

The background of the cover is a light yellow-green color with several faint, stylized leaf motifs scattered across it. Each motif consists of a stem with two leaves pointing upwards and to the right.

# **AGING AND IDENTITY**

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**A Humanities Perspective**

**Sara Munson Deats, Lagretta Tallent Lenker**

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# AGING AND IDENTITY

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## *A Humanities Perspective*

Edited by  
Sara Munson Deats and  
Lagretta Tallent Lenker

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We dedicate this book with admiration to  
LEE LEAVENGOOD.  
She teaches us by her example and enriches  
us with her energy, creativity, and  
ceaseless dedication  
to the art and purpose of living.

*Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale  
Her infinite variety.*  
William Shakespeare

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# Contents

Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction	1
<i>Sara Munson Deats and Lagretta Tallent Lenker</i>	
<b>PART I THE AGING MALE IN LITERATURE</b>	
1 The Dialectic of Aging in Shakespeare's <i>King Lear</i> and <i>The Tempest</i>	23
<i>Sara Munson Deats</i>	
2 Shakespeare Teaching Geriatrics: Lear and Prospero as Case Studies in Aged Heterogeneity	33
<i>Kirk Combe and Kenneth Schmader</i>	
3 Why? versus Why Not?: Potentialities of Aging in Shaw's <i>Back to Methuselah</i>	47
<i>Lagretta Tallent Lenker</i>	
4 Hemingway's Aging Heroes and the Concept of <i>Phronesis</i>	61
<i>Phillip Sipiora</i>	
5 Bertrand Russell in His Nineties: Aging and the Problem of Biography	77
<i>William T. Ross</i>	
<b>PART II THE AGING FEMALE IN LITERATURE</b>	
6 Work, Contentment, and Identity in Aging Women in Literature	89
<i>Rosalie Murphy Baum</i>	

7	Old Maids and Old Mansions: The Barren Sisters of Hawthorne, Dickens, and Faulkner <i>Maryhelen C. Harmon</i>	103
8	The Aging Artist: The Sad but Instructive Case of Virginia Woolf <i>Joanne Trautmann Banks</i>	115
PART III AGING IN THE COMMUNITY		
9	The Sacred Ghost: The Role of the Elder(ly) in Native American Literature <i>David Erben</i>	129
10	Aging and the African-American Community: The Case of Ernest J. Gaines <i>Charles J. Heglar and Annye L. Refoe</i>	139
11	Aging and the Continental Community: Good Counsel in the Writings of Two Mature European Princesses, Marguerite de Navarre and Madame Palatine <i>Christine McCall Probes</i>	149
12	Aging and Academe: Caricature or Character <i>Helen Popovich and Deborah Noonan</i>	161
13	Aging and the Public Schools: Visits of Charity—The Young Look at the Old <i>Ralph M. Cline</i>	169
PART IV AGING IN THE FINE AND POPULAR ARTS		
14	Aging and Contemporary Art <i>Linnea S. Dietrich</i>	183
15	The Return Home: Affirmations and Transformations of Identity in Horton Foote's <i>The Trip to Bountiful</i> <i>Carol J. Jablonski</i>	191
16	Animated Gerontophobia: Ageism, Sexism, and the Disney Villainess <i>Merry G. Perry</i>	201
17	8½ and Me: The Thirty-Two-Year Difference <i>Norman N. Holland</i>	213
	Notes	229
	Bibliography	231
	Index	247
	About the Editors and Contributors	255

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# Introduction

*Sara Munson Deats and Lagretta Tallent Lenker*

Matthew Arnold once stated that literature enshrines the best that has been said and thought in the world. This study affirms the more comprehensive view that not only literature but the humanities as a whole transmit multiple reflections on human life that have shaped our social mores for good or ill. Moreover, this study asserts that the humanities continue to bear a vital relationship to situations experienced by individuals in almost any given culture. On the one hand, literature, the arts, and the media mirror the conventional mores and attitudes of their own social milieu, even as history records these mores and attitudes. However, since all societies contain multiple clashing ideologies, these aesthetic forms may also reflect the concepts of a residual culture or anticipate the tenets of an emerging one, often establishing a dialectical tension between these competing discourses. In addition, the way in which individuals view the world is largely determined by the language they use to describe the phenomenon that they experience as reality and by the images (in literature, painting, sculpture, the performing arts, and, perhaps most of all, the media) through which they depict this phenomenon. We suggest, therefore, that these cultural forms construct as well as encode the conventional perceptions of individuals in a given society; they intervene in history even as they reflect history. It follows, therefore, that literature, the arts, and the media not only mirror society's conventions, but also create them.

