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The critical use of narrative and literature in gerontology

By HANNAH ZEILIG*

Abstract

It is now widely accepted that “age” and “ageing” are cultural concepts that are open to question. The thinking encouraged by critical gerontology has been crucially important in provoking questions about the complexities of later life, age and ageing. Similarly, the interrogation of stories of age and ageing via narrative approaches and as found in literature are increasingly recognised as an important source of knowledge for mining the intricacies of later life. There are close links between the interests of critical gerontologists and those who engage in narrative and literary gerontology. However, the potential that critical gerontology has for illuminating and probing these stories of age has often been neglected. The central argument of this article is that narrative and literary approaches to age and ageing when allied to perspectives from critical gerontology can furnish scholars with important perspectives for interpreting and re-configuring “age”. The focus is upon how a genuinely dialogic relationship between critical gerontology and narrative and literary gerontology can be forged. In this way, the full potential of these stories of ageing; their epistemological status for enriching theoretical work on ageing, might be better exploited.

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Introduction: Thinking Critically

Critical thought implies the examination of “taken for granted” assumptions. It involves an active and persistent questioning in contrast to a passive acceptance of information. Such questioning often unsettles normative assumptions and unmasks ideologies that underlie our societies and ways of living. One of the impulses of critical gerontology is to go beyond accepted explanations of age and ageing to plumb the underlying processes that shape these explanations and thereby to elucidate social, cultural and individual experiences of ageing. Critical gerontology therefore provokes a reconsideration of conventional ways of thinking about age and even the discipline of gerontology itself. Its advocates are equally interested in the particular and in the general, querying prevailing norms that define ageing as well as probing how age is experienced by an individual within a specific historical moment. In this way, the thinking encouraged by critical gerontology “... enlarges our perceptions and so calls attention to what more positivist approaches cannot or do not notice” (Holstein & Minkler 2003: 788). It represents the attempt to move from the ceaseless accumulation of knowledge towards understanding the “hows” and “whys” of ageing (Alley et al. 2010: 583) and therefore to contribute to theory building.

Stories of ageing, as these are elucidated by the use of narrative in gerontology and by those who have recourse to literary representations of “age” and “ageing” have become increasingly recognised as lending important insights to gerontological knowledge. These approaches demand critical interpretations about the ways we have of “knowing” and are less concerned with seeking definitive explanations or certitudes. They constitute a fundamental part of the endeavour to open up new debates and redefine the meaning of ageing, the desire to embrace rather than elide the complexities of later life.

There are evident overlaps in the interests of critical gerontology with both narrative and literary gerontology. 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. Indeed to discuss them as separate entities within gerontological knowledge is to imply that there are dichotomies between these areas of study that do not exist. However, despite their commonalities, there remains (for the most part) a lack of dialogue between these areas. This has sometimes resulted in a dearth of critical thinking by those who investigate narratives or literature to clarify, scrutinise or even reappraise concepts of “age” and “ageing”.

This article then, represents an attempt to examine some of the ways in which narrative and literary gerontology could be enhanced by reference to critical gerontology. These are both out-workings of humanistic gerontology¹ and have emerged in parallel with critical perspectives. It is thus these areas that I discuss here, critically. My purpose is not, however, to provide an exhaustive analysis of either narrative or literary gerontology. Nor do I aim to offer a comprehensive overview of the genesis of critical gerontology. Rather, my objectives are twofold. On the one hand, to examine through carefully selected examples, the intersections between critical gerontology and narrative and literary approaches to age and secondly, to outline the ways in which some of the questions provoked by critical gerontology could further extend the discourses of narrative and literary gerontology. The article concludes with suggestions concerning the uses that perspectives from critical gerontology could have for these discourses and some of the questions it might help scholars of ageing ask about stories of “age”.

Structuring and Constructing the Stories of Age: Considering Narrative Gerontology

The word “narrative” derives from the Latin verb *narrare*: to recount. A narrative is thus most interested in the *telling* of a story (which may be fictional or non-fictional) and the architecture of that story, rather than the story itself. Consequently narratives are identified as, for instance, “written

¹ For a full description of the use of humanities in gerontology and “humanistic” gerontology see Cole et al. (1992, 2000, 2010).

narratives" or "oral narratives" which distinguish between the modes of storytelling. There has been a growing interest in narrative approaches within gerontology, a conceptual trend that is linked to critical gerontology (Biggs 2004: 50). Although whether, as Katz claims (2003: 19) it can be identified as a separate path within critical gerontology, or as a "recognized discipline" in its own right (Phoenix et al. 2010: 1) is perhaps debatable.

Despite this growing interest in narrative gerontology, there is no easy definition of the area. Randall (2007) summarises the inherent difficulties of arriving at a fixed description:

As for narrative gerontology, there are as many ways of defining the phrase as there are gerontologists who identify with it, and as many ways into its subject, which ... is part psychology, part philosophy, part literary criticism, and part several other things too.

(Randall 2007: 373)

It is perhaps unsurprising then, that narrative gerontology comes in various guises. This is because, as Randall points out, "narrative" has been characterised differently and used to different purposes within gerontology. As Biggs notes: "Narrativity has been examined as a research method, a description of ageing ... and as a form of therapy" (2004: 50). It is neither solely a hermeneutic concept nor a heuristic technique or methodology and pinning it down is perhaps unimportant.

