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Aging in the Short Story

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Synonyms

Fable; tale; philosophical tale; long-short story; short-short story; novella

Definition

The short story has consistently resisted definition, references to it offering ideas of 'short' that range anywhere from 500 words in length to a short novel (*novella*) of 30,000 words. For the current purposes, this entry will simply treat the short story as a piece of fictional writing, usually first published in either a magazine or a collection of tales. It will consider short stories in recent literary history in its three canonical guises, each of which offers something particular to the understanding of the experience of aging: namely, as *realist tales*, *modernist short fiction* and the *postmodern short story*.

Up until the late nineteenth century, the writer Elizabeth Bowen argued, the short story was treated as merely a "condensed novel", and the art of writing it judged by how far the author could, in literary scholar Adrian Hunter's paraphrase, "squeeze the machinery of plot and character into [a] reduced frame" (Hunter 2007, p1). Towards the end of that century, however, the short story began to "break free" from this negative comparison with the novel. Writers like Henry James and Joseph Conrad started to make artful changes to the form, changes that gave it "richness and complexity", as Hunter puts it, "as a result of, rather than in spite of, its brevity" (Hunter 2007, p2). Material that, in Hunter's words "usually determined narrative continuity and coherence" (Hunter 2007, p2) was omitted in tactical ways, so that a story implied meaning rather than stating it, privileging what critic Dominic Head describes as "ellipsis, ambiguity and resonance" (Head 2010, p2) over narrative drive. The story became identified with the compression of time and the foregrounding of symbol. All of these features can shed light on the complex experience of aging, a period often considered unpropitious for more conventional forms of narrative. In some cases, the story also began to foreground its "exaggerated artifice" (Head 2010, p2), becoming more experimental in form in the course of the twentieth century in the hands of writers such as John Barth, Joy Williams and Lydia Davis, all of whom have concerned themselves with old age as a central theme in recent years.

Overview

There are two principal ways that the short story—and perhaps all fiction—treats older age as a central subject. The first of these is age as *symbol*, using signs of age or the process of aging as a means to represent moral retribution, socio-political intransigence or cultural decline. The second is older age as *theme*: short fiction that represents and in the process examines older age or aging in itself—something which allows for, though does not always entail, more positive representations of a life stage of wisdom and acceptance. The fictions of older age as theme generally take one of two forms. They may be stories that look at older age from the outside: narratives showing us the reactions older age garners from others, or the ways that it is or is not accommodated by society. Or they may be works that take the subjective experience of older age, and offer an insight through a *first-person* perspective, or via the narrative feature of *free indirect discourse*, in which an older

subject's point of view is registered in the third-person voice via vocabulary or phrasing characteristic of their speech. Literature can, as critic and scholar Patricia Waugh has suggested, be a kind of 'practical phenomenology', in this way (Waugh 2013, p24), capturing the elusive texture of aging over time: both the slow accumulation of wisdom and knowledge, and what age studies scholar Kathleen Woodward has called the "infinitesimally decremental process of the subtraction of strengths, of a cumulative series of losses" (Woodward 1991, p38).

Important work on ageing in literary gerontology has accordingly taken short fiction as its field of enquiry. In a recent issue of the *European Journal of English Studies* on 'Writing Old Age', three out of five entries (those of Barry, Wohlmann and Kribernegg) focused on short stories, by Alice Munro, Rebecca Harding Davis and Margaret Atwood respectively, exploring the writers' insights into the accumulation of experience over time, the construction of older age through scientific and cultural perspectives, and the institutionalization of care (Oro-Piqueras and Falcus 2018). The ethics and politics of care, in particular for those with dementia, also feature in treatments of Alice Munro by Amelia deFalco (2012), Sara Jamieson (2014), Marlene Goldman and Sarah Powell (2015), and Berndt and Henke (in Chivers and Kribernegg 2018). Teresa Gibert writes about internalized ageism and the female body in the short fiction of Margaret Atwood (Worsfold 2005), and Sally Chivers discusses similar themes in Simone de Beauvoir's stories, where challenges to fulfilment, an acceptance of failure, and anxiety of the loss of desire and desirability are tempered if not alleviated by a philosophical framework (Chivers 2003).

