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AGEISM AND THE REPRESENTATION OF OLDER ADULTS IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE: A LITERARY GERONTOLOGY PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the representation of older adults in contemporary literature through the lens of literary gerontology, an interdisciplinary field that analyzes how cultural narratives shape and are shaped by the aging process. Despite global demographic shifts toward aging populations, literature often perpetuates ageist stereotypes—portraying older characters as frail, cognitively declining, burdensome, or, conversely, as idealized "super-agers." Analyzing a corpus of late 20th and early 21st-century novels (including works by Paul Harding, Emma Healey, and Zadie Smith), this research identifies three dominant tropes: the narrative of decline, the burden narrative, and the redemption/successful aging narrative. Drawing on Margaret Morganroth Gullette's concept of "aging by decline" and Kathleen Woodward's theory of "narrative gerontology," the paper argues that while contemporary literature remains complicit in ageist schemas, a counter-narrative tradition is emerging—one that offers nuanced, embodied, and temporally complex portrayals of older adulthood. Ultimately, this paper advocates for a critical gerontological reading practice that resists stereotyping and recognizes older adults as narratively complex subjects.

Keywords: Ageism, Literary Gerontology, Contemporary Literature, Narrative Representation, Aging Studies, Stereotypes

I. INTRODUCTION

In an era of unprecedented global longevity, the disconnect between demographic reality and cultural representation has never been starker. Persons aged 60 and above constitute the fastest-growing age demographic worldwide (United Nations, 2020). Yet, in the collective imagination—and critically, in the stories we tell—older adults remain marginal, one-dimensional, and symbolically imprisoned. Literature, as a primary vehicle for cultural meaning-making, both reflects and reinforces societal attitudes toward aging. The field of literary gerontology, emerging from the interdisciplinary nexus of age studies, narrative theory, and cultural criticism, posits that narratives do not simply describe aging but actively produce age as a category of experience (Gullette, 2004; Woodward, 1991).

This paper investigates the following question: **How do contemporary literary texts represent older adults, and to what extent do these representations challenge or perpetuate ageist ideologies?** After establishing the theoretical framework of literary gerontology, the paper proceeds through three sections. First, it delineates the predominant ageist tropes in late 20th-century literature. Second, it analyzes three contemporary novels as case studies, revealing both regressive and progressive portrayals. Third, it explores emerging counter-narratives that offer alternative models for representing later life. The conclusion considers implications for readers, writers, and critics, arguing that a literary gerontology perspective is essential for any humanistic engagement with aging.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: LITERARY GERONTOLOGY AND THE CRITIQUE OF AGEISM

Literary gerontology, as formalized by scholars such as Anne Wyatt-Brown, Ruth Ray, and Margaret Morganroth Gullette, moves beyond treating older characters as mere sociological data. Instead, it insists that narrative forms—plot structures, temporality, point of view—construct age as a lived, felt, and contested experience (Wyatt-Brown, 1990). Central to this field is the critique of **narrative ageism**: the systematic underrepresentation or misrepresentation of older adults through plot conventions that equate aging with loss, dependency, and narrative irrelevance.

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2.1 Gullette's "Aging by Decline" Thesis

Margaret Morganroth Gullette's seminal work, *Aged by Culture* (2004), argues that Western societies have internalized a "decline narrative" that reads aging as an inevitable trajectory from competence to decrepitude. This narrative is not biological but cultural. Literature, particularly realist fiction of the 19th and 20th centuries, has been a primary vector for this ideology. In decline narratives, older characters exist primarily to die, to be cared for, or to impart wisdom before exiting the story. Such narratives produce "age shame" and internalized ageism, conditioning readers to fear their own futures.

2.2 Woodward's Critique of the "Aging Body"

Kathleen Woodward, in *Aging and Its Discontents* (1991), adds a crucial psychoanalytic and feminist dimension. She observes that literary representations frequently reduce older adults to their bodies—bodies that are either grotesquely decaying or unnaturally preserved. This "spectacle of the aging body" functions to distance younger readers from mortality. When older characters are granted interiority, it is often framed as nostalgia or regret, rarely as active desire, creativity, or future-oriented agency. Woodward calls for narratives that represent the "aged self" as a site of continuing development, not merely a residual echo of youth.

