

**AGEING BRAINS AND MINDS, AGEING SENSES AND SENTIMENTS:
LITERATURE, NEUROLOGY, PSYCHIATRY**

**Centre Universitaire de Norvège à Paris
May 26-27, 2016**

**Jan Frich, Professor of Health Care Management, Consultant Neurologist,
University of Oslo.**

Literary Myths about Neuro-degeneration: The Case of Huntington's Disease

The presentation will highlight intersections between culture, medicine and literature, focusing on how myths are exchanged between the three fields of sense-making. Two literary works that portray a neurodegenerative condition, Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude* (1928) and Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005), will be studied. While Huntington's disease is an explicit theme in *Saturday*, *Strange Interlude* portrays "hereditary insanity". I will argue that Huntington's disease is a likely model for Eugene O'Neill. Both works are heavily influenced by contemporary culture, scientific discourse and genetics. I will show how the authors use concepts, models and myths from medicine to create new models, messages and myths. While O'Neill challenges the emerging eugenetics and cultural norms, McEwan uses genetics and the disease to create new myths in an attempt to understand terrorism.

**Bernt A Engelsen, Professor of Neurology
Department of Clinical Medicine, University of Bergen and Haukeland University
Hospital**

The Aging Self in an Epileptological and Neuropsychiatric Setting

The self is a mental image and physical construction of many fragments. Composition of self consists of the physical body and its mental representation and implicates coherence of autobiographical memory, aims, values, meaning and ownership. It also includes the extended self and its social bonds and interpersonal space. Not localizable to isolated brain structures, self may still emerge through particular involvement of cerebral "gates" such as the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, posterior cingulate cortex, precuneus and the insula.

The disentangled self in schizophrenia, transiently fractured self in epileptic seizures and progressively impaired holistic self in neurodegeneration will be addressed in the context of transience and impending chronic impairment to full extinction, in late life. The continuous and creative, "ageless" sense of self, may transform with age and disease. This may affect our tendency to perceive the past self less, and future self more positively.

Moreover, in neurodegenerative disease particular involvement with disturbance in the orbitofrontal cortex may impair the evaluation of valence and, thus, personal reward value.

Importantly, in western culture the concept of self emphasizes individual autonomy, whereas other cultures may focus on interdependent view of self in collective interaction. Thus, reflecting upon self requires complex contexts and neuroscientific prudence.

**Marlene Goldman, Professor of English Literature
Department of English, University of Toronto**

Re-imagining Age-related Dementia: Alice Munro's "In Sight of the Lake"

My talk offers a close reading of Canadian Nobel Prize winning author Alice Munro's recent story "In Sight of the Lake." My aim lies in exploring how her stories interrogate the prevailing social imaginary of dementia and, more precisely, what clinicians view as "neuro-degeneration" and what sociologists term "the fourth age." Formally and thematically, Munro's story relies on irony to subvert the logic that engenders and normalizes the opposition between the third and fourth ages, and, by extension, the disempowerment and social death of people coping with later-life dementia. Relying on irony's inherent doubleness, Munro's fiction displaces the Gothic view of the fourth age as a monstrous, degenerative transformation, and brings an alternative, surreal perspective to the foreground.

"In Sight of the Lake" offers an account of a woman named Nancy, who has been referred to a specialist due to her memory problems. Due to a series of errors, however, Nancy cannot find the specialists' office. Moreover, increasingly strange and surreal phenomena characterize her trip, ranging from the sight of clocks that no longer tell the time, to a boy riding his bicycle backwards, to a strange, lush, private garden filled with flowers that burst from between the paths and from the grass. Toward the conclusion, she strikes up a conversation with the man who tends the exotic flower garden. He helpfully suggests that she look for the specialist at the Lakeview Rest Home. The story concludes with Nancy, who has made her way to the Rest Home, alone at night in an empty corridor of the institution, hysterically calling for help. In the end, help of a sort arrives. An orderly named Sandy chides Nancy for creating a scene. At this point, readers are shocked to discover that Nancy is, in fact, a resident of the Home, and that the preceding events were merely her subjective fantasy.

