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Stories of age do not provide answers to questions about ageing. They do not illustrate gerontological concepts. They can offer comfort, inspiration and possibility. They may not offer any of those things. Telling and reading stories of age does open up debate and embrace complexity, and may challenge our ways of thinking. From the trauma of Shakespeare’s bereft King Lear to the eccentricity of Charles Dickens’ Miss Havisham (Great Expectations 1860) and the ribald effrontery of Angela Carter’s Nora and Dora (Wise Children 1991), ageing—across the life course—is part of our literary heritage and, according to some, becoming more prominent in texts from current writers (Oró-Piqueras 2013). Others argue that demographic change is, in part, responsible for a ‘new coming of age of literature’ (Ramos 2010: 14). There is not space in this short piece to map fully the way that literature deals with ageing. Instead, the chapter concentrates on a specific aspect of the literary treatment of age: how critics have addressed ageing and literature, or, to put it another way, how age has emerged as a critical perspective from which to view literature.

Despite the wealth of literary texts that explore and present ageing across the life course, as Helen Small argues, literary critics very rarely take ageing as a focus for their work: ‘Old age in literature is rarely if ever only about itself—but as far as criticism has been concerned, it has oddly rarely been much about itself at all’ (2007: 6). In literary studies, ageing has been the unacknowledged shadow that intersects with more prominent approaches such as gender or postcolonialism. A similar lack of interdisciplinary connections has also been the case in gerontology, meaning that the humanities, including literature, found themselves marginalized in this area. However, this is changing and a genuinely dialogic relationship between literature and gerontology is becoming established, a field appropriately coined by the term ‘literary gerontology’.

As a result, the importance of literature and the literary to gerontological study is increasingly recognized and, though this is expressed in multiple ways by critics, few would disagree with Sally Chivers’s argument that ‘a humanities-based approach to aging can consistently maintain the crucial complexity of growing old because works of art, such as literature, can comfortably encompass contradictions and even gain their aesthetic strength from doing so’ (2003: x). It is the ability to accommodate and even thrive on contradiction, incompleteness and possibility that makes literature such a valuable area of study for gerontology. Literature does not—as most
literary critics working on ageing are at pains to stress—simply mirror or reflect a social world, but, instead, is part of and complicit in shaping that social world.

This of course raises the related question: what does gerontological research have to bring to the literary studies table? As Aagje Swinnen and Cynthia Port argue in relation to the humanities as a whole, there are numerous benefits to be derived from the engagement with social science, including the possibility of links with ‘living people’, producing research that has clearer relevance to society in general, and learning how to exert a greater impact on public policy (2012: 10–11). More generally, as Swinnen and Port explain, being aware of research in the social sciences prevents duplication and promotes collaboration and innovation (2012: 10).

Developments in literary studies, the influence of literary theory and cultural studies, particularly since the late 1960s, have fostered interdisciplinarity and widened the field of study, making it easier for gerontology and literary studies to meet. Much of the work in literary gerontology shares a positive approach to literature and ageing, aiming, in the words of Barbara Frey Waxman, to ‘foster social change regarding old age’ (1990: 2). And this political edge chimes with the ‘cultural studies’ aspect of literary criticism. There are, of course, potential dangers in such an openly political drive, something Oliver Davis argues is the case in some gerontological work, which unites around ageism to such an extent that it risks falling foul of the simplistic promotion of positive ageing (2006: 17–18). However, it is clear that most critics working in literary gerontology are cognisant of the complexities of gerontological debate in their keen engagement with the ethical and political questions around ageing and culture.

**Literature and gerontology: a brief history**

Though there was some interest in literature and ageing prior to the 1980s, it was in that decade that literary gerontology really began to develop, allowing Anne M. Wyatt-Brown to herald ‘The Coming of Age of Literary Gerontology’ in 1990. Wyatt-Brown argued that, though there were relatively few existing literary gerontological studies, the number was increasing and this looked set to continue. As she noted, one of the most significant early and continuing contributors to the field is Kathleen Woodward. Moving from *Memory and Desire* (1986) to *Ageing and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions* (1991), Woodward pairs psychoanalytic texts and concepts with literary works, proposing, for example, the mirror stage of old age, addressing what she sees as the neglect of ageing in Freudian models (1991: 68).

