



## Reading and creative writing as a tool for analysis and transformation of the ageing experience

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**ABSTRACT:** Literature is especially important for senior citizens, since through literary representations they can question stereotypes and taboos associated to the ageing experience as well as the continuity of creativity during old age. The analysis and the results presented in this article are based on a reading and creative writing workshop organised within the “Aula abierta” programme at the Universitat de Lleida. In the four sessions that composed the workshop, texts from contemporary authors that focused on topics such as wisdom, loneliness, illness and death were analysed. Through the analysis of the debates and the creative writing activities of the participants, we conclude that literature is an ideal medium to reflect and debate on ageing from an open and creative perspective. Amongst the main conclusions of the analysis, creativity continues to be present in old age.

**KEYWORDS:** Ageing; wisdom; loneliness; illness; creativity.

## La lectura y escritura creativa como herramientas de análisis y transformación de la vejez

**RESUMEN:** La literatura es especialmente importante para las personas mayores, ya que, a través de representaciones literarias, éstas pueden cuestionar estereotipos y tabúes asociados al envejecimiento, así como la continuidad de la creatividad durante la vejez. El análisis y los resultados que se presentan en este trabajo se basan en un taller sobre lectura y escritura creativa organizado dentro del programa “Aula abierta” de la Universitat de Lleida. En las cuatro sesiones del taller se comentaron textos de autores contemporáneos en los que predominaban temas como la sabiduría, la soledad, la enfermedad y la muerte. A partir del análisis de los debates, y de los ejercicios creativos de los participantes, concluimos que la literatura es un medio ideal para reflexionar y debatir sobre la vejez de forma abierta y creativa. Entre las principales conclusiones consideramos que la creatividad continúa activa en la vejez.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Envejecimiento; sabiduría; soledad; enfermedad; creatividad.

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## Introduction

This article, which falls within the interdisciplinary field of cultural gerontology, introduces a case study conducted with a small group of senior students at the Universitat de Lleida in 2019. This study aims to illustrate the close relationship between old age, quality of life and literary creativity, especially when it comes to addressing aspects of aging that have been silenced, stereotyped or not treated with sufficient rigor. Following the pioneering work of Kathleen Woodward (1980), Barbara Frey Waxman (1990), and Janice Sokoloff (1987), beginning in the late 1980s literary gerontologists such as Amir Cohen-Shalev (1989, 2002) and Anne Wyatt-Brown (1989a, 1989b, 1990, 2010) began to consolidate the union between gerontology and literary studies through the analysis of the mature and late works of well-known writers and artists. In their studies, these authors demonstrated that the preservation of creativity in old age is not only a common characteristic of long-lived artists but also has a clear impact on both of their work and in their quality of life in general. Decades later, literary gerontology has become a very important part of aging studies (Zeilig, 2011; Falcus, 2015; Marshall, 2015). Whether through the study of older authors or the analysis of their works, a significant part of this specialty of humanistic gerontology has been devoted to refuting alarmist stereotypes that relate aging to the loss of intellectual faculties (Wyatt-Brown, 1990, p. 300-302). In line with anti-ageist postulates, there are already numerous studies of aging and literature that have compared and disproved the so-called “decline narrative” of old age, so well described by Margaret Morganroth Gullette (2004). In particular, literary analyses showing the maintenance or even increase of creative activity in maturity and senescence of many authors support an alternative and integrative view of aging (Casado-Gual *et al.*, 2016; Molina *et al.* 2018). Beyond biographical and longitudinal studies of writers, literary gerontology has also shown that literary creativity itself (including reading and writing texts) allows us to explore topics and aspects related to old age in greater depth, and thus facilitates an integrative vision of this stage of life, for the benefit of both young and old.

Negative stereotypes of old age and, related to them, the ageist view of aging tend to affect people of all ages, so that these can manifest or (re)appear in different forms

throughout the life cycle (Gullette, 2011). In this sense, literature plays a relevant role in freeing young and old people from limiting beliefs related to the process of aging. However, literature is especially important for older people, as they can be both victims and oppressors in the ageist view they may have of themselves. Despite the growth of this field of cultural gerontology, there are still few studies on the effects that literature can have on the elderly, especially in the context of the Spanish state. In the English-speaking world, where literature and aging studies have advanced most intensively, representational studies of aging also predominate over field studies, thus the effect of literature or literary creation on the elderly has not received as much attention. Still, there has been pioneering work on literary and artistic interventions with people with dementia, such as Anne Davis Basting's projects within theater studies (2009; Basting, Towey, & Rose 2016), and Aagje Swinnen's work on poetic interventions (2014). Within the sociology and aging studies, it is worth highlighting the project led by the British Nick Hubble and Philip Tew on reading groups with elderly people (2013), a clear precedent of the study we present.

This research is based on part of the results obtained in the project "Healthy Aging, Creativity and Narrative" (ECAVINAR<sup>1</sup> 2017-2019), which has involved interdisciplinary work between philologists, sociologists, social psychologists, and health researchers. Through its two main lines of work, the project has analyzed, on the one hand, the case of recognized authors who have continued writing and publishing after the age of sixty; and on the other hand, the role of narrative (either from a strictly literary point of view, or from the more open interpretation of the term) on the elderly when it comes to improving their quality of life.<sup>2</sup> This article presents the results obtained in a creative reading and writing workshop conducted between February and March 2019 and addressed to senior students at the University of Lleida. The workshop, based on the literary texts of four of the authors

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<sup>1</sup> By its name in Spanish: "Envejecimiento, calidad de vida y creatividad a través de la narrativa".

