

Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction

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Aging and Vulnerability III

Hello, and let's look at some of the common stereotypes of the old and how this are useful for us to think in terms of vulnerability. One of the most positive stereotypes you have about old age is to do with the fact that old age should be indomitable, that it continues to be whatever it was during its youth, the person was during their youth. So one of the best examples for this is of course, Tennyson's "Ulysses", which begins with how here is Ulysses who is an ideal king and who has an aged wife and he is kind of dismissive. But towards the end of it, he will go to the fact that he also has friends, his mariners with whom he worked and with whom he toiled. And as he says over there, for them, he speaks about the fact that "my mariners, souls that have toil'd and wrought and thought with me, that ever with a frolic welcome took the thunder and the sunshine and opposed free hearts, free foreheads".

"You and I are old", he says, "old age hath yet his honour and his toil. Death closes all, but something ere the end, some work of noble note may yet be done. Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods. The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks: The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep moans round with many voices. Come my friends, 't is not too late to seek a newer world". And then he goes to the part where he says, "Tho' much is taken, much abides. 'Tho we are not now that strength which in old days moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are; one equal temper of heroic hearts, made weak by time and fate, but strong in will". If you look at what he's saying over there, when he speaks about his marinas, there is, first of all, the past within, they were an equal temper, etc. Men who strove with gods, people who worked and who fought, know all of that. But now, as he says, they have been made weak by time and faith and yet what remains for them? They have strong wills.

"And those strong wills, the fact that old age hath yet his honour and his toil", he gestures towards the vulnerability. One, that closes all, two, the fact that they are made weak by time and faith. "That they are not now the strength which in old days moved earth and heaven", we're told about each of those and yet he says, we can still do something. And in some ways, what you see here is the vulnerability of old age, but also the resilience of old age, that the old are not necessarily always vulnerable, weak, broken.

No, you can be vulnerable and they are. Ulysses makes no bones about the fact that they are not now what once they were, that they have been made weak by time and faith, that death closes all, that is just there waiting for them. And yet he says, we can still do something, a little bit, something erudite, some work of noble note may yet be done. And that's resilience. So, literature does, of course, focus on vulnerability and the vulnerability of old age, but it also focuses on the resilience, the possibility of adaptation. As he says, we cannot do what we did once, something we can still do.

And that's something is what the old would like to strive for. You can read "Ulysses" by Tennyson alongside Yeats' "Four Ages of Man", which is interesting because it speaks about man and man is waging a fight. He wages a fight against the body, against the heart, against the mind. And finally, he wages a fight with God and that's of course, old age. And as he says, the last couple, two lines, the last couplet, "now his wars on God begin at stroke of midnight, God shall win".

If you look at Tennyson's "Ulysses", "The Four Ages of Man" Yeats's and Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle Into that Good Night", all of them speak about the fact that you can fight, but there is only one end to that fight. That is death: "At stroke of midnight, God shall win". Tennyson's "Ulysses" speaks about the fact that death closes all. And Dylan Thomas, of course, speaks about the fact that even as he exhorts the old, his father specifically, but generally the old as well, then he says, "do not go gentle into that good night". The good night he knows is there, waiting. There is the close of day, there is the light, dying of the light. He of course says that "Do not go gentle into that good night. Old age should burn and rave at close of day. Rage against the dying of the light".

And then he will give you wise men, good men, wild men, and then finally grave men. And lastly, he'll speak about his father, who is old, dying. And for each of them, even as he says, do not go gentle into that good night or rage against the dying of the light, even as he offers them these modes of dealing with old age and the kinds of sorrows that he brings, it was also a mode of resilience and of adaptation, that you do not succumb to the vulnerability of old age, but that you can fight against it, that you can do something, that you will rage against the dying of the light. It is also, of course, inevitably there within these poems that eventually the light will die out, death will close all. At midnight, God will win.

But you do not go gentle into that good night. You do not need to wither away; you do not need to succumb to the many evils that old age brings along with it. You can fight, you can burn and rave at close of day, you can rage against the dying of the light. So, in some ways when these poets speak about old age, it is not the kind of vulnerability of old

age and the acknowledgement that Lear makes, “age is unnecessary”. Instead, here you have poets who are saying that dying is there, the inevitable end of all mankind, but you can rage against the dying of the light, you can war upon God, you can “strive, seek, find, never to yield”, as Ulysses says.

So, you have two different visions of the vulnerability of old age and what you do with it. One, you can beg for raiment, food, a bed, Lear did that. But you can also be like these people that Yeats and Tennyson and Thomas speaking about, a person who will rage against the dying of the light. You also have, in poetry, the depiction of the loneliness of old age and you see this in Wordsworth who speaks in “The Old Cumberland Beggar”, repeats a line which is that “he was so old, he seems not older now, he travels on a solitary man”. He travels on a solitary man.