Similarly significant, both in the early days of the field and subsequently, is Margaret Morganroth Gullette. Gullette’s ‘progress narrative of the middle years’ (1988: xi) is an early example of the identification of what we might call ‘ageing genres’, those that accommodate new discourses of ageing. Gullette suggests that this progress narrative emerged in the 1970s and 1980s in Anglo-American culture and is identified by stories of change and development (1988: xii), which are at odds with the dominance of what she terms the decline narrative. Gullette’s work, like Woodward’s, continues, and in *Declining to Decline* (1997) and *Aged by Culture* (2004) a much less optimistic view of the progress narrative emerges, a trend continued into her latest book, *Age-wise: Fighting the New Ageism in America* (2011). An indefatigable campaigner for ‘age studies’ (2004: 101–19), Gullette produces work that is often literary, but she combines this with economics, history, media studies and social sciences to create a multidisciplinary, cultural studies of ageing.

Barbara Frey Waxman’s *From the Hearth to the Open Road* (1990) similarly identifies generic developments in literature since the publication of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Coming of Age* (1970/2) (a key text for many in literary gerontology), positing the existence of the *reifungsroman*, a term she coins to describe the novel of ripening, as opposed to the youth of the *bildungsroman*. Constance Rooke also looks to the *bildungsroman* to explain her term *vollendungsroman*,
defining the latter ‘as a complementary term, to refer to the novel of completion or winding up’ (1992: 245). Like Gullette (1988) and Waxman, she argues that there has been a ‘recent proliferation of novels about old age’ (Rooke 1992: 244), making the 1970s onwards crucial decades for literature about age, and the 1980s and 1990s important in the literary gerontology that followed from this.

Following on from the work of these pioneers, perhaps the most significant sociological figure engaged in literary gerontology in the 1990s and into the twenty-first century was Mike Hepworth, whose *Stories of Ageing* (2000; see also 2002) brought literature into sociology with his use of symbolic interactionism in readings of selected literary texts. Hepworth sets out his aim in the book thus: ‘to encourage you as readers to explore fiction as an imaginative resource for understanding variations in the meaning of the experience of ageing in society’ (2000: 1). Hepworth recognizes the complexities of the debates about the relationships between reader, author, text and world that bedevil literary studies, but he largely sidesteps these in favour of his own ‘interest […] in the potential of fictional representations of ageing to engage our interest and concern’ (2000: 6). Hepworth’s work is not therefore particularly informed by literary theory or practice, but it is important for the way it highlights the value of fiction and the significance of cultural representation in gerontology, bringing to the fore authors who are interesting to literary gerontologists.

Like many studies in the 1980s and 1990s, Anne M. Wyatt-Brown and Janice Rossen’s *Aging and Gender in Literature: Studies in Creativity* (1993) tried to put right the lack of literary interest in ageing, but this book was also significant as an example of a strand of literary gerontology that focusses on later-life creativity. There are potential pitfalls in this approach, since it can too easily conflate ageing and creativity, and read authorship in a way that seems naive in the light of the radical questioning of the role of the author since Barthes and Foucault. This is not, however, to suggest that the concept of late style or the biographical focus is not important, and this aspect of literary gerontology continues to develop in interesting ways, including in recent work by Wyatt-Brown (2010). Gordon McMullan’s work (2007) is a further example of this approach, as he considers late style as a construction that denies old age.

Another theoretically more complex approach is found in Mary Eagleton’s (2011) recent essay on British editor and writer Diana Athill, which explores age identity as an older writer, drawing on both Bourdieu and the notion of the literary life. She examines Athill as one of a group of older writers who are marketed as ‘new’ and analyzes both her high media profile and the effects of her work on readers. Rather than linking these things simply to late style, Eagleton (2011) argues that a combination of factors accounts for Athill’s popularity, including the ageing population, class nostalgia, the popularity of the memoir and Athill’s own influence within a publishing world. Critical work from gerontology may have added to the conceptualization of ageing and the older writer here, but this is nevertheless an example of both a more nuanced reading of the relationship between age and creativity and the way that age has entered the literary critical mainstream.

Similarly contentious within literary gerontology is the prominent content-based study of representations of ageing within fiction. Often aligned to the early feminist literary ‘images of women’ approach, this has been criticized for not paying enough attention to extra-textual factors and to matters of style (Davis 2006: 23). Some critics argue that a more multi-dimensional and contextual approach is needed (this can be seen as analogous to the way that feminist literary studies have developed, with a move to more contextual and intersectional works). As Hannah Zeilig comments:

> Fictional stories can be invaluable for considering the various manifestations of age and ageing. However, these stories are most insightful when they are thoroughly contextualized,
when the frame of reference is accounted for and when fiction as one in a range of cultural discourses is appreciated.