<sup>2</sup> The ECAVINAR project (FFI2016-,7966R), funded by the Ministry of Education and Competitiveness, and led by Núria Casado and Fidel Molina, started in 2017 and obtained a six-month extension for its completion in June 2020. It is the coordinated work of the research group Grup Dedal-Lit, dedicated to the study of aging through literature, and the interdisciplinary group GESEC. Both groups are from the Universitat de Lleida and are associated with the INDEST Institute for Research in Social Sciences of the same university.

analyzed within the framework of the ECAVINAR project, offered its participants the opportunity to analyze, discuss and generate new texts based on the case of four writers from different backgrounds, all of them over seventy years of age and with recent publications. The following authors served as references for analysis and creative exercises: Joan Margarit (Barcelona, 1938), Julian Barnes (Leicester, United Kingdom, 1946), Alexander McCall-Smith (Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, 1948) and Lorna Crozier (Swift Current, Canada, 1948). Despite their varied origins, as well as the different genres and subgenres in which they usually publish—while Joan Margarit and Lorna Crozier have been mainly dedicated to poetry, Julian Barnes and Alexander McCall-Smith are mostly known for being fiction authors—, they are four writers of recognized prestige in their respective national and international fields, and all of them have extensive careers.

Breaking with the stereotypes that link aging with decline, all four authors have been especially prolific in the last years of their careers. Thus, Alexander McCall-Smith has published fourteen works of fiction in the last three years, including detective novels, short stories and children's literature, among others. Joan Margarit, from the age of seventy to eighty-two, has published not only six new volumes of poetry, but also two books of essays, and has continued to update his bilingual anthologies. In Barnes' case, he has kept up the pace of publication since he began his career in the 1980s. In the last ten years he has published three novels, a collection of short stories, and five collections of essays on literature and art. Crozier, between the ages of sixty and seventy-two, has also published her first memoirs in prose poetry, seven volumes of poetry—two of which in dialogue with photographs by well-known North American artists— and three books of poetry for children. All of them address different issues related to aging and old age in their most recent works, which is also why they were selected for the design of this workshop. Through the analysis of their latest texts, the workshop aimed to promote an integrative and critical vision of old age, as promoted by literary gerontology, and at the same time to generate a space for exchange and discussion in which the creativity of the participants would also play a relevant role.

## Objectives and methodology

This study has two main purposes: first, to demonstrate, through the case of four well-known elderly authors, that literature can be an excellent tool to present alternative visions of old age and, thus, promote a critical view of aging among a group of elderly people who are not necessarily fond of reading; second, to observe how, based on very specific literary references, elderly people who are not experts in literature can also develop their creativity and express, through their own writings, their particular experience of aging.

As stated in the introduction, the analysis and results presented in the following sections derive from a workshop on reading and creative writing that was organized as part of the program called “Aula oberta” (Open classroom) at the University of Lleida during the 2018-19 academic year. The program suggests the organization of courses open to undergraduate and graduate students, as well as to people outside the university who may be interested in a specific topic. The “Aula oberta” program complements the senior program of the University of Lleida, and both are part of the Lifelong Learning program of the UdL. The workshop proposed within the framework of the ECAVINAR project was entitled “Literature, creativity and aging: old age and contemporary authors”, and consisted of four sessions of two hours each, which took place over a period of four weeks. Fourteen people between fifty-eight and seventy-six years old and a thirty-eight year old doctoral student participated; some of them already knew each other because they had participated in similar workshops, while others had not participated in “Aula oberta”. In each of the sessions, all the participants showed interest in expressing their opinion and discussing the different topics that were presented from their own experience, as well as from the experience of acquaintances and family members.

Each workshop session was taught by a member of the Grup Dedal-Lit group (the authors of this article), and according to the case study that each researcher was in charge of within the overall project. Therefore, each session focused on a single author and, more specifically, on particular and recent texts where the studied authors presented specific aspects related to the experience of aging. Based on a session design established by the four researchers, the sessions had the same structure: first, there was a brief introduction

to the author and his or her work as a whole; then, a specific analysis of one of his or her texts was presented; followed by a debate on the main themes and perspectives offered by the text; and, finally, the session concluded with a creative proposal in which the participants could express themselves freely, but taking the text or author analyzed as a reference point. In addition to this common plan, the first session offered an introduction to cultural and literary gerontology, and the last session concluded with a final discussion, in which perspectives and topics covered in the previous sessions were reviewed.

The first author analyzed was the Catalan poet, Joan Margarit. Based on a brief presentation of the work published by the author after his seventieth birthday, and through quotations from his last poems and the essay *New Letters to a Young Poet* (Noves cartes a un jove poeta, 2009), it was shown how recurrent themes in his poetry and apparently related to the story of decline (such as death, loneliness or loss) actually acquire new nuances in his late work, thus creating a much more inclusive image of old age. At the same time, these renewed themes coexist with the survival of the love theme in his verses, and even more persistently, with his conception of poetry as an inexhaustible source of self-knowledge and, above all, of consolation for the reader.<sup>3</sup> The session ended with a mimesis exercise, in which the participants had to “establish a dialogue” about old age with the poet, taking as a starting point one of the titles, verses or images discussed in the session.

In the second session, the participants worked on a short story by the British author Julian Barnes, which can be found in the volume of short stories *La mesa limón* (The Lemon Table, 2004). Death and love and, along with them, aging and the meaning of life are recurring themes in Barnes’ work from his earliest publications, but especially in the stories collected in *The Lemon Table*.<sup>4</sup> After a brief introduction to the author’s extensive work, the

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<sup>3</sup> This vision also appears with greater force in the writer’s most recent interviews, thus giving a global sense to his work as a whole, as well as to the fact that he continues writing at more than eighty years of age. The relationship between old age and creativity in Margarit’s work has been studied in the following works: Casado-Gual, Núria, “Literary Mentors for Life: Joan Margarit’s Lessons on Poetry and Ageing in *New Letters to a Young Poet*” (2019a); and Casado-Gual, Núria, “Lessons from an Older Poet: The Meanings of Ageing in Joan Margarit’s Late-life Poetry” (2019b).

