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LITERARY EXPLORATIONS OF AGING: A COURSE DESIGN AND ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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I had for some time been convinced of the usefulness of an undergraduate course on aging, when one of my composition students submitted an essay reinforcing my conviction. The writer of the paper, a good-natured eighteen-year-old coed, had this to say about "aged people":

> . . . the old people's days are empty. They are lonely. Their bodies, crippled with arthritis, need a cane to

> support their painful steps. Eyes depend on glasses now. Freckles which faded years ago have been replaced with creases and wrinkles. Whereas children plan for the future, the old people's future has already passed. The world has lost the excitement, and lost its size also. It is now the size of their homes or rooms; going out just seems to be too much of a bother now. The lonely days of the old person are busy too, though not with life and living, but with death and dying.

My student's portrait of old age, dismal to say the least, unfortunately reflects not only the view of many young adults but of our society in general. Although growing old is a natural phenomenon, being old is a stigma in our society, and old people are often objects of pity or prejudice. Moreover, "Few people know how to be old," as LaRouchefoucald put it, because few want to accept their own old age or view with understanding the old age of others.

Viewing old age with understanding is the primary objective of the course I am about to describe. Entitled "Literary Explorations of Aging," this course explores the unique problems, needs, and experiences of elderly individuals and examines society's attitudes toward the old, primarily through the reading and discussion of fiction and poetry. Underlying my choice of these materials is my basic conviction that well-chosen examples of these literary genres are likely to encourage honest self-exploration in a nonthreatening atmosphere, evoke strong emotional responses and help induce the formation of valuable new insights regarding self and society.

It is my belief that examining issues related to old age helps eliminate negative attitudes toward the elderly and can constitute a crucial step in the young college student's psychological preparation for his or her own aging. As it is designed, this course can be offered either as a literature-humanities course organized thematically or as a sociology-social-work-gerontology course whose material is chiefly literary.

The use of literature to increase self-understanding and expand social awareness has long been recognized by bibliotherapists and educators who are sensitive to their students' or clients' needs and the needs of society. In her book, Family Insights Through the Short Story, educator Rose Somerville vigorously espouses the use of imaginative literature in the study of family life. Moreover, she specifically advocates the use of literature as a tool for educating students on the elderly, when, in one of her chapters, she discusses works of short fiction that can help increase students' understanding of aging family members' problems and needs. Like Somerville, the renowned gerontologist, Robert Butler, also recognizes that "the arts are an important way of illuminating old age." Yet he laments the sparcity of "novels, poems, movies or other art forms in Western Civilization that deal with older persons as central subjects" and notes that "the old, if depicted at all, usually play supporting and stereotyped roles."[1] While no one would probably disagree with Butler that realistic literary studies of the aged are difficult to find,

[1] Why Survive? Being Old in America, p. 411.

there do exist a sizeable number of literary works whose fully developed heroes and heroines are elderly people engaged in a variety of struggles related to their aging. Furthermore, when gathered from the numerous anthologies in which they appear, these materials can provide the foundation for a thorough course exploring the aging process.

"Literary Explorations of Aging" consists of four basic units or phases, summarized as follows:

1. Definitions, Stereotypes and Societal Attitudes
2. Self-Image and Assessments of the Aging Individual
3. Family Relationships of the Elderly
4. Life Review and The Experience of Death

Commencing the course is a discussion of various definitions of aging and old age as well as society's stereotypes of old people. A slide presentation of advertisements and paintings depicting the elderly initiates an examination of both positive and negative stereotypes. In conjunction with this general exchange of views and definitions, students are encouraged to share their impressions regarding society's attitudes toward the old. Two contrasting poems by D.H. Lawrence, "Old People" and "Beautiful Old Age," can be highly effective in focusing students' attention on these attitudes.

The remainder of the course's initial unit revolves around fiction that also emphasizes societal attitudes toward the elderly and specifically what Butler calls "Ageism," the discrimination against the old as a stigmatized group.[2] Through following closely the fortunes of old people and identifying or

[2] Why Survive? pp. 11-12

disagreeing with the various young people in these works, students examine their own assumptions regarding old age. Moreover, through discussing these works in class, students have an opportunity to test their own reactions and assumptions against those of their classmates and teacher.

