Heather Ingman

Ageing in Irish Writing

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palgrave
macmillan

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ISBN 978-3-319-96429-4 ISBN 978-3-319-96430-0 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-96430-0

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018948657

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Cover illustration: Aydin Aksakal/EyeEm

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

This book is dedicated to my parents, gallantly sailing into their nineties

Acknowledgements

I am, as always, grateful to staff and students in the School of English, Trinity College, the University of Dublin, for their writing and many conversations that have deepened my understanding of Irish literature. I would particularly like to thank Eve Patten and Margaret Robson. I also thank the staff of Trinity College Dublin library and Aberdeen University library for their helpfulness in facilitating my studies.

Part of the material in chapter four has been published as '"Strangers to Themselves": Ageing, the Individual and the Community in the Fiction of Iris Murdoch, John Banville and John McGahern' in the *Irish University Review* issue 48.2 (2018) and I am grateful for the encouragement of its editor, Emilie Pine, and for the permission to reprint. I am grateful also for the support of all in Palgrave, particularly to Commissioning Editor, Tomas René, and to my editor, Vicky Bates, and to the two anonymous readers whose observations allowed me to make substantial improvements to the book. The faults of course remain my own.

Although this is the first full-length study of ageing in Irish writing, it is important to acknowledge the inspiration I have drawn from pioneers in the field of literary gerontology such as Kathleen Woodward, Anne Wyatt-Brown, Barbara Frey Waxman and, more recently, Jeannette King. The initial impetus for this book came not from the world of scholarship, however, but from my admiration for the courage and civility displayed by my parents, David and Elizabeth Ingman, and my mother-in-law, Irene von Prondzynski, in confronting the adversities but also the joys

of ageing into one's nineties. I would also like to thank Ferdinand von Prondzynski for his patience in listening to more about the trials and consolations of ageing than he would perhaps have wished.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Gerontology and Its Challenges

Ageing is a worldwide phenomenon but it is also a sociopolitical identity that varies according to different cultures and, with predictions that by 2030 one in five people resident in Ireland will be aged fifty or over, the study of ageing in Ireland is growing apace.[1] However, as we will see, Irish literary gerontology has been slower to develop and, given recent demographic shifts and the growing cultural visibility of older people, age is arguably a missing category in Irish literary criticism, as once was the case for class, gender and race. This study, investigating the advantages of looking afresh at a range of familiar and not so familiar Irish texts through a gerontological lens, is intended as an early intervention in the field rather than a comprehensive survey, and aims to provide stimulus for further discussion. This introduction will look first at general theories of gerontology, then at literary gerontology, before going on to discuss ageing in the Irish context.

GERONTOLOGY AND ITS CHALLENGES

The fact that gerontology has been gaining in importance since the 1970s is scarcely surprising since most of us, at least in the more affluent western societies like Ireland, are living longer, giving us all a stake in understanding the specific problems of ageing. Age studies, looking at the implications of age differences across the whole of the life course with particular emphasis on age-based discrimination, have also been developing rapidly and seeking best practice for promoting

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H. Ingman, *Ageing in Irish Writing*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-96430-0_1

intergenerational understanding.[2] We in the west live in a highly age-specific culture where, from the moment we enter primary school, we are conditioned to be evaluated, and to evaluate others, according to age and these labels, as Jan Baars has pointed out, are often highly arbitrary: ‘Adult persons are transformed into aged or older bodies at a particular chronometric age without any evidence that such changes are actually taking place at that age.’[3] Age-related generalizations are popular because the complexity of ageing identities is so difficult to comprehend. Moreover, we live in a culture that rewards youth and penalizes old age. Thomas Cole has highlighted the extent to which a liberal capitalist culture contributes to ageism by esteeming only those who are productive in terms of power, money and success and he argues that the ideological and psychological pressures to master old age have generated an unhelpful gerontophobia in the west.[4] Chris Phillipson agrees that, because its priorities relegate social concerns and individual needs behind the quest for profits, ‘as a social system capitalism can have a disastrous impact on the lives of older people’.[5] In the final chapter of her husband’s *The Life Cycle Completed* (1982), Joan Erikson argues that western society is not the best culture in which to grow old because it is unable to find a central role for older people: ‘Lacking a culturally viable ideal of old age, our civilization does not truly harbor a concept of the whole of life. As a result, our society does not truly know how to integrate elders into its primary patterns and conventions or into its vital functioning.’[6] The relevance of the notion of a whole life vision has increasingly been questioned in view of the fragmentation of postmodern societies in which, in the absence of traditional frameworks, the onus is on individuals to shape their own ageing experience. Nonetheless, as we will see, some notion of harmony and integration over the course of a life remains vital for successful ageing.