Now, it's not that the old choose loneliness or they choose to be alone, they choose to be solitary. It is that as you grow old, several of the people with whom you spent your life, they die around you. Sometimes you are the last man left standing, you are the last person in your old age. So, this is done with great tenderness and beauty in A.R. Ammon's “In View of the Facts” where he begins with, “The people of my time are passing away, my wife is baking for a funeral, a 60-year-old who died suddenly, when the phone rings and it's Ruth, we care so much about in intensive care”. Think about that. You're baking for a friend's funeral and at the same time they get a phone call about somebody else, a friend, who is in intensive care.

We are looking at one by one friends dying and as he writes, at the same time, they're getting used to so many leaving, that as you grow older, people will leave, that nobody lasts forever. A.R. Ammons offers you this contrast between how when you are young, it's about weddings and babies that initially you hear, but now it's this, that or the other and somebody else gone or on the brink. So impending death and as we began in the first lesson when I spoke about the fact that you cannot escape from death, that old age is also frightening, is also scary because you know that the end of old age is death and A.R. Ammons also emphasizes that, is this, that or the other, somebody else gone or on the brink.

“Well, we never thought we would live forever and now it looks like we won't”. Then of course, he itemizes the many vulnerabilities of old age. He says “some of us are losing a leg to diabetes, some don't know what they went downstairs for, some know that a hired watchful person is around” and so on and so forth. So the many vulnerabilities of old age that illnesses are exacerbated, that sometimes you don't remember what you went downstairs for, but sometimes there's only a hired person around to watch out for you. Now all of these and he'll speak also about the fact that even as you grow old, there are

men who are left in empty houses, widows who decide to travel a lot and then he comes to once again the idea of resilience and adaptation.

“Until we die, we will remember every single thing. Recall every word, love every loss. Then we will, as we must, leave it to others to love, love that can grow brighter and deeper till the very end, gaining strength and getting more precious all the way”. It's a wonderful affirmation of life, right? That there is and the poem will itemize along with the leg loss to diabetes, there is congestive heart failure, there is brain tumours, all kinds of things that are happening. But he says there is also love and there is memory, there is the remembering of every single thing, every word. There is loving for everybody. And then he says “we will leave as we must and then we leave it to others to love and love which will grow brighter and deeper till the very end”. That old age doesn't necessarily mean that you sink into a morass where there is no affection, where there is no memory of good things.

And instead, till the very end, you can gain strength, not that the physical old person gains strength, but that the love gains strength and becomes more precious all the way. Again, like I said, affirmation of what is possible in old age. It is not necessarily the possibilities that are there for the young. But these are nonetheless possibilities. And these are possibilities that people such as A.R. Ammons as well as previous poets that we looked at Dylan Thomas, WB Yeats and Dylan Thomas, they're all speaking about the possibilities that still are available to the old.

So you have somebody like David Bottoms who will then offer you the frailty of old age. And it's there's physical decrepitude, there is mental decrepitude. And David Bottoms has this again, tender loving poem about his father's left hand where he says, “Sometimes my old man's hand flutters over his knee, flaps in crazy circles, falls back on his knee”. The hand, if you are familiar with the old, you know that as old age advances, hands begin to tremble, you lose the steadiness that once you possess, you lose the control of your body that you once possessed.

Here you have a hand which flutters over his knee, flaps in crazy circles, and sometimes falls back. “It leans for an hour on that bony ledge”. And that's evocative also of not just hands and knees, but also people leaning on ledges, it's bony. And that's of course also the boniness that accompanies old age. All the flesh falls away to finally the bones are all that's left. And then there is the concluding part of that poem where he speaks about “Sometimes when the evening closes down his window and rain blackens into ice on the sill, it trembles like a sparrow in a storm. Then full dark falls and trembles less and less until it's still”. Back to the idea of there stillness, dark falling, all of it. If you think about it, several of these poets are offering death as a full stop of course, inevitably so, but also release. It is not necessarily something to be scared of.

The dying of the light, yes, you rave, you burn, but the dying of the light is inevitable. And there is also release in that dying of the light. So old age, which is accompanied by physical decrepitude, the vulnerability that is inherent in the old because their body is failing as epitomized in “My Father's Left Hand” by David Bottoms also offers you a way out: death.

