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Gerontology in Bryony Lavery's *A Wedding Story* (2000) and Sebastian Barry's *Hinterland* (2002)

Rania Mohamed Rafik Abdel Fattah Khalil
The British University in Egypt (<rania.khalil@bue.edu.eg>)

Abstract:

Old age is perceived as a narrative of decline, recently, an alternative perspective was introduced known as positive aging or Gerotranscendence. This paper examines ageing in Bryony Lavery's *A Wedding Story* (2000) and Sebastian Barry's *Hinterland* (2002) through the theory of gerontology. Gerontology in British and Irish modern theatre, according to Giovanna Tallone (2020) and Heather Ingman (2018), is a new category in literary studies and theory. The paper aims to examine the challenges of retaining agency in old age in comparison to the notion of aging as a process of inner harmony further proving that despite the process of ageing being an individualised experience, the commonalities of growing old are universal as depicted in Lavery's and Barry's works.

Keywords: *A Wedding Story*, Gerotranscendence, *Hinterland*, Literary Gerontology, Theatre

1. Old Age a Social and Cultural Construct, or Biological?

Old age has been part of the history of theatre since its inception. What is relatively recent is the attention paid in Theatre Studies to the study of Ageism, and for good reason. A report published in 2009 by the United Nation alarmingly declares an unprecedented global aging crisis where by 2045, the number of young adults will be exceeded by the number of old persons (United Nations 2010). This change in the social sphere will ultimately rock the foundations of societies in all countries across the world. Robert N. Butler dubs this crisis the "longevity revolution" (2008). It has become a universal topic for discussion in the humanities and the social sciences.

According to Giovanna Tallone (2020) and Heather Ingman (2018), gerontology is a new category in literary studies and literary theory. Literary gerontology and interdisciplinary

studies of old age open the inquiry for researchers to examine what it means to be old. What does ageing mean to the person getting old? And what does it mean to others? Old age is not a phenomenon, but an interrelated labyrinth of stereotyping, social constructions, and realities. Ageing populations are compelled to adjust to the increasing probability of illness and the impending probability of death. Society, further, imposes these conditions, terms, to which the ageing population must come to terms with such as the dependence on others, the loss of a mate, acceptance of declining health, the relinquishment of social relationships, and the acceptance of the individual's perception of the self in contrast to reality or how they appear to others. There is also a need to understand that the experience of ageing is culturally diverse.

This research, in its attempt to take a broad-brush picturesque view of the key issues that concern age studies, makes a reference to Plato's *The Republic*. *The Republic* opens with an inquiry into philosophy, truth, politics, and old age. Socrates and his comrades visit Polemarchus in the Piraeus where they meet Cephalus, Polemarchus' elderly father. The old man greets his son with the stereotypical question as to why he does not come to visit frequently; a typical complaint that is often heard from the aged (2002, 17). Many of the points raised by Plato in *The Republic*, continue to shape the research agenda of the exploration of old age and the meanings we seek to examine today.

The intellectual framework of literary gerontology on which this paper rests, builds on these perspectives taking into consideration the recent discussions related to the intersection between the narratives of decline in theatre and the different perceptions and experiences of ageing. Literary critics (Basting 1998; Lipscomb, Lebi 2010, Mangan 2013; Sandberg 2013; Lipscomb 2016; Bernard, Amigoni, Basten *et al.* 2018) have come to emphasise the role theatre can play in enriching interdisciplinary studies on old age. Valerie Barnes Lipscomb (2012) highlights the emancipatory role of theatre in terms of self-expression in our anti-ageist communities which can lead to a constructive discourse on ageing and social empowerment. Lipscomb in her introduction to the book *Performing Age in Modern Drama*, opens the discussion on ageism with the statement "act your age" (2016, 1) and explains that it rests on the supposition that age is performative.

The paper scrutinises two dramatic texts concurrently: British dramatist Bryony Lavery's *A Wedding Story* (2000) and Irish playwright Sebastian Barry's *Hinterland* (2002). Lavery's play, depicts aging as a process where there is difficulty in retaining agency and humanity. The play focuses on the experience of the ageing female character and the prevalent decline of her body and mind. Sebastian Barry's *Hinterland* illustrates old age as a representation of the societal changes pre and post the Celtic Tiger in Ireland. The paper attempts to address the theatrical manifestations of stereotyping old age and raising awareness that it is a social construct. In parallel it explores the representations of old age as *other* and the alternative notion of aging known as Gerotranscendence: positive ageing, a process of inner harmony.