In the context of diseases of the mind such as Alzheimer’s and dementia, John Swinton identifies a particular problem in western liberal cultures that isolate the intellect, reason, memory and learning capability as the core constituents of the human personality: ‘Thus there is an explicit and implicit negative cultural bias toward diseases which involve deterioration in intellect, rationality, autonomy, and freedom, those facets of human beings that Western cultures have chosen to value over and above others.’[7] Cognition and memory are seen as crucial to the designation of social personhood and Swinton argues that living in such a society becomes a significant problem for people with dementia who risk not only social exclusion but also being regarded as no longer fully human.

In humanistic gerontology, concerned with the philosophical meaning of later life experience, ageing has often been seen as a time of getting back to essentials, a journey towards a more authentic self. As Henri Nouwen and W.J. Gaffney commented in their study, *Aging: The Fulfillment of Life*: 'When hope grows we slowly see that we are worth not only what we achieve but what we are, that what life might lose in use, it may win in meaning.'[8] The eight stages of ageing famously drawn up in ego psychologist Erik Erikson's *The Life Cycle Completed* have been influential in this respect. Employing a Hegelian model in which successful resolution of the central crisis of each life stage involves a synthesis of two dialectical qualities, Erikson delineates the first seven stages moving from infancy to middle adulthood, while the eighth stage, which he labelled maturity, spans the years from sixty-five till death. This stage involves a tension between the thesis integrity (awareness of life's wholeness) and the antithesis despair (horror at life's fragmentation) leading to, if all goes well, a synthesis in wisdom, self-acceptance and a sense of fulfillment. Expanding on Erikson's stages, Lars Tornstam employs the term gerotranscendence to suggest the serenity, the desire for solitude and meditation, and increased attentiveness to the world around us that may come with age: 'The gerotranscendent individual … typically experiences a redefinition of the self and of relationships to others and a new understanding of fundamental, existential questions.'[9] Unlike Erikson's end-stopped integration, gerotranscendence in Tornstam is an open-ended process. Raymond Tallis argues that ageing provides the opportunity for creating the story one wants for one's life as compared with 'the traditional, largely unchosen narratives of ambition, development and personal advancement; and the biological imperatives of survival, reproduction and child-rearing'.[10] Time, he argues, may even operate differently, with less emphasis on the constraints of clock time, more on an intensification of the moment, as our awareness of the transience of life deepens our appreciation of it.

The positive view of ageing in Erikson, Tornstam and Tallis has been challenged by other gerontologists and in fact Erikson's own account became more nuanced when, as a result of her observations of her husband in his nineties, Joan Erikson added a ninth stage covering advanced old age when loss of capacities may command all one's attention, emphasizing that the ageing process is only partly controllable and that to promote positive ageing in terms of health and self-reliance may result in a superficial optimism not borne out by the facts.[11] Several writers have questioned Erikson's notion that a 'life review', a term introduced by Robert Butler in 1963, necessarily leads to integration and a more accurate understanding of life-long conflicts. The life review was intended to provide a therapeutic opportunity for the older person to explore the meaning of his/her life through autobiographical reminiscence, thereby allowing for the possibility of personal transformation while also countering the impersonality of data collection and demographic monitoring. Butler describes the life review as a 'naturally occurring, universal mental process characterized by the progressive return to consciousness of past experiences, and particularly, the resurgence of unresolved conflicts; simultaneously, and normally, these reviewed experiences and conflicts can be surveyed and integrated.'[12] The difficulty is that reviewing one's life may produce not integration and transcendence but a new sense of instability and uncertainty around identity, and Betty Friedan has suggested that integration of one's past life is not necessarily the answer since it cuts off the possibility of future change and development.[13] In his discussion of life narratives, Jan Baars also chooses to emphasise reflection as on-going and always liable to re-evaluation over completion and integration.[14] Nevertheless in providing a bridge between gerontology and literature, the notion of a life review or narrative has played an important function.

