought-provoking comments and his suggestion that she use her language skills to help local refugees who do not speak English at a nearby church, encourages her to look at herself and the world differently. She is not just a pretty face or a simple wife and mother; if she wants to help others, she can be herself and use the skills that she learned in life because there are many that could use her assistance, especially if her husband and sons are too self-centered to appreciate her efforts. According to Mardy Ireland, friendships shape identity (11); they “help a woman confront the limitations of current ways of thinking about herself,” acting as both “the mortar which helps hold an identity together, and at times a catalyst for change” (8).

The friendships Willa forges in Baltimore support these ideas presented by Ireland. Without Denise, Cheryl, Ben, and all the neighbors, Willa would not begin to understand herself
or her need for redefinition. If Willa wants to care for others, it does not have to be at the
detriment of her own happiness or needs. Her family, husbands, and children want everything;
their needs should be met first and foremost, but her friends in Baltimore, Denise and Cheryl
especially, show that a real relationship, one that helps both people grow, is one that provides for
each person, an equitable connection. Overall, Denise, Cheryl, Ben, and the neighbors help Willa
acknowledge her feelings of unhappiness and lack of fulfillment, which aids in her understanding
that she no longer needs to put herself second all the time, and she can help others who truly
want and need her support. When Willa decides to return to Baltimore, giving up Peter and the
confines of her old identity, she has the potential to create a whole new life, identity, and even
family, one that is supportive of her and each other.

For the first half of her adult life, Willa is June Cleaver, a kind and supportive housewife
and mother who aims to please and care for her family and loved ones, even at the expense of her
own wants and needs; however, through her relationships, relinquishing feelings of guilt, and
breaking from conventional expectations and duties, Willa comes to understand who she was and
what no longer works for her. Finally, she sees that her identity and life feel empty and
unfulfilling, and she is ready to make a change. According to Loretta Goff, the “ongoing
processes of constructing and negotiating our identities are ultimately realized in our
performances of them. Thus, in the overlap between identity choice and the actual performance
of identity, selfhood is understood and identity formation (continuously) occurs” (73). This
proves true for Willa. It is not until she begins living a new life, even if she believes it to be short
term, and starts making different choices for herself, especially after Peter’s departure back to
Arizona, that real development of her identity begins to occur. She no longer sees herself as
meek, an overly mild-mannered housewife and mother; she is ready to redefine herself and her life for her second adulthood. In her younger years, Willa “dreamed of living in a real city where she could fall asleep every night listening to the gritting of strangers’ shoes beneath her window” (274). Now, with her decision to remain in Baltimore, she can have this dream. Most importantly, she can have many new dreams and wishes; this change brings countless opportunities for her. Her new life in Baltimore is one on her own terms where she is able to do what she wants. She could “rent a room somewhere,” “live in Mrs. Minton’s house,” “find herself an apartment with a swimming pool” for Cheryl, “teach English to Ben’s refugees or Spanish to Cheryl’s classmates,” or she might “try something new that she hasn’t even imagined yet” (291-2). Unlike other female protagonists in this study, Willa's decision to develop her identity for the second half of her life does not hinge on a man’s involvement or assistance; rather, her choices prove to be a strong step against the controlling and patronizing men of her life and a clear push against traditional norms. However, it is important to note that Willa’s ability to leave her husband and return to Baltimore appears simple and easy in most regards. She does not seem to worry about where she will go or what she will do. There seems to be no real concern about the financial aspects of this big life change, which reinforces Willa’s privilege. Willa does not worry about money or logistics and apparently, based on the conclusion, neither does Tyler.
CONCLUSION

The Baby Boomer generation is a large, nuanced group of people who are not going anywhere any time soon. Currently, the World Health Organization estimates that there are around 600 million people 60 or older throughout the world (Barnett 86). Since Boomers are living longer than previous generations, it should not be surprising to see the Baby Boomer generation continue to impact society as they age. In their younger years, they influenced changes in marriage and lifestyles because they felt more comfortable making different choices for their lives than previous generations had made. Those choices included not getting married or having children, as well as women opting to work outside the home whether they had children or not. As they get older, Boomers will reshape attitudes toward later life, demonstrating the possibilities, not just the pitfalls, that come with ageing. According to William H. Frey, current senior populations will differ from those of the past, “not only in terms of their size, but in their educational profiles, their household diversity, their greater gender equality” (36). Overall, Boomers have refused and continue to refuse to get with the program, regularly doing things their own way (Levine 4). This is also true in terms of their own identities. Whether they select more traditional paths or not, Boomers derive great comfort through finding their own identity (Strauss 10-1). This could not be more true of middle-aged Boomer women, who often face a chance for redefinition for their later years.