While the humanities and age studies have examined the stereotyping in old age, still little has been done, although this has started to change. The contribution of artistic representations in deepening the understanding of the aging process and the elderly, is slowly being recognised and it is what Julia Twigg and Wendy Martin have termed as "the cultural turn" (2015, 353). Dramatic texts and theatre productions concerned with the human struggle of aging and the experiences of older persons within a variety of societal frameworks provide rich data around the ageing experience and perspectives which advance research in the humanities and old age studies (Kivnick, Prucho 2011; de Medeiros 2014; Marshall 2015a, 2015b; Oró-Piqueras 2016; Weil, Lefkowitz 2019).

No current scholarly publication compares the representation of ageing in Bryony Lavery's *A Wedding Story* to the representation of ageing in Sebastian Barry's *Hinterland*. Few publica-

tions inspect the representation of aging in British theatre to the depiction of old age on the Irish theatre stage. The two dramatic texts understudy have gained little attention from theatre studies academics and literary gerontology critics. Jennifer Thomas (2017) holistically examines Lavery's aging female protagonists in a number of the playwright's works, the paper does not focus on ageing, but on the role of older females as agents of change. *Hinterland*, Barry's play, is among the array of dramatic texts referred to in Austin Hill's (2013) dissertation reflecting on cultural change and the impact of the Celtic Tiger as depicted on the Irish theatre stage. Publications on Sebastian Barry's works have mainly addressed his genius as a novelist and poet. He has written nine plays but is best known for *The Steward of Christendom* (1995) and *Our Lady of Sligo* (1998).

The limited scholarly work on literary gerontology and theatre studies, given its short trajectory as a field and the current global ageing crisis, gives this research great significance. It is however necessary to acknowledge that there are contemporary British plays that address continuity into old age like Tom Stoppard's *The Invention of Love* (1997) as well as the dramatic work of Irish playwrights Hugh Leonard's *Da* (1973) and Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990). However, these works focus more on the performance of age where the character on the stage plays a different age highlighting a fragmented perception of the aging self. The plays depict a notion of the self and hence are more defined as memory plays. Academic work connecting ageing and theatre studies came to bear fruit through the work of scholars such as Núria Casado-Gual (2021); Bridie Moore (2014, 2018); Sheila McCormick (2017); Katarzyna Bronk (2017); Miriam Bernard and Lucy Munro (2015); Elinor Fuchs (2014, 2016); Margaret Cruikshank (2013 [2003]); Valerie Barnes Lipscomb (2012, 2016); Margaret Morganroth Gullette (2004); and Anne Davis Basting (1995, 1998). However, Giovanna Tallone (2020), and Heather Ingman (2018) among other critics, continue to underscore the absence of the reflection on old age from the mimetic space. Miriam Bernard equally contends that research about theatre and old age and its transformative potential "remains woefully under-researched" (Bernard, Munro 2015, 64).

This research builds on the previous stellar publications, although few, and presents a textual analysis of the selected dramatic texts as a sample to illumine what entails social/cultural constructions of aging in British and Irish societies through theatre. This paper aims to add to the understudied interdisciplinary area of ageism and theatre.

2. *Literary Gerontology: Ageism*

Critical literary theory on gerontology is based on contributions from political economy, gender, ageing, and the humanities. Robert Butler coined the term ageism making it analogous to other forms of oppression. A broad definition of the theory of ageism is one age group holding prejudice against another (1969, 243). Extending the discussion around this definition, Bill Bytheway explains that ageism allows for any age group to be "oppressed by [...] dominant expectations about age [...] that dictate how we behave and relate to each other" (2005, 338). Jeff Greenberg, Jeff Schimel and Andy Martens further explain that ageism refers to the negative attitude towards the elderly (2002, 27).

