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Reframing Aging: Narrative and Cultural Gerontology in the Works of Penelope Lively and Helen Small

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***Abstract*—Literature possesses the efficacy to render human life artfully and to represent humanity through its narratives. Aging is one of the extensive areas still being studied, and the interdisciplinary nature of literary gerontology offers considerable scope for research in the contemporary world. The paper focuses on Penelope Lively's *Ammonites and Leaping Fish: A Life in Time* (2013) and Helen Small's *The Long Life* (2007), two significant texts in the context of aging studies. Lively adopts a memoiristic style in her rendering of the aging experience, while Small takes up a philosophical approach to growing old. Two frameworks, narrative gerontology and cultural gerontology, have been used in analysing each of the texts. Penelope Lively's portrayal of her aging, blended with the themes of memory and identity, is examined through the discourse of narrative gerontology. At the same time, Helen Small, through her work, carries out cultural representation and philosophical inquiry, and thus the theory of cultural gerontology has been applied to her text. A parallel study of both approaches is conducted in this research, offering possibilities for exploring the encompassing nature of the study of aging. Aging is an amalgamation of both lived experience and collective cultural expression, and the paper studies aging as a meaningful and dynamic phase of life. This study contributes to the existing body of gerontological discourse by highlighting the importance of personal narratives and cultural inquiry in fostering diverse and inclusive perspectives on ageing.**

***Index Terms*—aging, memory, literary gerontology, narrative gerontology, cultural gerontology**

I. Introduction

Aging is both a personal journey and a complex cultural phenomenon. "Aging, as the term implies, is a process. It begins even before birth and continues until death. As such, aging is synonymous with human development" (Burgess, 1960, p. 4). As a subject of inquiry, aging is often situated within biomedical, sociological, or demographic domains. Yet, in subjective experience, aging extends beyond the boundaries of these frameworks. Dominant medical, economic, and social discourses emphasise decline, loss, and dependency. Literature, however, possesses the unique capacity to refract and reinterpret lived experiences, offering a powerful counterpoint to these reductive narratives. This research paper examines the potential of literature to reframe the subtractive view of aging and to illuminate its more affirmative possibilities. Accordingly, this parallel study explores how both authors challenge prevailing cultural scripts about aging. In their works, the authors employ two distinct approaches to conveying the experience of growing old, providing ample scope for analysis through narrative and cultural gerontology, respectively. Both Penelope Lively and Helen Small contribute significantly to the critical reimagining of age. As Oró-Piqueras (2016) states in her paper, "Being a woman and entering into old age is a double-sided jeopardy which has increasingly been present in contemporary fiction" (p. 1). Lively, writing in her eighties, constructs a memoir-like reflection that interweaves her cumulative life experiences with nuanced observations of the material world as perceived in later life. "Lively is part of a growing number of women writers and artists who are not only productive in their later years but who provide valuable accounts both fictional and autobiographical -of their own ageing" (O'Neill & Schrage-Früh, 2019, p. 1). In *Ammonites and Leaping Fish*, Lively (2014) states: "This is not quite a memoir. Rather, it is the view from old age" (p. 3). She reasserts the authority of an aging voice, one refined and deepened by the passage of time. Helen Small adopts a philosophical and critical standpoint in her approach to aging. Her book *The Long Life* interrogates representations of old age in Western philosophy and literature.

Gaidash (2019) notes that literary gerontology emerged in the mid-1970s within the context of age studies, and researchers in literary gerontology analyse gerontological indicators inside fictional works. In contrast to sociologists or medical gerontologists, who perceive biological ageing as a decline of the body and mind, literary scholars examine

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fictional portrayals of late adulthood through a more critical lens, highlighting how elderly individuals confront various negative stereotypes in a youth-centric culture. The primary notion in literary gerontology is ageism, whose etymology is derived from the term age. The original meaning of lifetime; maturity; vital force has been obscured over time, evolving to signify decline. This idea, while taken into consideration, is itself central to this study, which seeks to demarcate ageist stereotypes from mainstream narratives and to highlight the strength and positivity that should guide the study of aging. Since, in today's world, the concept of aging is shaped not only by biological processes but also through cultural representations, it becomes essential to challenge the ageist narratives around us. Media portrayals of the aged as merely weak, an economic system that often stresses productivity over wisdom, are all examples of how societal renditions lead people to focus on the ill aspects of aging. The result of portraying the bleak side of aging through cultural representations is a stagnant mindset in which aging is seen as a problem to be solved or managed, rather than as a natural phase of life. In the *Handbook of Indian Gerontology*, Ramamurti and Jamuna (2005) point out that the predictions of the United Nations indicate that by 2050, the population of elderly individuals is anticipated to rise more than threefold, from 600 million to over 2 billion. The proportion of the elderly population is anticipated to increase from 10 to 21 per cent. The escalation will be particularly significant and swift in some nations in Asia and Latin America. Currently, one in ten individuals globally is aged 60 or older. It is anticipated that by 2050, this ratio will rise to one in five, and by 2150, it will escalate to one in three.