<sup>4</sup> The interrelationship between recurring themes in Julian Barnes’ work such as death and aging have been analyzed in the following scholarly works: Oró-Piqueras, Maricel, “Memory Revisited in Julian Barnes’s *The Sense of an Ending*” (2014); Oró-Piqueras, Maricel, “Exploring the path to death through Julian Barnes’s older

story *La caja para frutas* (The Fruit Cage), about a love triangle between a couple in their eighties and a neighbor in her seventies, was analyzed. Through the narrative voice of the text, which corresponds to that of the protagonist couple's son, the story reflects on love and desire in old age, and offers the perspective on life that is acquired with the approach of death. At the end of the session, participants were asked to write an alternative ending to the one presented by the author.

The third session focused on the Zimbabwean-born, Scottish author Alexander McCall-Smith, known primarily for his detective novels. This session first introduced the concept of the detective in English-language literature and, at the same time, discussed the most relevant differences between the professional detective and the amateur detective.<sup>5</sup> In light of this distinction, the first and last chapters of the novel *El club filosófico de los domingos* (The Sunday Philosophy Club, 2004), the first in a mystery series set in Edinburgh and starring the amateur detective Isabel Dalhousie, which reflects on the concepts of wisdom and justice, were analyzed. McCall-Smith treats wisdom in the classical sense, that is, as a way of life focused on finding one's own happiness and fostering the common good. Thus, wisdom is closely linked to age and experience as well as constituting a positive view of aging, since it brings greater happiness and quality of life for the wise person<sup>6</sup>. In the final part of the session, participants were also asked to come up with a different ending to the McCall-Smith novel.

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characters: between irony and melancholic meditation" (2018); y Oró-Piqueras, Maricel, "The multiple faces of aging into wisdom in Julian Barnes's *The Lemon Table*" (2019).

<sup>5</sup> Some recent studies that inquire into the interplay between age and gender in the English-language detective novel are, for example, the following: Domínguez-Rué, Emma, "In Their Blooming Sixties: Aging as Awakening in Amanda Cross' *The Imperfect Spy* and *The Puzzled Heart*" (2012); Domínguez-Rué, "What Goes Around Comes Back Around: Life Narratives and the Significance of the Past in Donna Leon's *Death at La Fenice*" (2014); Domínguez-Rué, Emma, "Successful Female Aging for Beginners: Carolyn Heilbrun / Amanda Cross and perspectives of Gendered Aging in *The Players Come Again*" (2016); Domínguez-Rué, Emma, "Patriarchy and Poetic Justice: Women as Victims and Perpetrators of Crime in Donna Leon's *Death at La Fenice*, *A Venetian Reckoning* and *About Face*" (2019).

<sup>6</sup> Among others, some recent essays dealing with the interaction between age, wisdom and quality of life are the following: Domínguez-Rué, Emma, "El arte de hacer el bien. Envejecimiento, creatividad y sabiduría en las novelas de Isabel Dalhousie" (2018); Casado-Gual, Núria, Domínguez-Rué, Emma, Oró-Piqueras, Maricel "De sabiduría, crecimiento y gratitud: Revisando la figura del mentor en el marco de los estudios sobre el envejecimiento" (2019).

The fourth and final session addressed the poetry of Canadian writer Lorna Crozier, emphasizing the relationship between gender and aging as reflected in the selected poems “Taking the Measure” (2011) and “Watching My Lover” (1999). Throughout her work, Crozier has been incorporating from a non-ageist point of view the physical and psychological changes involved in each stage of the aging process, especially as it relates to women. Crozier has also used humor to criticize sociocultural prejudices about aging. Once the author’s work was briefly contextualized in the light of literary gerontology studies, two of her poems were analyzed. The main themes of these texts<sup>7</sup>, illness and death, were discussed by the participants. In the second part of the session, participants were asked to write an acrostic poem with the title “Older Woman” or “Older Man”, according to their respective gender.

As a whole, from the personal points of view of the four authors discussed, and through the literary genres of which they are representative, the four sessions invited participants to reflect on and discuss their own experience of aging. At the same time, the fourth session served as the conclusion of the workshop, so that a final discussion on the concepts and perspectives offered throughout the four sessions closed the course. The same discussion addressed the role that literature can play in the expression of personal and social perceptions of aging. The following is the narrative analysis of the discussions that took place in each session, as well as the interpretation of the creative texts produced by the participants, both from the prism of literary gerontology and aging studies in general.

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<sup>7</sup> The following are some recent studies that examine literary creativity and genre in Crozier's work: Mina-Riera, Núria, “The Beginning of Lorna Crozier’s Late-Style: A Thematic Change in the Symbol of Snow” (2016); Núria Mina-Riera, *A Poet’s Seasons: A Gerontological-Ecocritical Approach to the Poetry of Lorna Crozier*. [Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation. To be submitted during the second term of 2021] Universidad de Lleida.