All the works selected for this part of unit one deal with the young or middle-aged person's insensitivity to the loneliness, poverty, or loss of status that attends old age and with the younger person's or society's failure to conceive of an old person as fully human. While several of these works highlight the psychological space between the young and the old, others focus on specific social issues directly related to discriminatory attitudes toward the elderly. For example, Zugsmith's story, The Three Veterans," raises the issue of the medical profession's treatment of the older patient in our society, while Crane's "A Detail" and Lessing's "An Old Woman And Her Cat" poignantly reveal how an old person's options regarding employment and housing arrangements are affected by societal attitudes.

While the emphasis in the first unit is primarily sociological, the focus in Unit Two is psychological, for the works comprising this second unit disclose the aging individual's interior life and depict men and women assessing themselves in their new life stage or attempting to adjust to changes brought on by their aging. By connecting the substance of units one and two, students can begin to see how society's attitudes influence the old person's view of self. Through the works read for this phase, students have a rare opportunity

to discover the intimate thoughts of an old person and are able to evaluate a variety of reactions to the aging process.

It seems appropriate to introduce this psychological phase with literature depicting characters who examine, in general terms, the implications of being old and draw a variety of conclusions regarding the nature of old age. Including both brief poetic self-explorations and the more extensive self-assessments found in fictional pieces, these introductory materials reflect a wide range of attitudes and tones in order to reinforce the idea that old or aging people are individuals comprising a diverse population. For example, the positive speakers who affirm old age in such works as Baker's poem, "Let Me Grow Lovely" and Welty's story, "A Worn Path," could be set in contrast to those gloomy speakers who paint dismal pictures of old age in poems like Arnold's "Growing Old." In a similar manner, students can profit from reading in pairs such obviously contrasting poems as Kinsella's "Mirror in February" and the anonymous "Now I Am Old," for while the persona of the former mourns his physical deterioration, the latter's persona accepts the limitations of his old age and retirement with humor and good grace.

In addition to exploring reactions to the aging process itself, this "self-assessment" unit of the course includes works which focus on the emotional needs of elderly persons involved in a variety of situations. For example, there are a number of literary works revealing the personal reactions of elderly men who, in their fervor for self-rejunenation, are hopelessly drawn to young, attractive women. Also, there

are several works exploring old men's psychological adjustment to the concept as well as the everyday realities of retirement. Since readily accessible works on the above subjects do not contain female protagonists, it is a good idea to examine in classroom discussions, the needs and problems of elderly women in these same kinds of romantic and retirement situations.

In dealing with stereotypes, society's attitudes toward aging, and the old person's self-assessments, the course's first two units touch upon the issue of role change or loss; however, Unit Three focuses entirely on this all-important aspect of old age by examining the old person in his or her roles within the family unit. The material chosen for this unit, psychological as well as sociological in perspective, introduces students to elderly characters who are spouses, widows, widowers, grandparents, and parents of adult offspring. Here, students become acquainted with elderly family members who are adapting to new roles, suffering from role loss or modifying existing roles. Moreover, in this unit, students have a chance to examine the effect that the elderly person's behavior has on younger family members, at times changing their roles as well.

Since some of the most difficult and emotion-laden challenges facing families involve the relationship between aging parents and their middle-aged offspring, the first half of Unit Three deals with several dimensions of this relationship. One such dimension involves what has been called role reversal. When parents become old and their offspring reach adulthood, the parents often find themselves in a dependent, child-like

position. For parents who lack adequate financial resources, this dependency may be almost complete. However, even when not forced into economic dependency, old mothers or fathers often discover that they are becoming more and more emotionally dependent on their children and feel they must decide how much independence they wish to retain. Also, elderly parents often need to decide how much of their parenting function they will relinquish as the years go by or how accepting they will be of their offspring's values when these differ sharply from their own. Moreover, in facing the above situations, elderly parents are ultimately affected by the kind of relationship they have established with their children in the past.

Through studying materials that elicit discussions of the above issues, students become aware of the social and psychological pressures that help to determine the relationship between middle-aged and elderly adults. For the college student who recognizes, in the fictitious characters, his or her own parents and grandparents, a deeper understanding of a personal family situation is likely to result.