The popularity of narrative for gerontology may be because the concept opens up a critical space between what is and what is possible. After all, scrutinising the way a story is constructed also allows us to imagine how it could have been otherwise. In addition, a narrative whether it is linear or not, has a temporal element; a relationship to time that is attractive for scholars of ageing. (To this end, "narrative" in gerontology has recently been described as a "widespread traveling concept" that helps to define ageing as a development through time, [Swinnen 2011]). Finally, a narrative allows for the perspective of the listener – for how the story is heard. I am interested in the flexibility of narrative for gerontology and the possibility that it is a paradigm, or explanatory model which may be extended by critical gerontology.

Some of the ways in which “narrative” in gerontology has been used are discussed below.² These include as a tool for teaching students, as a heuristic for critiquing social policy and as a conceptual mode for considering biographical life stories. These particular areas have been highlighted as representative of the scope of narrative gerontology; they are inevitably limited as an all-inclusive review is outside the compass of this article.

Narrative approaches have been drawn on to facilitate the teaching of gerontology, narrative is seen as having “pedagogical potential” (Randall & Kenyon: 2004). Here narrative is the “root metaphor” for a consideration of ageing in terms of (mostly) biographical stories. Thus in one example, segments of stories about ageing were used to “... animate principles about aging that we want the students to consider” (Shenk et al. 2008: 242). It is posited that:

Narrative gerontology allows us to illustrate how theories of aging are socially constructed, moving learners beyond a single approach to the stories and meanings of aging.

(Shenk et al. 2008: 241)

The narratives used by these teachers included the story of an African American woman born in the 1920s. In this way, undergraduate students were encouraged to consider changing expectations of the life-course and were presented with an antidote to simplistic and

² A number of exponents have been included here. These were selected as they seemed to represent the most pertinent recent examples within their fields. Thus, the work of Shenk et al. (2008) echoes Randall (2007) who is one of the most frequently cited practitioners of this approach. Biggs (2001, 2004) and Biggs et al. (2003) is one of the foremost UK scholars to analyse narratives of social policy. Similarly, the scholarship of Katz (1996, 2003, 2005) Katz and McHugh (2010) has been central as it critiques social narratives of ageing. An extensive literature search found that the work of US scholars Kenyon et al. (2001), Randall and McKim (2004), McKim and Randall (2007) was frequently cited. Moreover, both Randall and Kenyon are highlighted by Moody (2008) as major contributors to narrative gerontology. This is not, however, to indicate that these are the only relevant examples of narrative gerontology.

conventional ways of thinking about old age (Shenk et al. 2008: 243). A second exercise, also developed to illustrate the life-course perspective and how history and cohort placement contribute to who we become in later life (Shenk et al. 2008: 243) was based on a narrative description concerning the ways in which war-time experiences shaped an older man's early and later life.

It is argued that through these exercises, students hear "the human voice" of ageing and are able to relate this to themselves:

Not only do the students learn the basic concept of life expectancy ... but they also actively experience the way it affects the lives of older adults as well as themselves.

(Shenk et al. 2008: 243)

In addition, students are "challenged":

... to explore norms and social roles from their own present-day perspective as well as a historical perspective, examining these issues within the broader context of changing demographics of the population.

(Shenk et al. 2008: 243)

Here, narrative gerontology is a framework or structure for teaching, it is a technique. The composition of autobiographical stories is considered. Students are taught to identify key fragments of a story from a personal account and "... to look beyond the literal or surface meaning to find story structures" (Shenk et al. 2008: 245). It is thus a means of connecting students with the lived stories of older people, the storied nature of our lives, the ways in which we structure our life stories and with metaphysical concepts of "self".

Narrative gerontology as a tool for teaching relies on the recognition that life can be thought of as an actively constructed text that must be part fiction. Just as the stories in novels are made up so we "make ourselves up" when we relate the substance of our lives. Therefore, the act of reading lives is similar to the act of reading novels or "fictions". Both endeavours rely upon our interpretative abilities and are full of subjectivity. This recalls the innovations of anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff (1992) who was amongst the first to stress the importance of the stories older

people told her not despite but *because* of their potentially fictive content. Myerhoff (1992: 231) examined the stories told by older generations about themselves in the following terms: "They 'make' themselves, ... it is an artificial and exhilarating undertaking, this self-construction" (1992: 231).

When these aspects of narrative gerontology as pedagogical instrument are appreciated, there is a clear congruence with the emphases of critical gerontology. For instance: the interest in how "age" is performed by the storyteller, the relationship of an individual's story to the wider stories of society and history (the master narratives that we are inscribed in) and therefore "age" as a dynamic rather than static or fixed concept.

Narrative approaches have also been employed by analysts of social policy and ageing. The meta-narratives that structure ageing have been questioned by, in one example, examining the ways in which cultural narratives have affected the residents of retirement communities (RCs; Biggs et al. 2000). There is an attempt in Biggs' study to link the stories that are told about RCs by both those who choose to live within them and by those agencies that own them: "What ... is the relationship between the RC as it appears in the representations of claims-makers and in the experience and imagination of ... older people?" (Biggs et al. 2000: 651). The possibility that the success of RCs lies in their ability to create: "... a secure and convincing narrative for identity in later life" (2000: 653) is explored. The narratives told at a personal level by older people within one particular RC are analysed by Biggs (and divided into three levels of narrative meaning, 2000: 654) as a means of understanding the wider cultural narrative that guides the RC in question. It is concluded that:

As RCs develop in the UK, it is clear from this study that they are not a simple matter of collective accommodation and individualised consumer choice. To succeed, as a community, and it is from this that many of its positive effects appear to arise, it must also provide a convincing narrative within which tenants can live their lives.