These conflicting arguments around old age echo the debate between Freud, who regarded old age as akin to castration and argued that adult development is fixed in middle age with no possibility of further change,[15] and Jung who emphasized the special developmental tasks of old age and suggested that ageing is a time of potential for growth and self-realisation, when one gains a new sense of freedom from society's constraints and becomes less conformist: 'The afternoon of life is just as full of meaning as the morning; only, its meaning and purpose are different.'[16] The danger of limiting the complexities of the ageing experience to such positive-negative polarities is evident and, as discussed below, literature may do much to bring nuance to the debate.

Similarly polarising attitudes to ageing are, however, to be found in the work of those few second wave feminists that took up the subject. Simone de Beauvoir made a significant intervention with *La Vieillesse* (1970) translated as *The Coming of Age* (1972), a mammoth survey of attitudes towards ageing going back to Roman times, drawing on ethnology, psychology, medicine, sociology and the arts. *The Coming of Age* stresses the poverty, ill-health and neglect of older people and is now often criticized for being too orientated towards the narrative of decline found in Freudian psychology and towards a Marxist sociological analysis of western capitalist consumerist society that fails to find value in ageing: 'The aged do not form a body with any economic strength whatsoever and they have no possible way of enforcing their rights.'[17] De Beauvoir's study emphasises the importance of keeping busy, active and useful as one ages; in essence, advocating continuing as far as possible the political, social and intellectual engagements of one's earlier life. Giving no special meaning to the final years or to the hidden world of private life, *The Coming of Age* finds none of the compensatory moral or intellectual gains of ageing, only an increasing sense of loneliness and lack of purpose. Also published in 1972, Susan Sontag's influential essay on 'The Double Standard of Aging' in *The Saturday Review*, focuses more particularly on society's gendered attitudes towards ageing and sexuality that lead the ageing woman to be judged more harshly than the ageing man.

Despite these early interventions by de Beauvoir and Sontag (or perhaps disheartened by their pessimism around ageing), second-wave feminism largely displayed indifference towards the problems of older women. In *Look Me in the Eye: Old Women, Ageing and Ageism* (1984), Barbara Macdonald and Cynthia Rich highlight second-wave feminists' lack of interest in ageing women like themselves.[18] This indifference continued until the 1990s when two second-wave feminists, themselves ageing, published important works in the field. In *The Change: Women, Ageing and the Menopause* (1991), Germaine Greer critiques the medicalization of the menopause, particularly the use of HRT designed, as she sees it, to keep older women attractive to men: 'In the guise of immense chivalrous sympathy for women destroyed by the tragedy of menopause, a group of male professionals permitted themselves to give full vent to an irrational fear of old women, which I have called, from the Latin *anus*, meaning old woman, anophobia.'[19] Greer argues that the menopause may lead to a re-ordering of priorities and her book celebrates the freedom from pleasing others, either in the family or the workplace, that ageing may bring for women: 'The climacteric marks the end of apologizing. The chrysalis of conditioning has once for all to break and the female woman finally to emerge.'[20] 'There are positive aspects to being a frightening old woman,' she adds drily.[21]

Like Greer, Betty Friedan in *The Fountain of Age* (1993) believes that the myth of the menopause is based on an outdated view of the lives of older women, no longer defined by their historic roles of housewives and mothers. With women now living many years after the menopause, they are experiencing the menopause in their prime (51 is the average age in the west) and, like Greer, Friedan argues that, released from social pressures around femininity, the ageing woman may find different strengths and new abilities. More generally, Friedan resists the narrative of decline for both women and men, arguing that it is often our own fear of ageing that leads us to focus on ageing as a problem, while neglecting the developmental possibilities of later life: ‘It is time to look at age on its own terms, and put names on its values and strengths as they are actually experienced, breaking through the definition of age solely as deterioration or decline from youth.’[22] This, she argues, may be harder for men than for women since the former often remain attached to culturally stereotyped definitions of masculinity that revolve around career, sex, and physical strength. Ageing is hardest, she observes, in those people who try to cling to the values that drove their youth and she challenges ‘the attempt to hold on to, or judge oneself by, youthful parameters of love, work, and power. For this is what blinds us to the new strengths and possibilities emerging in ourselves and in the changing life around us, and thus makes a self-fulfilling prophecy out of the expectation of decline.’[23]

Greer and Friedan have been followed more recently by another second wave feminist, Lynne Segal, who in 2013 published *Out of Time: The Pleasures and the Perils of Ageing*, a lively personal reflection on the psychology and politics of ageing that includes discussion of a wide range of fiction, art and poetry by both men and women with the aim of seeking richer and more positive images of ageing. For Segal herself, continuing political activism is a way of retaining value and purpose as she ages. One criticism that might be brought against the emphasis in Friedan and Segal on positive ageing, and indeed against Greer’s focus on the middle-aged woman, is that such accounts, although a welcome counterbalance to pathologising discourses of old age, gloss over the fact that those who age successfully are often healthy, well-off and educated, and thus such studies may inadvertently contribute to the marginalization of frailer, disabled and dependent older people.