Erin Gentry Lamb in "Not your Grandmother's Ageism: Ageism Across the Life Course" (2021) brings to light another aspect of ageism which is not explored in this paper, but that needs to be referred to within the discussion of ageism. Lamb explains that ageism does not only include older individuals. E.B. Palmore, Laurence Branch, Diane Harris build on this point explaining that experiences of ageism include youth and middle-aged populations

(2005, 138). This stems from the idea that ageism is a parallel to sexism and racism, a form of discrimination or negative attitudes. It is the exclusion of certain people or labelling them as unfit for social responsibilities. As evident, a number of authors have attempted to define the theory of Ageism, but one of the most straight forward definitions is provided by Andrea von Hülsen-Esch (2022 [2021]) and Erin Gentry Lamb (2021): ageism is systemic discrimination projected against people because they have aged. This discrimination can manifest itself in hostile behaviour towards them, abuse or neglect. It also includes relegating them to a lower status in society. This is the perspective that this research paper adopts and aims to highlight in the examination of the dramatic texts *A Wedding Story* and *Hinterland*. The theory of ageing depicts the elderly as “alien other” based on the social constructions of our public spaces (Thomas 2017, 262). Gerontology as a literary theory allows room for the exploration of the social perceptions depicted in the selected dramatic works of what it means to be old as well as to understand the cultural constructs of age, and the tensions between our physiological aging process and chronological aging. It also looks into what constitutes social rejection as well as the newly adopted notion of gerotranscendence.

Gerotranscendence is a counter theory; it emphasises the process of turning inward in old age. It also assumes that the disengagement of the elderly from society on the physical and psychological level is associated with inner satisfaction and harmony as opposed to an experience of discord. Gerotranscendence bases its argument on the hypothesis that despite the fact that all communities tend to push the aging person to the peripherals of society, and the inevitable reduction of social responsibilities of the elderly, the aging individual, despite the reduced psychological activity and social involvement does not experience the negative overtones of an inactive life. Building on the existing theory of aging, the theory of gerotranscendence, creates a paradigm shift that prompts a necessary new understanding of ageing particularly that few gerontologists have approached the exploration of this new theoretical perspective (Tornstam 2005, 34-36). Both of the literary theories referred to equally allow room for the examination of the depiction of old age on the theatre stage prompting an engagement in integrative discussions on aging.

2.1 Literary Gerontology

Theatre has been considered by Margaret Morganroth Gullette (2004) a valuable vehicle to address age as a social construct, and previously Anne Davis Basting (1995; 1998) supported the role theatre played in questioning the rigid views of the experience of getting old. Similarly, Lipscomb (2012) heralds the theatre’s interdisciplinary approach to ageing and mutability of expression. Looking at Shakespeare’s plays, we find that they often depict the aging and in some cases are associated with madness in *King Lear*, foolishness such as Polonius in *Hamlet*; anger in *Romeo and Juliet* and in *The Tempest*, it depicts a different version of old age: Prospero’s wisdom. The theatrical depictions of old age vary and often times can be inaccurate and painfully unjust. Aging, contrary to common understanding, is primarily a social and cultural construct rather than solely a biological one.

2.2 What It Means to be Old: Depictions on the Theatre Stage

Age, according to Aagje Swinnen and Cynthia Port, is defined as “as a state of *being* but through acts of *doing*” the repetition of behaviour related to the chronological stages of aging across the span of one’s life (2012, 12). It is also the physiological changes of the body. Ageism

includes the biological understanding of age, its conflicting definitions within societies, and the social constructions on age imposed in our communities. It is worthy to note that today's elderly rejects the traditional constraints constructed by society in relation to old age. Lynne Segal explains "As we age, changing year on year, we also retain, in one manifestation or another, traces of all the selves we have been, creating a type of temporal vertigo and rendering us psychically, in one sense, all ages and no age" (2013, 4).

Ageing tends to make us fear being the *Other*. Kathleen Woodward in her book *Aging and Its Discontents* sheds light on the theory of the mirror stage of old age explaining that it is "the alienation of the aging body from its mirror image" (1991, 62). Woodward argues that there is a unified consensus among the elderly that they feel the same way they did at their early thirties or late forties despite the change in their mirror image (*ibidem*). Societies tend to stereotype the elderly and consequently this instils a fear in us of becoming old. This discomfort of the widespread notions of ageism resides in many of us and is thought to be reason enough as to why aging has been marginalised within modern theatre studies. The selected plays Bryony Lavery's *A Wedding Story* and Sebastian Barry's *Hinterland* invite audiences to question the perception of age in relation to physicality, the representation of the self, social perception, and in the case of Barry's *Hinterland*, the representation of the state of the nation. Theatre's natural element of expression allows for the meaning of aging to be exchanged and explored. The two plays at hand offer a complex representation of this notion.