Rather than offer the Truth concerning dementia, Munro's story effects a vertiginous shift in perspective that plunges the reader into the world of dreams. Significantly, the reliance on dreams together with the images of broken clocks highlight a debt to the Surrealist movement—a movement that refused to pathologize altered states of consciousness. It is in this playful, ironic spirit that Munro's story imaginatively reconfigures and, for a time, replaces the prevailing Gothic map of age-related dementia with an alternative, yet equally imaginative map. Rather than serve as a joke solely on Nancy, the narrative reflexively draws our attention to the reader's role in conjuring both the agential and victimized versions of the protagonist. Equally important, the story offers imaginary "insight" (pun intended) into the mind of an isolated and anxious elderly character, who shares her fears of becoming lost and her dreams of a more inclusive social imaginary—a town with a garden where everyone is "welcome to rest" (224). In this way, Munro's narrative underscores how the stories we tell are complicit in consolatory attempts to deny our vulnerability—epitomized by aging and dementia. Paradoxically, stories are also our most powerful tools for bringing us into a more ethical relationship with our own mortality.

**Elizabeth Barry, Associate Professor
Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies,
University of Warwick**

Towards A Neurophenomenology of Dementia

This paper will consider the subject with dementia in relation to traditional phenomenology (Husserl, Merleau-Ponty) and a newer strand of neurophenomenology (Depraz, Varela). It will argue that phenomenology and the philosophy of psychiatry can offer an enhanced understanding of the lived experience of the subject with dementia, their relationship to their body and their perception of time. There is, however, an apparent conceptual instability in current understandings of this subject, linked to divergent uses of such philosophy. Philosophical and sociological writing on dementia has used phenomenology to argue for radically divergent positions on the question of how long the dementia patient remains a meaningful and autonomous subject at all (see e.g. Davis 2004, Kontos 2005). This paper will reconsider what phenomenology might offer in relation to the dementia sufferer's lived experience (experience of language, the body, memory and time) as well as thinking about how this bears on their construction as a subject. It will use memoirs (Bayley, Grant) by those with dementia and those close to them as illustration (if not evidence) of some of these ideas.

**Hanna Serkowska, Professor of Comparative Literature, Faculty of Letters
University of Warsaw**

Before the Speech Balloons Go Blank: Dementia in Cartoons

Rather than in (1) narratives of the caregiver on behalf of the sufferer (Franzen, Ignatieff, Geiger, Sieveking, Mortier, Samson) or (2) the expert's (demented person's) viewpoint, closest to narrating the breakdown of language (De Baggio, Bernlef), I'm interested in a medium such as comics which overrides shortcomings of both perspectives. The (1st)category is the most numerous and oldest. Since the 1990s onset of the Alzheimer's epidemic (Forster 1989) AD has served as a cultural metaphor (Zeilig 2014): texts have shown that the world we live in is frenzied. Yet, when faced with AD, families reunite, the novel turned into an idyll. The (2nd)category stages "de-served" individuals testifying "beyond language" (Eakin 2008). Still, "pathographies" rely on conventional techniques: speak of dementia "on the level of content but not of form" (Krüger-Fürhoff 2015). The conclusion that narrating the limits of narration is a contradiction in terms and that AD demands other narrative approaches, call for investigating a different medium. I argue that comic books (Roca, Arrugas 2007, Chast's Can't We Talk about Something More Pleasant? 2014) overcome the paradox of a breakdown of language in language, due to the use of images and words, which can supplement, replace or contradict e/o. This cold medium (McLuhan 1964), unlike films, doesn't enhance a unique sense by providing a complete vision and demands conscious effort to fill in details and other intentionally left out elements to determine the meaning. AD comics put emphasis on care rather than (unavailable) cure and elicit attention to the sufferers. Finally, by underscoring leisurely and apparently non committal character, cartoons help defuse the charge of fear (AD "commands fear before sympathy" Jolley&Benbow 2000) and remove the stigma.

**Svein Atle Skålevåg, Associate Professor of History, Department of Archaeology,
History, Cultural Studies and Religion,
University of Bergen**

Psychiatry and Life Narratives

Since psychiatry first took shape as a branch of medicine in the early 19th century it has predominantly been framed as science of the brain and the nerves. A strong tradition of psychiatry has sought the location of mental illness in the structure of the body. This strain of psychiatry has been concerned with seeing the signs of the body, not hearing the stories of the patient.

But this “organicist localism” never reigned supreme in psychiatry. *Life narratives* have also had a privileged role through the history of psychiatry, though this fact has not always been admitted. The psychiatrists have approached their patients through narratives, and it has presented them through narratives. This is maybe most prominent in the psychoanalytically informed psychiatry of the 20th century, but is also to be found in other quarters.