The introduction of gender into discussions of ageing goes some way towards countering the abstractions and even essentialism found in earlier writing on gerontology and forms part of the recent cultural turn in gerontology working across the social sciences and the humanities to formulate new theories and new methodologies in the study of later years, taking into account the social structures in which ageing takes place. Whereas humanistic gerontology places the emphasis on the existential experience of ageing, cultural gerontology recognizes that ageing, like gender and sexuality, is complex and more shaped by social and institutional forces than earlier accounts, based on chronological or medical definitions, acknowledged. There are some overlaps between cultural gerontology and the more narrowly focused critical gerontology, which does valuable work in examining political and economic structures that operate on the ageing experience in a disadvantageous way. As Jan Baars notes: 'We can never find aging in a *pure* form; aging can only be experienced or studied in specific persons and specific situations or societal contexts that influence and co-constitute the processes involved.'[24]

This is where literary gerontology comes in since many of the theories, postmodernist and poststructuralist, that have enabled gerontologists to destabilize and deconstruct previous normalizing accounts of ageing were already widely in use in literary criticism. Gerontologists have recognized that, since the experience of ageing varies with each person and is influenced by such factors as biology, culture, gender and social class, literature, with its focus on individual cases within specific social contexts, is ideally placed to present the complexity of the ageing process and its difficult interaction between body, self and society. A dialogic relationship is developing between gerontology and literary studies as gerontologists acknowledge literature's power not only to reflect but also to shape cultural understanding of the ageing experience.

Literary Gerontology

The process of ageing is often difficult to grasp until we begin to experience it ourselves and the study of ageing in fiction has been recognized as a useful balance, not only against cultural constructions of old age, but also against the abstractions and theorization of humanistic gerontology by placing the subjectivity of older people at the centre in an attempt to counter depersonalizing images of old age. Nevertheless literary gerontology was relatively slow to develop. General studies of ageing in fiction began to appear from the end of the 1980s but as late as 1993 Anne

Wyatt-Brown was lamenting that, compared with discourses around race, class, gender and sexuality, ‘aging is a missing category in current literary theory’.[25]

Methodologically, some early studies of ageing in literature paralleled feminism’s early emphasis on images of women in literature, for example, Janice Sokoloff’s *The Margin that Remains: A Study of Aging in Literature* (1987) is an untheorised discussion of representations of middle-aged characters in a diverse range of literary texts, including *Moll Flanders, Persuasion, Jane Eyre, Middlemarch, The Ambassadors*, and *Mrs. Dalloway.* Despite its lack of a theoretical basis, Sokoloff’s study was valuable in challenging the paradigms proposed by Erikson and others that suggest neat, linear stages of growth over the course of a human life. Literature, Sokoloff suggests, paints a deeper and more complex picture of the ageing process that is often at variance with society’s chronological measure of time: ‘Literature … appears to be the richest source we have for representations of aging, and for the effort to understand the contradictory and complex ways in which the human psyche’s experience of time shapes character.’[26] In *Safe At Last in the Middle Years* (1988) focusing, as the title suggests, on middle-aged protagonists’ consciousness of ageing in fiction by Saul Bellow, Margaret Drabble, Anne Tyler, and John Updike, among others, Margaret Gullette, like Sokoloff, takes issue with the decline narrative of ageing, suggesting that fiction also produces stories of change and development in later years. In a later work, *Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of Midlife* (1997), Gullette notes feminism’s reluctance in this period to engage with the combined effect of sexism and ageism on women. Feminism’s silence on the subject of age and its impact on female identity was contributing, she argues, to the cultural erasure of the ageing female body.