(Biggs et al. 2000: 670)

Taking up this theme, Katz and McHugh (2010)³ inspect the social norms that shape RCs. This study examines the unique ways in which Sun City RCs "... link the experience of ageing with cultural narratives of mobility and sociability" (2010: 275). The background to Katz and McHugh's study are the "... dilemmas of post-traditional aging and the contradictions of its narratives ..." (2010: 271) thus the various narratives that dominate "post-traditional ageing" (which is, as Katz and McHugh point out, often promoted through "positive aging" cultures that elongate middle age) are made explicit and examined as they oppose and illuminate one another. The ways in which over-arching cultural narratives can affect an individual's ageing are succinctly summarised:

The creation and celebration of global, post-traditional aging identities also come with a moral edict to live in ways that maximise individual responsibility in the service of meeting new over-arching political goals of minimising risk and dependency.

(Katz & McHugh 2010: 274)

Hence ageing as it is a political event is also highlighted, larger questions about utopian ageing are tackled (2010: 287) as are the inherent contradictions embodied by RCs:

... between exclusivity and diversity, the tension between the acceptance of and resistance to aging, the mediation between local place and global nonplace, and the intersection between the nomadic forces of our time and the individual journeys and biographies through which they flow.

(Katz & McHugh 2010: 288)

Thus narrative approaches have been used to make explicit and critique elements of social policy and the culture that surrounds ageing that are often taken for granted. The conflicting stories that we are told about

³ The essay itself is a germane example of the effective interweaving of many perspectives (the narrative, the humanistic and spatial gerontology). In this it demonstrates, in virtuoso, an effective interdisciplinarity that prompts critical reflection on ageing.

ageing are laid bare and ageing is exposed as it is a political as well as a personal event.

In this vein, Biggs (2001) employs a narrative approach to interrogate political attempts to fix definitions of later life⁴: "... which may or may not benefit older people themselves" (2001: 303). Here, the narratives dominating UK social policy are cross-examined. Biggs convincingly dissects the process whereby later life is redefined by its association with work and the ways in which retirement that is not resourced by elders on an individual and private basis is discouraged (2001: 312). In this way, the limitations of the superficially appealing and much flaunted concepts of "successful ageing" and "active ageing" are revealed as miasmas, promoted by government to further their own agenda. As is neatly observed:

... At first sight, "new ageing" policies appear to be highly facilitative. ... It creates a narrative that is facilitative for older people with the ability to finance a "midlife style" and want, or have the physical or mental capacity, to participate in existing social institutions. It encourages inclusion of a type that privileges work and activities that take a work-like form. As a place in which to stand and build an ageing identity, this story of late-life development is, however lacking. It lacks critical edge and at root, it has little place for dissident or alternative pathways for self and social development other than through work.

(Biggs 2001: 314)

These are ideas, as discussed, that are also considered by Katz and McHugh (2010) who eloquently note:

Integral to the cultural narratives of positive ageing ... is its governance through the coercive individualism of global processes that erode the subsidies and services of welfare states and national economies.

(Katz & McHugh 2010: 274)

⁴ This echoes the work of Katz (1996) who was among the first to expose the social construction of "age". Indeed, the scholarship of Biggs and Katz is mutually reflective and informative when considering the "meta" narratives that shape ageing.

In this guise then, narrative gerontology is a methodology as well as an effective heuristic. It is a means of querying the content of the tales being told to us about later life *and* a technique for interpreting the disconnect between the surface appearance of these tales and the underlying trajectory they insidiously follow. It is therefore inherently critical and challenging, a call for change. And the need to radically re-think the ways in which age and ageing have been culturally configured is a central impulse in critical gerontology, which aims to unsettle our habitual and comfortable frameworks and needle us towards personal and cultural transformation.

The possibility that narrative methods might promote social change is cogently argued by Ray (2007). She contends that the intertwined nature of individual with collective narratives, the possibility that marginalised groups (such as older women) are fore-grounded and a sense of social responsibility can all be encompassed within narrative gerontology. She therefore includes the individual level, a perspective missing from Biggs' and Katz' accounts. Ray points to a reflexive form of scholarship in ageing, one that is personally engaged rather than academically distant and descriptive. She asserts:

... as social change agents, narrative gerontologists must not only change the way people *think* about ageing, but also how they *feel* about ageing. This requires that we must first change our own thoughts and feelings about ageing.

(Ray 2007: 70, emphasis in original)

Whilst this is a consciously ambitious agenda, it encapsulates the ambitious and radical nature that is also characteristic of critical gerontology. However, it should be noted that this form of narrative gerontology does not, of course, provide a foolproof methodology for capturing and then explaining stories of age. Its difficulties are mentioned in passing by Phoenix et al. (2010) as the dangers of creating "yet another general unifying view" into which we neatly slot the stories that are told us.