### **“Old age as the last taboo”: old age, creativity and quality of life**

As various scholars in the field of literary gerontology, sociology and literary and cultural studies have pointed out, literature is a very rich tool for reflecting on topics that can be considered taboo in both social interactions and cultural representations. According to Mike Hepworth (2000), one of the first sociologists to base his research on literary fiction, “la ficción es un recurso particularmente valioso precisamente porque permite al escritor, a través del ejercicio de la imaginación, acceder a las variaciones personales y a las ambigüedades que subyacen la condición común de envejecer” (p. 4, authors’ translation). In this sense, both the discussions and the creative writing activities carried out by the participants of this study confirmed the capacity of literature to provide a productive space for discussion, as it allows readers to interpret and express their opinions about their own experience. As Nick Hubble and Philip Tew (2013) demonstrate in their study of reading groups with older participants, students’ opinions and analyses imply relevant data that provide insights into the similarities and differences between reality and fiction in old age. One of the main conclusions of their work is precisely the fact that age, in this case, old age, is still a source of social prejudice. On the other hand, it is precisely through fiction, both at the level of its interpretation and its creative expression, that these prejudices can be questioned and even transformed. Hubble and Tew, comment: “puesto que las imágenes del envejecimiento se encuentran mayormente en narrativas y símbolos concernientes a uno mismo, la ficción nos permite imaginar otro espacio de otredad [...] que puede generar nuevas ideas y respuestas, precisamente porque la literatura tiene la capacidad de resistir narrativas e imágenes de envejecimiento reduccionistas y unidimensionales (p. 180, authors’ translation). After transcribing and analyzing the results obtained from the workshop, we were able to classify the main themes derived from both the text comments and the participants’ creations into the following areas of interest: (1) the concept of wisdom in relation to the aging process; (2) the relationship between loneliness and old age; and (3) illness and death. Ultimately, literature, as source of creativity, understood both from the point of view of the creator and from the point of view

of the reader invites us to question and discuss the conception of old age and aging in our society.

### ***Wisdom and old age***

Wisdom is a complex term to define and has traditionally been associated with old age. As indicated by several studies on aging and wisdom (Baars, 2012; Edmonson, 2005), in ancient Greek and Roman texts, wisdom was already attributed to those men of advanced age. However, the connection between age and wisdom was not conceived as a direct relationship, but rather advanced age was a necessary condition for aspiring to wisdom—in no case was it considered a guarantee of acquiring the status of sage. Similarly, and fleeing from the (in this case, positive) stereotype of the wise older person, today we can also affirm that age offers the opportunity to learn important lessons and develop a way of thinking that can also be valuable for younger people (Baars, 2012, p. 98). In other words, wisdom increases with age, but not necessarily in every person; it does so, in any case, “in those who are able to develop it,” as Ricca Edmonson describes in her ethnographic study on wisdom and age, “simplemente porque las experiencias tardan mucho tiempo en ser recopiladas y asimiladas” (2005, p. 352; authors’ translation).

From the work of reflection and discussion around the four texts and authors, our participants defined different ways of understanding wisdom in old age, which can be summarized as (1) wisdom as a synonym of experience and individual freedom; and (2) wisdom as the practice of empathy and tolerance with oneself and others, that is, wisdom understood as a tool that allows developing an ethic of daily life for one’s own benefit and that of others. The first type of wisdom was clearly reflected in the sessions dedicated to the two poets. On the one hand, Joan Margarit’s late poetry reflects an advanced state of self-knowledge, which is always, in reality, a work in progress. His most recent poems also show the author’s interest in the lucidity reached in old age, which Margarit identifies as “the supernova of intelligence” (*Un hivern fascinant*, p. 57, authors’ translation). Four of the participants in our study responded to this aspect of old age with poems that mimicked in style and content this account of progress threaded through Margarit’s verses, that is, the

recognition of life as a continuous source of learning, and of old age in particular as a possible higher stage of knowledge. Thus, one of the workshop participants said in a poem that “maturity is not given to you by anyone / you have to make it your own. Lights and shadows / are interspersed / and lead you to serenity”, while another participant contrasted the knowledge acquired as an adult with “radiant youth” that “does not understand”, stating in the final lines of his poem that it is his present that “provides him with the conscious wisdom that reasons”. Likewise, Lorna Crozier’s late poetry shows both the need to value old age as a sign of the vital learning obtained throughout life, and the importance of having illusions until the moment of death. Inspired by Crozier, in the session dedicated to her work, the students valued the experience gained over the years in a very positive way. One of the participants writes in her poem that thanks to the experience that life has given her, she has the strength to move forward and hope to achieve whatever she sets her mind to in the future: “Grandes hitos todavía te esperan / Nada te detendrá en tu objetivo / Ahora es tu momento, pues tienes la / Noción completa de la vida” (authors’ translation). Another participant describes this same idea in a very similar way: “Ahora que ya sabes donde vas / No te faltará valor” (authors’ translation).

The association between old age and individual freedom, also frequent in Margarit’s late poems (in which the poet projects himself on wild and solitary animals, such as wolves and foxes), had its influence on two of the students of the workshop, for whom old age allowed, according to their verses, to become small “and free, transparent” to approach a crack that “hides the secrets and keeps the answers” and lets in “that light that dazzles me”. Another of the students interpreted old age in a similar way as “that last station” in which freedom is conquered when “you don’t need to forgive yourself” and “you can still settle some debts / with your dreams”. The revealing of individual freedom in old age also receives a gender-specific interpretation, as Friedan (1993), Greer (1992), Waxman (1990), Woodward (1999) demonstrate, and of which Lorna Crozier speaks in one of her late poems. The poem tells the story of an elderly woman whose first husband—a writer of great fame—decides to return to her in old age, after having abandoned her for fleeting relationships. The woman, however, decides that she no longer desires his company, as

she is now free to enjoy the things in life, without being harmed. In doing so, Crozier empowers the elderly woman to be free to make her own decisions. One of the participants made reference to this point in one of the discussions of the session dedicated to the Canadian poet. For her, age gives women freedom, because they realize that they don't have to ask anyone's permission to do what they want. As she reflected in her own poem, the participant would not hesitate to end a relationship in which the man wanted to restrict her personal freedom, which has now become more important: "Woman, where are you going? / Wherever I feel like it / No way! You have obligations! / Goodbye. / War so early in the morning, dear? / Rage, love? / We'll end badly! / No, it's already over".

