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“SPRIGHTLY AT EIGHTY-TWO”: GROWING OLD IN AMY HERZOG’S PLAYS

Anna Gaidash (corresponding author)
Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University (Kyiv, Ukraine)
ORCID iD: 0000-0001-8200-2875
a.haidash@kubg.edu.ua

Yuliia Ivanova
Grammarly, Inc. (Kyiv, Ukraine)
ORCID iD: 0000-0003-2886-2289
yuliia.ivanova@grammarly.com

One of the challenges introduced by the contemporary drama is representation of old characters as protagonists on stage. The article tackles the representations of growing old in Amy Herzog’s plays “After the Revolution” and “4000 Miles” relying on the physical and sentimental markers through the examination of the adaptation of the female character to old age. The authors analyze the dramatis personae through the lens of literary gerontology.

Growing old in Herzog’s plays is developed from the perspective of intergenerational relationships in both plays. In “4000 Miles”, nonagenarian Vera and young Leo represent a meaningful synthesis of adolescence and late adulthood. In this drama, old age embodies wisdom for younger generation linking grandchildren and grandparents. “After the Revolution” gives another example of intergenerational bond between octogenarian Vera and her granddaughter Emma. Vera’s intervention into Emma’s family case investigation has a positive impact on relationships between them. In addition, Emma gets on well with another senior representative, Morty, Vera’s admirer. There are no prejudices or stereotypes about old age in their conversations, but only Emma’s support and encouragement to undermine the stereotype that old people cannot be involved into romantic relationships.

The ways of ageist stereotypes subversion are presented by the extended description of physical process of growing old; using vocabulary rich of aphorisms and slang words to illustrate the elderly’s wisdom and at the same time awareness of the modern language; portraying the elderly as individuals with a wide range of social activities and occupations; older characters are shown as protagonists of the plays, not only minor characters.

Key words: *growing old, Amy Herzog, dynamics, aged woman character, self-stereotyping, drama, literary gerontology, markers.*

Гайдаш А. В., Іванова Ю. М.

«Жвава у 82 роки»: старшання у п’єсах Емі Герцог

Одним із викликів сучасної драматургії є зображення літніх персонажів як головних героїв на театральному коні. У статті вивчаються особливості процесу старшання у п’єсах Емі Герцог «Після революції» та «4000 миль». Авторки статті вирізняють соматичні та психологічні маркери цього процесу в рамках вивчення пристосування найстарішого персонажу дилוגії до літнього віку. У статті проаналізовано низку дійових осіб крізь призму літературознавчої геронтології. Вивчається як суспільне ставлення до старших персонажів, так і самостереотипізація власне літніх дійових осіб.

Старіння у п'єсах Герцог "Після революції" та "4000 миль" представлено крізь призму міжпоколінних взаємовідносин. У драмі "4000 миль" Віра та Лео, молодші дійові особи, відіграють важливу роль медіаторів поколінь. У цій драмі старість уособлює мудрість для молодого покоління, пов'язуючи онуків і бабусь/дідусів. Драма «Після революції» наводить ще один приклад зв'язку між поколіннями, а саме між 80-річною Вірою та її онукою Еммою. Втручання Віри у розслідування сімейної справи Емми позитивно впливає на стосунки між ними. Крім того, Емма добре ладнає з іншим літнім персонажем, Морті, шанувальником Віри. У їхніх розмовах немає табу чи стереотипів щодо старості, а лише підтримка та заохочення Емми спростувати дискримінаційний міф про те, що літнім людям непотрібні романтичні стосунки.

Варіанти мінімізації ейджистських стереотипів представлені розширеним описом фізичних особливостей старшання; використання лексики, багатой на афоризми і сленг, які водночас ілюструють досвід й адаптацію до сучасних мовних варіацій; зображення літніх дійових осіб як активних громадян суспільства та з точки зору персонасфери як протагоністів, а не лише другорядних персонажів.

Ключові слова: старшання, Емі Герцог, динаміка, літній жіночий персонаж, самостереотипізація, драма, літературознавча геронтологія, маркери старіння.