The double nature of psychiatry is also to be found in the psychiatries of old age: Some psychiatrists have sought the nature of ageing in life narratives, rather than the nerve cells. The paper explores psychiatry’s relation to life narratives through the case of Gabriel Langfeldt and Knut Hamsun.

**Nora Simonhjell, Associate Professor of Comparative Literature
Department of Cultural Studies and Language
University of Stavanger**

Ageing and Dementia in Children's Literature

In the last years several contemporary Scandinavian children's literature have addressed aging and dementia as theme. Dementia is an illness that has consequences for a person's ability to remember, communicate and general orientation in life. What kind of narrative and visual techniques are used to describe the demented person? How are the illness presented and told for so it is understandable for children? How are the cognitive changes and memory loss told?

Drawing upon affective theory, memory theory and narrative theory, I am going to discuss how dementia and demented life and life experiences, are put into play in two new children's books. The literary examples are Stian Holes *Garmans sommer* (2012) and Costance Ørbeck-Nilssen and Akin Duzakins *Jeg kan følge deg hjem* (2016). Both books are multimodal, and have a very intense relation between narration and visual elements.

**Dr. Maya Hauptman
Department of French Studies at the University of Haifa**

Ageing in Tahar Ben Jelloun's Fiction and Auto-fiction: Expression and Impact of Dementia in About My Mother

Maya Hauptman is a researcher in the department of compared literature at Haifa University in Israel. Her book: *Tahar Ben Jelloun. The influence of the political power and the traditional society on the individual* (Publisud, Paris, 2012, 392 p), in French, analyses the characters' comportment according to the DSM. Some protagonists are old people suffering from obsessive compulsion, absence, divagation, and unexplained hate, others become mad, like Zarah's mother, victim of the Moroccan patriarchal society, unable to hold back her anger for being silenced during all these years. Feigning madness, Moha can tell truths about

the authoritarian regime with impunity. The retired immigrant, not knowing what to do with his free time, overcome by depression, lets himself die in immense solitude.

In *About My Mother*, the author bears witness of his mother's physical and cognitive decline due to Alzheimer. He tells her fears, loss of memory, disorganized thinking, impaired judgement, agnosia, hallucinations and flashbacks into her past. He shows how her physical, moral and social decline affects her feelings. Diminished, she is nothing but "a little thing". Her morbidity, lack of social interaction and agenda are compared and contrasted to the physical and cognitive health of his friend's mother, who travels the world and plays bridge, generating two different narratives and raising the question of the influence of the socio-cultural impact on ageing, and its effect on health. A comfortable and wealthy life ensures a cognitive age younger than the chronological one, by facilitating self-realization, which necessarily improves self and public image.

Ben Jelloun expresses hostility for nursing homes or any other kind of asylum, in which Foucault saw systems of monitoring and control. Any institution exerting political power is criticized, including the family and the caregiver, for being a subject/object relationship.

**Hemlata Giri Loussier, Ph.D. in French Literature and Civilization
University of Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris III**

***“Ageing sentiment of alienation” in Fire on the Mountain by Anita Desai
and The Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri***

The theme of ageing and alienation has not been the center of study in Indian novels but this theme has always been at the heart of Anglophone Indian novelists' writing. As most of the time these novelists write far away from their homeland, they do not hesitate to define the sentiments of ageing and alienation due to isolation within and out of their country. In the case of Anita Desai, the old age and alienation aren't linked with exile to some foreign land but in her own country, whereas in Jhumpa Lahiri's case, it is closely linked to nostalgia away from home and homeland. The common link between these two novels is the sentiment of isolation and alienation overpowering the protagonists due to their old age. The characters' experience of alienation and seclusion are deeply determined by the context in which they live: society, family, culture, country and time. The characters opt for different solutions related closely to their individual awakening. Anita Desai's novel represents an Indian society which has always had strict rules. The pressure created by these rules is huge, and it directly acts upon the individual, sometimes leading to isolation, and even alienation. On the other hand, in Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, alienation sets in due to separation or imposition of distance by the circumstances. The objective of this paper will be to essentially analyze how this alienation due to ageing manifests itself in the narration and what solutions are proposed to combat this sentiment.

Key words: Alienation, Ageing, Isolation, Nostalgia, Sentiments.

