

# Narratives of Aging in the Long Nineteenth Century: An Introduction

*Alice Crossley and Amy Culley*

The articles that feature in this special issue of *Age, Culture, Humanities* extend a conversation which began at the conference ‘Narratives of Ageing in the Nineteenth Century’ held at the University of Lincoln (UK) on a scorchingly hot day in July 2019.<sup>1</sup> In our promotion for the event, we chose to use a painting by William Powell Frith, *Many Happy Returns of the Day* (Mercer Art Gallery, 1856), which provides a suggestive visual depiction of multiple stages of the life course as experienced by a wealthy, Victorian family. In the painting (fig. 1) several generations of the same family congregate for the ritual purpose of marking the chronological passage of time: in other words, holding a birthday celebration for a rosy-cheeked child.

Surrounded by at least three generations in a merry gathering, the painting’s foreground is nonetheless occupied by a somber, solitary, elderly gentleman. He sits detached from the group collected around the table, both by spatial distance and by his occupation in reading a newspaper as he faces outwards in his chair. His presence is noted only by a little girl who carefully brings him a glass of wine and by a middle-aged man (presumably his son) who looks across, away from the festivities, towards the elderly figure at the canvas’s edge who seems so disengaged from the bustle of activity at the table. Frith’s painting, we felt, offered an intriguing depiction of the ways in which nineteenth-century old age will often occupy an anxious cultural position at the imaginative margins, even while the very topic of aging can be otherwise established as a central cultural concern (here, symbolized by a birthday—an apt marker for increasing age and for the nineteenth-century’s valorization of youth). Frith’s painting

---

<sup>1</sup> The conference was co-organized with our colleague Dr. Rebecca Styler and benefited from the support of the Lincoln Institute for Advanced Studies

therefore provides an account of complex familial relationships, cultivated across time, and frozen here for a single moment.



*Figure 1. William Powell Frith, Many Happy Returns of the Day, 1856.  
Harrogate Borough Council / Brideeman Images*

Inspired by this image, our conference addressed aging identities and cultural articulations of age from across the life course, in dialogue with one another, and from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. It brought together scholars from literature, history, art history, and the social sciences at all stages of their academic careers from the UK, Europe, and the US. The array of papers addressed a rich mix of cultural forms and genres as well as the lived experience of aging in the long nineteenth century. Panels explored the diversity of nineteenth-century conceptions and representations of aging and the period's negotiation of age on an individual and social level, analyzing cultural stereotypes and anxieties and recovering moments of resistance and re-

imagining.<sup>2</sup> The day ended with a thought-provoking keynote lecture by Professor Devoney Looser, recovering the ways in which nineteenth-century women writers confronted and navigated sexist and ageist pressures as they continued to publish across the life course. We are therefore delighted that a coda by Devoney Looser will be included in this special issue.

Studies of nineteenth-century aging have traditionally been dominated by youth, particularly imaginative investments in the figure of the child, Romanticism's cultural valorization of the youthful genius, and the period's rich contribution to children's literature and juvenilia. Nonetheless, there has been a flourishing of scholarly work in the humanities in recent years that addresses a broader spectrum of life stages in the nineteenth century, with new perspectives emerging on infantilism (Newbon), adolescence (Crossley), midlife (Gullette; Heath), old age (Boehm, Farkas and Zwielerlein; Charise; Chase; Hartung; Hepworth; Jewusiak; Looser; Small; Thane), and journal special issues that take age as their focus (*Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* (2017); *Romanticism* (2019); *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* (forthcoming 2021)).

Our special issue draws on these exciting developments in its movement across and between life stages, disciplines, and periods (eighteenth century, Romantic, Victorian, Modernist). In their diverse interests, our contributors take us from the end of the eighteenth century, identified as a crucial period of transition in Western conceptions of old age with a new emphasis on chronological definitions and an association of late life with dependency and decline (Ottaway; Troyansky), to the first usages of the terms midlife, adolescence, senescence by the early twentieth century (Heath; Chase). The latter end of the period this special issue covers is also heralded by the emergence of gerontology as a focus of scientific study, and the establishment of geriatric medicine at around the same time, which speaks to the widespread interest in issues of aging consolidated by this historical moment (Jewusiak).