A *short* story seems at first ill equipped in comparison with more capacious forms to give insight into the different stages of the life course in relation to the totality of a life, or to give a flavour of the accretion of life experience over time. In fact, however, its natural affinity for the depiction of memory states, meaningful transitions and belated realisations can allow it to heed particularly well the way in which truths which might dawn on us gradually—about aging and learnt in the course of aging—often finally come to light in a chance encounter or at an unexpected time.

The characteristic features of a short story can align themselves with the character of older age. A representative *moment of truth* or *epiphany* might illuminate the knowledge and insight accrued in late life or capture a recognition of an enduring aspect of one's self or another, as the fact of the experience and insight gained by Arturo's immigrant grandfather suddenly dawns on the boy in Judith Ortiz Cofer's 1995 'An Hour with Abuelo'. The *lack of narrative closure* often encountered in a short story can express well the narrative limbo that can (though does not always) characterise older age, when significant projects are complete and social relations fewer or more settled, or, less happily, when one might live with fear or uncertainty in the condition of frailty. Reflections on the *end of life* by a character close to this point, which are not propitious at the outset of a novel, can be captured in a short story --Chekhov's 'A Dreary Story' (1889) or Katherine Anne Porter's 1930 deathbed scene in 'The Jilting of Granny Weatherall', for instance where the expectations of narrative development are relaxed.

The short story can also go further than might be expected towards a statement about the life course itself. Short fiction such as Arnold Bennett's 'From One Generation to Another' (1907) often gestures towards the *totality of experience* over a life via an encounter between young and old, focusing on the value of the reciprocal exchanges that can take place and the complementary insights that the different life stages can offer (in this case about weathering the tensions of marriage). Or a story like Joy Williams's 'Stuff' (2016) can point, with irony but also celebration, at *continuities across the life course*. The story shows connections in outlook between a middle-aged journalist and a youth with a tattoo of A. E. Housman, represents an older inhabitant of the care home playing "dystopian video games", and bucks expectations of older people when the

protagonist's mother wonders what of the intellectual conversation of the residents is "getting through to you" visitors (Williams 2016, n. p.).

Conversely, the emphasis in many modern short stories on ambiguity and disjunction can express very well the strange *contradiction between mind and body*, between what philosopher Simone de Beauvoir called the "obvious clarity of the inward feeling that guarantees our unchanging quality and the objective certainty of our transformation" (De Beauvoir 1977, p323), in older age. Virginia Woolf reflects on just this disjunction in stories like 'A New Dress' (1924), or 'The Lady in the Looking Glass: A Reflection' (1929) in which Isabella suddenly and belatedly discovers the truth of her age, the mirror working "like some acid to bite off the unessential" and reveal her to herself as "old and angular, veined and lined" (Woolf 1989, p225). The story talks self-consciously about how it might approach such truths, reflecting as many modernist short stories do not only on the experience of aging but how a playful or complex narrative form might be needed to "prize [it] open" (Woolf 1989, p225). What will emerge from all of the stories discussed here, of whatever genre, is that the short story is as preoccupied with the means of its own telling as it is with its subject, allowing for an inadvertent or explicit reflection on how to write about older age as well as what the raw data on what late life experience might look like.