Bryony Lavery in *A Wedding Story*, utilizes an aging female character to explore the tension created by the social construct stereotyping her as an aged sick woman. Age studies literary theorist Margaret Cruikshank in *Learning to Be Old: Gender, Culture, and Aging* explains that "An old woman is an alien creature, costly and crabby, and her life stage is seen as disconnected from youth and midlife rather than as an outgrowth of them" (2013 [2003], 5-6). Lavery's elderly female protagonist Evelyn suffers from Alzheimer. She is introduced to the audience as a medical doctor; yet the humility of old age makes a laughing stock out of her amidst her family. As a woman of science, Evelyn, married with two adult children, is intelligent but the undiagnosed disease of Alzheimer paints her less intelligent than the dominant characters on the stage. Jennifer Thomas in her chapter "Transformation and Re-education through Ageing" emphasizes that "the sick and aged body of the protagonist is a site of re-education and counter-narratives to hegemonic and normative belief systems" (2017, 263). Evelyn is presented on stage without being given a "chronometric age" (*ibidem*). Her character is polarised by her daughter Sally who represents new meaning to family life. Pitiful scenes are created by the playwright where Evelyn is unable to recognise Peter, her own husband and asks him politely "who are you" (Lavery 2000, Act I, 14). Margaret Cruikshank further elaborates on this perspective explaining that a "person with Alzheimer's becomes a manifestation of disorder rather than an individual who is ill" (2013 [2003], 39). Alan Bennett an English playwright, in his work *An Englishman Abroad*, briefly and to a great extent accurately, sums up Evelyn's stage of degeneration into old age and disease: "age wipes the slate clean" (1989, 35). Considering this perspective, the effects of old age, and the symptoms of Alzheimer help shed light on Lavery's aging and ill female protagonist, Evelyn. The scenes with Evelyn's decline, as the play's narrative progresses, become more aggressive and remove all empathy for the character. As the play progresses, Evelyn is relegated to an alien status. The non-linear episodic moments of decline create an alienation effect. This Brechtian theatre technique is paired with life course theory by Elinor Fuchs (2016, 153; 2014, 72); a theoretical framework of old age that focuses on the "abhorrent reality of declining into the infirmities and disrepair of old age" (2014, 70). It can be said that this Epic theatre approach invites audiences to examine the constructs of decline on the stage. Paired with the previous analysis of Evelyn's

representation of old age, Fuchs' critical theory in gerontology and Cruikshank's notion of the aged woman as the alien other, prompt an investigation of the public space and the challenges posed for elderly females.

Johnny Silvester is a retired Prime Minister in Ireland during the Celtic Tiger period. The seventy-year-old politician in Sebastian Barry's *Hinterland* occupies the internal space of his home where he interacts with a dissatisfied wife and a lame adult son; the instability of his family life takes up much of his day. In his old age, the home is not a space for respite and relaxation but a fort from which he battles the savagery of the outside community as he attempts to thwart accusations of corruption and scandals over his extra-marital affair. The character does not suffer in his old age from an inactive life. The character is depicted on the stage as a man of an offensive and exploitative personality. Unlike Evelyn who occupies the home space to shield herself from the humiliation of being a public mockery, Johnny Silvester, is at the centre of his community. Johnny has the attention of all of Ireland with its media: radio, television and the newspapers. Audiences learn of his status through his quotes and description of himself as "the father of the nation" (Barry 2002, 59). Tension permeates his life. There is tension between him and his wife, between him and his son, his mistress, and the whole of Ireland. The character of the elderly man is situated between the version of the story he wishes to tell and the story Ireland tells. Act I of the play, discloses the services Johnny did for the country:

I made this country, whether they like it or not. They all voted for me when they thought it was to their advantage. [...] They will not give me my due now. I am to be ritually disemboweled in my own country, by my own countrymen. This is my fate now! (16)