**Georgia Mavragani, Director of the Happy End Company
Eugenia Grammatikopoulou, Associate Professor of French Literature,
Department of Literature, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki**

Old Age – A Choral Ode

On fall 2015, Georgia Mavragani & the Happy End Company presented a devised theater spectacle at the Experimental Stage of the National Theater of Greece (28/11–9/01), entitled *Old age – A Choral Ode* (<http://www.n-t.gr/en/events/togiras/>).

A six-member “chorus” of young actors meets the five members of a corresponding elderly “chorus” on stage (all of them ex-professional actors of the variety hall), creating a theatrical narrative of testimonies, interviews and literary texts. This performance-document on old age, inspired by the third *stasimon* from *Oedipus at Colonus*, constitutes a tribute to passing time that leaves its imprint on human existence, fashioning what we call experience, with whatever positive or negative associations we attach to the word.

We propose a synthesis of the concept and the realization of this project (along with some recorded, subtitled in English, extracts of the performance), with a parallel focus on the literary and poetic texts (from Sophocles and Chekov to Céline and Tabucchi) which composed its unique pattern, along with the interviews and improvisation of the performers, serving to shed light on the diachronically silenced burden of physical and moral human decay.

**Samuel Lepastier, Psychiatrist, Research leader at the Centre de recherches psychanalyse, médecine et société,
Université de Paris Diderot**

Ageing Hysterics: Fictional and Clinical cases

**George Rousseau, Professor of Cultural History,
University of Oxford**

George Rousseau reads from his new memoir in progress entitled Sleepless

My last book, *Rachmaninoff's Cape: A Nostalgia Memoir* (2015) was an experiment in multiple life writing, especially as a buffer against the ruins nostalgia creates. My new memoir in progress, entitled *Sleepless*, is written in similar first-person narrative and blends genres of non-fiction with fiction. Here I investigate contemporary notions of sleep and its opposites, of which insomnia is only one. My principal domain is the sleep of the elderly and how to contextualize that demarcated sleep: historically, narratively, and scientifically. *Sleepless*, like its predecessor, amounts to life-writing informed by insomnia's ambiguities and intricacies. I can write in this compassionate vein because sleep is now so close to me, and as the result of my belief that we may be on the cusp of a paradigmatic shift in our relation to it.

Sleepless begins and ends autobiographically. Positioned in between is a narrative alternating between a cultural history of insomnia and a manifesto calling for the liberation of defective sleep among the elderly; not merely on insomniac bases but by recasting the whole of life's last stage to the nocturnal world and what inevitably follows. This agenda will touch raw nerves in certain camps of psychiatry, neurology, and psychology, as well as some in literature and the arts. *Sleepless* is not a book aimed to please, certainly not everyone. Even the short passages from the memoir I select to read, will allow the audience to identify with a sense of the challenges I face in seeking to liberate insomniacs of all types, especially myself,

from the dark chains in which we linger. If *Sleepless* serves as a wake-up call to insomniacs throughout the life cycle to demand more empathy and compassion, my goal will have been attained.

**Lillian Helle, Professor of Russian Literature, Department of Foreign Languages,
University of Bergen**

Love on the Final Slopes of Life: Senescence, Sentiments and Sensuality in Fyodor Ivanovich Tyutchev's "The Denisieva Cycle"

My paper aims at showing how literature can give a unique access to individual aging, enabling us to grasp the ambivalences and intricacies connected to growing old more distinctly than the quantitative, statistical methods of sociological studies and medical reports can do. Not least can literature explore into the domain of ageing senses and sensations and deepen our understanding of how elderly individuals may experience sensual attractions, erotic love and sexual desire. To enlighten this topic I will focus on a collection of poems called "The Denisieva cycle", by the Russian 19 century diplomat and aristocrat Fyodor Ivanovich Tyutchev, one of the greatest poets in the classical Russian tradition. The cycle has an autobiographical context: it retells in lyrical verse how the married Tyutchev, at 50, an advanced age at that time, fell deeply in love with Elena Aleksandrovna Denisieva, a noblewoman of 22 and a school-friend friend of his daughters. While not divorcing, the poet kept up an illicit relationship with Denisieva for 15 years and she bore him 3 children. The affair ended in utmost tragedy, when Denisieva, ostracized by both family and former friends, after a long period of deteriorating health died from tuberculosis in 1865, followed closely by the death of 2 of their children. These events brought the elderly lover into a spiral of endless despair, but also resulted in a sublime body of poems which - amongst other things - constitutes a remarkable testimony of the aging mind and body in love.