In addition to focusing on the old person as parent, students take a careful look, in Unit Three, at the marital relationships of the elderly. As they read such works as Lardner's "The Golden Honeymoon" and Cavanaugh's poem, "Apartment Four Upstairs," students examine some of the unique problems, needs, and joys elderly people experience in their marriages while also discovering that the marriages of old couples have a great deal in common with those of younger couples. In contrast to these portraits of spouses fortunate

enough to grow old together are the fictional widows and widowers whose stories help acquaint students with the adjustment process and the normal reactions of sorrow, anger, despair, and denial that surviving spouses experience.

From an examination of the elderly spouse's grieving process, students move on, in the final unit, to an exploration of the grief or acceptance that the old person experiences in facing his own death. In the course's final unit, we look at old age as a concluding stage of life. The old people students read about in the semester's final weeks are aware of their own finitude and are experiencing a personal sense of their entire life cycle. They are going through what Butler terms "life review," the "progressive return to consciousness of past experiences" as well as the surveying and reintegration of past unresolved conflicts.[3] This process of life review is succinctly outlined in a four-line poem called "Dying Speech of An Old Philosopher" by Walter Savage Landor. Taking the measure of his life, the aged philosopher conveys the following message:

I strove with none, for none was worth my strife:
Nature I loved, and next to Nature, Art:
I warmed both hands before the fire of Life;
It sinks; and I am ready to depart.

Obviously, not all old people are as complacent about their lives or as accepting of their deaths as Landor's wise man. Therefore, in order to provide students with a well-balanced and realistic view of life's concluding stage, the works selected for Unit Four depict elderly individuals whose life

3 Why Survive? pp. 411-414.

review is negative as well as positive. While some of the fictional characters studied reflect on their lives with a sense of satisfaction, others feel their time is running out and view their lives as a series of missed opportunities.

After examining the life review process of fictional characters whose life styles and basic philosophies of life vary greatly, students are ready to tackle the question of what exactly constitutes a successful old age and to elaborate on their own criteria for successful aging. They are now ready to explore, in their final discussions, the question of how one's life style and fundamental view of life affect one's state of mind or attitude toward death, during old age. Attempting to deal with these questions helps to bring students closer to the realization that old age, as the concluding stage of one's life, forms a natural continuum following from one's youth and middle years. The old are not a separate species, different from ourselves; they are, in fact, what we will be if we survive our middle years.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF SELECTED COURSE MATERIALS

- UNIT I -

D.H. Lawrence's "Old People"--presents an overview of society's negative attitude toward growing old. By describing the young person's frantic effort to remain young and the old person's resentment toward the young, the speaker of this poem neatly sums up the "cult" of youth worship that permeates society.

D.H. Lawrence's "Beautiful Old Age"--the speaker of this poem tells us what old age "ought" to be like. It ought to be

a time of contentment, peace and a mellow sense of fulfillment, in short, a stage of life that the young can view as a goal.

Ernest Hemingway's "A Clean Well-Lighted Place"--vividly shows how the young can easily fail to commiserate with the old. Although focusing on an elderly widower who spends every evening in a cafe, this story is also about the cafe's young and middle-aged waiters who disagree in their assessment of the old customer. Impatiently awaiting the cafe's closing, the young waiter sees the customer as a useless old drunk. But the more mature waiter understands the old man better because he too knows the fear of an empty and lonely life.

Eudora Welty's "A Visit of Charity"--depicts an adolescent girl caught up in a whirlwind of youthful activities and insensitive to the problems of the elderly. Obliged to visit an old age home as a part of her "campfire girl" duties, young Marian is at first repulsed and unable to conceive of the Home's residents as human. Yet, in spite of her initial resistance, she does recognize, in one brief reflective moment, the human anguish and tragic loneliness of one old woman she visits. For any students who have found themselves forced to interact with old people they did not know, Marian's experiences should provide a strong stimulus for classroom discussion.

Katharine Mansfield's "Miss Brill"--is a particularly powerful story because it provides a contrast between an elderly

spinster's sensitivity and perceptiveness and the callous stupidity of the young couple who sit next to her on a park bench. Almost certain to evoke a powerful emotional response, this story is a poignant reminder of the old person's humanness and the manner in which younger people tend to deny that humanness.