*I like digging holes and hiding things inside them
When I grow old, I hope I won't forget to find them
"No Roots" (2016) Alice Merton*

Introduction. One of the references in the exposition of a popular song "No Roots" of a German-born singer is to the old age: namely, the process of aging and overcoming one of its predicaments — memory loss. The musical hit is aimed at the future which then 23-year old songwriter, Merton, associates with growing old or aging. As a result of the dramatic increase in the average life expectancy the topic of aging becomes widespread nowadays. It brings alongside age-stereotypes or misconceptions about elderly people. These stereotypes are often ageist in nature. Ageism is prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination against individuals in terms of age. Not only as a reflection of socio-cultural issues, but also as the way to shape a social world, fiction have been building connections with gerontology for quite some time. In 1990, Wyatt-Brown claims that the relationships between aging and literature has a gap that needs to be filled in (Wyatt-Brown, 1990, p. 301). Maierhofer argues that inasmuch the aspect of gender, race, and class are already incorporated into literary studies, the notions of old age and aging should be taken into account as well (Maierhofer, 1999, p. 256). In "After the Revolution" (2010) and "4000 Miles" (2012), authored by modern US woman dramatist Amy Herzog, growing old of Vera Joseph from octogenarian to nonagenarian character manifests some of the above mentioned aspects as well as representing both age-stereotypes and possible strategies of their subversion.

The aim. Following the appeal of literary gerontology to reappraise stereotypes, standards and conventions in terms of age in fiction (Switzky, 2016, p. 139), the article examines the adaptation of the female character to old age in fiction. **The aim** of the paper is to determine the process of growing

old in Herzog's dramatic texts. The following tasks are set to fulfill the purpose: study the elderly characters in the selected plays; detect and correlate the markers of growing old in Herzog's texts; classify ageist stereotypes in the studied plays; detect strategies of subversion of ageist stereotypes.

Theoretical background. Literary gerontology is a branch of literary studies examining the representations of old age in fiction in order to understand the experience of aging and explain what it means to grow old. Namely, literary gerontology is a critical analysis which does not focus on biological process of growing older, but on what growing older means socially, politically and culturally in fictional texts (Kriebiernegg, 2015, p. 839). Meanwhile, the branch raises awareness of old age stereotypes in literature and encourages literary critics to explore the cases of ageism in fictional texts. Thus, literary gerontology enables the scholars to work out the ways of combating ageism. In addition, the study of late adulthood can be an exciting and rewarding topic of research and teaching.

The study of literary gerontology had rapidly entered the academic mainstream. Weiland argues that gerontology influences fiction and it makes drastic changes in reader's responses to questions of age (Weiland, 1990, p. 436). As a result, readers become aware of ageist stereotypes in fictional works and understand better the irrelevance of ageism.

Apart from numerous fundamental studies and papers of aging in prose texts (A. DeFalco, A. Elmhindi, S. Edelstein, T. M. Falkner, J. Fiore, H. Gardiner, D. Gramshammer-Hohl, K. Gustafson, M. Hepworth, J. King, U. Kriebiernegg, R. Maierhofer, M. Oró-Piqueras, S. Pincharoen, H. Small, I. Stončikaitė, B. F. Waxman, K. Woodward),

the research of old age in drama gains momentum. An early form of human communication, drama serves as a mirror for the reflection of societal anxieties at all times. Switzky assumes that “[m]odern drama and literary gerontology echo each other most directly in their search for new structures that might accommodate the pluralism and specificity of experience over time” (Switzky, 2016, p.137). Theatrical aspects of aging in drama are in the academic limelight of M. Mangan (“Staging ageing”, 2013), M. M. Gullette (“Aged by culture”, 2004), and V. B. Lipscomb (“Performing Age in Modern Drama”, 2016). The monograph on discourse of aging in US drama explores the dynamics of old age via intergenerational conflicts, life reviews, death drive, nursing homes, ageist (self)stereotypes and their undermining, late style (Gaidash, 2019).

Research methods. Throughout the 20th century, a number of generations of US playwrights have generated the elderly protagonists in “Desire under the Elms”, “Death of a Salesman”, “The Milk Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore”, “The Long Christmas Dinner”, “Three Tall Women”, “All Over”, “Make Way For Tomorrow”, “The Oldest Profession”, etc. In the 21st century, Amy Herzog contributes the elderly dramatis personae to the array of old characters on American stage. The playwright mentions: “<...> our audience is largely older. Some people complain and we should be concerned about not having more young people going to the theater. But it’s amazing that we have that older generation coming out to see our work. So it seems especially important to write some characters they’d be able to identify with. But it’s not like I have some political or virtuous mission with it — I’m just interested” (Cantor, Herzog, 2021, p. 49).