**Pierre Laszlo, Professor of Chemistry
École polytechnique, Palaiseau, France and
University of Liège, Belgium**

*Neurochemistry of Cognitive Loss in the Elderly
and Self-estrangement in Samuel Beckett's Writings*

Current knowledge on brain chemistry in aging is reviewed. Focus will be primarily on the dopamine mediator and on dopamine receptors, especially those of the D2 types involved in memory, in both the prefrontal cortex and the hippocampus. Cognitive loss with aging also involves perceptual speed, motor speed, implicit sequence learning and vocabulary, in addition to working memory and episodic memory.

The second part of the presentation will rely on novels by Samuel Beckett, especially the Trilogy, consisting of *Molloy*, *Malone Meurt* and *L'Innommable*. Beckett chose deliberately to write them in French, rather than in English : « *À la Libération, je pus conserver mon appartement, j'y revins, et me remis à écrire - en français - avec le désir de m'appauvrir davantage. C'était ça le vrai mobile.* » The deliberate estrangement stemming from this choice eerily resembles the effect of old-age on elocution and linguistic competence.

Pitting textual analysis against recent advances in cognitive science provides, I submit, improved understanding of the aging process.

Marco Marchetti, Psychiatrist and Psychoanalyst, Full Professor of Legal Medicine, Dipartimento di Medicina e Scienze della Salute, Università degli Studi del Molise

Laura Tommaso, Adjunct Professor of English Studies, Dipartimento di Scienze Umanistiche, Sociali e della Formazione, Università degli Studi del Molise

***“The sensual enjoyment of life”:
Old Age and Sexual Desire in Philip Roth’s The Human Stain***

It must be accepted that we have always had difficulties in interpreting human sexuality (for example, homosexuality was considered an illness until quite recently) and that elderly sexuality is one of those phenomena which have caused major controversies, as it was believed to be aberrational against the background of the wise old man stereotype whose sex drive has inexorably disappeared. But is it really possible to have a life without desire, without that hope which is inseparable from desire? Through the lens of Philip Roth’s novel, *The Human Stain* (2000), this paper explores the continuing relevance of desire and sexuality throughout the life course. The appearance of the thirty-four-year-old Faunia into the life of the much older Coleman and Nathan tears away the scrim of pretense that sustains their rationalization of ageing as sexually inactive and jolts both characters into the recognition that desire is indeed always there. Among the questions that interest us is whether what is dramatized in the novel is more ‘acceptable’ because Faunia is also attracted to Coleman: is the female desire which makes more ‘orderly’ the old man’s sexual drive?

**Emanuela Ettorre, Associate Professor of English Literature
Department of Modern Languages, Literatures and Culture, University “G.
d’Annunzio” Chieti-Pescara, Italy**

***“Now my life is rounded”:
The Art of Equanimity in George Gissing’s The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft***

“Now my life is rounded; it began with the natural irreflective happiness of childhood, it will close in the reasoned tranquillity of the mature mind”, writes Henry Ryecroft at the end of *The Private Papers*, that make up a last look back over a life lived fully, but distressed by poverty and labour. Combining the forms of an autobiography with the fictional strategies of a novel, Gissing’s remarkable book (published in 1903, the year of the writer’s death) describes Ryecroft’s final phase of life as he abandons the tensions of the city for country quietude and “passionless contemplation”. What makes the book so fascinating is its construction of this “calm of the senses”, which Ryecroft achieves not because of his advanced years, but in spite of them – he is only a little over fifty when he finds his way to this “new life”, and, as the novel’s putative “editor” suggests, Ryecroft lives a full five years in this state of grace, before dying. With the composure of maturity and no fear of death, with the awareness that his “life is over” (“Mentally and physically I must be old, much older than my years”), he masters the art of living, ageing, and dying well, surrounded by Nature. This, then, is the book’s relevance to our own understanding of the psychological markers we

associate with the ageing process: in his penetrating account of Ryecroft's "new life", Gissing challenges us to wonder whether old age really is or need be a prerequisite for equanimity.