Leanne Zugsmith's "The Three Veterans"--deals with three elderly women who visit a doctor's clinic regularly. Filtered largely through the perceptions of a middle-aged nurse, this story illustrates the all too prevalent denial of the old person's uniqueness as a human being. To the nurse and doctors, the veterans are three of a kind--all meddlesome, foolish old ladies with varicose veins. Yet before the story ends, these women learn how to assert their human dignity and rebel against the stereotype imposed on them, by observing the actions of an angry young patient.

Stephen Crane's "A Detail"--is a brief recounting of an old lady's search for employment. Although Crane's old lady possesses a sense of her own dignity, she is not taken seriously by the young people around her. When she accosts two fashionable young women in order to inqure about a sewing position, her request meets with amusement and surprise, for the old woman's fragility and age seem to be incongruous with her need for gainful employment and her dignified, assertive manner.

Doris Lessing's "An Old Woman and Her Cat"--is a fully developed study of an old person's fight for survival. In her scathing satire on society's neglect of its elderly poor,

Lessing focuses on the actions and perceptions of a poor widow, Hetty Pennefather. As Hetty ages, she becomes more and more eccentric, at least to the respectable world outside her, but we, the readers, see that her "gypsy"-like and so called senile ways actually stem from her fiercely independent nature and the poverty of her surroundings. At the tragic close of this story, Hetty dies of hunger and pneumonia in a condemned building with her sole companion, a ragged tom cat. Although she has "chosen" this alternative by refusing to vegetate in a public home for the aged, we can't help seeing that she really has no choice at all, given her need for freedom, her love of her pet, and her lack of financial resources.

Dorothy Canfield Fisher's "Old Man Warner"--depicts an elderly farmer who is as fiercely independent as Hetty yet is more successful in maintaining his freedom in the face of societal pressures and prejudice. Because Old Man Warner lives alone in a farming settlement and refuses to live with his chidren or in a public institution, he is viewed by society as foolishly obstinate and cantankerous. Yet society's narrow view of him is in direct, ironic contrast to the sympathetic view of the young woman who narrates the story. To her, the ninety-three year old farmer's determination and ability to "do for himself" are admirable and unequivocally heroic.

- UNIT II -

Karle Wilson Baker's "Let Me Grow Lovely"--the speaker of this poem wishes to believe that old age can be equated with

beauty rather than ugliness. She points out that if so many objects in our lives, objects such as lace, ivory, silks, become more valuable and more lovely with the passage of time, why can't this be so for people as well?

Una W. Harsen's "Apology for Age"--For the speaker of this poem, the old, with their clear vision of an afterlife and hard-earned wisdom, play as vital a role in our world as the young.

Matthew Arnold's "Growing Old"--Through a series of rhetorical questions and assertions, the speaker of this poem dismally itemizes the many physical, emotional and spiritual deficiencies that old age brings.

Thomas Kinsella's "Mirror in February"--The aging speaker, shaving in front of his mirror on a dreary winter morning, reflects not only on his physical losses but on his spiritual disillusionment as well.

"Now I Am Old"--although the old man who speaks in this anonymous poem acknowledges his loss of physical energy and mental acumen, he is content to live in quiet retirement and can even view his old age with humor.

John Crowe Ransom's "Old Man Playing With Children"--In this poem, a spry old grandfather not only cheerfully accepts his old age, but in the poem's final stanza clearly points out that his self-image as an old person is much more positive than it was when he was caught up in the petty materialistic concerns of the middle-aged.

Eudora Welty's "A Worn Path"--Pursuing a journey to the town clinic, Phoenix Jackson evaluates her resources. As this

old Negress encounters numerous obstacles, she assesses her physical stamina, mental acumen, and courage, and remains proud in the knowledge that despite her age, she can still fulfill her nurturing role as her grandson's chief caretaker.