The second interpretation of wisdom, that is, the one identified with the learning process that allows us to be more understanding of ourselves and others, was more prominent in the sessions dedicated to Alexander McCall-Smith and Julian Barnes. The novel on which the session on McCall-Smith was based, *El club filosófico de los domingos* (The Sunday Philosophy Club), especially attests to the author's attempt to define that second type of wisdom, also described by the ancient Greeks, which tells us how to put knowledge into practice in order to develop an ethical way of life. Thus, intellectual and moral capacities must necessarily be accompanied by an emotional dimension in order to give the former an ethical value. In this sense, Anne M. Wyatt-Brown quotes an interview with Erik Erikson where he relates words such as "agape, caridad, humildad y empatía" to describe "los valores culminantes de la edad avanzada" (1990, p. 303, authors' translation).

In the novel, amateur detective and professional philosopher Isabel Dalhousie witnesses an accidental death and is faced with the dilemma of whether to denounce the unintentional perpetrator. Contrary to what the penal code would dictate, she finally decides not to denounce them so as not to ruin the life of another person, who will also have to carry a terrible feeling of guilt for the rest of their life. Based on this case, the participants of the session discussed the ending of the novel. In writing an alternative ending, students reflected the measure to which the "wisdom" gained from their life experience had helped them make a decision. The following passage defines such wisdom

in a way that is very similar to the ethical way of life described by the ancient Greeks, and which is reflected in the participant's creative response:

Personalmente, mi experiencia vital me enseña: a vivir el momento en positivo, sea cual sea la situación; amar y agradecer; mantener una mirada abierta y profunda; que cada uno es responsable de sus decisiones; a tomar con humor mis limitaciones físicas y mentales; a perdonarme y perdonar, esto quiere decir necesariamente también olvidar; a disfrutar de las pequeñas cosas cotidianas; que los demás no son ni mejor ni peor, sencillamente 'son', y por lo tanto, no puedo juzgarlos; a no necesitar tener la razón; que la soledad, si es deseada, es una buena compañía; a quererme y ser feliz para transmitir felicidad a los que tengo cerca; a aceptar que tengo fecha de caducidad (participant's answer, authors' translation).

In her reflection on how her life experience and acquired wisdom had influenced her decision on the ending of the novel, another participant reflects on age and experience with these words:

Considero que es humano equivocarnos, pero aprender de los errores y gestionarlos adecuadamente nos puede fortalecer. Necesitamos asumir nuestros actos para evitar malestares psicológicos o angustias que nos impidan evolucionar y afrontar el futuro. Si una posibilidad de conseguir la felicidad está en la verdad, vivir con la mentira no conduce a nada bueno (participant's answer, authors' translation)

In general, the participants based their decisions about the end on the morals inherent in the acts of our daily lives. In their contributions, they reflected on how these acts can also positively influence the lives of others. In the McCall-Smith novels, detective Isabel Dalhousie provides a similar reflection on the concept of wisdom: "Y ahí era donde la filosofía realmente importaba: establecía las opciones primordiales detrás de todas esas preguntas prácticas y cotidianas sobre caridad, comprensión y simple decencia" (2009, p. 84, authors' translation). McCall-Smith's character similarly expresses the importance of empathy and creativity in the process of constructing an ethical code for day-to-day life: "La moral depende de la comprensión de los sentimientos de los demás. Si uno carece de visión moral –y existe gente de ese tipo–, entonces simplemente no será capaz de

identificarse con ellos. El dolor, el sufrimiento, la infelicidad de los demás no le parecerán reales porque no los percibirán” (2004, p. 122).

In the session dedicated to Julian Barnes, the case study revolved around the short story “The Fruit Cage,” where the forty-something narrator, the son of the eighty-year-old couple who become involved in a love triangle with a slightly younger neighbor, offers reflection on the concept of fidelity and the ethics of decisions made when the proximity of death is more evident. Therefore, when the couple’s son discovers his father’s infidelity, and his mother’s reaction to his father’s choice to go live with his mistress Elsie, he argues: “Al principio pensé: No es más que otro caso, otro hombre tentado por el ego, la novedad, el sexo. Lo de la edad hace que parezca distinto, pero en realidad no lo es” (2004, p. 209). It is the son himself who, faced with the need to understand his father, decides to go to see Elsie, and realizes that his decision does not lie in a physical or sexual reason, nor in a whim, but in the very need to follow his own heart, as well as his desire, beyond social and cultural conventions about age:

¿Por qué presuponer que el corazón se enfría al mismo que los genitales? ¿Porque queremos –necesitamos– ver la vejez como una época de serenidad? Ahora pienso que esto es una de las grandes conspiraciones de la juventud. No sólo de la juventud, sino también de la madurez, de cada año que pasa hasta el momento en que reconocemos que somos viejos. Y es una conspiración más amplia porque los viejos corroboran nuestra creencia. [...] Salvo que mi padre se negaba a jugar este juego (2004, p. 210).

For Barnes, wisdom has to do with knowing how to adapt to new situations. In the analysis and discussion of the story, the students showed their understanding for the protagonist’s choice, even if some of them did not agree with it or did not consider it ‘practical’ for dealing with the last years of life. However, they were more critical of the concept of fidelity and marriage, not understood exclusively in terms of romantic love, but rather as a conscious lifestyle choice. Especially through their creative endings, participants felt that infidelity at the end of life could be understood more as a lack of loyalty, in other words, of having failed the person you choose to grow old with. In this regard, of the eight creative endings that the participants produced, six end with the

protagonist dead, permanently ill or alone, while only two give the protagonist the opportunity to end his days without any ties (including sentimental ties), but happy. Therefore, from the creative endings written by the workshop students, it could be concluded that, in some way, the moral condemnation for the lack of loyalty of Barnes' protagonist was mostly translated into giving him a tragic ending. Both Barnes through his story and the workshop participants questioned which decision is wiser in old age: to follow your heart or your reason.