Key Research Findings

Realist short story

Stories of aging in the nineteenth century often took the form of supernatural fables, even in the hands of arch-realists. Characters, like Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray, try to cheat the process of aging, or conversely, like Balzac's Raphael Valentin in *The Skin of Sorrow*, encounter a premature older age as a kind of moral retribution. The realism of the early twentieth century begins to tell a different tale of aging, however. British realist writer Arnold Bennett sought to quash any belief in or desire to circumvent older age, his story 'The Elixir of Youth' (1901) exposing the market in age-defying serums as a perennial scam, but one upon which people are always keen to gamble. Elsewhere Bennett celebrates the positive aspects of a long life: its wisdom, as has been seen in 'From One Generation to Another' (1910), or alternatively the stubbornness it can breed, persisting even at the moment of death, in 'Mary with the High Hand' (1905). Bennett, alongside other early and mid-century realists such as Frank O'Connor, Rosamond Lehmann or the British Indian writer Attia Hosain, tell stories of older age in which the protagonists are charged with preserving the customs and memories of generations of rural, urban and emigrant workers. Simultaneously, however, they record the lived experience of historical change on the mind and body. Lehmann's World War One veteran in 'A Dream of Winter' (1946) calls his wife back from wartime London in the 1940s as much to help him get the potatoes in as for her safety: "It means too much stooping for me" (Lehmann 1982, p175). Hosain's unnamed protagonist in 'Phoenix Fled' (1953), her skin "loose around the impatient skeleton", observes the transformation of her hitherto "changeless and circumscribed life" (Hosain 1988, p9) in post-Partition India.

Rich in experience as these stories are, however, they perpetuate the tendency of nineteenth-century realists to look at late life from the *outside*, and as an index of other social phenomena, and it takes the modernist movement to make a decisive turn towards the inner world of aging.

Modernist short story

Virginia Woolf famously criticised the realist method and Arnold Bennett in particular in 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' (1924), encouraging the reader in observing a nondescript older woman on a train to get underneath "her oddities and mannerisms; her buttons and wrinkles; her ribbons and warts" (Woolf 1966, p335), the "fabric of things" as Bennett might show it to us. Go, rather, Woolf directs us, into her mind: the "thousands of emotions [that] have met, collided, and disappeared in astonishing disorder" (Woolf 1966, p.336) in the course of a few hours or days of her life, as in those of her reader. A writing that will do justice to this disorder will in turn be "spasmodic [...] fragmentary [...] obscure" (Woolf 1966, p.336): qualities that have been customarily attributed to the modernist short story. Dominic Head says of Woolf's short stories that they often call self-consciously for "genuine inner characterization" and "critique [...] existing conventions which hamper this development" (Head 2010, p82). This is particularly constructive in relation to older people, customarily seen from the outside and in relation to dominant stereotypes. Woolf's stories act as a corrective to both tendencies. She demonstrates a detachment that tips into cruelty in stories such as 'The Mysterious Case of Miss V' (1906), its breezy narrator unapologetic about her neglect of the retiring older woman until brought up short by news of her death. 'An Unwritten Novel' (1920) skewers the lazy assumptions that one might make, its account of a lonely spinster giving way to the realisation that this lady is a fulfilled mother on her way to meet her adult son. In place of these attitudes, a story like 'The Lady in the Looking-Glass', mentioned above, moves from an external perspective to an internal one. In the closing passage, the character begins "so far off that one could not see her clearly", but by the end the narrator has perfect access to a mind once "full of locked drawers, stuffed with letters", but now—and this is not a completely negative change—"perfectly empty" (Woolf 1989, p225), free of social and emotional obligations.

A different form is given to subjective experience in the African-American writer Rudolph Fisher's 1937 short story 'Miss Cynthia', in which an older woman from North Carolina comes to New York to visit her grandson, David Tappett, and find out what he has made of himself. She is initially shocked by the burlesque nature of the show in which Tappett—now a famous singer and tap dancer—performs, but the experience is transformed for her by his singing the traditional folk song she herself had taught him, a *reversal* that bathes the preceding events in a different light. She can recast the audience's pleasure in the performance as a form of communion in the midst of the alienation of modern city life. The narrative voice, reproducing her patterns of thought to shift the story into a modernist register, gives a powerful aesthetic resolution to the question of whether older age is seen from the outside or the inside. The story is suffused with her sensibility, but it is a sensibility that is communal, modelling a route to contentment through community to the young celebrity who might otherwise succumb to the cult of the individual.