John Cheever's "The World of Apples"--focuses on an eighty-two year old poet laureate. Although still an active writer, Asa Bascombe begins to question the adequacy of his memory and his creative energies and to be troubled by his growing sensuality. With lustful feelings obsessing him, the elderly poet sets out on a pilgrimage to cleanse both his soul and his art. Through his rejuvenating experiences on this journey, he is restored to his best creative self and a dignified self-image befitting his age.

John Crowe Ranson's poem "Piazza Piece"--depicts an old man desperately trying to attract the attention and win the love of a young woman, who, involved in her own romantic dreams, is repulsed by the old man's advances.

Guy DeMaupassant's novel Strong as Death--provides an in-depth study of an aging painter's desire to renew his sources of passion and creativity through union with his mistress's teenaged daughter.

Bernard Malamud's story "In Retirement"--reveals the intimate thoughts and feelings of Simon Morris, a recently retired physician and widower of sixty-six. Suffering from loneliness and boredom, Simon allows his imagination to deceive him. He conjures up images of a romantic

involvement with an attractive young woman who doesn't even know he exists. While "In Retirement," like the two previous works, raises the often ignored issue of the aging individual's sexual and romantic needs, it also focuses on the common losses and problems of the retiree.

Farrell's "The Old Timer"--is another story focusing on the retirement experience and along with Malamud's tale, can help students realize what retirement can be like if one is not psychologically prepared for it. "The Old Timer" consists of portraits of men who, after giving the best years of their lives to their employers, are left with nothingness when they retire. The narrator of these portraits is an aging man not far from retirement himself, and as the story progresses, it becomes increasingly apparent that he is suffering anxiety over his own future. Realizing what the "old-timers" have gone through, the narrator vows at the end of his story not to make his job his whole life and prays that he will never be caught in that limbo between being too old to work and too young to die.

- UNIT III -

Honore de Balzac's Pere Goriot--portrays an aged man victimized by his own obsessive fathering. After years of self-deception, Goriot is forced to recognize the ingratitude of his two daughters and realize that paternal over-indulgence and the showering of material goods on one's children does not guarantee their filial affection in one's old age. Balzac's tragic novel raises several

crucial questions related to both filial and parental responsibility.

Dorothy Parker's "The Wonderful Old Gentleman"--provides a meaningful contrast to Balzac's novel, for while Parker's aged parent is also the father of two daughters, he is a very stingy, unsympathetic character whom we never even meet. With her characteristically ironic style, Parker paints the picture of a selfish, demanding old man through the comments and perceptions of his two middle-aged daughters. Although we never meet the old man, his presence dominates the story, and the problems he creates as a boarder in the home of one of his daughters are excellent topics for discussion.

"I Never Sang For My Father" (film based on play by Robert Anderson)--Although not focusing in particular on the old parent's struggle, this film provides an indepth study of a complicated relationship between an elderly father and his adult son. A primary lesson to be learned from viewing this film is that the neurotic patterns characterizing parent-child relationships can endure throughout the years, often creating crises when the parents are old. Here, we meet a father who is unable to relinquish or modify his critical parent role even when he becomes dependent on his son. We also closely follow the son as he responds to his father's attempts at manipulation and his own sense of guilt. Not only does this film clearly delineate the situation of role reversal that so often takes place between old parents and middle-aged

children, but it also encourages its viewers to explore the difference between normal filial devotion and excessive self-sacrifice.

Edna Ferber's "Old Man Minick"--focuses on the innermost thoughts and feelings of an aged father. Ferber invites us to commiserate with Minick as he tries to adjust to a life of dependency with his son and daughter-in-law, before deciding he must strike out on his own. Minick's choice to dwell independently in a "Home for Aged Gentlemen" is based on his awareness that interaction with his peer group adds to his self-esteem and gives meaning to his life.

Edna Ferber's "The Sudden Sixties" and Willa Cather's "Old Mrs. Harris"--contain two very different views of aging mothers. Students can profit from reading these two works together for they provide a significant contrast in maternal attitudes. Both Hannah Winter in "The Sudden Sixties" and Mrs. Harris are widows who are attached to their children and grandchildren. Yet while Mrs. Harris lives like a servant with her daughter's family, sacrificing without question her own needs and independence, Hannah lives on her own and experiences a great deal of conflict between her desire for relaxation and peer companionship and her feeling of obligation toward her daughter and grandchildren.

