

Reading old age, the ageing body and memory in British and American literature and texts of culture

Age studies point to all life stages as culturally and historically idiosyncratic, and complicated even more by various intersectional perspectives. Within this age(s)-focused field of analysis, humanistic and critical gerontologists as well as historians of old age issued an ardent call to redefine old age as equally ephemeral and multi-layered as any other life stage. Addressing the existing studies of the formative and foundational quality of youth and adulthood, gerontologists of various subdisciplines objected to seeing old age as simply the end of life, and to defining it as a precise point in time rather than a nebulous period with no exact opening temporal bracket. Thane (2000) in particular stressed the difficulty in defining old age in term of chronology only, proposing to view it as a functional and cultural category as well. More precisely, scholars noted, one is sooner *made (to feel)* old by culture and society than one perceives oneself as being such. Consequently, even if it is an essentially intimate and embodied lived experience, old age must be seen as an experience with a set of socio-cultural prescriptive and proscriptive rules of conduct and decorum as well as social sanctions and rewards.

Addressing all of said emerging conceptual recalibrations, Gullette claimed that indeed age “could be the next analytic and hermeneutic concept to make cutting-edge difference” (2004: 106) in humanist research. . Having specifically worked on middle and old age in her research, she further noted that, just like with other necessary intersectionalities, to talk about ageing is to keep unravelling and disentangling “the din of representations, unseen internalizations, [and] unthinking practices” (Gullette 2004: 27). Old age can then be seen as simultaneously “the culmination or the dreary denouement of life’s drama” (Cole 2006: xx), written as somatic and mental narratives of decline (Gullette 1997) as well as the most meaningful moment of human existence, “a time for recapitulating, connecting part to part, re-memembering” (Carson 1987: xii), leading to wisdom only allowed to the members of this in-group. From such a dialectic other questions are engendered: Do we with age become the embodied repositories of knowledge and guardians of traditions? Do we need to properly perform old age as the various gerontideologies socialize us to do

(Mangan 2013)? Are we our ageing bodies? How do our auto/self-narratives change with age? Can we “read the beginning in the end and the end in the beginning” (Baars 2016: 82)?

This themed volume aims to critically address and further identify the meaning(s) behind and potentialities of old age and ageing. As *growing* and/or *being* old are not only subjective and embodied experiences but also socio-cultural phenomena, the points of departure in this collection are the three fundamentals in gerontological research: 1) old age, 2) the (ageing) body and 3) memory, the latter understood not only as recollecting one’s spatio-temporal past but, in particular, re-membering one’s somatic “past-ness”. Such intertwining of old age with memory inevitably invites studies of nostalgia, seen as both positive and negative approaches to and perceptions of one’s embodied past. We thus welcome papers that engage in age and gerontological readings within British and American literature and paraliterary texts of culture (i.e. ego-documents, conduct texts, philosophical tracts, etc.) across all historical periods. Book reviews within the field of literary age studies or literary gerontology are welcome as well.

Please send a 150-200-word abstract (titled **Surname_PJES_Old age**) together with a short biographical note to kbronkk@amu.edu.pl The deadline for submission of abstracts is **1st June 2022**. Notifications about proposal acceptance will be sent by **20th June 2022**. The deadline for submission of completed papers is **1st November 2022**. Planned publication: 2023.

Bibliography

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