If Ray (2007) stresses the transformative possibilities of narrative gerontology other scholars have sought to draw on narrative techniques to examine the activity of "storying" our lives. To this end it has been defined as "... the study of stories of ageing as told by those who

experience life and growing older.” (Birren 2001: x). The thrust of this approach is to construe the stories told by older people as narratives and to use these as “data” for uncovering the dynamics of lives as these are affected by ageing. This approach then, is a means of capturing the individual processes of meaning making in later life, a way of delving into the interior (and private) aspects of “age”. Many such discussions of narrative gerontology draw overtly on the similarities between reading “lives” and reading “novels”, the “novel-like” quality of our lives. Thus Randall and Kenyon (2004) observe:

The feel of time in the midst of our life . . . is akin to what we feel when reading a novel, poised between the beginning from whence we have come and the end to which we are heading.

(Randall & Kenyon 2004: 335)

There is an insistence on the insights that can emerge when lives are examined as we would examine literary texts:

To look at lives as literary texts is more than playing with an appealing metaphor. It constitutes a valid perspective on the nature of human nature, the intricacies of internal change, and the complex contexts in which, over the lifespan, such change occurs.

(Randall & McKim 2004: 252)

To claim that examining lives “is more” than “an appealing metaphor” is perhaps to underestimate the power of metaphors for guiding study. Narrative gerontology, as it is articulated by these scholars, makes much of its roots in literary theory (although literary scholars might question this):

Yet insofar as a life is itself a type of text . . . analogous at least to an anthology and at most to a novel . . . then we might benefit by looking more closely at literary theory. . . . Drawing on such thinking, . . . let us consider how, in life as in literature, story time may vary with respect to feel, flow and focus.

(Randall & Kenyon 2004: 335)

There is a consequent danger of these analyses spiralling ever inwards as they grapple with questions of “self as author”/“self as reader”, rather

than critically adjusting their insights and extrapolating from these to provide insights on ageing; as the authors themselves note:

Given postmodern critiques of the very idea of “the author”, *self-as-author* is ... a problematic notion. ... There will, of course, be as many strategies for reading the self as there are for reading works of literature.

(Randall & Kenyon 2004: 338, emphasis in original)

The tendency of this approach (which has been further expanded with reference to the “poetics of ageing”⁵) is to imply that all stories can and should be distilled into coherent narratives and therefore to over emphasise the role of narrative in an individual’s life. In so far as this is the case, teleological leanings are discernable:

Narrative too, one could argue, is not only essential to life, or to making meaning *in* life, but *is* life. ... as I have tried to argue here, it is *in* stories and *through* stories that we live our lives at every level. Without narrative, ... those lives would be devoid of structure and direction, purpose and coherence, momentum and meaning.

(Randall 2007: 385–386, emphasis in original)

This is a problematic claim. The extent to which narrative is “essential to life” or indeed to making meaning in life is debatable, as is the assertion that without narrative lives are devoid of momentum and meaning.

Some of the difficulties of using a narrative approach for elucidating life stories are evident in the work of Grimm and Boothe (2007). These researchers used an elaborate methodology to examine biographical narratives of happiness and disaster. One of the problems of this study (although not presented as such) is that:

⁵The main proponents of this approach, Randall and McKim (2004); McKim and Randall (2007) borrow Aristotle’s concept of poetics (which they argue is no longer limited to literature) to refer to the active, creative way in which we make sense of ageing.

Narratives are governed by rules. The everyday storyteller has to set out the scene of the events, a stage and a starting-out constellation These conditions and circumstances create dramatic tension and suspense and thus open up the specific purpose-oriented movement of the narrative.

(Grimm & Boothe 2007: 142)

The extent to which the “everyday” storyteller seeks to create tension and suspense is surely controversial. And further, if narratives are indeed governed by rules, then the methods for unravelling these narratives (as indicated by Grimm and Boothe’s methodology⁶) are also rule bound. In contrast, the way we live and the stories that emerge cannot be captured by a set of rules. The inchoate and fragmented ways in which we really experience our lives (as partly articulated by writers such as Beckett, Pinter, Joyce) rarely work towards any single “end point” or moment of revelation. Our lives and their stories do not have the forward thrust of narratives, they are fractal. The relativity and uncertainty of the stories we tell must also be acknowledged; stories that cannot easily be subjected to methodological analysis.

Nonetheless, considering narratives of age (whether as teaching tools, to critique social policy and cultural norms or to explore biographical stories) represents one of the most interesting ways of provoking critical thought about ageing. Narrative gerontology has the ability to engage our critical and imaginative faculties in the consideration of stories as they are diachronic. These stories can be linked to wider global processes, thus avoiding parochialism. It has a capacity to admit to the indeterminacy and infinity of meaning (the co-authoring of our lives by wider cultural stories as well as by family and friends) that is potentially of great value to scholars interested in “post-traditional” ageing in an era of “post-postmodernism”. In this way, and reflecting the concerns of critical gerontologists, there is an ability to analyse the macro/structural levels of ageing without losing sight of the micro-levels.

Above all, critical gerontology looks at what is missing, it stands in opposition to what is known or thought to be known about ageing. Thus,

⁶The recourse to complex schema for analysing stories is also exemplified by the typology constructed by Phoenix et al. (2010).

social structures are critically deconstructed. They are important not simply in and of themselves but also because they affect how older people view themselves (Holstein & Minkler 2007). They are internalised. Understanding the internal worlds of people as they age and as these relate to the material, lived conditions of older people is an area of intense interest for critical gerontologists. In this sense, critical gerontology strives to connect the applied or practical nature of gerontology (Morrow-Howell et al. 2001) with the structural forces that shape ageing and the urge to comprehend the subjectivities of ageing. The use of narrative in gerontology is one of the most fruitful ways of uniting these concerns.