“After the Revolution” opens Herzog’s dilogy with its plot-line developing around the family of Marxists. Vera’s granddaughter Emma, law school student investigates a case of her grandfather Joe. Emma is a facilitator in the sense suggested by H. Donow: because “<...> the need for generational continuity cries out for reconciliation <...> there appear young characters <...> who are the instruments by which this conflict is resolved” in the fictional texts on aging and old age (Donow, 1994, p. 74). The historical research conducted by Emma reveals a grim truth which makes the entire family collide with abrupt consequences. As it turns out, Vera’s late husband is blacklisted for his outspoken political prejudices. The octogenarian Vera intervenes into the process of investigation and illustrates genuine interest towards historical events demonstrating the potential of a memory-transmitter of her family. While strengthening the intergenerational ties the elderly character adapts to her way of growing old, too.

In “4000 Miles” (following “After the Revolution”), a 21-year old Leo, Vera’s grandson, seeks the answer to the question how to grow up and take responsibility

in a confusing and complicated world. Leo asks for advice his grandmother (now nonagenarian), who is eager to help him. The dramatic image of Vera is based on Amy Herzog’s grandmother as well as Leo’s character is based on the playwright’s cousin. In Herzog’s words, “4000 Miles” is “very character-driven, with basically no plot” (Cantor, Herzog, 2021, p. 46). Like Emma in the first play of the dilogy, Leo Joseph-Connell plays the role of a “meditational figure <...> whose task is to heal the rupture between the generations” (Donow, 1994, p. 76).

Somatic and psychological markers of growing old. Relying on Gaidash’s framework of analysis of the discourse of aging in drama (Gaidash, 2019, p. 378–379) we study the representation of growing old in Herzog’s plays according to the following criteria: somatic markers (physical state of being), psychological markers (e.g., mindset, feelings, language) and the markers of self/stereotyping (prejudices and self-judgments).

In the play “After the Revolution”, there are predominantly the somatic corporeal markers, but psychological are noticed as well (4 episodes). Vera is “<...> *sprightly at eighty-four, but fragile and maybe a little off balance*” (Herzog, 2013, p. 9). The somatic markers of Vera’s physical appearance seem to correspond to her age. The playwright outlines the female character in her eighties, demonstrating the natural physical state of aged person. Another feature of the character’s somatic marker is an impairment of hearing:

VERA: *I guess I’ll allow that.*

BEN: *We were telling / Leo-*

Vera: *Louder* (Herzog, 2013, p. 10).

Additionally, the next quotes similarly demonstrate hearing defects of the elderly character: “*I can’t hear a word any of you is saying or maybe that was the point*” (Herzog, 2013, p. 15). “*You have to talk louder if you want me to hear*” (Herzog, 2013, p. 39). The fact that the woman struggles to hear is supported by the following dialogue from the play in which Vera has a conversation where she is not able to hear properly and asks for repetition of the same name twice:

VERA: *What’s his name again?*

EMMA: *Miguel.*

VERA: *What?*

EMMA: *Miguel.*

BEN: *(in his best Spanish accent): Miguel Roja, de Puerto Rico* (Herzog, 2013, p. 15). Eventually, among other somatic markers, in “After the Revolution”, the markers of poor hearing abilities prevail.

Herzog’s protagonist in “After the Revolution” finds it strenuous to hear, likewise she struggles to understand rapid speech. Hence: “VERA: *you could speak a little slower, and restate your point at the end*” (Herzog, 2013, p. 13). Vera puts forward her own observation of getting older: “*(Embarrassed and frustrated) You know my hearing really isn’t*

very good. I can't find words anymore, either. I say 'whaddaycallit' all the time. I sound like a dummy" (Herzog, 2013, p. 40). This somatic marker suggests how senior people in their late adulthood could feel about themselves. For Vera it is not always easy to find the proper words immediately: "<...> because people have become so...whaddaycallit apathetic" (Herzog, 2013, p. 41).

The elderly character is constantly surrounded by younger generations — her late husband's children and grandchildren. It helps Vera keep up with news and be always aware of life updates. However, the fact that the woman belongs to the different generation forms another layer of psychological markers. One of them is backed by woman's aptness to remember historical events of her lifetime and she eagerly inserts them into speech:

VERA: Well, not in my lifetime.