Nina Baym argues that genre is “a function of culture” (xli), which makes quite a bit of sense when applied to the Boomer generation and their role in American society; similar to their
demand for young adult texts that reflected their lives during their late teens and earlier twenties, Boomers, particularly women, are currently demanding literary works that mirror their current experiences and challenges as they get older. While men could and did write women’s fiction, even dating back to the 19th-century, and while some men currently write some Boomer literature, women’s fiction, especially Boomer literature, appears to be a distinctly female thing. According to Helge Normann Nilsen, women writers often concentrate on female experiences and perspectives, providing a strong voice for women and a better understanding of their feelings and lives, something male writers can never fully accomplish (37). Most authors of Boomer literature are women, regularly middle aged themselves, and their works discuss ageing and life in middle age, which aims to provide female readers with a better understanding of themselves and their new positions in life. Boomer literature makes the lives of women over a certain age visible instead of invisible and helps break negative stereotypes about ageing. In addition, Margaret J.M. Ezell states that the tradition of women’s fiction “reveals an evolutionary model of feminism” (18), and this proves true of Boomer literature as well. Just as 19th-century female texts often center around the domestic sphere, many current Boomer works remain focused on similar themes and trends, such as relationships with husbands, raising children, and the general and emotional innerworkings of women and their lives usually within the home.

All the women in this study, married or not, childless or not, demonstrate conventional gender norms at some point in their lives; for some, the confines of their stereotypical roles last longer than for others. While there are traditional aspects to these texts, they also connect well with the present evolution of women and the current facets of female empowerment and strides toward gender equality depicted in more contemporary women’s fiction. Heidi Macpherson
explains that contemporary American women’s writing “offers a forum for contesting dominant representations of women’s social and conventional spaces” (540). This writing showcases both “a continuation of earlier women’s writing, and an extension of it” (540). In her book, *Plots and Proposals*, Karen Tracey adds that texts by white female authors prove revealing, offering impactful stories about women’s hopes, fears, and ambitions. Especially after their moments of epiphany, most of these Boomer female protagonists shake off the limitations of their pasts and former selves; to differing degrees, most of them no longer allow their marital status, their roles as mothers, and/or their past conventional choices to dictate who they are or what they want for their future. Like many works in the canon of American women’s literature, these texts, while new and contemporary, offer insight into American women’s history, showcasing where we come from and where we aim to go. Our understanding of women’s fiction is a valuable resource, which allows us to, according to Linda Grasso, make “‘new fictions’ that will enable women to live new plots in their own lives” (150).

The most important aspect of Boomer literature is its genuine and realistic focus on female identity and its opportunities for growth and development in middle age; this is especially significant because, due to ageism, older women are often absent or horribly caricatured in contemporary media and literature. While older men may often experience some type of mid-life crisis, it typically does not alter their identities or stress that a change in aspects of their identities is needed. Often, older men just want to be/feel young again. The stereotypical gender roles for men, specifically white, straight, financially-secure, cisgender men, usually do not leave them feeling stifled or confined; they have always had options and freedoms to be who they want and do as they please. On the other hand, upon reaching middle age, women regularly can/need to
develop their identities. For women, ageing is not about being young again or buying an expensive convertible, but it often is about finding out who they truly are and who they want to be for the rest of their lives. Rita Felski states that a recurring theme of women’s fiction is “the difficulty many women still experience in defining an independent identity beyond that shaped by the needs and desires of those around them” (78). Middle age provides women with the possibility to embrace a new version of themselves, one that is not defined by traditional gender roles, conventional social expectations, and previous responsibilities. According to Amanda Smith Barusch, in our contemporary society, identities and norms “that earlier generations took for granted are up for renegotiation” (52). Middle age brings freedom and opportunities for women and their identities if they are strong enough and open to change. They must be willing to reject “the dominant cultural paradigm that equates growing old exclusively with decline into decrepitude” (Kellman 420). Betty Friedan stresses that freedom is one of the positive qualities associated with ageing, allowing “disengagement from the roles and goals of youth and from activities and ties that no longer have any personal meaning” (181). The difficulty sometimes is accepting and making use of this freedom because change can be scary and intimidating. Clearly seen from the previous chapters, particularly chapter four’s discussion of *The Female Persuasion*’s Faith Frank, not all middle-aged women are willing to embrace a chance for transformation. However, women who redefine themselves at this juncture end up more self-assertive and happier because they can be anyone they want to be and do anything they want to do (Levine 109).

