

SPECIAL SECTION
Negotiating Aging and Ageism in English-Speaking Fiction and
Theatre

Introduction

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Numerous societies in the world today are challenged by the rapidly escalating phenomenon of an aging population with its special problems and needs that develop in all people's later years and call for being addressed both in daily life and the realm of scientific research. During the last few decades, age studies has emerged as a new discourse within the humanities, which posits crosscurrents between aging, feminism, gender, intersectionality, postcolonialism, disability, and so forth. Among the prominent forums in the field, *The Journal of Women and Aging* and *The Journal of Aging Studies* came into being at the end of the last century and publish articles that inquire into a great variety of issues pertaining to aging mainly from sociological and psychological perspectives. In literary, theatre, and film criticism recent monographs, essay collections, and special journal issues demonstrate the scholarly engagement with the ways in which age, aging, and ageism are portrayed and, in several cases, undermined in drama, performance, fiction, poetry, and film narratives. Scholars agree that age is not merely a biological fact that everybody faces in the same way with the passing of time but, to a considerable extent, also socially constructed and performative by nature, which fosters the assumption that age is as significant a marker as gender, class, race, ethnicity, and sexuality for understanding patterns and shifts in both communal and personal identity.

One of the pioneer critical volumes in the field, edited by Anne M. Wyatt-Brown and Janice Rossen, *Aging and Gender in Literature: Studies in Creativity* (1993), examines how the experience of growing older affects the career of writers and their aesthetic choices. Other aspects of the representation of aging and ageism are discussed in books such as *Adventures of the Spirit: The Older Woman in the Works of Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood, and Other Contemporary Women Writers* (2007), edited by Phyllis Sternberg Perrakis, *Performing Age in Modern Drama* by Valerie Barnes Lipscomb (2016), and Heather Ingman's *Ageing in Irish Writing: Strangers to Themselves* (2018), to mention just a few examples. Characteristically, a significant portion of the critical literature on aging focuses on women's aging, which suggests, that it

is a rather heavily gendered subject in society, the world of letters, and the performing arts.

In this special section of five essays collected and edited for the *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, all the authors are women (from Hungary, Italy, and India), and, interestingly, the works they look at all come from male writers, while the aging protagonists constructed in them are both men and women. Aging does not always refer to characters being fairly advanced in years but can be experienced in midlife as well, suggesting, again, the culturally constructed and inculcated nature of feeling one's age and the discourses which influence and contextualize it. There are two essays on contemporary British and postcolonial fiction, respectively, and three essays on contemporary American and Irish drama, which explore the joint subjects of age, aging, and ageism as represented in their complexity and through the personal affects they generate. Drawing on aspects of the up-to-date reference literature and informed by observations of critical gerontology and international age studies, these essays engage with a broad range of issues that underscore elements of the performative in the protagonists' living their age. Also, the analyses demonstrate the significance of the overall theme for writers, readers, and theatre audiences because of its conspicuously manifold relations to the given national culture, embedded as it is in ever-changing global tendencies, as well as for the present and future of humankind.

“No country, this, for old men”: A View of the Aging Artist through Intertexts in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*” by Angelika Reichmann investigates the age-related anxieties of David Lurie, a scholar of English Romanticism in *Disgrace* (1999). The author claims that aging and the evident approaching of death in the novel also function as an image of the shared condition of humans and animals, which is particularly relevant in the post-Apartheid world of South Africa. Reichmann explores the ways in which intertextual references to modernist literary works, most poignantly borrowings from the poetry of W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot as well as the fiction of Dostoevsky, underpin and complicate by highlighting negative stereotypes of aging the representation of the joint crisis of the individual and the white community itself. Noémi Albert's essay “‘Life Is a Terminal Illness’: The War against Time and Aging in David Mitchell's *The Bone Clocks*” analyzes how this novel, published in 2014, brings together the personal level of aging on the part of the protagonist, the writer Holy Sykes, and the threateningly fast pace of humankind marching towards self-extinction, by sophisticated fictional devices. The essay charts the structure of the narrative leading up to 2043 as well as explores Mitchell's use of the fantastic in its style, which serves to

distinguish and contrast two kinds of world-views, those of the Horologists and the Anchorites, revealed in their combat for dominating humankind's present-day attitudes and "future destinies," to quote the title of another contemporary fiction writer, the Canadian Chris Turner.

Among the essays focusing on drama, "Aging and Death in Edward Albee's *The Sandbox* and Tennessee Williams's *The Milktrain Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*" by Réka M. Cristian compares aging women characters in the respective shorter plays of these major American playwrights. Cristian identifies differences in the dramatic construction of the two women, yet she concludes that although different perspectives on aging and death are revealed through them, both plays offer transgressive images of aging and thus contribute to the ways and means of representing this complex and sensitive subject in theatre and beyond. "Old Age and Aging: Presence and Absence in the Plays of Brian Friel" by Giovanna Tallone considers the fate of older characters and the role of portraying age or only the subjective feeling of it in some of Friel's plays, from *The Enemy Within* (1962) to *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), including *Aristocrats* (1979) among others, all of which are ingrained in the historical changes of Ireland at the time the play's action takes place. Tallone argues that the dramatist exploits the interaction of presence and absence as an important ingredient of his stagecraft in exposing the various conditions of aging and old age in relation to Irish socio-cultural problems and constraints which tend to shape the characters' temperament and behavior.

The title of Ambika Singh's essay, "No Country for Old Men?: A Poignant Portrayal of Aging and Ageism in Arthur Miller's *Mr. Peters' Connections*," quotes Yeats in the title, paralleling Angelika Reichmann's usage of the same phrase to introduce the crisis of the middle-aged intellectual protagonist in Coetzee's *Disgrace*. Harry Peters in *Mr. Peters' Connections* (1999) is, however, a really old man, a retired pilot who, apparently, is no longer able to distinguish images crisscrossing his mind from reality. Considering the drama in the context of some earlier works of the playwright, Singh argues that a lineage of this kind of protagonist is traceable in Miller's oeuvre, beginning with Willy Loman of *Death of a Salesman* (1949). She notes, therefore, that the assumption that playwrights place aged characters in the center of their drama when they have already started to feel the weight of their own years does not hold true. The protagonist of *Mr. Peters' Connections* obsessively wonders what the "subject" is several times, until, finally, he realizes that perhaps "love" is the subject he is searching for. In the concluding section of her essay Singh opines that the combined articulation

of both ambiguity and hope connects *Mr. Peters' Connections* also to Miller's other later plays such as *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan* (1991) and *Broken Glass* (1994), to name only a couple of them.

As guest editor of the special section I am especially indebted to the five authors who have contributed essays which manage to bring fresh insights into the scholarly discussion of literary works concerned with age, aging, and ageism as well as age-related clichés and stereotypes. Different as they are, each of the essays opens up new vistas for further research on the writers and on aspects of the targeted subject in its ramifications. Also, I am grateful to those members of the advisory board of *HJEAS* and other scholars who became involved in the peer-reviewing process of the papers, helping the authors by providing suggestions and recommendations for improving their writings. Last but not least, also on behalf of the authors of the included essays my strongly expressed thanks go to Donald E. Morse, editor-in-chief of *HJEAS*, and Éva Mathey, issue editor, who have generously supported the realization of this themed section and helped us, authors and editor, on the road to achieve the final result we now have in hand.

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