---

<sup>2</sup> We would like to express our thanks to all of the conference delegates, and especially our speakers, for facilitating a day of thought-provoking discussion and reflection. Thanks also to the authors of this special issue, who took these ideas forwards and were a pleasure to work with, and to our peer reviewers for their valuable contributions.

This special issue consciously adopts the inclusive tone of aging studies and the call for an open, flexible consideration of age, turning attention to the operation of lived time on the mind and body even when very little duration has passed, to appreciate age as a spectrum from infancy and childhood to advanced old age. In the opening issue of *Age, Culture, Humanities*, Looser advocates the treatment of aging in its most inclusive sense, which is “from cradle to grave”:

not only the “old” have “age.” ... In order to produce better scholarship, we need to come to terms with what age and aging mean and have meant, and that implies “from cradle to grave,” as the life course has long been colloquially described. We must learn more about how life in past centuries was carved into distinct periods, each with its own changing nomenclature and supposed characteristics, rewards, and challenges. (Looser, “Age and Aging Studies” 26)

We have collected essays which respond twofold to Looser’s challenge: envisaging age and the life course in terms that encompass its rich diversity, and in positioning accounts of what it means to “have ‘age’” within a concretely identifiable “distinct period” of the long nineteenth century—the period in which so much of age representation is codified using various strategies detected within the essays of this special issue.

The decision to take a broad historical perspective of the “long nineteenth century” has created unexpected confluences. For instance, two of our authors address skin as a powerful visual signifier of aging; June Oh discusses Jane Austen’s *Persuasion* (1817) in which blooming skin is tied to class status and Caitlin Doley addresses James Abbott McNeill Whistler’s portrait of his mother of 1871 in which older skin inspires creative experiment. Our collection also shows the potential of this extended timeframe for furthering our understanding of intergenerational relationships, afterlives, and legacies. Francesca Blanch-Serrat’s analysis of the eighteenth-century poet and letter-writer Anna Seward builds on Looser’s argument that “Using the emerging insights of feminist age studies, we can begin to see how received notions of age and aging in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries affected the first generations of professional women writers in Great Britain” (Looser, “Age

and Aging” 170). Blanch-Serrat provides a moving account of Seward’s tenacity in the late life curation of her literary oeuvre and her connections with the next generation of Romantic authors. But she also excavates the ways in which age, gender, and marital status interact to distort Seward’s posthumous reputation and critical reception, thus contributing to our understanding of how age influences literary fame in this period.

Margaret Morganroth Gullette’s insight that “Understanding age means going interdisciplinary in unexpected ways” (“Aged by Culture” 22) is exemplified here. Dialogues are established between nineteenth-century fiction, fairy tales, life writing, portraiture, and a sociological text, addressed in articles by scholars of literature, art history, social science, and social and cultural history (whose approaches are frequently informed by disciplines beyond their own). For instance, an interdisciplinary perspective is intrinsic to Gemma Carney and Leonie Hannan’s collaborative reading of G. Stanley Hall’s *Senescence* (1922) in its combination of medicine, history, biology, literature, and personal reflection, while Oh interprets the fiction of Austen through cosmetic advertisements and medical discourse, and David McAllister situates the correspondence and fiction of Charles Dickens in relation to demographic data and adverts for hair dye. Such approaches to Hall, Austen, and Dickens show how aging studies sheds new light on well-known nineteenth-century authors and, conversely, recognises these writers’ contributions to cultural constructions of aging in the period. However, in addition to familiar figures, this special issue introduces new voices into this discussion, exemplified by Claudia Capancioni’s study of maturation and generational progress in the Victorian fairy tales of little-known Anglo-Italian writer, Margaret Collier.