The chapters in this volume examine both the ways in which the humanities have contributed to the construction of stereotypic images of aging in our society and the ways in which the humanities can be employed to deconstruct these images. The contributors to this volume believe that in

striving to become more receptive to individual diversity and to offer alternatives to society's limiting stereotypes of the elderly, we can benefit not only from studying positive examples of aging presented in literature, the arts, and the media, but also from questioning the conventional negative conceptions of aging so often inscribed in these aesthetic forms. Through this process, we may become aware that many of the stereotypes portrayed in these artistic forums as natural and universal are actually socially constructed artifacts. Moreover, by studying the ways in which the images of aging are constructed in these artistic media, we can become more cognizant of the ways in which our conceptions of aging are constructed in society. Thus, literature, the arts, and the media can provide both negative and positive examples of the receptivity we seek to acquire in viewing the aging process; and by opening up our doors of perception—reading, listening, and looking with awareness—we can learn to deconstruct the negative stereotypes of aging that we encounter, while also seeking positive exempla as templates for reconstructing ourselves and our society (Lenker and Polivka 1996, 3–4).

Not only the attitudes of the general public but also the theories of philosophers, psychologists, and various clinicians have throughout history been informed—perhaps even determined—by the insights of the humanities, particularly of literary artists. Freud, an avid reader and critic of Shakespeare, was obviously influenced by that keen observer and recorder of human behavior, and although psychoanalytic critics frequently use Freud's theories to illumine Shakespeare's playtexts, awareness of Shakespeare's insights into human motivation and responses can also help us to understand the genesis of many of Freud's theories. A number of prestigious contemporary theorists, including thanatologist Edwin Shneidman, psychologist Leonard Shengold, and feminist theorist Elaine Showalter, have noted the reciprocal relationship between literature and psychology. Shneidman (1989) employs Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick* as a prototypic case history for studying the suicidal personality; Shengold (1989) focuses on the lives and works of Anton Chekov, Charles Dickens, Rudyard Kipling, and George Orwell in his analysis of child abuse; Showalter (1985a) details the way in which Shakespeare's depiction of Ophelia has played a pivotal role in the construction of conventional ideas of female insanity (Deats and Lenker 1989, 206–207). More directly related to our study, psychologist Erik Erikson (1979) finds in the interior journey of Dr. Borg in Ingmar Bergman's film *Wild Strawberries* an exemplum of his own theories of the human life cycle, and literary critic Margaret Morganroth Gullette (1993) demonstrates how a group of "midlife decline" novels, written by male authors during the early years of the twentieth century, helped to forge the link between male creative decline and aging that is conventionally accepted even today. The work of these five theorists validates the premise that not only does art imitate life, but life, returning the compliment, frequently imitates art.

Underlying much of the commentary cited is the assumption that art, particularly literature, mirrors reality, and that by studying great art, scientists, as

well as literary critics, can gain insights into human nature. However, postmodern criticism has effectively interrogated this mimetic association between art and life, the word and the world. Yet even if we reject the view that art mirrors nature, we may agree that art certainly inscribes the ideologies of a given culture and that one of the primary goals of criticism is to make visible these ideologies. It follows, therefore, that studying the way in which stereotypes of any kind—gender, race, class, or age—are constructed within a work of art can help us to learn about—and to challenge—the construction of stereotypes within our own society.

Gerontologists have already begun to interrogate the primarily negative stereotypes of aging that have dominated both cultural and scientific forums for centuries. Challenging the traditional portrait of old age as a time of infirmity and senility, contemporary gerontologists are evolving what Harry R. Moody (1988) calls a “dialectical gerontology,” an “approach to the study of human aging that acknowledges the contradictory features of old age and tries to locate these contradictions within a developmental or historical framework” (p. 28–29). As part of this dialectical methodology, Moody calls for a complementarity between the humanities and the sciences, between meaning and causes, between hermeneutics and empiricism, in order to achieve the emancipatory goals of the new “critical gerontology.”

Acknowledging the contradictory aspects of the aging process, many gerontologists insist that the ineluctable deterioration traditionally associated with age has been exaggerated. Gerontologist Bernice Neugarten observes, “Fully half of all people now 75 to 84 are free of health problems that require special care or curb their activities. . . . Even in the very oldest group, those above 85, more than one-third report no limitation due to age” (“Older” 1988, 76). More optimistic than most practitioners, gerontologists John Rowe and Robert Kahn (1987) go so far as to state flatly, “In many data sets that show substantial average decline with age, we can find older persons with minimal physiologic loss, or *none at all*, when compared to the average of their younger counterparts” (p. 143–144, emphasis added). Moreover, although most gerontologists may be less optimistic than Rowe and Kahn, many would agree that although some physiological debility generally accompanies the aging process, loss is only half of the picture, because aging can also bring growth, expansion, even emancipation. Betty Friedan (1993, 71–103) posits a Janus-faced portrait of age: On the one hand, this portrait presents the weak face of deterioration and decline traditionally depicted by the medical profession—the face we all shun and fear; on the other hand, this portrait presents the strong face of maturation and liberation drawn by contemporary gerontologists—the face also worn by many vitally aging individuals. Most important of all, gerontologists are beginning to stress the heterogeneity of the aging process, which has too often been submerged beneath society’s reductive stereotypes. To quote gerontologist George Maddox, “The more you study the actual behavior and health of older people, the more you see that aging is a social and not just a