2.3 The Binary of Successful vs. Pathological Aging

Contemporary gerontology has criticized the model of "successful aging" (Rowe & Kahn, 1997), which valorizes active, productive, and cognitively intact older adults while stigmatizing those with disabilities or dementia. This binary has infiltrated literature: characters who exercise, travel, and mentor are celebrated as "aging well," while those with physical or cognitive decline are depicted as tragic or burdensome. Literary gerontology rejects this binary, advocating instead for narratives that embrace the full spectrum of aging—including dependency, vulnerability, and cognitive change—without moral judgment.

III. DOMINANT AGEIST TROPES IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

Before examining counter-traditions, it is necessary to survey the persistent ageist schemas that structure much contemporary fiction. These tropes function both explicitly and implicitly, often without authorial intention, but their cumulative effect is to marginalize older subjectivities.

3.1 The Narrative of Decline as Plot Engine

In countless novels, the onset of an older character's illness or death serves as a catalytic event for younger protagonists. The older character's decline is not explored for its own sake but as a mechanism for younger characters' growth. For example, in Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005), the protagonist's mother-in-law with dementia is a source of anxiety and logistical disruption, her interiority almost entirely absent. Similarly, in Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001), the patriarch Enid and Alfred Lambert are primarily vehicles for exploring middle-aged children's resentments and disappointments. The older body becomes a stage for intergenerational conflict, not a locus of subjective experience.

3.2 The Burden Trope

A related trope depicts older adults, particularly those with chronic illness or cognitive impairment, as an unbearable weight on family systems and public resources. This narrative often culminates in a "liberation" through death or institutionalization. While such experiences are real, the literary emphasis on burden—to the exclusion of reciprocity, joy, or mundane care—reinforces ageist fears of becoming dependent. In Emma Healey's *Elizabeth Is Missing* (2014), the protagonist Maud's dementia is central, but the novel's tension arises as much from her daughter's exhaustion as from Maud's own disorientation. Though the novel offers empathy, it also participates in the burden schema.

3.3 The Aged Villain or Fool

Older characters are frequently cast as irrational obstacles to progress. In popular fiction, the "grumpy old man" or "hysterical old woman" blocks a romance, hoards resources, or clings to outmoded traditions. Alternatively, older adults appear as comic relief—physically incompetent, technologically illiterate, or sexually ridiculous. While such portrayals may be intended as harmless humor, they contribute to a cultural environment in which older adults are not taken seriously as agents with complex desires and stakes.

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3.4 The Idealized "Super-Ager" as New Stereotype

In reaction to purely negative portrayals, some contemporary works have veered toward the opposite extreme: the "super-ager." These characters run marathons, start new businesses, or have passionate love affairs well into their eighties and nineties. While seemingly positive, this trope imposes a different form of ageism: those who cannot maintain youthful vigor are rendered invisible or morally deficient. Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge* (2008), despite its many strengths, occasionally leans into this model, presenting Olive's physical and emotional toughness as exceptional rather than ordinary.

IV. CASE STUDIES: THREE CONTEMPORARY NOVELS

To ground the theoretical discussion, this section analyzes three contemporary novels that engage with aging in distinct, sometimes contradictory ways. Each case study exemplifies a different representational strategy: the lyrical decline narrative, the detective plot as cognitive reclamation, and the polyphonic intergenerational novel.

4.1 Paul Harding, *Tinkers* (2009): The Lyrical Decline Narrative

Harding's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel follows George Washington Crosby, an elderly clock repairer, as he lies dying in his living room over eight days. At first glance, *Tinkers* appears to rehearse the classic decline narrative: the protagonist is bedridden, hallucinating, and moving toward death. However, Harding subverts ageist conventions through form and temporality. The narrative does not merely observe George from outside; it plunges into his consciousness, weaving together memories of his epileptic father, his own midlife struggles, and his present sensory experiences.