Johnny's old age at first does not seem to be the focus of the play, but Barry's aged character has been relegated to the peripherals of social life. He is confined to his home. All the outside activity comes to him inside his home, the TV crew preparing for the interview are in the living room, the press is outside in the front yard, and the UCD PhD student, Aisling, who wants to collect historical facts about Derry awaits in the study. Johnny, as the only aged character in the play, is symbolically given the role of the historian: "I'm looking forward to it. [...] It will delight me to expatiate on these old matters" (20). Recounting history to the young UCD student is a representation of the binary relationship between the elderly and the young. Despite the girl's preliminary enthusiasm about meeting Johnny, she leaves disappointed having realised that he is not as sharp as she had expected him to be. He is run down by old age and disease. Although Johnny does not project this image about himself, it is the perception of those around him; their conversations enunciate this image. Johnny's narrative to Aisling about Derry is disjointed and he fails to remember quotes from Yeats, Seamus Heaney and Kavanagh. His story about Derry is fragmented and all he remembers is that he "had about three hundred cousins" (53). Johnny does not perceive himself to be aged. The retired politician is a manifestation of Woodward's theory of the ageing body and the "mirror image" (1991, 62). Her argument around the elderly's unaltered perception of themselves despite their advancement in age is reflected in the terse exchange between Johnny and the young Aisling who stands as a personification of Ireland: "You're subtle. You're kind, but you are like a dagger. Look, I made this country. ... The father of the nation. Do you understand? I have the whole country against me now. Do you know what that's like?" (Barry 2002, 59). While there are political undertones to Johnny's words, they could easily be interpreted as a protest against the hostile behaviour he is experiencing from society not just for the allegations against him, but because he is an old man that is no longer useful to society and is fair game. He has been pushed to a lower status in the community despite the accumulated wealth in his possession and his

political contribution to the nation. Gerontology theorists point out that ageing is a cultural construct, and the experience of ageing varies depending on the economic status and health of the individual. The individual experience of ageing depicted in Barry's *Hinterland* is in fact a common experience regardless of culture, social status, and economic prosperity. Johnny's economic status is repeatedly emphasised in the play; he owns a private jet. It is obvious that while he is able to afford a comfortable life as a result of poor financial dealings during his government years that there is no direct alignment that these factors have a positive impact on him in his old age. On the contrary, his wealth is the underlying cause of his troubles. There is a need here to pay attention to the structural conditions which force him to be confined to a limited internal space. Johnny's mobility is limited by the playwright to the parameters of his home, and in particular to the smaller space of his study throughout the play. Furthermore, the comfort he should experience as an aged man in his home, is absent. The old man, in a number of episodes in the play, experiences verbal abuse from his wife. The verbal abuse quickly evolves to physical; Daisy, his wife, slaps her elderly husband on his face. The humiliated old man does not reciprocate the violence administered against him. Andrea von Hülsen-Esch (2022 [2021]) explains that often times, those who have aged, face discrimination from society and family members. This behaviour which von Hülsen-Esch terms as *ageism* is apparent in the hostile behaviour, neglect or abuse administered against the elderly individual.

In parallel to the depiction of Johnny's character as a humiliated old man in his own household, Johnny is associated with the Irish government and the implication that he destabilised the nation in its leap to economic prosperity during the Celtic Tiger years. The political turmoil is mirrored in the destabilisation of his authority in his own home. Two extreme versions are presented of Johnny to the audience, leaving them to examine their underlying assumptions about old age and the complicated experiences of ageing. The consequences of his actions loom over his twilight years. In Act II, Johnny hides Connie, his mistress, in the state papers cupboard.

He is putting her into the State Papers cupboard, pulling papers out and stacking them hurriedly on his desk.

Connie: (indignant) In here? This is not a bedroom farce, Johnny.

Johnny: Well, this is not a bedroom, it is a State Papers cupboard.

He closes over the doors. Composes himself.

They mightn't come in here anyway, please God. (*He listens.*) (Barry 2002, 75)

This puritanic act is misinterpreted by his wife:

Daisy: He would hardly have put you in a cupboard if it was quite innocent. (77)

Hiding his mistress in the cupboard can be interpreted according to what Helen Small (2007) shares in *The Long Life*. Small believes that old age brings respite from the madness and furiousness of passions. Reference is made eleven times to the cupboard throughout the play, a significant reminder of Johnny's wish to bury his soiled history. The memories are painful and evidently will haunt him as he advances into old age. Dominant cultural narratives change when Johnny fails to play the part set out for him by society. Christopher Austin Hill comments that Sebastian Barry attempts to give Johnny the traditional role of the "*seanchaí*" (2013, 51), but the character fails to play the role. He is dismissed by both the author and the audiences as the philosopher he considers himself to be. B.S. Phillips clarifies that aged individuals must adjust to the parts that society imposes on them and must come to terms with the expectations (1957, 12). Johnny is forced to relinquish the image he has of himself as well as his social relations for two reasons: his age and his political scandals.