(2011: 31)

This helps to develop literary gerontology and protect it from accusations—sometimes levelled by critics from the social sciences—that it is methodologically flimsy. It is important, however, not to deny the value of analyses of representations of ageing in literature. Such representations do need to be addressed. As Josephine Dolan and Estella Tincknell note in their summary of Canadian scholar Sally Chivers’s approach to this in *Silvering Screen* (2011, a study of film rather than literature), she examines representation in its ‘richest, fullest iteration’ and is therefore considering ‘representation as power’ (2012: xi). This link between representation and power is crucial to understanding the importance of film and literature as part of the discourses of ageing. If we appreciate the power of literary narratives of ageing to influence our cultural understanding of what ageing means, then it becomes clear that content-based studies, as well as spirited defences of the need to consider representations of ageing in literature, are still very valuable to the field (see Oró-Piqueras 2013).

Nevertheless, also emerging are examples of more contextual criticism. Jeannette King’s recent study of ageing and literature, for instance, looks at nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary representations of older women alongside medical, psychological and social discourses of ageing at the time of writing:

Such a reading of nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction by women suggests the dynamics and tensions at work between text and context. Since novelists can imaginatively explore the subjective experience of ageing, their representations of ageing may contest those embodied in these powerful discursive contexts, offering alternative ways of understanding ageing in women.

(2013: xv)

King’s book is also an example of a prominent critical intersection in literary gerontology: age and gender. Wyatt-Brown could argue in 1990 that literary gerontology had not explored the relationship between ageing and feminism, but this is certainly not the case now. Susan Sontag’s (1972) assertion of the ‘double standard of aging’ provided a clarion call that has been developed and critiqued not only by those working in gerontology and the social sciences, but also by literary scholars. What this yoking of age and gender has had to battle with is, as Woodward argued in *Figuring Age* in 1999, the ‘ageism [. . .] entrenched within feminism itself’ (xi). But as gerontology began to develop a feminist strain in the 1990s (see Calasanti 2004 and 2006), literary gerontology could do the same, having the advantage of a strong tradition of feminist literary studies behind it. From Woodward (1999) to Chivers (2003), Brennan (2005), Paloge (2007) and King (2013), the intersection of ageing and feminism has proved fruitful in literary gerontological work and more widely in cultural gerontology.

**Literary studies: the difference age makes**

In this way, and particularly in the last 10 years or so, age has come to be seen as another way to approach literature, akin to, say, feminist, postcolonial or queer approaches. Age may therefore be read, as Victoria Bazin and Rosie White do here, as ‘the last difference, the unspoken but inevitable site of a difference not only between subjects but also a difference within subjects as they are exiled from their younger selves’ (2006: ii). Literary gerontology is energized by this intersectional
approach. This dialogue between age and other, more traditional literary approaches (such as gender, class, race and ethnicity) offers a rich vein of scholarship that can encompass the complexities inherent in the different experiences of ageing. However, it is important to recognize, as Chiavers acknowledges, that we may all have a more mobile relationship to age than to other perspectives or subject positions (2003: xiii). Age is not a ‘category’ quite like gender or ‘race’, though, like these terms, it is contested, because we are all ageing at any one moment and will most likely find ourselves moving across stages and definitions of age as we develop through the life course. This makes the focus of our study when we turn to age remarkably unclear. Indeed, as Gullette argues, awareness of ageing is moving down the life course and we must attend to ageing across this rather than simply focussing on ‘old’ age (2004: 3–20). This awareness does not invalidate intersections between age and other critical categories such as ‘race’ and gender, but the best literary gerontology is that which acknowledges the complexity of its parameters.

Also becoming more established as a bridge between gerontology and literary studies is the concept of narrative (see Bornat in this volume). Traditionally the preserve of the literary, narrative has now entered gerontology and become established within both theoretical and therapeutic environments (Kenyon, Bohlmeijer and Randall 2011). With its insistence on the temporal, narrative is of obvious interest to those exploring age, often based on the idea that we live storied lives. It is fair to say that narrative gerontology is not a clear-cut field, but an area that draws on many methodological and disciplinary knowledges, including literary studies. And perhaps it is this flexibility that enables it to provide a conceptual bridge for the literary and the gerontological. Bringing together narrative, critical and literary gerontology, Zeilig explains their concerns thus: ‘Narrative, literary and critical gerontology all share an ability to confront (rather than shirk) the ambiguities and complexities of age, ageing and later life and an interest in quizzing the cultural norms of ageing via non-scientific forms of knowing’ (2011: 8–9). This acceptance of complexity and ambiguity is, of course, where the chapter started with the value of the literary to gerontology. There are potential downfalls in the co-option of a literary concept into gerontology, as Zeilig (2011: 17–19) outlines, but the possibilities of the meeting-place for the literary and the gerontological provided by narrative are clear and are only just starting to be explored, as evidenced by Rishi Goyal and Rita Charon’s essay on Woolf’s The Waves in Kenyon, Bohlmeijer and Randall’s Storying Later Life (2011).