The intersection of age with other identity categories (gender, class, nation, race, dis/ability, and sexuality), has been a prominent aspect of studies of nineteenth-century aging. Femininity has received most critical attention and it is an important theme in this collection, including a discussion of the cultural denigration of the figure of the old maid by Blanch-Serrat and the gendering of maturation in the period by Capancioni. Our understanding of aging and

masculinity is at an earlier stage, but the topic is well represented here by our authors. McAllister argues that Dickens’s “late fiction repeatedly associates midlife masculinity” with “concerns over bodily decline,” “domestic and professional disappointment,” and “the contingency made evident by modern life.” These fictions of masculinity in the 1860s resonate strongly with *Senescence* in the early twentieth century and the challenges posed by bodily decline and retirement to Hall’s constraining “masculinist narrative” predicated on physical agency and professional status. Several of these essays therefore attend to the myriad challenges posed for aging masculinity, from Sir Walter Elliot’s horror at the wrinkled, roughened visage of elderly men who avoid those cosmetic aids intended to slow the appearance of time on aged, weather-beaten skin, to the crisis of status-bound professional identity faced by Hall at the prospect of his own retirement.

Looking beyond age and gender, our authors demonstrate the value of examining other intersections and, in doing so, point the way to areas in need of further research. Oh’s analysis of Austen’s *Persuasion* focuses on aging and class to show how at a moment in which “the aging body became a material result of self-care and consumption” investing in the promises of skincare products proved “disruptive to the existing social distinctions of class.” In addition, national identity and age are the focus of Capancioni’s study of Collier’s fairy tales which “chart new geographies of encounters between children, or young adults, and magical creatures” to explore the potential of growing up multinational and the creation of transnational identities in cross-generational communities.

The title of our conference—and, consequently, this special issue—reflects the importance of “narratives” in studies of aging and the fruitful conversations between gerontologists and humanities scholars regarding the ways in which the “ageing process unfolds in narrative structures” (Hartung 3). As Stephen Katz notes in the opening issue of this Journal, narrative:

anchors the inside of aging, bringing together self and society and animating our biographies as we borrow, adapt, interpret, and reinvent the languages, symbols, and meanings around us to customize our personal stories. Critical perspectives also deconstruct

dominant cultural narratives and give voice to suppressed and marginal narratives. (20)

The narrative form of the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* has been the focus of important critical work that has shown how changing conceptions of aging and the life course interact with aesthetic and formal developments of the period. In this collection, McAllister explores Dickens's innovative narrative perspective that extends "beyond the traditional endpoints of *Bildungsroman* trajectories by depicting aging protagonists who wish to unbecome" in narratives fascinated by "contingency, unled lives, and counterfactual speculation." How to narrate the experience of aging is also a feature of Carney and Hannan's study of *Senescence*, as they suggest "Hall's writing appears to search for order in the chaos of his own aging." This evokes both the expressive potential of narrative to give shape to the personal experience of aging as well as its limits.

The aesthetic implications of older age and its representation are also a central concern in Doley's close visual analysis of Whistler's *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* (1871). Responding to the relative neglect of the category of age for art historical analysis, Doley examines "one of the most famous and best-loved representations of an elderly person in nineteenth-century painting" to show that the age of the sitter had a distinct impact on creative decisions, techniques, and practices (including composition, color scheme, and paint handling). The article, therefore, makes a compelling case for the value of "interrogating the relationship between old age and the visual" and reminds us of the potential value of viewing aesthetic and formal traditions through the lens of aging.