### *Old age and loneliness*

During the four sessions of the workshop, negative aspects related to old age were discussed, which have systematically and since ancient times contributed to generate the so-called story of decline, to which we have already referred (Gullette, 2004). This cultural construction of aging promotes and justifies, moreover, ageist beliefs of the young towards the old, and of young and old towards themselves (Gullette, 2011, 2019). Within these visions, the association of old age with the feeling of loneliness or social reclusion stood out among the participants. The importance acquired by this topic in the debates and creations is not surprising, since it is perhaps one of the most deeply rooted in our society, obsessed with productivity and constant activity, and precisely for this reason it is one of the main arguments of the anti-ageing precepts (Marshall and Katz, 2002). For this reason, the literary images examined in the sessions, which promote more integrative or complex views of loneliness, were especially valued for promoting a richer, anti-aging view of old age. Also, some of the participants' creations confirmed the ingrained fear of loneliness as the age progresses, contributing to a more complex spectrum of attitudes and views of aging within the group.

In the sessions dedicated to the poets Margarit and Crozier, solitude was reviewed from different points of view. Margarit's constructive example, which presents solitude as a privilege that allows the author to find himself, and for that reason is a necessary condition for greater clarity, inspired the poem of one of the participants, who stated in her

verses that she was “no longer afraid”, and that facing the imagined mirror of her poem, with only “the shadows of her thoughts”, she “began to understand old age”.

Of the poems produced in the session around Crozier, two highlighted loneliness as a negative experience, and one endowed it with positive connotations. In her work, Crozier describes loneliness in old age as a feeling of absolute sadness, since it implies a lack of physical contact with loved ones. Closely linked to Crozier’s interpretation of loneliness in the poem “The Godmother” (“The Grandmother”), a participant highlights the loneliness felt by the grandmother she imagines because neither granddaughters nor sons ever visit her. However, the grandmother eventually grows accustomed to her enforced solitude, so that when the granddaughters finally stop by to see her, she finds their presence annoying: “Están bastante mal educadas / llenas de manías y descaradas / demasiadas libertades / llegan a hacer disparates” (authors’ translation). In a similar way, for one of the workshop students, the older man is treated by society as an “annoyance that contributes nothing and bothers”, and therefore no longer has the space to express his opinions nor enjoys social prestige. In addition, loneliness also comes between the two members of the older couple, as the man presents himself as a “lover who has gone mad because he does not feel loved” by his wife. Another participant, on the other hand, left open the possibility that loneliness can be a positive feeling for the older person: “Sometimes, just sometimes it is good to feel lonely. Sometimes feeling lonely without being lonely is the real loneliness.”

In the session on McCall-Smith, the protagonist’s apparent loneliness as a “spinster” was reflected in the different ways in which participants interpreted the detective’s desire to investigate the death she accidentally witnessed. Almost all male participants did not relate themselves to the protagonist –“no logro empatizar con ella lo más mínimo” (participant’s answer, authors’ translation)– and perceived her research as a way to pass the time. Because of her status as a single, wealthy woman, they tend to describe the protagonist’s life as dull and idle and therefore “no es de extrañar que no esté de acuerdo con ninguna de sus buenas intenciones morales” (participant’s answer, authors’ translation). On the contrary, the vast majority of the female participants identified with the protagonist and interpreted her desire to know the truth as an act of solidarity and



empathy for the victim and their family members. They did not perceive her eagerness to discover the truth as gossip nor the protagonist as a bored spinster: in this sense, one participant emphasizes that “la soledad, si es deseada, es una buena compañía” (author’s translation).

In the session dedicated to Julian Barnes, the story on which the practical exercise was based disrupts the association between old age and loneliness through the denial of another important stereotype in the narrative of decline: the belief that an older person’s body is undesirable and therefore rejected by society. In the case of the short story “The Fruit Cage”, as well as in the other stories that comprise the volume *The Lemon Table*, as in other works by the author, the elderly main characters express the need to feel love and desire. In this case, the protagonists of the analyzed story express how they come to fall in love and feel desire in the same way as they had done in their youth. In the discussion that took place with the workshop participants, some of them expressed that the situation described in Julian Barnes’ story was not strange to them at all, as some of the participants explained concrete cases of acquaintances of theirs who had started a sentimental relationship in their seventies and eighties. For the workshop participants, love and desire are part of a person’s entire life trajectory and, although the behavior of the protagonists of the story may not be morally acceptable, they found it believable that they would have fallen in love and desire as Barnes expresses it in the story.

In the final discussion that closed the workshop, participants emphasized again the relationship between loneliness and old age as a negative stereotype, but at the same time shared experiences of people close to them who self-impose loneliness or at least diminish their social life because they have an ageist view of themselves. Thus, some of them criticized the attitudes of many of their peers, who, because they consider themselves ‘too old’, stop doing many activities that they no longer consider appropriate. As Leni Marshall explains, older people who have internalized ageist social prejudices often choose not to participate in social gatherings and stay at home, and thus avoid feeling judged by society (2012, p. 59). The relationship between aging and loss of professional identity was also pointed out as a reason why some older people stop relating to others. Some of the

participants recognized that, for many older people, mainly men, work had been their main source of identity, and once retired, they did not know what to do with their lives. As Helen Barnes and Jane Parry state, they thus corroborated that “los valores culturales predominantes continúan dando prioridad al trabajo remunerado y le atribuyen un rol central en la formación de la identidad” (2003, p. 12, authors’ translation). Finally, the participants also affirmed that the fact of ceasing to relate to others has a very marked sociocultural origin, which is closely related to the mentality of the individual and their environment. Thus, if a person has had concerns or has engaged in leisure activities throughout their life, during their old age, they will most likely use their free time to devote themselves more fully to these concerns and activities. Participants valued the richness of topics of conversation with those who retained or expanded their concerns in old age, in contrast to those who led more isolated lives, who tended to focus on domestic issues.