In *From the Hearth to the Open Road: A Feminist Study of Aging in Contemporary Literature* (1990) Barbara Frey Waxman adopts a positive approach to literature and ageing, coining the term *Reifungsroman* (‘novel of ripening’, as opposed to the more youthful *Bildungsroman*) to describe fiction that reflects a concept of ageing as a time of growth, a journey towards a more realized self. Waxman particularly finds this in fiction portraying women characters who may be less trapped than men in capitalist structures and the patriarchal hierarchy, and she focuses on literary portraits of ageing by and about women in different English-speaking countries, including Doris Lessing, Elizabeth Taylor, Barbara Pym, Paule Marshall, May Sarton, and Margaret Laurence.

Less concerned with others' approval, no longer burdened by society's expectations around gender or professional roles and relinquishing power and competition, women during the ageing process, Waxman argues, may focus on different priorities—friendships, community, nature, and creativity—in order to reclaim buried aspects of the self. Noting that the authors she discusses recreate their accounts of later life using techniques such as interior monologue, personal confession and excerpts from journals, Waxman compares their free-flowing narratives to the *écriture féminine* of French feminists like Hélène Cixous who seek new representations of women's consciousness.

One of the most significant pioneers in the field of literary gerontology is Kathleen Woodward who, in *Ageing and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions* (1991), argues that psychoanalysis, particularly Freudian theory, has been complicit in and even formational of the west's gerontophobia. Her study pairs psychoanalytical concepts, such as narcissism, introjection, and mourning, with literary texts that, on account of their interiority, lend themselves particularly well to psychoanalytical readings, in order to show that while some literary texts reproduce Freud's pessimism about ageing, regarding it as a punishment that must be stoically endured, others demonstrate the richness and complexity of the ageing process. Lacan's mirror stage illuminates, for example, Woodward's reading of Marcel Proust's *The Past Recaptured* (1927) where Marcel's recognition of his ageing comes to him through the mirror of others' reactions to him. Woodward sees the mirror stage of old age as the inverse of Lacan's mirror stage of infancy in which the infant (mis) recognizes himself as whole. In old age, Woodward argues, the mirror stage reveals the disintegrating self, leading the older person to reject the mirror image rather than embrace it: Marcel experiences old age as uncanny and repulsive. In other chapters, Woodward employs Heinz Kohut's theories of narcissism to read Eleanor Pargiter in Virginia Woolf's *The Years* (1937) as a positive portrayal of ageing, and Donald Winnicott's theories of transitional objects in infancy to illustrate Malone's transition from life to death in Samuel Beckett's *Malone Dies*, which is accompanied by the progressive removal of objects from his environment.

The essays in another seminal study, *Aging and Gender in Literature: Studies in Creativity* (1993) edited by Anne M. Wyatt-Brown and Janice Rossen, focus particularly on late life creativity in individual authors such as W. B. Yeats, Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Bowen, Colette, Dorothy Richardson, and Roland Barthes, in order to highlight the way in which writing careers may change as a result of the ageing process, with bereavement, late life depression, and anxieties about death all affecting literary creativity and the psychological development of writers. Of particular note is Constance Rooke's coining of the word, *Vollendungsroman*, to denote a novel of completion or winding up depicting an older protagonist looking back over the whole of his/her life: Rooke situates John Cheever's final novel, *Oh What a Paradise It Seems*, in this category.[27] Rooke explains that the *Vollendungsroman* may have a special intensity due to the felt proximity of death though it does not necessarily imply that all such novels end with a definite sense of closure; nor are they all written by authors who are themselves nearing the end of their life. Rooke's *Vollendungsroman* is a potentially fruitful category and this study will attempt to locate some examples in Irish fiction but, unlike Waxman's concept of the *Reifungsroman*, which is frequently cited, it has had less impact so far on literary studies, possibly because of its association with affirmation and a kind of serenity in ageing that is often in short supply in literary texts.[28]

Aging and Gender in Literature: Studies in Creativity contains many insightful discussions of individual authors and their reaction to ageing but the emphasis is on biographical, rather than theoretical approaches, and the equation of age with creativity is problematic since it obviously does not apply to all ageing writers. The whole notion of 'late style' has been subjected to a searching critique in another volume of essays, *Late Style and Its Discontents: Essays in Art, Literature and Music* (2016), where the editors, Gordon McMullan and Sam Smiles, point out in their introduction that the term is too often used uncritically to denote the final production from an individual of extraordinary talent, which somehow transcends its immediate cultural and historical context. This volume is an important correction to earlier romantic understandings of lateness and its association with genius (generally male) as found, for example, most famously in *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (2006) by Edward Said. Consonant with the turn to cultural gerontology, and relevant to Chapter 2 of this study, McMullan and Smiles argue that it is best to avoid transcendent and transhistorical implications of the term and concentrate on the social and cultural context in which individual late works are produced.