The five Boomer novels examined in this study emphasize the significance of female identity and the possibilities afforded to women when they reach middle age. To varying
degrees, all five female protagonists enter middle age questioning what comes next or how they will proceed with their lives as they get older. They find themselves in what Kari Lizer describes as an “indefinable in-between,” an odd time that may feel “tender and aimless and mean” (4-5). This time is often filled with departing children and possibly husbands leaving. It may include a loss of a job, a home, or familiar roles. These women have reached a moment of confrontation with themselves; they must decide who they will be for their futures. This confrontation with the self varies from woman to woman, but based on the texts, each woman comes face to face with this moment. As frustrating or as overwhelming as this moment might be, these works demonstrate that the female characters must encounter it to acknowledge who they were in order to become who they want to be. Suzanne Braun Levine stresses that, before any woman can move on with the rest of her life, she has to figure out what she means by “my life” (15). She must also be willing to recognize the need for change within herself and the environment around her. If not, she likely will remain stifled by her previous identity and unable to redefine who she is, much like Faith Frank in *The Female Persuasion*. She remains dedicated to maintaining her image as a feminist icon, no matter the cost to herself, while the other female protagonists are more willing to let go of their past selves in order to embrace new identities for potentially better and happier futures. These women finally begin to see just what matters in life (Ephron 7), and one of the most important things is redefining themselves, finding their own voice, which allows them to shed past limitations and responsibilities.

Some of the most important elements that these female protagonists use to redefine themselves in middle age are relationships and location choices. Through connections with family, friends, partners, and children, these women characters established who they were in the
first half of their adulthood. In most cases, they became quintessential wives and mothers, fulfilling typical gender roles. They kept the homes and raised the children. Even the most radical of the women, Faith Frank, still chooses to marry and have a child. Overall, to differing degrees, the women appear to not fully regret their past choices or roles because of what it brought them, a partner, children, or simply a place where they, at least initially, felt like they belonged. However, as people age, relationships must change or evolve as well. Partners and children leave, parents get older, and friendships end. Moving into their second adulthood, the female protagonists are provided with an “aha moment,” a chance for change, and in many cases, this moment is possible or provided through connections. For some of the women in this study, this moment of recognition and self-awareness comes through romantic relationships and through connections with male characters. Trudy of *The Goddesses of Kitchen Avenue* and Margo Just of *The Bette Davis Club* benefit from the input and support of male partners, as well as other male characters, such as Trudy’s neighbor, Angel, and a film producer, Malcolm, whom Margo meets on her journey. While none of the men is a malicious character, it is only through their intervening that both female characters are able to recognize their need for change and development of their identities. On the other hand, for other women in this study, such as Rebecca Winter of *Still Life with Bread Crumbs* and Willa Drake of *Clock Dance*, their recognition that change is needed does not stem from romantic relationships or necessary guidance from a man. While they both benefit from friendships, typically with other women, their willingness to look inside themselves to acknowledge what needs adjusting, more so than some of the other characters, truly allows for their openness to the possibilities of redefinition. In both cases, this introspection is aided by a new environment; Rebecca benefits from her time in
the country, while Willa benefits from her time in Baltimore. New locations appear to provide a new perspective on their old lives. In the end, based on these novels, the opportunity for redefinition of female identity in middle age is offered to each character, regardless of background or history, but no two women respond to this moment of epiphany in the same way. Trudy and Margo end up relying on men, keeping them from fully reaching a new-found identity and independence. Rebecca and Willa appear to be the most successful in embracing new versions of themselves by not relying on a man or a romantic relationship moving forward into their second adulthoods, but Faith chooses to remain who she always was, leaving her stifled and, likely, unfulfilled during the second half of her life.

Women authors have been writing about female identity, as well as other topics, throughout the history of women’s fiction. Besides addressing female characters, according to Jean Radford, women writers often feature “the ‘Negro,’ the Jew, the Indian, the Irish, or some other embodiment of the Other” (110). Because women have traditionally been seen as the “weaker” sex, it is not surprising that female writers would feel a connection with those who lack power, people not classified as white, straight men and want to address the plights of those cast as the Other in their works. However, as noble as this is, white women authors, at least when referencing female Boomer literature writers, typically fail to address their own cultural backgrounds or heritages; they never face the role whiteness, and its privilege, plays in their lives or their work. The usual markers found in ethnic texts (extended families, alternative languages, different foods, religion, values different from the mainstream culture’s values, and even the fear of walking into a room where they are seen as different) are not usually available in the works of white female writers. They appear to have no group or tribe to which they belong. By noting this
absence, we can theorize about what is actually there and comment on how these writers think about identity when they themselves cannot identify a group to which they belong.