There is also Dorianne Laux writing about her mother who suffered a stroke and she describes how her mother is now. “The stroke took whole pages of words, random years torn from the calendar, the names of roses... She can't think, can't drink her morning tea, do her crossword puzzle in ink. She's afraid of everything, the sound of the front door opening, light falling through the blinds” and goes on to the fact that because of the “light falling through the blinds, pulls her legs up so the bright bars won't touch her feet. I help her with the buttons on her sweater”. And here you have both physical as well as mental breakdown. So, a person, an old person who has suffered a stroke, who is no longer able to find the words that she's seeking for, the stroke took whole pages of words. It takes random years, which have been torn from the calendar. Think of the violence over there, torn from the calendar. It takes away the names of roses.

And the poem also, of course, speaks about the fact that here was “roses were leaning over her driveway”, that they were part and parcel of her everyday life. And now she can't think, she can't drink her morning tea. How can you think if you have lost words? She can't drink her morning tea. And then there is do her crossword puzzle in ink. And here you have a harking back to the person she once was, the mother, who would do her crossword puzzle in ink because she did not need to erase it. She was so certain of the words. And now she's afraid of everything. The sound of the front door opening, light falling through the blinds, pulls her legs up so the bright bars won't touch her feet. Then you have a description of the child who looks after the mother, the speaker of the poem, who sings to her, does up her buttons, looks after her.

And then finally tucks her in, tucks her in because she's tired and no one knows where she's been. Now, when we think about being tucked in, when we think about being taken care of, somebody doing up somebody's buttons, think of it as parents doing it for small children. And here the roles have been reversed. It's a daughter doing it for her mother, tucking her in, doing up her buttons, explaining things to her. And you see how old age reverts to childhood, the vulnerability that is that of childhood, which we all recognize that children are vulnerable, children are helpless, children have very precarious lives, is also the vulnerability of old age. And that vulnerability of old age is something that the poets that we've been examining highlight, but they also give you answers.

And one of the most famous poems about old age is Yeats's “Sailing to Byzantium”, which weighs in with “An aged man is but a paltry thing. A tattered coat upon a stick,

unless soul claps its hands and sings, and louder sing for every tatter in its mortal dress, nor is there singing school, but studying monuments of its own magnificence". Now, the tattered coat upon a stick, gesturing once more to the fact that as you grow old, your life is left in tatters, it's all torn out, okay? And it's a stick, you don't even have a body, your body is all bones. But you can still surmount this old age, soul can clap its hands and sing. So, there's of course this idea, a stereotype again, of the indomitable soul of man. You can sing and louder sing for every tatter in your mortal dress.

So you might be mortal, your body is mortal, but your soul can sing. So, there is the wear and tear of the human body, but there is also the triumph of the human soul. And that's in one sense, a harking back to what we began with. And the innocent also spoke about the fact that we are not now with strength which ones we have, but we can still, we still have will. That will is enough to help us to go out there and strive and seek and find etc, etc. W.B. Yeats instead of saying "strive and seek and find" speaks about how soul can clap its hands and "sing and louder sing for every tatter in its mortal dress". So, mortality clothes the human body, but the soul of course can still be singing.

You have Jenny Joseph writing Warning when she speaks about an old woman as she says, when "I'm an old woman, I should wear purple with a red hat which doesn't go and doesn't suit me. And I should spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves and satin sandals and say we've no money for butter. I shall sit down in the pavement when I'm tired and gobble up samples in shops, press alarm bells, run my stick along the public rails and make up for the sobriety of my youth. I should pick flowers in other people's gardens and learn to spit". And then this female speaker turns to her partner says, "you can wear terrible shirts and you can grow more fat. Eat three pounds of sausage at a go. Only bread and pickle for a week".

Can do all kinds of crazy things if you look at it. And then there is, "But now we must have clothes that keep us dry, pay our rent, not swear in the street, set a good example for the children, must have friends to dinner, read the papers. Maybe I ought to practice a little now? So people who know me are not too shocked and surprised when suddenly I am old and started to wear purple". This poem in one sense inverts everything that we've been saying so far, because here is a person who's making plans for old age, making plans which are outrageous.

I'll behave badly. I will not dress properly. She offers her partner the option of growing fat, eating unhealthy food, saying do what you like, enjoy yourself. As opposed to now. So, in adulthood, you have to have clothes that keep you dry, you have to pay the rent, you have to set good example for the children, you have to do what is expected of you. So, old age in that sense is seen as liberating. Think again of this as a mode of resilience, that you can be indomitably old, or you can be like this, that you use old age as a relief

from all the strictures that governed your life during your youth.

And this is Jenny Joseph in "Warning", who speaks about how, as she grows old, she is going to do completely crazy things, including spitting in other people's gardens, pluck flowers. As she says, she will pick flowers in other people's gardens and learn to spit. And she says that maybe she ought to do some of this practice a little now. So people who know me are not too shocked and surprised when suddenly I'm old and start to wear purple". So you can see old age not necessarily as something terrible, which you will be afraid of and which will lead to the breakdown of your body and your mind. You can look at it as a time when all the rules that govern people in their maturity and in their youth are thrown out the window, you can do whatever you choose.