I now turn to some of the ways in which stories of ageing and age have been examined in literature, the differences between “story” as it is conceived of by narrative gerontologists and those engaged in literary gerontology and the possibilities that critical gerontology has for studies of ageing in literature.

Fictional Stories: Considering Literature and Gerontology

As noted by Cole et al. (2010: 16) literary scholars were amongst the first academic humanists to explore ageing (after historians). This has merged into the sub-discipline “literary gerontology” that has been pithily described as the interpretation of ageing and creativity through close readings of literary texts (Kontos 2003). Unlike narrative gerontology, literary gerontology does not represent a methodology (although content analysis has been favoured by some) and neither is it a conceptual framework. It does not appear in quite the profusion of guises that characterise narrative gerontology, although it does encompass a variety of genres (from the memoir to poetry, novels and plays). Literature has been used to diverse ends within gerontology and by those who are not gerontologists but who have an interest in “age”.

Kathleen Woodward and Schwartz (1986; Woodward 1991, 1993) demonstrated the possibility that literature and literary criticism could illuminate ageing and paved the way for the investigation of literary perspectives on ageing. Woodward’s work uniquely meshes psycho-analytic theory with literary works to investigate age, and is discussed below. Other scholars have considered late style and creativity in old age

(Cohen-Shalev 2002; McMullan 2007; Wyatt-Brown & Rossen 1993; Wyatt-Brown 2010) and the images of older people in literature (Fallis 1989; Hepworth 1996; Mangum 1999). Literature has been used as data for reconceptualising ageing – for example, assumptions concerning “age appropriate behaviour” have been considered as these are transgressed by Falstaff in *Henry V* (Donow 1992); and the concept of “life review” has been applied to novels by Philip Roth and Jane Gardam (Wyatt-Brown 2010). Stories from literature have also been used as teaching tools, including as a means of redressing ageist attitudes (Waxman 2005, 2010).⁷

Clearly, the notion of story is at the heart of both narrative and literary gerontology. It is perhaps curious that whereas narrative gerontology considers the concept of a story carefully, those engaged with literary texts generally take it for granted that there is a shared understanding about the components of a fictional story. As outlined, some narrative approaches stress the similarity between lives and literary texts, yet there are important distinctions to be made between “life” stories and those found in literature. One of the most glaring differences is the overt plea that fiction makes to a reader’s imagination. The story of a life as told by the person who has lived it, although composed using the imagination and in some ways “fictional”, necessarily bears some relationship to reality as experienced by the storyteller. However, the stories contained within literature make no such claims. Fictions call upon us to participate in the act of creation and the call to a reader’s (or an audience’s) imagination is

⁷ As in my discussion of narrative gerontology, I have referred to what I hope are some of the clearest examples of different expressions of literary gerontology. For the most part these are those US scholars whose work has been in the *Handbook of the Humanities and Aging* (Cole et al. 1992, 2000) and latterly the *Guide to Humanistic Studies in Aging* (Cole et al. 2010). The British scholar Mike Hepworth (1996, 2000) was an important influence on early attempts to think about literature and ageing as was the work of Kathleen Woodward. Recently, the insights from British literature scholars who include ageing, such as McMullan (2007) and King (2009) are contributing new perspectives to critical thinking about ageing and literature. To this end, McMullan has been instrumental to setting up the network “A new old age: critical dialogue between the arts and humanities, and critical/social gerontology”. This network will build strategically on expertise in arts and social/critical gerontology.

an essential part of the author's purpose in telling her story. In her book "Mystery and Manners" Flannery O'Connor (1961) makes a point about short stories that relates to the distinct nature of fictional stories in general:

A story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is. You tell a story because a statement would be inadequate.

(O'Connor 1961: 87)

In contrast, the stories that people tell us could be (and often are) told another way. (Hence the interest in narrative gerontology in how a story is structured and constructed). However, as Flannery O'Connor indicates, a fictional story embodies its meaning. This meaning is fleshed out by the reader's imagination whereas personal life-stories do not appeal to our minds and imaginative abilities in the same way.

This pull that literature has on our imaginations should make literary gerontology an especially insightful means of considering ageing. However, often those interested in ageing have naively excavated literature for insight into both the subjectivities and universalities of ageing. Literature has been used both heuristically and hermeneutically for ageing but its epistemological status has rarely been questioned. Just as gerontological theorising was once described as dominated by "stories about theories" (Marshall 1999); so there has always been a danger within literary gerontology of getting lost amidst stories about stories of ageing. The tendency to find "catch all" solutions within the humanities is evidenced in the work of some of those who first looked to literature to expand gerontological knowledge (as critiqued by Zeilig 1997, 2004). Like bibliomancy (the quasi-mystical medieval practice of finding general truths in books), many of these approaches seemed to draw universal truths from texts only marginally interested in age or ageing. This tended to result in a narrowing rather than a broadening of focus for both the humanities and ageing because the extent to which imaginative writing mediates and constructs reality was overlooked.