WEL: What not in your lifetime, Vera?

VERA: Everything what we were fighting for" (Herzog, 2013, p. 17).

People in their late adulthood experience nostalgia for the past (Gergov, Stoyanova, 2013) that is true of Herzog's protagonist, too. Hence a generation gap flows from age discrepancies which cause misunderstandings and variance between the characters: "VERA: I look at most people your age, at your cousins, and I don't know what they're for. I don't know how they're going to feel when they get to be my age. When they look back and see how they spent their time. I look back and I feel proud" (Herzog, 2013, p. 90). This psychological marker of social distancing results in the idea that the elderly's values and ethics differ significantly with the youth's ones. Vera's rather opinionated and at the same time self-nostalgic attitude towards the grandchildren shows her anxiety and uncertainty about their future.

Not only is Vera the representative of the elderly in drama, but also Morty, a minor character who acts only in Scene 5. A little younger than Vera, Morty wants to be involved with her:

MORTY: You're busy, I understand. I was busy once, too, I can faintly remember. How is your beautiful grandmother?

EMMA: She's well. I mean she still misses Joe a lot, so...

MORTY: No disrespect to your grandfather, who I greatly admired, but as soon as she is fully recovered, I hope she will go on a date with me (Herzog, 2013, p. 31).

Regardless his age Morty (76) seems to be physically attracted to Vera. Societal beliefs emphasize on love affairs' decay with aging, yet Herzog's characters prove the opposite:

EMMA: You're not really that old, Morty.

MORTY: I'm six years younger than your grandmother; that's what you're thinking. But I don't think age should stand in the way of true love (Herzog, 2013, p. 33).

This intergenerational dialog, although a bit patronizing on behalf of Emma, promises a perspective of romantic relationships in late adulthood.

Apart from romance, Vera goes in for active exercising: "I saw her at the tennis courts in Central Park a few weeks ago, playing doubles. I told her she should call me if they were short a player, she said she didn't think she would. Just like that, she said, 'I don't think I'll do that, Morty.' I like a woman who's honest" (Herzog, 2013, p. 32).

Similarly, Morty is an embodiment of a brisk person: "Now before I forget, last night I'm having dinner with some friends, and we're talking about which organizations we give money to, which is a way old lefties show off and pass the time and put off thought of death" (Herzog, 2013, p. 32). As we can see, the character maintains socializing as it protects him from obsessive thoughts about the death ("put off thought of death"). Therefore, it demonstrates the importance to stay socialized in order to keep emotional and physical health in balance.

The character of Marxist grandmother, hard-of-hearing, is rich in wry use of language. Her language is colloquial and contains slang words: "VERA: I'm not a rah-rah American" (Herzog, 2013, p. 35). An adjective "rah-rah" is originally used by college students (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). The leading character is liable to insert aphorisms and idioms in her speech as in the following line: "<...> no good deed goes unpunished, right?" (Herzog, 2013, p. 107). The character's inclination to use saying is an indicator of life experience and wisdom.

Morty's vocabulary is reserved and contains euphemisms: "Admittedly an extravagance at lunch, but you just graduated and I'll turn up my toes soon and everything I don't spend will be taxed to hell anyway" (Herzog, 2013, p. 33). The euphemism "turn up my toes" is used instead of the word "die" that the male character intentionally substitutes.

There are three types of growing old markers detected in Herzog's dilogy: somatic, self-stereotyping and psychological. First, the somatic markers in the play strengthen the fact that the main character experiences the process of growing old. In the sequel of the dilogy, the somatic features or bodily markers are represented in the form of physical description of an aged woman: "Vera, ninety-one, tiny and frail but not without fortitude, is in her nightgown. Her eyes have not adjusted to the light. She covers her mouth because she hasn't put her teeth in. Her speech is altered for the same reason. She is quite disoriented" (Herzog, 2013, p. 99). As opposed to narrative, Vera's hearing ability is represented in the dialog:

VERA: What?

LEO: NO SUCH THING AS A LOCAL BANANA.

VERA: You don't have to yell, it's only when you speak very low or very fast that I can't hear you (ibidem).

The aged character puts some effort to let her relatives know the way they should speak in order to make their speech comprehensible for Vera.