An early example of this form of old age was seen in Lewis Carroll's parody of the poem by Robert Southey, "The Old Man's Comforts And how he gained them". Now Southey's poem is very moralistic. So here is the example, "You are old Father William, the young man cried" and "you are but you're hale and hearty". Father William says, "In the days of my youth, I remember'd that youth would fly fast and abuse not my health and my vigor at first, that I might need that I never might need them at last". So, he did not do things which would have been detrimental for his fitness when he was young. And as a result, when he's old and pretty, he's hale and hearty. Carroll of course makes a mockery of this when he writes in his poem, "You're Old Father William", "You are old Father William", the young man said, "And your hair has become very white, and yet you incessantly stand on your head until you think at your age it is right". "In my youth", Father William replied to his son, "I feared it would injure the brain. But now that I'm perfectly sure I have none, why, I do it again and again".

And of course, there are three other stanzas following from this as to how in old age, Lewis Carroll's Father William does stuff which you would not expect an old man to do. And he says it's because "I have the ability in old age to do what I could not do in my youth". In his youth, he says over here, he feared it would injure the brain. Now in his old age, and this is of course, a stereotype which is being overturned, right, that in your old age, you're supposed to suffer mental decrepitude, that your mental resources decline. Says now I don't have a brain, I can stand on my head. So old age does not necessarily have to be seen in terms of only vulnerability. It can also be seen in terms of enjoyment.

And the Father William poems work towards that. So, if we look across literature, and we did some from Shakespeare, we did popular fiction, which would be your Agatha Christie, but you also have a range of literary fiction, which you might like to think about. So, we looked at texts such as Christie's and Lear's and a lot of poetry. But there are also texts which you might like to think about from fiction. So, if you're interested in looking at stories about Dementia and Alzheimer's, and how the mind fails, and yet does

not fail entirely, you might like to look at Emma Healy's *Elizabeth is Missing*, which is about an old woman whose mind has definitely failed. But there are pockets of clarity and because of those pockets of clarity, she's able to solve a murder mystery, which was there in the past.

You have stories such as Bernice Reubens' *The Waiting Game*, and Richard Osman's *Thursday Murder Club*, which are about old people who are doing things even in their old age. So, in Bernice Reubens' *Waiting Game*, which is set in an old age home, as is the *Thursday Murder Club*, you have people who live in an old age home, but continue to have very vibrant lives. So, in the *Waiting Game*, there is a woman who is running a small blackmail racket from her nursing home crew. In the *Thursday Murder Club*, the nursing home people, the old age home people, they are of course interested in solving murders. If you were to look at Indian fiction, Shashi Deshpande has a range of books, all of which have featured old women and the kinds of lives that they have in their old age, and posit those as against the youthful lives of the protagonists of the books.

So the range of books that's available, plentiful. And when you look at these, literature does not give you just one perspective on old age. It shows you vulnerability over and over again, but it also shows you resilience. It shows you adaptability to the changed circumstances of old age. So, whether you're looking at Jenny Joseph's "Warning", where the person is going to be wearing purple and doing all of that, whether you're looking at Dylan Thomas saying "rage against the dying light", or Tennyson offering you this very moralistic, but very also gung-ho kind of portrayal of what is possible in old age.

They offer you various ways of tackling the vulnerability of old age. Where Lear wants to beg, you also have an Adam that is taken care of. Where Lear is thrown out, runs around on a heap, in a storm, naked. Where there are other characters in that book, old Gloucester has his eyes pulled out. There is vulnerability of a terrible kind for the old. There is vulnerability for women of a terrible kind, because if you're not a wife, then what are you in your old age? There's nothing left for you.

But they also, all of them, offer other options. And inevitably, invariably, they also offer the option that there is death. So, and this is what I would like to conclude with that death is not necessarily seen as something terrible to be afraid of. Death is seen as inevitable, but also ending a life. And you can choose how to live that life. There is, in conclusion, Tennyson's poem, "Tithonus", which is about the fact of somebody who continues to grow old. So, if aging is seen as frightening, "Tithonus" is the most frightening example you would ever find of a person who continues to age but will never die. So, in that sense, death is also seen for the old as an escape, the end, a finality with which there is no arguing. So, old age and vulnerability, yes, but also the fact that vulnerability also ends

with death, unlike for Tithonus, who will continue to grow old and older and older and never die. So, we can see the vulnerability, yes, but we also know that vulnerability ends. Thank you.