biological phenomenon. These terrible things you see happening to some people in age are not the inevitable ticking of the biological clock. Age is not a time bomb. Even the new emphasis on age as a crisis, the midlife crises, etc. is misleading. When you come to one of these life crises or transitions that are supposed to be so traumatic, the people who cope, grow" (Friedan 1993, 117).

But is this acceptance of heterogeneity, this acknowledgment of a strong as well as a weak face of age, only wishful thinking, a fairy tale designed to protect us from our dark fears of senescence? Friedan (1993) marshals a plethora of reassuring clinical evidence to support a resounding "No!" According to Friedan, the most recent scientific research has discovered "some *positive* changes in certain mental abilities, as well as muscular, sexual, and immune processes, that can compensate for age-related" deterioration (p. 68). Friedan's assertion finds persuasive support in the research of psychologist Marion Perlmutter (1988), who insists that "our society has inappropriately focused on decline when describing age change in late life" (p. 247). Perlmutter argues that though from a biological perspective aging may be connected with decline, from a psychological point of view, this link is both unnecessary and inaccurate. Indeed, the eminent gerontologist submits that "it is probably unnecessary, or even inappropriate, to assume distinct phenomena of development and aging," since "age change is multidirectional and multicausal" (p. 249). While recognizing the diversity of the aging process, Perlmutter does, however, acknowledge recurrent trends or patterns (although these may be culturally constructed rather than biologically determined). Studies cited by Perlmutter suggest that although some cognitive abilities may decline with age, others, such as vocabulary, remain stable over time, whereas still others, such as expertise in one's profession or occupation, may actually improve with age. Thus, although from a physical perspective aging may mean deterioration, from a psychological vantage point it may offer compensatory benefits (pp. 254–256).

Gerontologists also posit emotional growth as a component of creative aging. New research cited by Friedan (1993, 85) indicates that individuals over sixty-five who do not decline seem to become more harmoniously "integrated in their various characteristics as they grow older. They also become increasingly individual" and progressively different from their age peers who do decline (p. 85).

One aspect of this personality integration — what sociologist David Gutmann (1977, 312) refers to as "sex-role cross over" — seems to occur in the years after parenthood. According to Gutmann's cross-cultural studies, in many societies sexual polarization becomes established during parenthood in response to the presumed needs of the child for certain kinds of emotional and physical security. Thus, each sex surrenders to the other the attributes that might interfere with the special mode of security that societies have traditionally constructed for each sex. As Gutmann explains,

Male providers of physical security give up the dependency needs that would interfere with their courage and endurance; these they live out through identification with their wives and children. By the same token, women, the providers of emotional security, give up the aggression that could alienate their male providers or that could damage a vulnerable and needful child. Each sex lives out, through the other, those aspects of their nature that could interfere with adequate performance in the parental role, and that could therefore be lethal to their children. (p.312)

Gutmann (1977, 312; 1987) goes on to suggest that later in life, in many different cultures, men feel free to reclaim their passive, nurturing, contemplative qualities (attributes traditionally gendered “feminine” and repressed by men during parenthood), whereas women feel free to discover their assertive, commanding, or adventurous traits (attributes traditionally gendered “masculine” and repressed by women during parenting). According to Gutmann’s hypothesis, therefore, one of the great benefits of aging is the freedom to reclaim the buried aspects of the self.

Gutmann’s conclusions are supported by two popular recent examinations of the aging process, Terri Apter’s *Secret Paths* and Gail Sheehy’s *New Passages*. Apter (1995) typifies women in “mid-life” (forties and fifties) as follows: “Women in fact do not lose power as they age. Instead they gain it. They gain it through self-confidence and through self-knowledge. They gain it by their new directness and their refusal to repeat past patterns of compromise” (p. 76). Apter goes even further than Gutmann in insisting, “Older women become more assertive and more content” (p. 77). Moreover, she avers that “the balance of power shifts between men and women over the life span” (p. 77). In her sampling of eighty “midlife” women from many different social strata and occupational circles, she found that “older women feel relatively less dependent on their partners, and older men become relatively more dependent on theirs” (p. 77). A number of contemporary novels narrate the association of female aging with emancipation and expansion. Indeed, the motif is so prevalent in contemporary fiction that Barbara Frey Waxman (1990, 2) has identified it as a separate genre, what she calls the *Refungsroman*, or novel of ripening. Sheehy (1995) affirms this conclusion, proposing that when individuals reach their fifties, rigid role divisions dissolve and men and women become more alike, taking on the characteristics of their gender opposite (p. 318–319). All of these researchers—Gutmann, Friedan, Apter, and Sheehy—conclude that in their post-midlife years women and men achieve the freedom to develop their entire personalities, aspects of which have been repressed by society’s rigid—and, we would add, deleterious—gender polarization. Thus, according to these theorists, the liberation and integration of former suppressed facets of the self seem to be keys to vital old age.