Somatic features outline the physical condition of the elderly which can occur in her age. The author is rather convincing in representing ripe old age: "Vera enters the door with the laundry cart. She has some troubles maneuvering it through the door and into the apartment" (Herzog, 2013, p. 105). Aging evidences motion deficit and slows down movements as in Vera's dramatic portrayal.

Second, psychological features are demonstrated through protagonist's sentiments: "<...> otherwise I would have had to go out and get you something and I wasn't feeling up to it. Some days I'm myself, and some days my head isn't right. It's really disgusting" (Herzog, 2013, p. 109). It demonstrates the psychosomatic marker of balance loss as it is based on corporeal features "go out and get you something" and mental instability "some days my head isn't right".

Third, there are self-discriminating references of the dramatis personae in the plays. Self-stereotyping is prescribing judgments about oneself. Vera uses stereotypes about her age: "What? Oh, sure, they're all just useless, they just tell me I'm old and I knew that already", "VERA: I'm old and close-minded, is that it? LEO: You're old but you could choose not to be close-minded" (Herzog, 2013, p. 109, 112). Leo debunks the stereotype "being old equals close-minded". Vera's grandson claims that renouncing societal labels Vera is responsible for the way she wants to see herself. In spite of age assertions, the woman manages to get on with younger generations which is defined by the language she operates, similar topics for discussion and the idea of being zealous to interact: "She is just a like a really good friend who I happen to be related to" (Herzog, 2013, p. 145). Likewise, Morty (acting in the first play of the dilogy) makes judgments about his age as well: "in my decrepit old age", "But I want to listen to an old man on a soapbox for just a minute" (Herzog, 2013, p. 33, 34). Self-stereotyping is found in generalizations and myths of people in late adulthood which society spreads. Both Vera and Morty reflect negative impact of stereotypes on general wellbeing. Also, other characters put stereotypical labels on the elderly: "Oh my God! That scared the shit out of me! She looked like a ghost! She looked like a little white-haired old lady ghost" (Herzog, 2013, p. 147). These words were addressed to Vera by Leo's girlfriend: she characterizes the aged woman in ageist and disrespectful manner with implied aversion. Her attitude is an example of gerontophobia, hatred towards seniors. The girl says: "I don't want to get old and lose all my teeth, that shit is so fucked" (Herzog, 2013, p. 148). The young character judges aged Vera on the basis of her age and the consequences that aging brings.

Nevertheless, protagonist's self-awareness is quite harmonious as she takes for granted her markers of old age: "because my hand shakes,

which is disgusting, but then it was locked anyway so either you did it or not I'm going crazy which I must admit is very possible" (Herzog, 2013, p. 118). Vera also tries to evaluate herself in terms of age: "...but the worst one is not being able to find my words" (Herzog, 2013, p. 109). As memory declines in old age (Maylor, 2005), Vera gets accustomed to this. The old character accepts her physical health problems and speaks openly about them. These descriptions show the protagonist's current state of health, yet Vera still has the strength to enjoy her life. The leading character's active life is mentioned in the following passage: "There were seven of us, octogenarians, and we had dinner once a month for a lot of years and we were all lefties and there were a lot of memories and laughs <...>" (Herzog, 2013, p. 120). The whole picture of Vera's time spending is highlighted in this quote. The female character combats the misconceptions of society about old people, and enrolls herself into social events where collective interactions occur.

Regardless of her age the protagonist knows the drawbacks of growing old, yet she proudly accepts them.

Analysis of somatic and psychological markers of the protagonist reveals Vera as a woman who has troubles with her general well-being, but who actively and vigorously lives the life: "It's the time of the year I usually do all my donations and I can't find the list of charities... That's the kind of morning I'm having" (Herzog, 2013, p. 156). The lead character depicts the harmonious identity paired with self-acceptance; she tends to celebrate her strengths. Denying social assumptions about people of late adulthood the characters of the play demonstrate the life from a different perspective. The process of aging is inevitable, as the somatic characteristics mentioned in above mentioned quotes show; however, the mindset can be altered from negative to positive direction. The dramatis personae cope with self-stereotyping and myths and demonstrate the ability to be valuable in their late adulthood.