Similarly, Bryony Lavery gives audiences a glimpse of her aging female protagonist's past professional life and the pressures of social obligations. Evelyn's struggle is portrayed internally within the confines of her own family home and inwardly in her psyche. Evelyn has no memories. Plagued by Alzheimer, she has no recollection of past or present. Her scientific background as a doctor is presented in a short scene at the dinner table with her guests. The space she occupies on stage is unbound by time, a vacuum where she is simultaneously non-present and yet still present. Her battle with Alzheimer is a lost one. Peter, Evelyn's husband, is depicted as the loving spouse who attempts in every way to treat his wife with care, sometimes even treats her as a child. Evelyn's deteriorating stage character, allows audiences to witness and experience if just briefly the degenerative symptoms of old age and disease. Jennifer Thomas points out "that Peter must continually work to gain access to the innermost part of Evelyn's psyche in order to maintain some semblance of marriage and normalcy in their lives" (2017, 280). The first four scenes of the play portray Peter and Evelyn letting go of their relationship and the legacy of their marriage. In scene five, Evelyn is presented as an outsider within her own family. The role of storyteller is depicted here as well, this time it is relegated to Sally, the young female character. Lavery composes a scene between Sally and Evelyn, the young and the old, where words are ping-ponged back and forth between them with underlying fondness and much hidden resentment. Sally recounts episodes of memories about a lost stable marriage relationship between her father and mother. The failing relationships between husband and wife, and mother and daughter create tension on the stage. In the introduction to her play text, Lavery writes: "None of the characters speak in sentences or observe punctuation or breathe at the right time. Because often They are in torment" (2000, 6).

The binary relationship between the elderly and the young is present in *A Wedding Story* in the mother-daughter relationship and in *Hinterland* between Johnny and Aisling as well as between Johnny and his son. Both playwrights do not dwell much on the contrasting age representations but focus more on the contrast between the past and the present as well as the *impact* of the past on the present. Both playwrights highlight this contrast by emphasising the tension between the young and the old without underscoring the father-son or mother-daughter relationships or allowing them to evolve. The relationships between the ageing characters and their offspring are superficial and serve as a platform to contrast the striking gap between a younger character and an ageing character.

3. Gerotranscendence: Inner Harmony in Old Age

Within the framework of gerotranscendence which promotes the notion of turning inwards to experience ageing as a harmonious process, it can be argued that both Evelyn and Johnny have turned inward, but both fail to experience their old age as a journey of harmony. Both of the ageing characters within their different cultural contexts and play settings, experience alienation and are treated as *Other*. This paper argues that the examination of the ageing protagonists in both *A Wedding Story* and *Hinterland*, prove that it is a mixed combination of progress and decline. It further argues that while there is some truth to the claim that ageing is a social and cultural construct, the analysis of the dramatic texts, though do not represent the span of cultures across the world, prove that ageing is biological as much as it is an imposition of expectations on those advancing in age. This theory may have taken its point of departure from the theory of ageing, and it may have some supported data by empirical research; yet, the study of the two dramatic texts in relation to ageing in two different contexts does not lead to the conclusion that the process of ageing is one of harmony. The study also reveals that physical

and psychological disengagement from social life and duties is not a result of an intrinsic drive to spiral into social disengagement but it is an “involuntary reduction” (Tornstam 2005, 33). The attention paid to the theory of gerotranscendence and discussion of the theory, allows this paper to serve as a critical reflection of the fundamentals on which this counter-theory is based. The dramatic texts examined, further emphasise that the ageing process is not culture bound as the notion of gerotranscendence claims it to be. Moreover, the claim that the ageing individual’s disengagement does not lead to a sense of dissatisfaction or psychological complications is not fully justified. Johnny and Evelyn neither one is happy with the state they are in. Neither one is fully inactive but at the same time they are also almost absent. They are there but not there. This research has disputed the hypothesis of the gerotranscendence theory and contends the notions on which it is based. The playwrights depict elderly characters who suffer “involuntary reduction” (*ibidem*). However, the fact that the theory of gerotranscendence does not apply here to the elderly protagonists of these two plays does not negate its presence in other dramatic representations or fictional works.