Despite the fact that sociological research on the feeling of loneliness is not conclusive, since there is no agreement on whether it is experienced more by males or females, nor whether its prevalence increases with age (López-Doblas & Díaz-Conde, 2018, para. 14). Both the sessions dedicated to the authors and the final discussion showed that the association between loneliness and old age is a complex issue and that it generates different attitudes, within which stereotypical beliefs about one’s own body and its adequacy or inadequacy in relation to others are included.

### ***Sickness and death***

In the workshop discussions, course participants felt that often in both literature and film the representation of old age is associated with disease, a fact that highlights the importance of the story of decline in our culture. In addition, some students criticized the lack of realism in the fictional accounts of these diseases. For example, as stated in the last discussion, they were struggling to find a film that dealt with Alzheimer’s disease with non-idealized characters. Participants attributed this to the harshness of diseases such as dementia, which would contribute to the low popularity of any film that portrayed this reality with greater plausibility. On the other hand, dementia remains a social and cultural

taboo, a fact that also contributes to its invisibility in art in general. While literary gerontology studies confirm the abundance of stereotypical representations of Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia (Cuadrado *et al.*, 2016; Chivers, 2011), it is also true that there are more recent artistic manifestations that empower people living their old age with these diseases, showing them as an active subject (Medina, 2018).

As the last discussion of the course reflected in a special way, Alzheimer's disease and the loss of memory and identity, closely linked to this disease, are part of the fears that the participants associated with old age. For several of the students, the realization of their own mental and physical deterioration, they said, would be worse than death itself. As Anne Davis Basting (2009) and Margaret Cruikshank (2009) explain, the fear of suffering from Alzheimer's in old age is a common fear in the Western world, due to the great importance that has been given to the functionality of the body and the association of the "self" with its intellectual capacities. Reflecting this fear and beliefs, which are otherwise challenged by both gerontology studies and disability studies, one participant mentioned assisted death or euthanasia as an alternative if she were to remain "como un vegetal en la cama o sufriendo unos dolores insoportables" (authors' translation). Two more participants agreed with her, thus exposing one of the most widespread concerns about aging and, once again, the identification between old age and illness inherent in the narrative of decline.

At the same time, the analysis and creative exercises of the sessions dedicated to the authors offered an alternative vision to the "old age and illness" pairing. On one hand, in the session dedicated to Julian Barnes, the story "The Fruit Cage" focused the attention of the participants on two themes that may seem opposed but, thanks to the fiction and the debate that Julian Barnes' short story generated, turned out to be complementary: love and desire, on one hand, and illness and death, on the other. As Barnes explains in several interviews that followed the publication of *The Lemon Table*, through the stories in the volume the author intended to reflect on the fact that growing old does not mean gaining wisdom or serenity in an almost magical way, nor entering a period of irremediable loss, but that old age, like any other time of life, entails gains and losses.

In this regard, Barnes explains that the volume “se opone a la noción de que las cosas se calman cuando uno llega a la vejez, cuando se supone que la filosofía empieza a hacer efecto –que el cuerpo, el corazón y el deseo sexual se desarrollan y envejecen de la misma forma. No lo hacen, se desarrollan con grandes disyunciones” (O’Regan 2003, p. 2, author’s translation). Both the debate and the small productions of the workshop participants reinforced Barnes’ initial idea that old age is not a homogeneous period of life, but as varied and multiple as any other.

In the case of the session devoted to McCall-Smith, both the discussion of the novel (and the reflections around the death that occurs in it) and the participants’ responses about alternative endings led participants to think creatively about age and experience in order to understand the complexities of the aging process. This process, even though it entails a series of losses (such as illness or death of family and friends), is also enriching: it can help, as one participant states, “to take my physical and mental limitations with humor”. Similarly, age and experience are related to the concept of wisdom also in the sense that they place emphasis on “disfrutar de las pequeñas cosas cotidianas” and, at the same time, “aceptar que tengo fecha de caducidad” (participant’s answer, authors’ translation).

On the other hand, Crozier’s work incorporates a poetic look at the illness and subsequent death of her parents in old age. Although in both cases the sense of loss is profound, grief over the death of the mother –to whom Crozier was very close– becomes a recurring theme in her work. Similarly, the realization that she has now become the older generation brings moments of anxiety about her own and her husband’s mortality. Even so, Crozier, through the figure of the daughter in her publications, shows strategies to overcome grief and fear of death in order to move on with her life. In this way, and using Robert Neimeyer’s terminology, Crozier integrates the loss of his parents into his own sense of identity (2002, p. 303).

In the session dedicated to Joan Margarit, death was very present, as it is one of the main themes of all the author’s poetic work. Throughout his career, the author has represented it shamelessly and with all its rawness to refer to the awareness of his own

mortality, and also to the weight of the essential losses (especially the deaths of his daughters) that have marked his life.

In his most recent poetry, however, death (and loss) take on a new meaning as the poetic voice claims to no longer fear the end itself and also discovers a deeper sense of love through loss, now turned into a companion of life. This was the model adopted by three of the participants, who responded to Margarit's "gerotranscendent" vision (in Lars Tornstam's terms, 2005) with verses such as "I have the capacity to accept death / as a natural part of life", "Where will we go next? Who knows...", or projecting his own mortality onto Margarit's borrowed image of the "birds of passage", and feeling, in spite of everything, and like the poet, "mysteriously happy". As a contrast to this review of the subject of death, another participant wrote an autobiographical text in which, alluding to his professional experience of more than four decades in the world of medicine, he said he had not yet found any meaning in death, and preferred to see it, like Luis Eduardo Aute, as a "reverse birth" or a "miscarried departure", in other words, as an abrupt end to life over which we have no control.