Results. A rather opinionated and wry stepmother to her three children, Vera is an understanding grandmother of Emma (26 years old) and Leo (21 years old) whose roles of generational mediators acquire importance for harmonious co-existence of youth and age. The dynamics of aging of Vera's character is represented by generational interaction, and an active strategy of coping with age predicaments in Herzog's dilogy. Vera's portrayal is enriched with the references of supporting character of Morty whose interest in the elderly woman has romantic overtones. A set of somatic markers (hard-of-hearing, dentures) manifests the danger zones of ripe old age and the adaptation of the character to the challenges. Herzog's dilogy both focuses on biological process of growing older and on what getting older means socially and culturally.

Growing old in Herzog's plays "After the Revolution" and "4000 Miles" is developed from the perspective of intergenerational relationships in both plays. In "4000 Miles" Vera and Leo represent a synthesis of "youthful desire and mature judgment <...> because it is through them that the values of the previous generation coalesce with the aspirations of the new" (Donow, 1994, p. 77). In this drama, old age embodies wisdom for younger generation linking grandchildren and grandparents. "After the Revolution" gives another example of intergenerational bond between Vera and her granddaughter Emma. Vera's intervention into Emma's family case investigation has a positive impact on relationships between them. In addition, Emma gets on well with another senior representative, Morty, Vera's admirer. They communicate about relationships, social events and how to gain Vera's interest. There are no prejudices or stereotypes about old age in their conversations, but only Emma's support and encouragement to undermine the stereotype that old people cannot be involved into romantic relationships.

The representatives of late adulthood are Vera, an aged woman in her nineties, the protagonist and Morty, seventy-six years old, a minor character. The process of growing old is represented verbally — via dialogues and monologues and non-verbally — via stage remarks and the play of actress. In the plays, there are gerontological markers of three types: somatic, or corporeal markers, psychological and self/stereotyping. Corporeal markers (15) dominate, proving that the physical description of elderly characters plays significant role in drama. Psychological markers occur less (12) whenever the dramatis personae demonstrate their sentiments and prejudices about their age. Self-discriminating markers as a case of self-prejudice occur 3 times (in lines of Vera and Morty). Though the gerontophobic and psychosomatic markers are not included into suggested classification, they should be mentioned. Gerontophobic markers occur 2 times: they are uttered by the minor character, Leo's girlfriend, who characterized the aged woman in ageist and disrespectful manner. There is only one case of the use of a psychosomatic marker based on the protagonist's features ("*go out and get you something*") and her mental instability ("*some days my head isn't right*").

The issue of ageism is proved by generalizations and myths of people in late adulthood which are

detected in the plays "After the Revolution" and "4000 Miles". However, the aged characters are prone to self-stereotyping they accept themselves the way they are. It illustrates the playwright's intention to highlight the prejudices about old age and at the same time undermine them by demonstrating a protagonist's realistic but positive attitude to herself.

The ways of ageist stereotypes subversion are presented by 1) the extended description of physical process of growing old instead of limited representation of aged characters with the adjective "*old*"; 2) using vocabulary rich of aphorisms and slang words to illustrate the elderly's wisdom and at the same time awareness of the modern language; 3) portraying the elderly as individuals with a wide range of social activities and occupations (donations, tennis, social events); 4) older characters are shown as protagonists of the plays, not only minor characters.

Conclusions. Dramatic discourse stays on the border between the Lesendrama and the play, since it always includes interaction between verbal and non-verbal elements. In the plays somatic markers are represented by non-verbal elements in the form of author's remarks and descriptions, Vera's movements on the stage.

In Herzog's drama, the experience of growing old has physical and sentimental features. Thus there are somatic and psychological markers of old age in the literary portrayal of the protagonist, an aged woman in her nineties. The playwright uses stereotyping to define old age as a social construct in her drama. The instances of self-stereotyping occur when Vera evaluates her well-being through the prism of being "*old*". Amy Herzog undermines stereotype that an old age means the end, giving her protagonist the capacity to live active social life establishing productive intergenerational contacts.

Modern American playwright, Amy Herzog considers age challenges and implies that while growing old one can enjoy social interactions, take up sports, do charities and be in harmony with their age.

The aged dramatis personae demonstrate the strategies of coping with old age in modern society. Herzog's characters might help combat self-doubts and self-sabotage spurred by the age. Older people should be treated and portrayed as individuals with vivid range of activities they might be enrolled into. Eventually, the stand of literary gerontology is a pivotal issue for modern authors to raise society's awareness on ageism in literary works and media.

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