Certain external circumstances also appear to foster a flourishing old age. Friedan (1993, 87) notes that much research done in the last ten years in

nursing homes and retirement communities reveals that autonomy, the extent to which one is able to make one's own decisions, strongly affects both performance and well-being in aging. Other theorists, such as gerontologists Harry Moody (1992) and George J. Agich (1993), also stress autonomy as a necessary ingredient of affirmative aging, both within and outside of long-term care. In her discussion of dynamic seniors, Sheehy (1995, 357–368) expands the concept of independence to include the courage to take risks and an openness to change as crucial aspects of a vital, even of a zestful old age.

Friedan (1993) identifies a final quality that gerontologists have found integral to creative aging. She observes that frequently a fulfilled old age requires a shift in priorities—a voluntary relinquishment of the sex–power race and an orientation around human relations. Simone de Beauvoir (1972), in her landmark book *The Coming of Age*, anticipates many of the findings of contemporary gerontology when she insists on the necessity of human relatedness to a meaningful life at any age: “One’s life has value so long as one attributes value to the life of others, by means of love, friendship, indignation, compassion” (p. 803). Charles J. Fahey and Martha Holstein (1993) support this view, arguing persuasively for the necessity of community involvement (be that “community” the family, the church, or the larger society) as an aspect of positive aging. Friedan (1993, 90–91) further refers to a number of studies showing that *connectedness*, as well as autonomy, has a direct effect on mortality, concluding that both of these attributes are critical to a vital, fulfilling old age. The research of gerontologist Cecelia Hurwick (Sheehy 1995) validates Friedan’s conclusions. In a longitudinal study of women in their seventies, eighties, and nineties who had remained active and creative well into old age, Hurwick describes these zestful seniors as follows: “They had mastered the art of ‘letting go’ of their egos gracefully so they could concentrate their attention on a few fine-tuned priorities. They continued to live in their homes but involved themselves in community or worldly projects that they found of consuming interest. Close contact with nature was important to them, as was maintaining a multigenerational network of friends. And as they grew older they found themselves concerned more with feeding the soul than the ego” (p. 144).

A number of feminist psychologists, among them Jean Baker Miller, Dorothy Dinnerstein, Nancy Chodorow, and Carol Gilligan, speculate that in our Western society women are conditioned to foster relationships and men to develop autonomy. The gerontological discoveries adduced so far suggest that the melding of these seemingly contradictory (but actually complementary) qualities provides one of the secrets of creative aging.

Traditionally, old age has been associated with the attainment of wisdom; however, citing the work of Margaret Clark, James E. Birren, and Erik and Joan Erikson, Friedan (1993, 119–122) argues for a new professional emphasis on the wisdom acquired through aging as a significant feature of the paradigm shift occurring in contemporary gerontology. Erik Erikson’s (1982, 61–

65; 1979) influential theory that wisdom frequently emerges in the last (or eighth) stage of life has been a catalyst to a renewed interest in the age-old association of wisdom with old age. Erikson develops his theory of the human life cycle around a Hegelian model in which the successful resolution of each life-stage crisis involves the synthesis of two dialectical qualities; thus, affirmative aging includes a balance between the thesis, Integrity (a sense of life's wholeness and coherence), and the antithesis, Despair (a sense of life's meaninglessness or stagnation), which produces the synthesis, Wisdom (an informed and detached attitude toward life when confronting death). This wisdom also represents the culmination of all the syntheses achieved in the successful resolution of previous life crises: Hope, Will, Purpose, Competence, Fidelity, Love, and Care. More empirical than Erikson, Birren (1985) further characterizes wisdom as including the following very desirable traits: reflectiveness ("meaning that the individual acts less impulsively and is more concerned with the review of relevant information" [p. 34]), mastery over emotional responses, forbearance, a wealth of experience, a familiarity with cultural backgrounds and an understanding of what decisions are acceptable, and a capacity for divergent thinking. The focus of Birren, Clark, and the Eriksons has been expanded by Paul B. Baltes, Jacqui Smith, Ursula M. Staudinger, and Doris Sowarka (1990) of the Max Planck Institute for Human Development and Education in Berlin. Baltes and his colleagues define wisdom as "an expert knowledge system in the domain of fundamental life pragmatics (life planning, life management, and life review)." Wisdom is also associated with "exceptional insight into human development and life matters," and "exceptionally good judgment, advice and commentary about difficult life problems" (p. 68, 74-75). Although the research of Baltes and his colleagues is still ongoing, the data accumulated so far has led to the hypothesis that although not all older persons will be wise, among wise persons there will be a disproportionate number of elderly individuals. For a useful survey of the literature on aging and wisdom, we refer the reader to Ronald J. Manheimer's "Wisdom and Method" (1992).