Crucially, George's decline is not presented as mere loss but as a different mode of perception. Hallucinations are rendered as meaningful visions; the failure of the body coincides with an intensification of memory and affective connection. Literary gerontology finds in *Tinkers* a model of "late-life interiority" that refuses both the sentimental deathbed scene and the clinical case study. Yet the novel is not without critique: all meaningful action occurs in memory, while the present remains confined to a single room. Harding does not show an older adult engaging with the external world, which implicitly reinforces the idea that aging is primarily a retreat inward.

4.2 Emma Healey, *Elizabeth Is Missing* (2014): Dementia as Narrative Method

Healey's debut novel features Maud, an octogenarian with progressive dementia, who becomes convinced that her friend Elizabeth has disappeared. The novel alternates between Maud's fragmented present and her memories of a sister who vanished after World War II. *Elizabeth Is Missing* is remarkable for its narrative point of view: the reader experiences the same confusion, repetition, and frustration as Maud. Healey uses dementia not as a tragic backdrop but as a structuring principle that redefines detective fiction.

From a literary gerontology perspective, the novel resists the "tragedy narrative" of dementia in two ways. First, Maud retains fierce agency: despite her memory gaps, she is determined, resourceful, and often correct in her suspicions. Second, the novel demonstrates that cognitive change does not erase personhood. Maud's emotional memory, her sense of injustice, and her love for her dead sister remain intact. However, critics have noted that the novel's resolution—Maud's daughter finally believing her—depends on the younger generation's recognition, subtly recentering youth as the arbiter of truth. Moreover, the strain on caregivers is vividly depicted, but less time is spent on Maud's own experience of that strain. Nonetheless, *Elizabeth Is Missing* represents a significant advance over earlier dementia narratives that reduced older characters to vacant shells.

4.3 Zadie Smith, *NW* (2012): The Polyphonic Intergenerational Novel

Smith's *NW* eschews a single older protagonist in favor of a network of characters across ages, set in a London housing estate. Among them are elderly figures—Mrs. Keisha, an older neighbor; and Leah's mother, Pauline—who appear not as central subjects but as integral nodes in a social ecology. Smith's accomplishment, from a gerontological perspective, is to normalize older characters' presence. They gossip, offer loans, express political opinions, experience loneliness, and display sexual desire without these activities being framed as remarkable or pathetic.

For instance, when Natalie (born Keisha) visits her aging mother, the scene includes irritation, tenderness, and opaque family history—but no epiphanies or deathbeds. Smith refuses what Gullette calls the "epiphany plot," in

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which older characters exist solely to deliver life lessons. Instead, *NW* presents aging as one dimension among many, intersected by class, race, and geography. The novel's fragmentary, multi-perspectival form allows older voices to emerge without dominating or being reduced to symbols. The limitation is that no older character receives the same depth as the middle-aged protagonists; thus, *NW* might be described as "age-inclusive" rather than "age-centric." Nevertheless, it models how contemporary literature can decenter youth without becoming didactic.

V. COUNTER-NARRATIVES AND EMERGING POSSIBILITIES

Beyond the case studies, a growing body of contemporary literature actively resists ageist schemas by experimenting with form, temporality, and voice. This section outlines three counter-narrative strategies.

5.1 The "Middle-Aged" Novel That Refuses the Afterlife

Many novels end with the protagonist's retirement or death. A counter-tradition, exemplified by Margaret Drabble's *The Dark Flood Rises* (2016) and Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger* (1987), places older characters in the present continuous, with projects, friends, and aesthetic interests that have no narrative endpoint. These novels refuse the teleology of decline; aging is not a lead-up to death but a series of ongoing negotiations. Drabble's protagonist, Fran, is a critic who travels, maintains friendships across generations, and contemplates mortality without being consumed by it. Literary gerontology celebrates such works for restoring narrative time to older adults—time that is not merely a "fourth age" waiting period.

