

DIACHRONIC PERSPECTIVE ON THE AGING DISCOURSE IN THE FICTIONS OF WESTERN EUROPE AND THE USA

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The relevance of the aging discourse is driven by the need of understanding the increase in life expectancy that is reflected in recent fiction. Age studies and gerontological studies of the 20th century recommend socio-psychological and historical-cultural analyses to comprehensively cover the phenomenon of aging. To achieve this goal is possible with the help of diachronic consideration of the subject of a certain society with its specific features. The purpose of the article is to outline the main milestones of social and artistic representations of aging in Western civilization in a diachronic perspective, based on the philosophical, anthropological and historical works of de Beauvoir, D.H. Fischer, T.R. Cole etc. They discern opposing attitudes towards the elderly in the history of Western civilization: reverence as much as neglect. At the same time in the framework of the available data a straight story cannot be written, because the references to late adulthood concerned mainly the representatives of the privileged classes. The elderly representatives of other social strata stayed on the margins of society and public interest. Therefore the challenges of old age are a significant problem of governmental and social concerns. This is especially true of the aging women who perceived their physiological and psychological transformations in old age as a source of embarrassment, shame, and disgrace for centuries. Yet the period of late adulthood has turned into “decline” even more conspicuously in recent centuries largely due to the disengagement of the elderly from their practical activities. The author traces the representations of old age in the landmark works of antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, 17th-20th centuries in junction with anthropological observations of a particular period. The religious and communal understanding of late adulthood can be traced in Western civilization from the time of antiquity to the end of the 16th century. Then there is a sharp transition to a scientifically-individualistic perception of old age in Europe and the USA in the period from the 18th to the 20th centuries. The author claims that the dominant aspect of the aging discourse in fiction for a long time has been and remains the motive complex of intergenerational conflicts. Apart from that a contemporary discourse of the dynamics of aging in fiction also develops representations of the routine life of elderly characters, their social statuses, relations within their families and issues of transcendence. The methods used in the paper are mixed: historical data processing, analyses of interdisciplinary resources (anthropology, literary gerontology, social gerontology, age studies). The results can be practical for classes of theory of literature and social gerontology. The findings of the paper conclude that societal attitudes toward old age and aging and its literary manifestations have undergone dramatic, sometimes polar, transformations over more than two millennia.

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