So, for example, Kastenbaum's interpretation (1995) of Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* demonstrates some of the more obvious dangers when extrapolating from a novel to provide gerontological insights without proper regard for its whole context. The fundamental problem with using

The Picture of Dorian Gray is that Wilde's primary interest in the novel is in youth as a symbol of superficiality and decadence. This is connected to his fascination with aestheticism; and is not important in relation to age. Dorian's portrait reflects his moral corruption rather than how he would look if he were ageing. In addition, Kastenbaum tends to take the fictional character of Dorian out of context and treat him as though he actually existed, resulting in the misleading statement that "Dorian's decontextualisation of youth leads to self-deception ..." (Kastenbaum 1995: 190). Dorian Gray was Wilde's creation; he could not actively "decontextualise youth". Thus Kastenbaum has started to endow the character Dorian Gray with a life of his own. This confusion between an author and the characters she/he has created further exemplifies some of the problems encountered by early attempts to use literature to enlighten gerontology.

There have, of course, been notable exceptions to the tendencies towards grandiose claims and generalisations that characterised some of those who first examined literature for gerontological insights. Mangum's work on representations of ageing in 19th century British children's literature (1999) prompts a reassessment of tales that are firmly engrained in the collective psyche. So, for instance, the ageing Queen and Duchess are considered in *Alice in Wonderland* as they refuse to play games by the rules and are "... irascible and dangerous abusers of the authority that comes from both the State and their age" (Mangum 1999: 71). The reader is invited to reconsider this familiar tale from the perspective of age. The text is carefully related to its context. This context includes the concerns of the author: "The representation of aging in *Alice* echoes Carroll's larger preoccupations with the unmanageable, growing, aging female body" (1999: 72).

Other discourses that were latent in Victorian England are also used by Mangum to contextualise her analysis (in particular the essay "The Art of Growing Older", 1866 in which an ageing woman is labelled a "queen"). In this way, the images of the Queen and the Duchess are convincingly demonstrated to be recognisable "types" within Victorian culture. Mangum carefully sites her analysis within the wider culture and social mores of Victorian England:

The term "old age" signalled only a general and shifting category in England until the passage of the 1908 pension bill forced members of Parliament to attach old age to a specific chronological age.

(Mangum 1999: 61–62)

Her study therefore reveals the uncertainty of the term "old age", its historical evolution as related to chronology and how these factors are tied to cultural representations of older women in Victorian British children's literature.

Similarly, Hepworth (1996) examines the *William* stories, which were written for children, as these provide images of older people. Hepworth's work (like Mangum's) carefully locates the *William* stories by Richmal Crompton within their fictional and cultural contexts. Hepworth however concentrates upon a single concept "infantilisation" as it is associated with later life. Through reference to the characterisation of older people in Crompton's stories, Hepworth explores the possibility for a "positive infantilisation" and finally asserts that "... in these stories the older characters are liberated ... from the negative stereotyping and thus depersonalisation of the adult world" (1996: 437).

Images of older people in a specific form of fiction are therefore examined through the lenses of age and "used" within a wider proposition: concerning the normally derogatory notion that older people are trapped in a state of childishness. In this way, Hepworth demonstrates the potential that fictional stories can have to question and unsettle jaded assumptions about older people. Mangum and Hepworth both appreciate the nuances in fictional representations of "age" and the way these are inherently linked to historical context and the author's concerns. Both scholars avoid the facile categorisation of older people as a blurry homogeneous group. In this, their work displays a criticality that invites us to question superficial and established notions of what old age is or how it is represented.

The works of Woodward and Schwartz (1986) as well as Woodward (1991, 1993) use literature and psychoanalytic theory reciprocally and critically to get beneath the experiences of ageing. Woodward's discussion of *The Years* (1991: 73–90) not only provides insights into later life, but simultaneously into Woolf's novel. *The Years* is read alongside the work

of Freud, Lacan, Pontalis and René Girard as a means of considering narcissism and ageing and the “differentiated and moving views” (1991: 75) that the novel presents of the coming of old age. Woodward focuses on the character of Eleanor in the novel (who is depicted as she moves through her 50s and into her 70s during the course of the story) and in particular on several “paradigmatic moments” (1991: 76) in the final scenes of *The Years*. Woodward draws our attention to the concluding chapter of the novel (which features a party and the coming together of four generations of the Pargiter family, who are at the heart of *The Years*) and a moment in which Eleanor drops off to sleep. The reaction of Eleanor’s middle-aged nephew (North) as he gazes upon his aunt is scrutinised with reference to both Freud’s work on narcissism and Lacan’s analysis of aggressivity:

If a sleeping child calls forth a tender gaze, *The Years* asks us to consider that the sight of an old person in sleep elicits dread. The fear of one’s own mortality in turn calls forth aggression, as we see in North’s description of Eleanor’s body as she sinks into sleep.

(Woodward 1991: 77–78)

This work opens up fascinating perspectives on ageing and its possible elucidation with reference to psychoanalytic theory and fiction; discourses that are brought into direct and critical dialogue. Thus the fictional character of Eleanor is discussed as she represents an alternative sort of dreamer from that envisioned in Pontalis’s essay “Dream as an Object”:

In the character of Eleanor we find a figure of maturity who stands in marked contrast to Pontalis’s final view of the dreamer who attaches herself in a childishly regressive way to the dream as an object.

(Woodward 1991: 80)

And as she represents an alternative vision of old age:

For Eleanor, old age is precisely *not* a period in her life she longs to escape . . . Woolf’s figuring of Eleanor’s experience proves wrong the cultural myth of old age as inevitable decline.