Heterogeneity, diversity, balance of contraries, wisdom—these then are the characteristics of old age identified by contemporary gerontologists, traits very different from those depicted in traditional stereotypes of aging.

To return to Moody's "dialectical gerontology," we suggest that the chapters in this collection, concentrating as they do on the treatment of aging in literature, the fine arts, and the popular media, demonstrate this dialectic through their exploration of artistic works that inscribe both the strong and weak faces of age—and multiple different combinations of empowerment and vulnerability on the spectrum between these polarities. Gerontologists Melanie Angiollilo and Charles F. Longino, Jr. (1996) warn against limiting the diversity of the aging experience to a dualistic positive-negative model, and thus reinscribing the stereotypes that one may wish to explode. Despite the conventional association of aging with physical, mental, and emotional

decline, many of these chapters discover surprisingly positive images of aging in the artistic works examined. Moreover, these positive portraits often exhibit the melding of "feminine" and "masculine" qualities identified by Gutmann, as well as the linking of autonomy and relatedness stressed by Fahey and Holstein, Friedan, and Hurwick, and the acquisition of wisdom emphasized by Baltes and his colleagues, and by Birren, Clark, and the Eriksons. Conversely, other chapters uncover the predictable negative face of infirmity and deterioration that has traditionally dominated our Western cultural perspective. However, the majority of these chapters encounter in the analyzed works the dialectical tension between positive and negative aspects of the aging process already discussed. The very multiplicity of the portraits of aging presented in these artistic works reinforces the stress on heterogeneity characteristic of contemporary gerontology.

We insist, therefore, that because of their traditional focus on the multiplicity of experience, the humanities, and particularly literary criticism, may offer valuable techniques not only for realizing the interdisciplinary interaction advocated by Moody, but also for examining the Janus-face of age limned by other contemporary gerontologists. Gerontologist Thomas R. Cole (1992a) supports this conviction, lamenting that some necessary ingredient seems to be missing from a purely scientific and professional approach to gerontology, a lack he believes can be supplied by the humanities. As Cole points out, even though postmodern theory has interrogated the validity of language as an avenue to truth, the humanities still possess a language, however contested, to talk about moral and spiritual concerns, the very concerns that Cole believes should be addressed by gerontology. Moreover, because the humanities emphasize "description, interpretation, explanation, and appreciation of the variety, uniqueness, complexity, originality, and unpredictability of human beings striving to live and know themselves," Cole sees these disciplines as offering a valuable lens through which to view the phenomenon of aging (p. xi, xiii). The chapters in this volume seek to capture the variety, uniqueness, complexity, originality, and unpredictability of the aging individual as this heterogeneity has been inscribed in the literature, art, and popular culture of many different societies. We hope through this process to contribute to the development of the critical gerontology espoused by Moody and Cole.

Although even the most ardent devotee of the humanities would hesitate to suggest that reading great literature or viewing great art necessarily makes one a better person, we submit that the art that endures (whether it be literature, painting, sculpture, or film), because it offers multiple perspectives of experience and because it evokes empathy, tends to encourage tolerance, open-mindedness, and compassion, values vital to the study of aging. Moreover, we believe that if these values are to become more fully incorporated into our society, the humanities must leave their academic ivory tower and sally forth into the marketplace to speak out and be heard. This is precisely what the chapters in this collection are attempting to achieve.

## DEFINITIONS

Perhaps we should heed the dictum of Socrates and pause to define our terms, particularly the key terms of this study, which are some of the most emotionally charged and ambiguous words in our language: "aging," "elder," "old," and "old age." From birth to death we all age, and from womb to tomb our chronological progress is obsessively and meticulously recorded: on our driver's licenses, on our passports, in the newspapers (if we are unfortunate enough to be celebrities), on the end papers of our books, and at our birthday parties. Moreover, a number of the privileges, benefits, and detriments of our society are linked to chronological age: voting, smoking, drinking, driving, being drafted, retiring. However, despite the centrality of "age" to our social agendas, "aging," "old," and their synonyms and euphemisms remain highly relative and fluid terms. Although we all age, this term does not acquire its derogatory connotations until we become a certain age, and that age differs with our life stage. The term "old" is similarly slippery. To the very young, all adults are "old." To the flower children of the 1960s, anyone over thirty was "old" and thus not to be trusted. As Kathleen Woodward (1991) observes, recounting an anecdote concerning ninety-five-year-old Amelia Freud who considered one hundred years to be "old," "People often label as 'old' only those who are older than they are" (p. 6). Official identifications of aging show a similar mobility, and citizens of the United States are variably certified as "senior" at fifty (for membership in AARP), sixty-two (for purposes of airline and entertainment discounts), and sixty-five (for social security benefits).