In *The American Adam*, R. W. B. Lewis depicts the white American hero as a figure “emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race,” an individual “standing alone, self-reliant and self propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources” (5). Lewis thought it was important to stress the American break from British culture and history by noting that the heroes he encountered in novels written by Nathaniel Hawthorne and other American writers made no claim to a European past, but people are not devoid of a history or a cultural background. The problem, however, is that far too many contemporary American white women writers appear to perpetuate the idea of the American Adam as an individual removed from history posited by Lewis in their own novels. They continue to write stories in which the heroine's ancestry is not relevant and their female protagonists show no interest or recognize no significance in their own cultural backgrounds. While ethnic writers frequently discuss the issue of difference in their texts, white women authors appear to take their mainstream position and privilege for granted; they never mention anything about difference in their works. These writers do not have to think about their own place in the world because, for them, it is a given, and while these female characters define themselves through key aspects, such as relationships and locations, something missing from their identities is recognition and incorporation of their ethnicities.

Each of the novels in this study presents a different version of whiteness, but it fails to be significant to the writers or the characters. Why are race and ancestry not relevant for these
women? It may be due to the fact that white women are provided some protection by being associated with white male culture. It is likely easier, and possibly safer, to not face the realities of whiteness, its associated privileges, and the inequalities faced by other races. For example, in *The Goddesses of Kitchen Avenue*, Trudy has African American friends and is attracted to a Latin man. A white woman like her can slip in and out of other people’s spaces without thinking about the space; people of color, however, are always aware of where they can and cannot enter. Facing the privilege connected with their race and the inequality other races deal with just might be more than these white female characters and the white women writers who created them are ready to acknowledge because it could severely alter how they perceive themselves or because they have no idea how to work towards fixing the issue. Another theory may stem from the fact that, for a long time, whiteness, the invisible race, has been the “ruler” in society, used as a measurement against other races and ethnicities; often, right or wrong, the “ruler” is not addressed when discussing the measurements. Possibly, this lack of ethnic awareness comes from fear of what might be found in one’s past, like slave owning ancestors, or it may come from feelings of white guilt, which pushes these white female writers away from discussing race because it would appear insensitive to the obstacles and struggles of ethnic individuals, as well as ethnic writers and their characters, who experience much more severe realities due to their cultural backgrounds on a regular basis. In the end, it is likely not one matter or concern which keeps these female authors from addressing the issue of heritage or ethnicity in their writing. However, the invisible nature of whiteness must be challenged and transformed in our modern culture and literature in order to make strides in obtaining equality; change must take place in order to create change. Instead of helping bridge the divide between races, Boomer literature
further emphasizes the idea of white privilege by showcasing this opportunity for white women. Overall, in many cases, white women can choose another life or identity, they can have that “aha” moment, while ethnic women are regularly trapped by economic limitations and racial strife.

The "aha" moment present in these novels compares well to the more traditional moment of emotional development characteristic of the bildungsroman text, a work that focuses on the coming of age of a character. Often, these texts focus on younger characters, on the cusp of adulthood, and on the formation of male identity rather than female identity. Novels such as Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, J.D. Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye*, and Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* come to mind. While more writers, especially ethnic writers, like Sandra Cisneros and Julia Alvarez, are providing bildungsroman works for female characters, this focus on female identity does not usually appear in works about older women, but the novels in this study use the traditional concept of the bildungsroman to provide the same journey of initiation into a more enlightened old age to women characters. Since there is often a lack of representation for middle-aged and older women in literature, Boomer literature proves to be that much more important, making the lives and stories of older women relevant. These texts provide a sort of coming of age story where these white female characters are able to focus on opportunities for growth and transformation of their identities on the cusp of their second adulthood, a time when they can finally do and say as they please. While no one may have wanted to hear, read, or face the issues of ageing, Boomer literature is changing all that, getting rid of the stigmas of getting older. According to Leslie Allison, American women writers “revel in thresholds, pushing against them and using them to expand whose story gets to be told and to
what ends,” expanding “generic and content boundaries” (208). What was missing, or minimally available, even just ten to fifteen years ago in literary options, as well as film and television, is now becoming a popular genre for older female readers, helping to demonstrate that ageing does not mean life stops at 50, and we can thank the Baby Boomer generation for that.
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