Making clear the way that literary gerontology is finding its feet within an interdisciplinary environment, other recent work on ageing and literature takes a more practice- and people-based approach. For example, the Fiction and the Cultural Mediation of Ageing Project based at Brunel University, UK, takes literature beyond theory and analysis with its emphasis on readership. As stated earlier, Swinnen and Port argue that two of the main advantages to humanities scholars of the dialogue with social science research are ‘engagement with living people’ and learning how ‘to exert influence over policy making’ (Swinnen and Port 2012: 10–11). This project demonstrates the viability of both of these aims, using diary responses by volunteers from the UK University of the Third Age to a series of literary texts chosen for their representations of ageing. The project aimed ‘not to examine the event of reading for its own significance, but to explore fiction’s capacity to catalyze individual and collective reflection on the changing dynamics of contemporary age culture’ (Morrison 2011: 6). The voices of older people are prominent within this study, but it also draws on literary techniques and the currently less popular approach of reader-response. The project was unusual in that it resulted in a report, ‘Ageing is Not a Policy Problem to Be Solved: Coming of Age’ (Bazalgette et al. 2011), produced by the UK think tank Demos, demonstrating the synergy between literary gerontology and work in public policy.
Conclusion

Since Wyatt-Brown’s 1990 essay, it can be said that literary gerontology has indeed come of age. Books and articles on ageing and literature proliferated throughout the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, and there is no sign of a slowing of pace. Literary gerontology has spread its net widely, taking in drama and performance, fiction, auto/biography and poetry. It includes attention to non-Western writers—though it is true that at the moment the balance is still tipped in favour of US, Canadian, European and (to a lesser extent) Australian writers—and pays some attention to both the popular and the literary. Content-based studies draw close attention to representations of ageing within literature; others look at ageing and creativity, genre or readership. More and more, intersectionality is invigorating literary studies of ageing, with a notable flood of work addressing age and gender (see above) and a more limited amount of research into ‘race’ and age (for example, Gual 2004). And exciting, truly interdisciplinary work that yokes literary and social science methodologies is developing. This does not, however, mean that the field has nowhere to go. The conceptual and practical aspects of the use of narrative in gerontology and literature have yet to be fully explored. Intersectionality may be flourishing, particularly around age and gender (though the issue of masculinity is not given significant attention, despite the growing interest in masculinity in gerontology and the strength of masculinity studies within literature), but other connections are less well explored, such as age and ‘race’, and age and sexuality. For example, little work has been done on the intersection between queer theory and age studies, and Brian Worsfold points out the need for cultural gerontology as a whole, including literature, to attend to the experience of the ageing immigrant and emigrant (2011: xxxi).

Perhaps the greatest hurdle facing literary gerontology comes from the literary field. Despite the enthusiasm for literature within cultural gerontology, and the burgeoning of the field of literary gerontology detailed in this chapter, literary gerontology still struggles to find its feet within literary studies. There is some evidence of increasing acceptance of gerontological work within the discipline, such as the publication of literary gerontology by mainstream literary journals (for example, Studies in the Literary Imagination and Contemporary Women’s Writing), the prominence of literary studies within cultural gerontology research groups (for example, the European Network in Aging Studies) and conferences on ageing emerging from literature departments within universities. But the relationship between ageing and literature is very rarely a focus for syllabi within higher education institutions and is not strongly represented within literary doctoral studies.

Gerontological research is still not given the attention it deserves by some literary critics. For example, Thomas Cole (2009), in his review of Helen Small’s The Long Life (a text that brings together philosophical and literary texts, but is primarily interested in old age and philosophy), argues that she pays little attention to gerontological work, and Roberta Maierhofer is ‘less convinced that the work done in cultural gerontology has found recognition in the field of cultural studies, and has entered research and teaching as part of the overall field’ (2011: xv). Nevertheless, the possibilities for literary study within gerontology, and the value of literature and literary study for interrogating and even changing discourses of age, are now firmly established. Kathleen Woodward sees the potential for literature (and other imaginative works) to be ‘epistemological tools’, offering vital knowledges about ageing (2012: 6). Literary gerontologists are in the privileged position of unearthing and bringing to light these knowledges.

References