Historically, our Western culture has tended to focus on aging almost exclusively in terms of physical deterioration, but, as noted, gerontologists are becoming increasingly aware of the many spectrums of age: chronological age (the numerical total of years lived), biological age (the strength, health, vigor, and elasticity of the body, which frequently bear little relationship to chronological age), social age (the culturally constructed, often prescriptive behaviors arbitrarily linked to a chronological numeral), and individual age (our own self-image, which is often at variance with all the other markers of age). Researchers like James E. Birren, George L. Maddox, James Wiley, and Kathleen Woodward observe that traditional markers of age are not always in synchrony, since there may be wide disparities between biological, chronological, psychological, and social age, and a single individual may decline physically in the later years while growing psychologically. While Woodward (1991, 6) discusses the relativity of the terms "age" and "youth," Maddox and Wiley (1976) categorize the diverse processes of senescence differently, dividing them into biological age, psychological age, and social age, and insisting that "these components do not correlate in a precise way, and this fact must be taken into account in research on aging" (p. 28). Birren (1985, 30-31) adopts the categories of Maddox and Wiley and, like his colleagues, argues for the

relativity of these emotionally charged words. Affirming the variability and relativity of such terms as “aging” and “old,” Moody (1993) explains, “We are seeing an erosion of the cultural boundaries that separate youth, adulthood, and old age, and we have entered a period in which norms for age-appropriate behavior are in flux.” According to Moody, therefore, “Today old age as a period of life is becoming less determinate, less role-governed, and other life stages are moving in that direction as well” (p. xx, xix). Thus, as Birren, Maddox, Moody, Wiley, and Woodward show, the meanings of terms like “youth” and “age” are being dissolved today, as are other established boundaries in our society, such as sex, gender, sexuality, and race.

But this dissolving of boundaries, culturally desirable as it is, poses a linguistic problem for the theorist in aging studies. For if the conventional meanings of the terms “aging,” “elder,” and “old” have eroded, how can one use these terms with any precision? Yet how can one write an essay on aging without adopting the lexicon of one’s society? In answer to this dilemma, we will follow the practice of Jacques Derrida (1976)—who argues for the fluidity and indecidability of all language—employing these terms for purposes of communication while implicitly placing them under erasure for purposes of interrogation. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1976) explains Derrida’s practice of placing a term “*sous rature*,” or “under erasure”: “This is to write a word, cross it out, and then print both word and deletion. (Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary [for communication], it remains legible)” (p. xiv). Therefore, although throughout this study we apply to these imprecise, perhaps inaccurate words their conventional denotations, we ask the reader to imagine that each time these necessary but virtually meaningless terms—“aging,” “elder,” “old,” and “old age”—are employed, we are placing them under erasure in Derridean fashion.

## HISTORY

This collection is the culmination of many years of studying and writing about the reciprocal relationship between the humanities and social issues, and behind this volume lies a decade of directing conferences and editing books on this subject, including conferences on “Literature and Youth Suicide,” “Literature and Spouse Abuse,” and “Gender and Academe,” all of which developed into published collections of essays.<sup>1</sup> On October 1994, we officially joined the dialogue on aging through the presentation of an interdisciplinary conference, “Aging and Identity: A Humanities Perspective,” sponsored by eight University of South Florida departments and featuring scholars in gerontology and the humanities from both USF and across the country. These scholars gathered together to study the ubiquitous aging process and to consider some of the more promising discoveries of current research that challenge the biomedical model of aging as a process of disease and decline. Playing to a standing-room-only crowd of teachers, social workers, writers,

clinicians, and others interested in aging issues, these scholars explored attitudes toward aging depicted in the writings and art of various cultures and historical periods, and through these analyses attempted to provide alternatives to our late-twentieth-century fixation on youth. Using an interdisciplinary methodology, the participants focused on a reexamination of what aging has traditionally meant and what it can mean. Several speakers reminded the audience that although the science of gerontology is relatively new, our fascination with age is not. Throughout history, writers, artists, and other humanists have concentrated on the aging process and the pleasures and perils of the last stages of life, and these scholars demonstrated how examining these efforts can result in a reevaluation of the myths and stereotypes of aging and to a deconstruction of ingrained theories that equate the last half of life with boredom, loneliness, and misery. A total of sixteen presenters investigated various strategies for maintaining one's identity and dignity in old age and some ways that the humanities can contribute to this laudable goal. Betty Friedan capped the conference with a talk about her latest book, *The Fountain of Age*.