## Conclusions

After analyzing both the creative productions of the participants and the discussions that concluded each of the four sessions of the workshop, we found that literature and creative writing served as an expressive and communicative tool for the participants to address their own age and the transition of time from various perspectives. In line with studies that consider that the definition of active aging should be open to the multiple realities and possibilities of the elderly (Boudiny, 2013; Boudiny & Mortelmans, 2011), participants associated reading and writing with a more inclusive and positive way of understanding and experiencing aging. At the same time, the fact of being active favors creativity itself, since, as the participants themselves commented: "Si estás activo, estás creativo" y "la imaginación, despierta la imaginación" (authors' translation). Thus, aging does not irremediably entail a detachment from activity or social life, but may involve the development of forms of creativity that lead to greater personal fulfillment and, thus,

provide a higher quality of life. As Molly Andrews states, “la vejez puede ser un crecimiento hacia nosotros mismos. Todavía seguimos siendo las mismas personas que siempre fuimos, pero lo somos más profundamente” (1999, p. 311, authors’ translation).

Participants also associated the practice of reading with memory activation and exercise. As one participant stated: “reading is to the brain what exercise is to the body”. In this regard, studies such as that of Meredith Flood and Kenneth Phillips (2007) have demonstrated the positive effect that creative interventions have on the mental and psychological health of the elderly. Participants also acknowledged that when they read they do not always notice the elderly characters. However, after taking this course they admitted that they would certainly look more closely at the representation of elderly people in literature, thus demonstrating a greater sensitivity to the problem of cultural representation. In reference to this issue, one of the participants mentioned the importance of reading all types of literature at any age, in order to be more open-minded and to come to show genuine intergenerational understanding at any time of life.

Precisely through analysis, discussion and short creative writing exercises, the participants raised issues related to old age that are not normally discussed, such as wisdom, loneliness, death and illness and, related to them, desire and love. The need to find meaning in life at any stage of life, but especially in the final stage, was also made explicit. An interesting aspect of this study is that through fiction the participants openly reflected and gave their opinions on these issues from their own experience and from their own particular background, both personal and professional. From the experience and data collected in the workshop under study, we found that participating in activities that promote creative reading and writing contributes to discussing the aging process itself, and helps to highlight the expectations and fears of growing old. It is also worth noting the participants’ comments regarding the positive aspects derived from participating in small creative writing exercises, which reinforces one of the theses proposed in this article –that creativity is present in all of us throughout our lives and that, in a way, it helps us to live better lives.

At a time when the current health crisis caused by COVID-19 has highlighted the ageist views of our supposedly advanced societies, and negative stereotypes of old age have been exacerbated, while increasing the isolation of the elderly, practices such as those described in this article seem to us not only positive but also necessary. In this sense, we are considering the possibility of incorporating new technologies to organize workshops such as the one described above in the near future: for example, one of our last interventions was carried out in a virtual format, since the current situation did not allow us to carry out the reading workshop in person. Finally, this study demonstrates the need to continue to explore the topic of creativity in old age with a life course perspective, with the aim of reflecting and discussing topics that are often taboo in social debates and that tend to limit the meaning of age, and above all, of old age.

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## ANNEX

### **"Watching My Lover"** (*What the Living Won't Let Go*, pp. 71-72)

I watch him hold his mother  
as she vomits into a bowl.  
After, he washes her face  
with a wet cloth and we try  
to remove her soiled gown  
tied in the back with strings.

Unable to lift her  
I pull the green cotton  
from under the blankets, afraid  
I'll tear her skin.  
He removes the paper diaper.  
No one has taught us  
how to do this, what to say.  
Everything's so fragile here

a breath could break you.

She covers her breasts with hands  
bruised from tubes and needles,  
turns her face away.

*It's okay, Mom,* he says.

*Don't feel shy. I've undressed  
dozens of women in my time.*

In this room where my lover  
bares his mother, we three laugh.

Later, I curl naked beside him  
in our bed, listen to his sleeping,  
breath by breath. So worn out  
he burns with fever – the fires  
his flesh lights to keep him  
from the cold.

Though he has washed  
I smell her on his skin  
as if she has licked him  
from head to toe  
with her old woman's tongue  
so everyone who lies with him  
will know he's still  
his mother's son.

**"Taking the Measure"** (*Small Mechanics*, p. 81)

The belly's post-menopausal slouch,  
under each bicep the swag of a fleshy wing,  
dollops of fat above my bra below my armpits  
flap and make smacking noises when I run. Long as

the face of a foal, my breasts meander, my cheeks  
 droop. Naked, I look in mirrors only on the sly  
 and never try the ones in hotel bathrooms. Some claim  
 wisdom but my mind sags, too. *Au revoir*  
 to high-school French and long division, to the seven  
 kinds of ambiguity, the common names of flowers,  
 and Shakespeare learned by heart. To be has taken over  
 not to be. So be it. For that I'm grateful.  
 I and my lover of long duration still turn to each other  
 in the night and in the morning and in the fierce-eyed  
 glare of afternoon. The years, he says, have made me  
 elemental. I taste more and more like salt.

**"Cap altre inici"** (Un hivern fascinant ©hereus de Joan Margarit. 2017 © Edicions Proa)

Vaig arribar a sentir com udolava  
 un llop al fons d'un bosc.  
 I les guatlles cridant-se ocultes entre el blat.  
 Em vaig trobar de nit els ulls de les guineus.  
 He vist els grans voltors damunt d'un mar de boira.  
 Però res no ha acabat, i no sé de cap pèrdua.  
 Què era el que posseïa?  
 No puc jugar amb la por com quan era un infant.  
 Ja sóc al fons del bosc de tots els contes,  
 somrient i feliç de no ser jove.  
 Sabent que, quan s'ha obert,  
 una esquerdada no es torna a tancar mai.

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