Dr. Adrian G. Tait, Independent Scholar of English Literature

Rudyard Kipling and the Unravelling Dialectic of 'Old Age'

Rudyard Kipling's old age was anything but easy. His personal life was overshadowed by illness and the gradual effacement of the imperialist ideals he held so dear; to the very end, he was haunted by the death of his only son in war. The youngest ever winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, he also lived long enough to see his literary reputation undermined by a new generation of writers who found his common touch (and populist politics) abhorrent. Yet Kipling's final collections of short stories – *Debits and Credits* (1926) and *Limits and Renewals* (1932) – are amongst his most original and modern. Whilst his characters often include the old, however, Kipling was never concerned with old age; the more concerned he became with the psychological and even psychical aspects of human existence, the more piercing, particular and exacting his literary focus. It was the individual he found fascinating, not the type. As Angus Wilson observes, these are stories of compassion, of care; and as this paper discusses, they also reflect a profound desire to find balance in understanding, and unravel the dialectic that underlies the archetypes of 'young' and 'old'.

**Erika Natalia Molina García. PhD student in Philosophy,
University of Toulouse II, Jean Jaurès & University Charles de Prague.**

Riot and Levity: De Beauvoir and Borges on Ageing

"The animal is death or almost death.
There's only the man and his soul left."
Jorge Luis Borges, *Elogio de la sombra*.

Change or degradation, learning or relenting, life or death, are not the only polarities at play in the hermeneutic dilemma of ageing. There's also the subjective reaction to the objective transformation that ageing is, which is going to determine the whole interpretive frame and creative possibilities of the subject in question. To analyze these ageing-moods, these subjective reactions, I propose to examine and compare two maturity works, one from the philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (*La Vieillesse*, 1970) and another one from the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges (*Siete noches*, 1980), expressing two completely diverse attitudes towards ageing, both as experiencing individuals and as authors having to face this problematic as subject-matter.

**Gunn Inger Sture, Ph.D. Applicant, Department of Foreign Languages,
University of Bergen**

Memory and Ageing in Proust's À la recherche du temps perdu

Marcel Proust's work *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*) has been the subject of many previous studies, and themes such as memory and time have been examined closely. However, the theme of ageing has not received much attention despite its pertinence in relation to time and memory. This presentation will examine how metaphors of memory and time in *la Recherche* can help us understand how Proust views the ageing mind.

To Proust, the metaphor is intrinsically related to memory and time. It forms the basis for the involuntary memory which is the means by which one can recapture lost time. In exploring the links between metaphors, memory and ageing, this presentation will draw upon theories of conceptual metaphor set forth by George Lakoff, Mark Johnson and Mark Turner. They see metaphor as something more than a linguistic expression – according to their theories, we understand and conceptualise the world around us through metaphors. This can be related to Proust's own view of the metaphor as a means of discovering the truth or the essence of things and ideas.

**Margery Vibe Skagen, Associate Professor of French Literature, Department of Foreign Languages,
University of Bergen**

*How Can Literature Complement other Disciplines in the Study of Ageing?
The Art of Being Useful to other Disciplines and Loyal to One's Own*

Over the last three decades, the multidisciplinary study of ageing, “the new gerontology”, has developed into a separate academic field, in which features of late life are now considered not only in the perspective of medicine and psychiatry, but also within society and culture. “Humanistic gerontology” and “cultural gerontology” have long challenged dehumanization in health care and medicine by applying methods and concepts from the humanities. “Narrative gerontology” represents a specialization of the discipline, which focuses on the biographical dimensions and subjective experience of growing old as a way of redefining the meaning of ageing and improving not only the care of the elderly, but also their self-understanding, empowerment and public image. With the works of among others Kathleen Woodward, Margaret Morgenroth Gullette, Mike Hepsworth and Anne M. Wyatt-Brown, “literary gerontology” has become a recognized field of study. Parallel to the recent “proliferation of novels about old age”, ageing has also emerged as a critical perspective for literary scholars, sometimes using interdisciplinary approaches, as Helen Small in her ground breaking *The Long Life*.

Using literature for causes outside of literature has implications for the way we think literature relates to the world. Humanistic gerontology has often used literary texts for their representativity, in the same way as early feminist studies tended to rely on the “image of women approach”. In literary studies, the word *use* may still be negatively associated with an instrumental, uninformed conception of literary texts, which disregards their “literarity”. How can literary research complement medical and psychiatric approaches to ageing without limiting itself to representational realism? How can literature contribute to counteract “othering” of the aged without reducing literature to a socio-political tool? This paper will address questions related to the uses of literature, and exemplify the potential of literary criticism to investigate ageing as a fundamental dimension of human existence.