4. *Theatre and Old Age*

Barry and Lavery use the theatre stage to create a space filled with tension where the characters play a role in re-educating the audiences about their biases towards ageing. Associations with old age and illness are unravelled in two different contexts making the process of growing old both universal and unique to the ageing individual. In the opening of Act I, in *A Wedding Story* the stage directions read “We are in a fog. [...] Our characters appear and disappear in the partnership between light and fog” (Lavery 2000, 7). Fog interweaves throughout the play denoting Evelyn’s mental unclarity as she oscillates between good days and bad days because of Alzheimer. The fog and light interplay theatrically to represent the polarity between youth and old age. It also serves to indirectly insinuate the presence and absence of the ageing female protagonist in Lavery’s play. Jennifer Thomas comments on the relationship between Peter and Evelyn explaining that the ageing process and disease force the couple to find new ways to connect. Evelyn is involuntarily dysfunctional and lacks this self-awareness. Johnny, old and ill, like Evelyn, also moves from being in the spotlight of the whole Irish nation to a place of non-recognition. His political contribution goes unacknowledged at the end of his twilight years. Johnny’s illness is stated in the opening of the play and remains a point of concern for him, but the outcome of the medical reports is never disclosed to the audience or Johnny himself. The play ends with the depiction of an old, humiliated man with an erased history, condemned and invisible to everyone. Illness becomes an impetus for Johnny to make amends with his wife and son, but the connection is lost. Daisy is the “perpetrator of violence” against her husband instead of playing the role of wife and caretaker (2017, 285).

Both Johnny and Evelyn are represented on the stage as visible ageing characters and gradually towards the end of both dramatic works, the protagonists are invisible subjects within their family structures and more broadly, in society. This truth presented on the theatre stage by Lavery and Barry is a reality too harsh to be easily accepted by audiences outside of the theatrical framework of the real and the imagined. The theatre stage is a suitable vehicle for the examination of the ageing process from a universal standpoint despite the argument that it is a personal experience. Theatre allows audiences to consider the “doubleness of being” (Thomas 2017, 286). To examine the duality of presence and absence and visually explore it within a communal setting in the physical parameters of theatre space eases the individual fear often experienced when considering the decline into old age. Thomas explains that the theatre

stage helps “by unravelling the biases, assumptions and associations previously learned and/or understood, space is created for what was once excluded and denied and is now included and represented both onstage and in life” (*ibidem*). According to Oró-Piqueras theatre aids in understanding the variations of ageing from a number of perspectives that may escape the critical eye of other disciplines (2016, 193).

5. Conclusion

The theatrical meanings of old age presented by both Barry and Lavery are both implicit and explicit. Critically examined, both narratives present transformational pivotal points in the lives and relationships of the protagonists Johnny and Evelyn. The traditional marriage narrative is tested in both play texts and despite the different contexts, the ageing characters fail to maintain their relationship with their spouses. Both Evelyn’s and Johnny’s marriages disintegrate. True, it is for varying reasons, but the element of old age and sense of uselessness of the ageing individual is evident in both plays. The two plays are about the journey of the aged individual from recognition to non-recognition. It can be safely stated that the non-recognition is also on the part of the ageing protagonist where they fail to identify as the individual they once were. This statement is in alignment with Woodward’s (1991) theory of the mirror stage where the ageing individual feels and sees himself/herself as they were in their prime years. It further supports Lynne Segal’s (2013) notion of the ageing individual retaining a trace of all their previous selves. The short lines, the spaces within or between the lines, are there on purpose to indicate the subtext and to help the performer to find the physical and emotional journey within a speech.

This paper presented the complexity of the portrayal of old age from different perspectives, in reference to gender, culture, and social context in two dramatic texts. It attempted to emphasise the importance that must be paid to the process of ageing as an essential human evolvment within a framework of theatrical creativity. The paper further attempted to examine the social perceptions of age in contrast to the perception of the ageing self in light of two literary critical theories; the theory of ageism and the counter theory of gerontology. The paper argues that the process of ageing is universal and transcends culture, social and economic factors; but at the same time, supports the notion that the journey of ageing can still be a unique experience to each individual. The dramatic texts examined, further emphasise that the ageing process is not culture bound as both theories aim to promote. This paper aimed to depict the complexity of artistic representation of old age on the theatre stage and hence underscore the little attention paid to the topic; although it must be noted that the intersection between humanities and age studies in exploring old age representations in theatre and drama has started to garner more attention from researchers. Fuchs labels this as creating “a theoretical bridge between theatre studies and the field of ageing studies” (2016, 143). Further research on old age and its representation in theatre would ultimately bring awareness to the stereotypes into which the elderly are entrapped and bridge the gap between the humanities and the study area of gerontology.

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