(Woodward 1991: 83, emphasis in original)

Woodward's work (including a more recent essay "Performing Age, Performing Gender" 2006) demonstrates an ability to probe the representations of age deeply, drawing upon a multiplicity of cultural reference points to uncover the ways in which age identities are formed. Her work lays bare the ways in which we are all engaged in "storying" age at cultural and individual levels and helps us to query ideologies of age. In this, it is an example of gerontology at its most effective and critical.

Woodward's scholarship has amply influenced other scholars. McMullan (in *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing*, 2007) examines late life creativity and engages closely and critically with Woodward's analyses in her essay "Late Theory, Late Style: Loss in Freud and Barthes" (1993). McMullan is a Professor of Shakespeare and Early Modern Drama and he happens upon the ideas of literary gerontologists as these are relevant to his interest in the common conflation of late style with old age.⁸ In his concern to expose late style as a construct rather than the reality of creativity in old age, McMullan necessarily (albeit slightly reluctantly) engages with scholars of ageing. An uneasy relationship with "humanistic gerontology" and "literary gerontology" is betrayed in the Introduction to *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing*, here McMullan notes: "... it is not my intention in this book directly to work within the field of humanistic gerontology" (2007: 9) and he is at pains to emphasise that his study has only an "oblique" relationship to "the field of literary gerontology" (2007: 11). However, he simultaneously acknowledges the influence of Woodward's analyses:

Nevertheless, it seems to me that Kathleen Woodward is right when she claims that the repression of ageing is an intrinsic component of contemporary western culture, and I would argue that the concept of late style is designed less to celebrate than to *deny* the difference represented by old age and to substitute for it a myth of synchrony ...

(McMullan 2007: 9, emphasis in original)

⁸ It should be noted that the complex relationship between age and stage of life have been carefully considered by gerontologists in other contexts. For instance, Gilleard and Higgs (2008) explore the contingent nature of age/cohort effects in an article on internet use in later life.

and later (chapter 5) credits the potential that humanistic approaches to gerontology have for “the study of late style” (2007: 267). It seems then, that McMullan is not quite sure how his study relates to the concerns of scholars of age and ageing, as he attempts to clarify in the Introduction: “This is not, . . . , a book written about or against old age” (2007: 10).

Nevertheless, the intricate pulling together of many texts (including work by Adorno, Kenneth Clark, Jung, Robert Butler and Eric Erikson among many others) to illustrate his points and the careful and critical contextualisation of each text or work referenced, exemplifies how literature and concepts from gerontology might best be integrated. McMullan confronts the fluidity of the category “age” as this is relevant to Jacobean England:

Old age was a flexible conjunction of calendar age and infirmity, and it is important to remember this flexibility in establishing an understanding of ageing in the 17th century.

(McMullan 2007: 287)

His study grapples with the profound difficulties of “age” when applied to creativity in later life:

It seems to me, . . . , essential to distinguish between “old-age style” and “late style” because the importance accorded to late work is not always the product of a privileging of old age per se.

(McMullan 2007: 10)

and therefore demonstrates the way in which “old age” escapes from its comfortable chronological delimitations when considering late style: “A late stylist, it seems, must be *considered* old, *treated as* an old man, even if he is not . . . actually *old*” (2007: 284, emphasis in original). The uncertainty of age in both life and art is therefore exposed. The extent to which age is culturally determined and utilised as a construct by critics seeking a way of categorising an artist’s oeuvre is carefully detailed (see for instance “Old-Age Style without Old Age” 271–284). McMullan’s

study shows that despite the difficulties of juxtaposing disciplines, the potential of such combinations for enhancing our study of ageing is clear.

King (like McMullan a Professor of English Literature) cogently takes up the argument that seeing literature as a direct mirror of the experience of old age is problematic:

The “reflection” model in imaginative literature fails to take full account of the way in which these discourses shape both the experience of ageing and how it is perceived and represented by others.

(King 2009: 298)

King challenges this limited approach, proposing instead: “I believe that it is necessary to consider the ways in which fiction interacts discursively with non-fictional work on ageing” (2009: 297). To develop her argument, King looks at the representation of memory loss and its impact on identity and self-image in the female protagonist of *There Were No Windows* by Norah Hoult, first published in 1944. The novel is related to medical and sociological discourses on women and ageing during the same period, which includes several papers published in the *Lancet* in the 1940s as well as Simone de Beauvoir’s famous 1949 work on older women as “other” in “Le Deuxième Sexe” [The Second Sex].⁹ *There Were No Windows* is carefully and critically contextualised as it presents the character of an older woman (Claire) struggling with the onset of dementia:

It is useful to consider what professional discourses were available to a doctor during the 1940s by which to describe a woman in Claire’s condition Since the psychiatry of old age was still in its infancy during the 1940s, the absence of a gendered discourse of ageing is unsurprising.

(King 2009: 302–303)

Thus as King concludes:

⁹ De Beauvoir, S. (1988). *The Second Sex*. Translated by H. M. Parshley. London: Pan. (As referenced by King 2009).

... *There Were No Windows* highlights the inadequacy of discourses of gendered ageing in Hoult's own time, and invites the reader to reflect on those of their own.