Thus, there is a growing need to rethink and remodel the understanding of aging, as demographic shifts lead to a larger aging population. The twenty-first century is itself regarded as a century of aging, making awareness on aging-related issues essential. In the *Encyclopedia of Gerontology* (2nd ed.), edited by James E. Birren, Phillipson and Vincent (2007) argue that globalization is a constituent of the risk society and may generate new forms of insecurity, of which anxieties and fears about growing old represent one significant aspect. They pose the question of whether a new cohort of older people will give a different voice and meaning to the nature of growing old. It is important to mention the term 'population ageing' here. According to Phillips et al. (2012), population or demographic aging denotes the continuous transformation of the global age structure, resulting in a rise in both the proportions and absolute numbers of elderly individuals. Population ageing is widely seen as a global phenomenon, as the majority of nations are currently undergoing this shift in age structure. Literature plays an integral part in shaping societal attitudes, and thus analysing any piece of art or literature is not a waste of time, but rather a truly functional process that is likely to elevate our humanity to a superior level. Aging is undoubtedly a critical humanitarian concern, and it is society's responsibility to protect older adults in the vulnerable stages of their lives. Hepworth (2000) suggests that engagement with creative forms such as literature, visual art, film, and music enables individuals to reflect imaginatively on their own aging. He further argues that such works help audiences acknowledge the lived experiences and subjectivities of older people and reveal how age and aging are shaped through cultural meanings rather than biology alone. "The future of global aging depends on our collective ability to honour both universal human dignity and cultural diversity in our approaches to later life. By embracing this complexity, we can develop more nuanced, effective, and respectful frameworks for promoting positive aging outcomes across the rich tapestry of human cultures and experiences" (Begam, 2025, p. 44).

This paper examines the humanitarian role of literature in cultivating awareness about aging, and the selected texts and theoretical frameworks collectively offer a robust foundation for advancing research in the interdisciplinary field of gerontology. The aim is to analyse the story of old age both as a personal narrative and as a cultural construct, and the objective of this parallel study is to articulate a holistic understanding of aging as simultaneously an experience and an area of inquiry. This paper adopts a qualitative research method, and the expected outcome is a reframed understanding of aging that challenges the conventional ageist stereotypes prevalent in society.

II. An Overview of Theoretical Framework

The framework aims to explore narrative gerontology and cultural gerontology through a close reading of the select novels. The term 'narrative gerontology' (Kenyon et al., 1999; Ruth & Kenyon, 1996) is intended as a heuristic for the study of ageing. Its purpose, as we see it, is to emphasise and coordinate a particular set of insights about the ageing process itself and how we investigate it. As the word "narrative" implies, its main agenda for gerontological theory, research and practice is to explore the entailments of the metaphor of "life as story" (Kenyon & Randall, 1999). Of the two selected texts, *Ammonites and Leaping Fish* by Penelope Lively (2014) offers an account of the author's personal journey as an older woman, articulated through a narrative form. This text is analysed through the lens of narrative gerontology to examine the central role of storytelling in understanding old age and identity. Narrative gerontology is an inquiry that listens to the stories of later life and examines how they are shaped by social factors. "Life stories often accompany a person's growth and journey. Therefore, the life stories of older adults are crucial for us to understand their lives and provide feedback" (Fan & Wu, 2024, p. 149).

Twigg and Martin (2015) state that cultural gerontology has become an active and insightful area of academic study in the last decade. It combines research from the humanities and social sciences, and this field has transformed how we examine later years, challenging old stereotypes. It also introduces new theories, methods, and ways to engage politically and intellectually. Cultural gerontology is an interdisciplinary field that studies how cultural meanings and representations shape old age and aging. Within this theoretical context, Helen Small's *The Long Life* (2007) is selected as a key text for analysis under the framework of cultural gerontology. Cultural gerontology understands aging as something shaped by

culture rather than biology alone. It pays attention to how different social practices and everyday assumptions influence what growing old means in different societies and across time. Over the years, this approach has become an important part of gerontological studies, encouraging new ways of thinking about later life as well as new directions in research and critical debate.