The dual temporal and relational aspects of aging are highlighted in narratives across our collection. The individual ages both through time, and within an imagined binary of youth and old age which, Heike Hartung observes, make it especially suitable for theorization through narrative: "The temporal aspect of narrative with its progressive movement towards an ending expresses this general condition of physical ageing and makes it an adequate medium for life-storytelling" (1). Age in its configuration in many of these essays is experienced

relationally, explored, for example, through the fairy tales of Collier in Capancioni's article, in which growing up involves positioning oneself amidst others' worlds and lives, in order to operate most productively within a transnational context. Age is unavoidably inflected by the aging models and stories provided by others. It is not experienced in isolation—not for the characters of Collier's Anglo-Italian children's stories; not for Seward in her meticulous attempts to curate her legacy through posthumous publication despite perceptions of her career based on gender, age, and marital status; nor even for Whistler in his stark painting of an older woman that Doley suggests draws on, but ultimately rejects, the conventions of portraiture which seek to attach conventionally sentimental meanings to the aged mother figure.

It is within such a network of relational age ideologies that nineteenth-century writers and artists responded in their articulations of age and its significance. Furthermore, the impulse of biographical criticism, deployed to varying degrees within each essay, reveals the strength of age-autobiography. Individual lives are narrativized, especially when a new threshold within the life course is reached. Across the youth and age divide, moments of transition are especially significant—considered metaphorically in the fairy tale, or inspired more literally by Dickens's consternation at his own graying beard as a portent of increasing age, or prompted by the spectre of sterile retirement and redundancy for Hall. Such moments of crisis are an instigation for the articulations of aging through narrative, either as a mode of subjective stock-taking or to cultivate a sense of meaning and purpose for the present moment.

The ramifications of aging are revealed as the outcome of a slow, accretive process, brought about through incremental change over long swathes of time. Duration and its inscription across narrative forms, Jacob Jewusiak has recently recognized, emerges through various guises. It is often contradictory, but relies on cultural subscription to dominant ideas about chronological development that minimize those alternative means by which aging manifests: "The idea of constructing identity around a number ... conceals the continual process of aging, making chronological age a more reliable index to reality than the temporality of transformation upon which it is projected" (Jewusiak 8). The



essays collected in this issue are alive to the sense of cultural urgency in establishing chronological markers for age that emerged in the long nineteenth century, but also map these against other physical or subjective measurements. Capturing the impact of age is, therefore, a tricky business. For those looking backwards from a long life, such as Seward early in the nineteenth century and Hall in the twentieth, the clues of the past take on fresh significance as they are pieced together with painstaking care and attention. This is evident in Dickens's fiction when characters such as Rumty Wilfer in *Our Mutual Friend* and Barbox Brothers in *Mugby Junction* are preoccupied with reflections of the past, present, and future, in what McAllister demonstrates is the author's exploration into narrative contingencies of later life: "Dickens's middle-aged men become haunted by the unrealized hopes of their younger selves," McAllister notes, as "Dickens's late construction of midlife [is] a period in which his characters seek to diagnose life's disappointments, and indulge themselves in optative considerations of contingent past events."

The impulse of old age to mourn the loss of a past self who is altered over time features strongly in the texts under consideration here. This accords with a propensity to reflect reductively on the life course as involving inevitable decline, initiated (according to Kay Heath, and developed here by McAllister) during middle age. This is intensified in subsequent decades of life (as Carney and Hannan indicate in Hall's sociological definition of senescence, in which old age is reckoned in terms of the writer's thinly disguised personal disgust). While some of the essays here uncover the trace of the past as an irruption of regret for a lost self (evident in the analysis by McAllister, or Carney and Hannan), for others the interactions between past and present can be read in a more positive light. Capancioni suggests, for example, the ameliorative potential of intergenerationality, observing that Collier's fairy tale collection "sustains a positive belief in generational progress." Drawing on Susan Stanford Friedman's model of identity that rests on a "dialogic of sameness and difference" (153) that relates to age as much as to nationality, Capancioni demonstrates that Collier's texts gesture towards ways that cross-generational differences can be productively broken down and reoriented.