(King 2009: 306)

King's work therefore demonstrates the function of fiction as one in a number of cultural discourses on ageing, which can be related to its own period and then extrapolated from to help contemporary readers consider the construction of the older woman: "Hoult's novel suggests that the most well-meaning of us may hide behind discourses that make older people and particularly older women Other" (2009: 306). In this way, fiction can be "used" to help us question and resist normative discourses of gendered ageing. This is an inherently critical exercise that chimes with the concerns of critical gerontology, which has sought to understand the feminisation of later life (Bernard & Scharf 2001; Calasanti 1999; Holstein & Minkler 2007; Ray 2007; Woodward 2006) and to dissect the ways in which age and gender interact.¹⁰ Although it is noteworthy that King does not refer to the work of these scholars.

Insights from literature are truly insightful then, where the author and her/his work are contextualised properly, when their depiction and representations of age are interrogated rather than accepted and when they are understood as one in a number of cultural discourses. Understanding the historicity of old age and therefore recognising that it is not a simple point of definition should be central to any mutual reading of literature and gerontology. Equally, the ability to separate "age" from cultural constructs such as "late-style" and allied to this, not using it as a facile explanation for any given story is essential.

However, it is perhaps by admitting age as a category, by recognising that age cannot simply be added into analyses of fictional stories (or indeed the stories that older people tell us) that will elicit the most pertinent insights from literary and narrative gerontology.

¹⁰ The work of the women, ageing and media (WAM) group is also pertinent here. Although they do not refer overtly to critical gerontology the work emanating from this group is designed to provoke, it radiates cultural awareness and critical sensibility in its reconsideration of discourses of ageing as these affect older women; cf: "<http://www.wam-research.org.uk/watch-online/>".

To this end, the role of critical gerontology as a way of considering both narrative and literary gerontology has great potential.

Concluding Questions and Comments – Critical Stories

An awareness that “age” and “ageing” encompass more than straightforward physical decline and decrepitude, that alone these categories explain nothing about an individual and that we need to change our minds about what “age” can be, is at the heart of critical gerontology. If “age”, “ageing” and even “age-related” illness can not be accepted unquestioningly then it follows that a consideration of structural inequalities, power relations, concepts of successful ageing (quizzed by Torres 2001, 2006 among others), thoughts about our ageing bodies are all open to examination. These insights, the urgency of questioning the stories of age – be they wholly or partly fictional, is at the core of how critical gerontology can contribute to narrative and literary gerontology. The discourses of critical gerontology can be used to help us reconfigure what culturally has been casually accepted.

When these perspectives are applied to stories of age, innumerable interesting questions start to form about the intricate interplay between the personal, emotional and the social, political, cultural constructions of age/ageing/older people. These questions include querying the age ideologies that underpin a story, interrogating how age, gender and ethnicity interact to shape the stories that we are told, examining how the story under consideration relates to other stories and discourses on age, considering how far “age” is a relative concept that is unrelated to the years that a person or character has lived, asking how the stories that we are told age us and considering how the stories that we are told about age can be challenged and changed.

These are general queries, but there may be some specific ways in which critical gerontology can provide clarification for the discourses discussed here. Narrative gerontology, as a tool for teaching could be sharpened by explicit reference to questions about the interplay of individual agency with social structure, the way these shape experiences of ageing. Further, students might be alerted to the problematic nature of “age”, which is not a simple explanatory concept. The use of narrative to critique social policy

is invaluable but might benefit from micro-level insights, the inclusion of voices from those who are “on the ground”. This in turn may prompt more scholarship that is personally engaged (as advocated by Ray 2007). The study of personal life narratives may benefit from critical questions about how lives are experienced, the incomplete way in which they are often lived.

Where extrapolations from literature fail to be critical they also fail to tell gerontologists anything about ageing. Fictional stories can be invaluable for considering the various manifestations of age and ageing. However, these stories are most insightful when they are thoroughly contextualised, when the frame of reference is accounted for and when fiction as one in a range of cultural discourses is appreciated. Incorporating the critical gerontological imagination as an approach to works of literature reveals the possibility that “age” can be considered as a concept that is integral to the reading of a text and as it relates to a wider historical context and can not be fully understood within the confines of a particular story. The work of both McMullan (2007) and King (2009) happen upon the importance of considering “age” as an unreliable explanation that requires clarification, however both analyses would have been aided by an awareness of the questions that have already been asked by critical gerontologists. In particular, McMullan’s discussion of the influence of Alzheimer’s on the poet Oppen and the artist de Kooning (2007: 283–284) would have benefited from an awareness of questions recently posed about the malignant social construction of this illness (Basting 2003, 2009; Kontos 2003). King examines the way an older woman may have an identity beyond her age but does not engage with the ways that feminists working in gerontology or age studies (for example: Gullette 1988, 1993, 1997, 2003, 2004, 2007) have also explicated this “othering” of older women.

If both narrative and literary gerontology are cross-examined with reference to the insights of critical gerontologists then it is possible that an individual expression of “age” (be this a personal narrative, social narrative or an imagined account) may be properly extrapolated from as it connects with the conditions that have created this particular vision of “age”. In this way, the subjectivities of individual stories (and the interpretations of these stories) may contribute to a more generalisable, epochal sense of age/ageing. Thus age can be considered as it is a

historically specific and therefore shifting phenomenon. A truly interdisciplinary and integrative relationship between narrative and literary gerontology and critical gerontology could be created, such that there is a mutuality of reflection between these discourses, which have so much to gain from one another.

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