The scouring of fiction for images of ageing continues in sociologist Mike Hepworth's largely untheorised (from the literary point of view) *Stories of Ageing* (2000), which discusses portrayals of older people in a wide range of contemporary fiction by such authors as Anita Brookner, Doris Lessing, Penelope Lively, Pat Barker, Margaret Foster, Elizabeth Taylor, Paul Bailey and Kingsley Amis, with the aim of encouraging readers to explore literary texts as an imaginative resource for understanding the experience of the ageing process. Hepworth finds fiction addressing the new awareness of the body that ageing may bring as it makes itself felt through pain or illness, the strengthening of personal identity through memories of the past, including the dead, vulnerability to cultural stereotyping, loneliness, social exclusion, and the importance of friends, family and relationships between the generations.

A collection edited by Maria O'Neill and Carmen Zamorano Llena, *The Aesthetics of Ageing: Critical Approaches to Literary Representations of the Ageing Process* (2002), includes some essays that provide more theorised approaches to representations of ageing in fiction, poetry and drama across a range of different cultures, including Canada, Australia, Ireland, South Africa, Nigeria and the Caribbean. The theories and approaches vary widely, though there is a sustained interest across the volume in gender differences in the ageing process, and the collection is as much creative as scholarly with the stated aim of providing more positive and optimistic accounts of ageing.

Also published in the first decade of the new millennium, Zoe Brennan's *The Older Woman in Recent Fiction* (2005) looks at post 1960s fiction by female authors such as Margaret Laurence, Doris Lessing, May Sarton, Margaret Foster, Fay Weldon, and Angela Carter among others, which challenge the prevailing discourse of age as stagnation and decline. Brennan presents these authors as countering the marginalization of older women by placing them at the centre of their fiction and emphasizing the diversity and freedoms of older women's lives with identity never static but subject to constant change and negotiation. Paying attention to this body of fiction is one way, Brennan argues, that literary criticism can help challenge reductive and dehumanizing images of old age.

Jeannette King's approach in *Discourses of Ageing in Fiction and Feminism: The Invisible Woman* (2013) is more nuanced and contextualized, reflecting the move away from the abstractions of earlier gerontologists and the turn to cultural gerontology. By juxtaposing literary representations of older women from the late nineteenth-century onwards with contemporary medical, psychological and social discourses around ageing, King reveals the dynamics at work between literary texts and social contexts. Her study demonstrates the advantages of limiting the scope of analysis to a particular area, such as gender, in order to explore more fully the impact of cultural perceptions of ageing on literary texts and the ability of the latter to resist and even subvert cultural stereotypes. This challenge to cultural discourse around ageing is particularly evident in her discussion of Angela Carter's novel, *Wise Children* (1992), where King applies Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity to the ageing process, reading Dora's narrative as a performance through which she constructs an identity undetermined by her ageing body and challenges the stereotype of the asexual older woman. Such readings demonstrate the power of gender theory to revitalize our understanding of the ageing process and an especially fruitful example of this has been Sarah Harper's suggestion that Elizabeth Grosz's work on the sexed body, in a study such as *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporate Feminism* (1994), might also be applied to the ageing body in order to investigate the way in which the ageing body has been inscribed with various medical, cultural and social discourses that may be at variance with the phenomenological lived body.[29]

Two interdisciplinary volumes are welcome interventions in the field, namely *Ageing, Popular Culture and Contemporary Feminism: Harleys and Hormones* edited by Imelda Whelehan and Joel Gwynne (2014), looking at the representation of ageing in popular culture, including fiction for the mass market, and *Ageing Women in Literature and Visual Culture: Reflections, Refractions, Reimaginings* edited by Cathy McGlynn, Margaret O'Neill and Michaela Schrage-Früh, published in 2017. Like Jeannette King's study, this latter collection of essays, arising out of an international conference on 'Women and Ageing' that took place in 2015 in the University of Limerick, follows the turn to cultural gerontology, employing gender theory to explore the challenge to cultural constructions of the ageing woman in international literature, drama, film, television, celebrity culture, art, performance art and fashion. In the context of Irish fiction, Michaela Schrage-Früh's reading of Clare Boylan's novel, *Beloved Stranger* (1999), as an example of *Reifungsroman*, and Margaret O'Neill's discussion of Joseph O'Connor's *Ghost Light* (2010) in the light of Lynne Segal's observation of the psychic layering of our inner lives that comes with ageing, are especially insightful.[30]

It is clear, even from this short survey, that there has been a particular emphasis in literary gerontology to date on the ageing woman.