In these essays, aging may, therefore, involve crisis and fracture, but it also ushers in creativity and transformation in one shape or another. Each demonstrates aging as predicament; nonetheless, each also illustrates that aging in the long nineteenth century isn't an inevitable foreclosure of narrative possibility. Blanch-Serrat shows that Seward, for example, faced with her own mortality, is eager to promote her continued legacy in the provision of instructions for how and when her manuscript materials should be released to the public. Hall, in similar fashion, combines the personal and the abstract in confronting his own aging: as Carney and Hannan demonstrate, he uses his last great treatise as an attempted exorcism of his own age-related demons. McAllister observes a similar response in Dickens, whose fiction is a testament to the author's midlife crisis as various characters consider how their past choices have led them to their present middle age. Austen's insufferable Sir Walter Elliot draws attention to the aesthetic imperatives at work in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century cosmetic discourse, which Oh determines pathologized the visual effects of old age on the body. Such accounts prompted individuals to actively pursue treatments that promised to keep at bay the worst of aging's insidious consequences, facilitating narratives of self-care as moral responsibility. For Whistler, however, Doley asserts, it was not his own aging that motivated his *Arrangement in Grey and Black: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* (1871), nor his personal relationship with his mother, the sitter; instead, in confronting the uniquely aged skin of his model, Doley indicates Whistler was inspired to expand his application technique. As Oh and Doley point out, these ways of managing aged appearance can also be opportunities for creativity, and Capancioni similarly asserts that growing older is an impetus to expand narrative horizons.

Many of these essays therefore adopt the dominant cultural decline-narrative (familiar to age studies theorists) as the aged figures whom they interrogate largely treat the shift to midlife and senescence in particular with fear and suspicion. However, at times, they also demonstrate creative ways to address or repurpose those same anxieties. The contributors to this special issue of *Age, Culture, Humanities* establish the resourceful means exhibited by fictional

characters, authors, and artists to find elegance, balance, resilience, and promise in increasing age. These essays often suggest the means of confronting the presently aged self, and how that age can signify beyond the limiting narrative of age as a process of unproductive diminishment. The threads that weave across our collection also suggest some of the ways in which nineteenth-century narratives have shaped contemporary conceptions of aging. Consumption, advertising, and the role of the beauty industry, the cultural anxieties produced by demographic change, the emergence of midlife as crisis or decline, the internalization of ageism, and more hopefully, the potential for late life to inspire creativity, agency, resistance, and cross-generational transformation are just some of our themes rooted in the nineteenth century that speak persistently to the present.

#### WORKS CITED

- Boehm, Katharina, Anna Farkas, and Anne-Julia Zwierlein, editors. *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Aging in Nineteenth-Century Culture*. Routledge, 2014.
- Charise, Andrea. *The Aesthetics of Senescence: Aging, Population, and the Nineteenth-Century British Novel*. State University of New York Press, 2020.
- Chase, Karen. *The Victorians and Old Age*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Crossley, Alice. *Male Adolescence in Mid-Victorian Fiction: George Meredith, W. M. Thackeray, and Anthony Trollope*. Routledge, 2018.
- . Guest editor. “Special issue, Age and Gender: Aging in the Nineteenth Century.” *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2017.
- Fallon, David and Jonathon Shears. Guest editors. “Special issue, Romanticism and Ageing.” *Romanticism*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2019.
- Friedman, Susan Stanford. *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter*. Princeton University Press, 1998.
- Gullette, Margaret Morganroth. “Aged by Culture.” *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Gerontology*, edited by Julia Twigg and Wendy Martin, Routledge, 2015, pp. 21-28.
- . “The New Era of Longevity Discovered, 1869-1929: The Shock of Women’s Midlife Strength and the Construction of Gender Envy.” *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2017. [ncgsjournal.com/issue132/grisham.htm](http://ncgsjournal.com/issue132/grisham.htm).
- Hartung, Heike. *Ageing, Gender, and Illness in Anglophone Literature: Narrating Age in the Bildungsroman*. Routledge, 2016.