If the hallmark of a successful conference is the discussion generated among the audience, both during the meeting and afterwards, "Aging and Identity" was an unqualified success. Audience evaluations praised the speakers and their subject matter as "thought provoking," "rich in cultural diversity," and "a good mix of genres (film, novels, paintings, etc.)." The crux of the discussion occurred, however, when several clinical workers queried the panel of scholars about how the humanities can aid their day-to-day work with the poor, ill, and often despondent elderly. Larry Polivka, conference moderator and Director of the Florida Policy Exchange Center on Aging, responded that the humanities can help older people to understand the narratives of their own lives and can also assist gerontologists and others who work with the elderly in their efforts to preserve their clients' dignity, identity, and self-worth. (Lenker and Polivka 1996, 6). To achieve the goals enunciated by Polivka and also to promote the paradigm shift currently revolutionizing gerontology, we have collected these presentations, with a few additional invited essays, into the present volume.

## CONTENT

During the past decade, the study of aging from a humanities perspective has flourished, with a particular focus on literature as a well-stocked laboratory for gerontological research. These studies can be roughly divided into the following categories.

Category 1 comprises the anthologies of literary works (poems, short stories, dramas, etc.) treating the subject of aging that have proliferated during the past two decades. These anthologies are of great value to humanistic gerontologists (or gerontological humanists) as sources for the examination of aging.<sup>2</sup>

Category 2 contains the numerous theoretical treatises published during the last two decades that address the potential partnership between the humanities (primarily, but not exclusively, literature) and gerontology. First, these theoretical essays consider both the potential benefits and the potential hazards of this proposed collaboration, while overwhelmingly concluding that the advantages outweigh the detriments and that this reciprocal relationship can help both disciplines more fully to understand the phenomenon of aging. Second, these essays frequently employ the strategies of the humanities, particularly those of literary criticism and often those of postmodern criticism, to interrogate, probe, and comprehend the construction of aging in our society and in those of other times and places. Our study attempts to both expand and exemplify this critique by applying the techniques of this "critical gerontology" to an analysis of the treatment of aging in literary, artistic, and popular culture forums.<sup>3</sup>

Category 3 is composed of essays investigating the relationship between chronological age and literary or artistic style, between the psychology of aging and the psychology of creativity. Some of the chapters in this volume adopt this focus, exploring the dynamic between aging and creativity as revealed in the maxims of the "mature" Princess of Navarre, in the novels of the middle-aged Virginia Woolf, and in the writings of the nonagenarian Bertrand Russell.<sup>4</sup>

Category 4 incorporates the many essays and books analyzing the image of aging in the humanities, with particular reference to literature. For an excellent overview of critical analyses of the treatment of aging in literature see Anne M. Wyatt-Brown (1992), "Literary Gerontology Comes of Age." This category contains by far the richest and most diverse body of material, far too vast a corpus to survey at this time. We will, therefore, limit our discussion to a few approaches that we judge most valuable to the study of aging. Some very useful cross-cultural studies compare the treatment of aging in the literature, and less often in the plastic arts, of different cultures. Some provocative interdisciplinary studies employ the concepts of Freud, Lacan, or, less often, object-relations theorists to view the representation of aging in literature through a psychoanalytical lens. Still other commentators have discovered entire new subgenres of literature devoted to the representation of aging: the *Volledungsroman*, or novel of "concluding," the *Refungsroman*, or novel of "ripening," and the midlife progress novel. However, the vast majority of these studies adapt the "image of women" approach so popular in feminist literary criticism to an examination of the "image of aging" in literature.<sup>5</sup> The majority of chapters in this collection also adopt this popular approach, while enlarging this critique to include not only literature but also the fine and popular arts. In this endeavor, the essayists often employ a strategy similar to Elaine Showalter's (1985b) "feminist critique," while modifying these tactics to explode the stereotypes of aging rather than those of gender and to expose the biases of a gerontophobic rather than a misogynistic society.

Category 5 looks to other branches of the humanities beside literature and the arts—history, philosophy, and religion—to deepen our understanding of the meaning of the aging experience.

This collection participates in this rich and complex debate, involving itself in at least three of these five interpretive strategies while seeking to expand the dialogue to include a fuller treatment of age-related studies of the fine arts and popular culture as well as of literature. Moreover, far more deliberately than most published studies, this volume seeks to exemplify through specific analyses the theories of the new critical gerontology.