Ring Lardner's "The Golden Honeymoon"--Narrated by the spirited husband, Charlie, this story provides a detailed as well as humorous picture of a marital relationship

characterized by habits of honest affection and harmless bickering. Yet, even though Charlie and his wife Lucy are so comfortable with one another after fifty years of marriage, they still react like jealous young lovers when they run into Lucy's old flame and his wife.

James Cavanaugh's "Apartment Four Upstairs,"--a much more succinct account of a marital relationship than Lardner's story, this poem portrays an old couple who, in spite of their age and debilitation, still share a relationship marked by lively affection and sexual feelings. Short as it is, this poem effectively challenges the narrow but commonly held view that old people are sexless or ought to be.

Theodore Dreiser's "The Lost Phoebe"--recounts the story of a widower who cannot accept his wife's death after forty-eight years of a loving marriage. Avoiding a grieving process which would be too painful, Henry Reifsneider convinces himself that his wife is still alive and journeys obsessively to find her until he meets his own death. Although perhaps extreme in his reaction, the widower in "The Lost Phoebe" is not unlike many elderly people who lose a beloved spouse.

- UNIT IV -

Luigi Forni's "Peace for Geretiello"--Although the seventy-six year old Geretiello does not know that he is living his last day, he feels he is at a concluding stage of his life and spends his day examining his past, present, and future. Longing for the peace and dignity of retirement,

Geretiello is bitter over the fact that he still must work for the dowry of his seventh daughter. Not only does he regret the slavishness of his lifetime occupation as a beach attendant, but he regrets not having a son to lighten his financial burden and become the free man he himself has not been.

Frieda Arkin's "The Light of the Sea"--Like Geretiello's bitterness, the dissatisfaction Jessica Packard experiences in this story stems from her fear of oblivion and her sense that her life has been wasted. Jessica's life review is characterized by anguish over the disappearance of her family line, suppressed anger over the infidelity of a husband who is long dead, bitterness over her two nephews' neglect, and overwhelming sadness over the death of her only son.

Katherine Anne Porter's "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall"--focuses on the actual death experience of an eighty year old woman and the negative life review that renders this experience all the more painful. While Granny can experience some pride in having kept a well-run house, having married a good man and having raised normal, healthy children, she feels she has missed something very important in her life. Moreover, her sense of incompleteness is accentuated by the fact that in her dying moments she is compelled to relive the jilting she experienced many years ago.

Dorothy Parker's "Little Old Lady in Lavender Silk"--the elderly lady in this poem does not refer to her death

but does review her past life in positive terms. She half facetiously issues a statement to the world summing up her life. Despite some bitter experiences and heartbreaks in past love relationships, she does not regret any of her decisions and glibly conveys her attitude in the phrase, "There was nothing more fun than a man!"

Robert Frost's "A Record Stride"--the positive life review of the old man speaking this poem centers around a faithful pair of old shoes. The speaker's pride in these "past-active shoes" is in fact his pride in himself and his satifaction with his lifetime adventures and accomplishments.

Willa Cather's "Neighbour Rosicky"--Although Anton Rosicky knows he is not far from death, he retains his cheerful outlook and thinks of death as the inevitable conclusion to a life well-lived. As Rosicky sits remembering his past, he is thankful that he chose farm land and open spaces over crowded and corrupting city streets. He is also content in the knowledge that he is leaving a valuable legacy to the family he loves so well.

Dorothy Canfield Fisher's "The Heyday of the Blood"--The hero of this story, Gran'ther Pendleton, does not shrink from the reality of his own death because he has lived his life fully. Although eighty-eight and ailing, Gran'ther continues to enjoy his life with gusto, and his trip to the county fair with the great grandson who narrates the story is symbolic of his basic attitude toward life, summed up in the words, "Live while you live, and then

die and be done with!"

Alfred Lord Tennyson's "Ulysses," lines 1-32--In these lines, the aged adventurer reviews his accomplishments and comes to the conclusion that for him an active life until death is the only answer. Ulysses' words provide a clear illustration of one current popular theory of healthy aging. Proponents of this "activity theory of aging" maintain that continuation of the activity level and life style of one's middle years constitutes successful aging.

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