- Heath, Kay. *Aging by the Book: The Emergence of Midlife in Victorian Britain*. State University of New York Press, 2009.
- Hepworth, Mike. "Framing Old Age: Sociological Perspectives on Ageing in Victorian Painting." *The Sociology of Art: Ways of Seeing*, edited by David Inglis and John Hughson, Palgrave, 2005, pp. 113-38.
- Jewusiak, Jacob. *Aging, Duration, and the English Novel: Growing Old from Dickens to Woolf*. Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- Katz, Stephen. "What is Age Studies?" *Age, Culture, Humanities*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2014, pp. 17-23. [ageculturehumanities.org/WP/what-is-age-studies/](http://ageculturehumanities.org/WP/what-is-age-studies/). Accessed 26 November 2020.
- Looser, Devoney. "Age and Aging." *The Cambridge Companion to Women's Writing in the Romantic Period*, edited by Devoney Looser, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 169-82.
- . "Age and Aging Studies, From Cradle to Grave." *Age, Culture, Humanities*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2014, pp. 25-29. [ageculturehumanities.org/WP/age-and-aging-studies-from-cradle-to-grave/](http://ageculturehumanities.org/WP/age-and-aging-studies-from-cradle-to-grave/). Accessed 26 November 2020.
- . *Women Writers and Old Age in Great Britain, 1750-1850*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008.
- Newbon, Pete. *The Boy-Man, Masculinity and Immaturity in the Long Nineteenth Century*. Palgrave, 2018.
- Ottaway, Susannah R. *The Decline of Life: Old Age in Eighteenth-Century England*. Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Small, Helen. *The Long Life*. Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Thane, Pat. *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues*. Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Troyansky, David. *Old Age in the Old Regime: Image and Experience in Eighteenth-Century France*. Cornell University Press, 1989.

---

**Alice Crossley** is a Senior Lecturer in English (University of Lincoln, UK). Her research focuses on intersections between age and masculinity in texts primarily by Victorian and modernist writers. In the field of aging studies, her work includes *Male Adolescence in Mid-Victorian Fiction* (Routledge, 2018), an edited special issue in *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* (2017), and an article on asynchronicity and aging queerly in the fiction of Israel Zangwill (forthcoming, 2021). In addition, she has published chapters on childhood and nostalgia in *W. M. Thackeray* (Routledge, 2016), the Victorian schoolboy body (EUP, 2018), and eroticized intergenerationality (*Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 2017). She is currently working on a new book, *Old Fashioning: Aging and Masculinity in Western Fiction, 1840-1930*, which interrogates the representation of aging masculinity in a number of popular and less well-established writers. A concurrent project explores senescent male sexuality in the work of Japanese writers Jun'ichiro

Tanizaki and Yasunari Kawabata. She also works on nineteenth-century valentines and material cultures.

**Alice Crossley** is a Senior Lecturer in English (University of Lincoln, UK). Her research focuses on intersections between age and masculinity in texts primarily by Victorian and modernist writers. In the field of aging studies, her work includes *Male Adolescence in Mid-Victorian Fiction* (Routledge, 2018), an edited special issue in *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* (2017), and an article on asynchronicity and aging queerly in the fiction of Israel Zangwill (forthcoming, 2021). In addition, she has published chapters on childhood and nostalgia in *W. M. Thackeray* (Routledge, 2016), the Victorian schoolboy body (EUP, 2018), and eroticized intergenerationality (*Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 2017). She is currently working on a new book, *Old Fashioning: Aging and Masculinity in Western Fiction, 1840-1930*, which interrogates the representation of aging masculinity in a number of popular and less well-established writers. A concurrent project explores senescent male sexuality in the work of Japanese writers Jun'ichiro Tanizaki and Yasunari Kawabata. She also works on nineteenth-century valentines and material cultures.