The texts analyzed in this volume cover a broad spectrum of media (literature, fine art, cinema, television), literary genres (poetry, drama, the novel, the short story, the essay, biography), time periods (early modern to postmodern), and ethnicities (British, French, Italian, Anglo-American, African American, Native American). The inclusion of multiple time periods reflects our assumption that the human angst over aging is as old as history, though as current as today's advice column. The inclusion of multiple media substantiates our belief that the concern with this human reality transcends artistic medium and genre as well as time period. However, the inclusion of multiple ethnic groups demonstrates the degree to which aging is viewed differently by different cultures in different eras, thereby validating our conviction that attitudes toward aging are largely social constructs. Indeed, the belief in the cultural interpretation—if not necessarily the biological process—of aging as a social construct provides a nexus uniting the chapters in this collection.

This volume is divided into four parts. The first part, "The Aging Male in Literature," includes five essays examining portraits of the aging patriarch in the texts of three highly influential, canonical male writers: Shakespeare, Shaw, and Hemingway. The final essay explores the biographical construction of another eminent aging writer, Bertrand Russell.

In her chapter, "The Dialectic of Aging in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *The Tempest*," Sara Munson Deats posits that long before gerontologists discovered the dialectic of aging, Shakespeare was exploring this tension. She argues that Lear, in particular, combines the face of senescent decline traditionally drawn by pessimistic practitioners in the medical profession with the face of growth and liberation depicted by contemporary gerontologists. Prospero, on the other hand, at least by the opening of *The Tempest*, has learned the lessons taught by experience and has emerged as a figure empowered by age. Yet despite these obvious differences, both characters, according to Deats, anticipate to a remarkable degree the two faces of age identified by Friedan and many contemporary gerontologists in their deconstruction of the age mystique.

Kirk Combe and Kenneth Schmader, in their chapter, "Shakespeare Teaching Geriatrics: Lear and Prospero as Case Studies in Aged Heterogeneity," like Deats, focus on the two faces of age as represented by Shakespeare, but

whereas Deats interprets both Lear and Prospero as embodying to different degrees both the positive and negative aspects of aging, Combe and Schmader view these two elder monarchs as diametrically opposed portraits of aged individuals, with Lear exemplifying the frail elder and Prospero the well elder. Using the principles of geriatric assessment, including a comparison with similar examples from the Duke Geriatric Evaluation and Treatment (GET) Clinic, Combe and Schmader appraise these two characters as case histories representing positive and negative aspects of aging. The authors conclude that compared to present-day clinical case histories, Shakespeare provides a rich and very different narrative of aging individuals that may prove useful in teaching geriatrics and gerontology. The first two chapters in this volume thus exemplify the collaboration between the humanities and gerontology advocated by critical gerontology by presenting two studies that employ the methodologies of literary criticism and medical case history respectively to analyze the same author and the same texts.

Lagretta Tallent Lenker's chapter, "Why? versus Why Not?: Potentialities of Aging in Shaw's *Back to Methuselah*," examines the double visage of aging as depicted in the work of another influential English playwright, George Bernard Shaw. As Lenker notes, *Heartbreak House* proffers both the positive and negative aspects of aging in the octogenarian Captain Shotover, while *Caesar and Cleopatra* presents an exemplar of affirmative aging in its eponymous superman. Lenker's work concentrates, however, on the potentialities of aging as dramatized in Shaw's magnum opus on aging, *Back to Methuselah*, concluding that Shaw's extrayaganza anticipates the discoveries of humanistic gerontology in several ways: in its stress on the social constructiveness of traditional concepts of aging, in its advocacy of a multidisciplinary approach to the study of aging, and in its realization that society must totally change its attitudes toward aging if human potential is to be achieved. Lenker concludes that Shaw provides a revolutionary vision of the potentialities of aging that has rarely been equaled.

Almost as optimistic, however, is Phillip Sipiora's analysis of the treatment of age in the works of another highly esteemed male writer, Ernest Hemingway. Sipiora's chapter, "Hemingway's Aging Heroes and the Concept of *Phronesis*," investigates the portrayal of elderly male characters in Hemingway's texts, ranging from the short story, "A Clean Well-Lighted Place," to the novels *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms* to the novella *The Old Man and the Sea*. Drawing upon the theories of Erik Erikson and other researchers into the association of wisdom and aging, Sipiora discovers that the elderly "codeholders" in these texts, whether they be protagonists or relatively minor figures, share a quality that Hemingway consistently links with fulfilled aging, the quality of *phronesis* or practical judgment. Sipiora concludes that the *phronesis* shared by Hemingway's "beloved gerontes" becomes an index of the respect that the author feels for the elderly, who through experience and suffering have acquired practical wisdom.