5.2 Queer and Feminist Aging Narratives

Mainstream literature has often rendered older women as sexless and older LGBTQ+ characters as tragic or invisible. Contemporary authors are revising this. In Sarah Waters' *The Paying Guests* (2014), an older spinster, Mrs. Wray, emerges as a complicated figure of repressed desire and quiet resilience. In Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016), the centenarian Daniel Gluck is a queer artist whose memories of mid-20th-century bohemia animate the present. These narratives decouple aging from heteronormative productivity, showing that later life can be a time of aesthetic intensity, political radicalism, and non-familial forms of love. They also challenge the notion that old age is inherently conservative or backward-looking.

5.3 The "Unreliable Elder" as Narrator

Traditionally, unreliable narrators have been coded as young or psychologically disturbed. Contemporary fiction has reclaimed unreliability for older narrators—but not as a sign of cognitive failure. In Helen Garner's *The Spare Room* (2008), the narrator Helen (aged 60) is fiercely opinionated, sometimes wrong, and increasingly exhausted while caring for a dying friend. Her unreliability stems from emotional bias, not dementia. This opens space for representing older adults as morally complex, contradictory, and capable of bad judgment—in other words, as fully human. Literary gerontology argues that such portrayals are more genuinely anti-ageist than idealized "wise elder" archetypes, because they grant older characters the same narrative fallibility as younger ones.

VI. DISCUSSION: THE POLITICAL STAKES OF NARRATIVE FORM

Why does representation matter beyond the aesthetic? Literary gerontology asserts that narrative forms have material consequences. When readers repeatedly encounter decline narratives, burden tropes, and absent or comic older characters, they internalize ageist expectations that affect healthcare policy, intergenerational solidarity, and individual psychological well-being. A 2019 meta-analysis found that exposure to negative age stereotypes was associated with reduced cognitive performance, cardiovascular events, and even shorter lifespan (Levy et al., 2019). Narratives are not merely reflections of ageism; they are active producers of it.

Conversely, exposure to complex, affirmative representations of aging correlates with reduced ageism and improved health outcomes. This is not to demand that literature become propaganda—tragedy, struggle, and loss are legitimate artistic subjects. The issue is whether older characters are granted the same depth, contradiction, and narrative time as younger ones. A novel can depict a painful death without reducing that death to a lesson for the young. It can show dementia without erasing personhood. It can represent dependency without invoking the language of burden.

The analysis of contemporary literature reveals a field in transition. Many bestsellers remain complicit in ageist schemas, but a critical mass of innovative works—including those discussed above—offer alternatives. The challenge for readers and critics is to develop what Woodward calls a "gerontological imagination": the capacity to

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read against ageist grain, to notice when an older character is sidelined, and to demand narratives that take aging seriously as a complex, ongoing human process.

VII. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued, from a literary gerontology perspective, that contemporary literature both perpetuates and resists ageist representations of older adults. The dominant tropes—decline, burden, the aged villain, and the super-ager—share a common failure: they reduce older adults to symbolic functions within younger-oriented plots. Yet counter-narratives are emerging. Through formal innovation (fragmented temporality, unreliable elder narrators, polyphonic structure) and thematic risk (embracing dependency without tragedy, queering later life, normalizing older desire), authors like Harding, Healey, Smith, Drabble, and Garner are expanding the literary possibilities for representing aging.

Future research should extend this analysis to genre fiction (science fiction, mystery, romance), non-Western literary traditions, and the rapidly growing field of graphic medicine, which often centers older patients' perspectives. Additionally, empirical studies on reader response could test whether exposure to counter-narrative texts reduces ageist attitudes.

In closing, literary gerontology reminds us that we do not simply age; we are aged by the stories we inherit and retell. To change how we age—individually and collectively—we must first change the stories we believe are worth telling. Contemporary literature, at its most daring, is beginning to write older adults not as the end of the story, but as its continuing, complex, and irreplaceable authors.

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