This focus on women has arisen partly because of the influence of feminist studies on recent developments in gerontology, partly because of the rich body of English and American fiction by women depicting middle-aged or older female protagonists, and partly due to a wish to challenge western society's all too visible prejudice against the older woman, played out daily in the workplace and in the media. The twentieth- and twenty-first-century Irish canon however contains a substantial number of male writers who portray deep conflicts around the ageing process. My book aims to redress the gender balance in literary gerontology by looking at a range of work by both male and female writers, while retaining the advantages of a study like King's which narrows the focus to a particular angle on the ageing process, in this case Irish writing where, to date, little critical work on ageing has been published.

The Irish Context

Ageing is a global phenomenon but the turn to cultural gerontology, emphasizing the social construction of identity in old age, is an important reminder not to homogenise the ageing experience which has too often suffered in the past from generalisations that elide individual experience and erase the cultural, class and gender diversity of the ageing experience. Fiction, with its accent on the individual, has been regarded as one way of overcoming this problem; focus on ageing in a specific cultural context, here Ireland, is another important way of avoiding glossing over the individuality of older lives by bringing to the fore individual experience shaped by a particular environment. Looking at fictional presentations of ageing in a particular social context is a means of providing a bridge between humanistic gerontology, with its emphasis on individual experience, critical gerontology, where the emphasis has been on the structural mechanisms, economic and political forces that hinder successful ageing and cultural gerontology, which looks at the wider social environment.

Until the nineteenth-century, care for the aged and poor in Ireland was sporadic and dependent on the wealthy and charitably disposed. The origins of social policy towards older people in Ireland date back to an Act not drawn up with old age in mind, namely the Poor Relief (Ireland) Act of 1838, the first statutory provision for the poor which established institutions for the poor, the sick, and orphan children, among others. Since this Act was not specifically designed for older people, in practice when workhouses were set up in Ireland priority was given to the destitute.[31] The 1906 Report of the Vice-Regal Commission on Poor Law Reform therefore recommended the establishment of almshouses to cater specifically for the aged and infirm. Its recommendations were not followed but workhouses became consolidated into county homes, which had as their aim care of the aged and infirm poor, though in practice they continued also to provide for other groups in need of shelter and assistance.[32] In this period, unless a destitute older person had family or neighbours to help out, he or she faced entering a workhouse or a county home. In 1908, the Old Age Non-Contributory Pension (means-tested and given to people aged 70 or over) came in under British law but the Old Age Contributory Pension was not introduced in Ireland until 1961 and the national pension scheme was not really consolidated till the mid 1970s. After Independence, state-run county homes continued to be responsible for people with a wide range of disabilities and ages, and there was low level provision of residential care, which was means tested and not of good quality. The widespread assumption, reinforced by the Catholic church, was that family members and, failing that, religious and voluntary associations, would assume care of older people. The voices of older people themselves were rarely heard and there was a tendency to speak for them.

In the beginning change was slow and tended to be from the ground up, piecemeal, and prompted by local people and voluntary organisations rather than by government policy. 1978 saw the formation of the first branch of Active Retirement Ireland, a national network of groups supporting older people to lead active and healthy lives for as long as possible. The Alzheimer Society of Ireland was inaugurated in 1982 and in 1986 Dr. Mary Redmond established the Irish Hospice Foundation. In 1992, Age Action was founded to promote the concerns of older people, to counter negative stereotypes and to enable them to continue to live active lives. Their stated mission is: 'To achieve fundamental change in the lives of all older people by empowering them to live full lives as actively engaged citizens and to secure their rights to comprehensive high quality services according to their changing needs.' Finally, in 1997, the National Council on Ageing and Older People was set up to advise the government on issues of health and welfare relating to the older population.

In 2000, a European Council Directive highlighted age alongside gender and race as a potential for discrimination but in Ireland any gains