Postmodern short story

John Barth's short story sequence *The Development* (2008) also thinks of older age in relation to community, in this case juxtaposing the oppressive atmosphere of a Florida retirement community with the loneliness that can nonetheless subsist within it as one's deeper relationships die out. In his story 'Peeping Tom' someone is taking an untoward interest in this community that is usually in retirement in all senses—withdrawn from professional and family life, out of view—offering a curious *twist* on the story of increasing invisibility in older age. The stories balance realistic details of everyday life in older age with Barth's trademark postmodern style, a retired creative writing

teacher on the development reflecting self-consciously on older age and retirement as fodder for literature.

Lydia Davis has another way of thinking about the question of objectification and alienation of older people in her story 'Old Men Around Town' (2014), writing the first half of the story without identifying the 'old men' who are seen on—and often disappear abruptly from—the streets of her town, but showing us how different the impression is in the second half of her story when she gives the old men names and makes them the subject of stories, connecting them to their community rather than presenting them as ghost-like figures who roam around without a sense of belonging. A story like Davis's 'Helen and Vi: A Study in Health and Vitality' (2007) takes a different tack but to similar ends. A work of pseudo-ethnography, it purports to give an objective enquiry into longevity through its account of two older women, one African-American and one of Swedish descent, promoting activity, good diet and service, but subtly shifts ground to offer insight into the subjective experience of prejudice and loss as their social world begins to shrink.

The Irish writer Christine Dwyer Hickey presents an equally interesting use of form in her recent 'Teatro la Fenice' (2012), where she offers a first-person rendering of the experience of dementia. This introduces ambiguity and discontinuity into the narrative not so much as a device as a fundamental component of the protagonist's changed perspective: Claire offers snapshots of her life, unable to maintain a narrative self that can link her experiences. As she herself observes: "[w]hat becomes before or what happens after – well, I'm not always in charge of the sequence' (Hickey 2012, p113). These experimental works, whether self-conscious about their written status or the discontinuity of their form, make connections between these formal manoeuvres and the lived experience of older age, challenging the invisibility or lack of eventfulness believed to characterise this life stage, and making of the experience of cognitive decline a compelling source of narrative interest.

Future directions in research

There is a dearth of criticism about the experience of aging in short stories by writers of colour and in the developing world, something that future research might productively address. Ira Raja has provided a valuable model of this in her readings of the ageing subject, ageing body and intergenerational relationships in post-Independence Indian short fiction (Raja 2004, 2005, 2009). Attention to age as 'embodied history' can shed new light both on the cultural specificity of the aging experience and—through the aging subject—on the sociocultural histories of class struggle, colonial conflict and emergent and established modernity. Stories which might be good subjects for investigation in this regard include Toni Cade Bambara's 'My Man Bovanne', Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 'Ghosts', Yiyun Li's 'The Proprietress', or Anita Desai's 'A Devoted Son'. More could also be written on male aging in short fiction. The emphasis has tended to be on women's writing in existing studies, but the work of celebrated short story writers such as Anton Chekhov, Raymond Carver or Ernest Gaines offer reflections on masculinity and ageing in relation to topics such as the body, intergenerational relations and social change.

Summary

The short story has always been able to reflect certain features of the experience of aging, the flexibility of form allowing it to express the compressed totality of the life course or a decisive

moment of realization, resignation or regret. The stories that can be told of protagonists of advanced age are in one sense, of course, short ones, but these tales can concentrate on the end of life in a manner that a novel might struggle to justify. They often trade on a reversal of expectation, their protagonists possessing more agency and acuity than those around them expect, and offering insight to the bumptious youngster that he or she scarcely anticipated. The development of the short story in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries also introduced a reflexivity of form whereby the story has consciously asked and answered questions about the viability of the older person as literary subject, playfully challenging preconceptions about their invisibility or intransigence. The inward turn in fiction has also allowed the subjective experience of the older person to come to the fore, “getting through”, as Joy Williams (2016) might put it, to even the most obtuse reader.

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