III. Methodology

The researchers use a textual analysis method to examine and interpret narrative gerontology and cultural gerontology in the novels. The primary materials for the study are *Ammonites and Leaping Fish* (2014) by Penelope Lively and *The Long Life* (2007) by Helen Small, and secondary sources like articles, research papers, and e-resources that deal with aging. This paper incorporates insights on Narrative Gerontology, helping the researchers understand aging as a meaning-making process in which narratives shape identity, memory, and the continuity of the self across the life course. Through an examination of the narrative told by Penelope Lively, researchers intend to discover the complex ways in which identity takes shape through memory and lived experience. Furthermore, looking at the ideas of researchers like Twigg and Martin (2015) on Cultural Gerontology, this study examines how cultural representations, social discourses, and symbolic meanings shape the understanding and experience of aging in society. Through this framework of cultural gerontology, Helen Small's *The Long Life* (2007) is analysed, which critically interrogates philosophical and literary traditions to reveal how cultural narratives construct, regulate, and often problematise old age.

IV. Findings and Discussion

A. Narrative Gerontology and the Authority of Experience in Penelope Lively's Ammonites and Leaping Fish

Narrative gerontology is a concept that has developed based on the ideas of autobiographical and narrative memories (Fan & Wu, 2024, p. 148). In *Ammonites and Leaping Fish*, Penelope Lively, in her eighties, reflects on her life story and considers the passage of time, memory, and the sense of identity she possesses as an older woman. A personal and nuanced picture of what it means to grow old is articulated through her words. Memory is central to her work, and she demonstrates an interest in understanding how memory functions and the role it plays in shaping our sense of self. Lively (2014) states that she wants to put her focus on her generation, which has become a large part of the Western population, and look into both their lives and the way society views them. She is concerned about the role of memory and how it connects and shapes people's identities. Reflecting on her own life, she brings up the major historical events that influenced her generation, including the Suez Crisis, the Cold War, and the cultural changes of the late twentieth century. She compares how people experienced these episodes at the time with the way they are viewed and judged today when looking back.

Lively links the individual to the broader cultural context through her story. For her, old age is an ambushing stage of life, in which her personality remains unchanged even as she reaches a different place and time. The duality of continuity and change in old age is clearly evident here. Lively (2014, p. 10) reflects on the experience of aging by observing, "We have to get used to being the person we are, the person we have always been, but encumbered now with various indignities and disabilities, shoved as it were into some new incarnation. We feel much the same, but clearly are not. We have entered an unexpected dimension; dealing with this is the new challenge." Other than memory, self and identity are the themes Lively seeks to unveil through her narrative. As an elderly woman, the unexpected stage of old age she has reached has made her realise that her personality has remained the same, although time has added its own weariness to it. Her self has undergone the pressures of time, but this does not diminish the identity she retains.

On recollecting her memory of childhood, Lively says, "The experience of childhood presents the greatest challenge. It is in one sense crystal clear, in another sense irretrievable" (Lively, 2014, p. 65). She was a wartime child in Egypt during the early 1940s and reminisces about how the war pervaded her thoughts at that time. "Wartime Cairo steamed with poets. Bernard Spencer, Robin Fedden, Terence Tiller, John Gawsworth, John Cromer, Gwyn Williams, Robert Liddell - none of these names would be familiar today to anyone outside the arcane world of mid-twentieth-century poetry studies" (Lively, 2014, pp. 68-69). The years she has lived and the wisdom she has acquired are conveyed through her narrative, and this personal experience carries a universal significance that warrants careful consideration.

Lively's narrative is significant in that it can be considered what Margarette Gullette has termed a 'Progress Narrative.' Unlike narratives of decline, this work beautifully portrays old age as an important and enjoyable phase of life, rather than as a problem to be managed. In her book *Agewise: Fighting the New Ageism in America*, Gullette (2011, p. 5) revisits ideas from her earlier work by explaining "decline" as a cultural way of thinking that makes growing older after youth feel negative, rather than part of a meaningful and continuing life. Although Lively recounts her life in detail, the narrative contains no sentimental overtones; instead, it offers a powerful and unsentimental perspective on the experience of aging. Medeiros (2016) observes that the importance of viewing life as a journey is that it emphasizes the past over the present or future. This suggests that, from the perspective of later life, all meaningful experiences have already occurred in a pilgrimage-like journey through time, leading to a stage of wisdom, reflection, and acceptance in older age. Connected to this concept is the feeling of loneliness—the belief that, as social circles have diminished over time, the likelihood of forming new relationships has decreased. This notion prevails more generally, but Lively's narrative provides an alternative image, highlighting a positive and brighter portrayal of old age.

Birren and Deutchman (1991) observe that a writer's capacity to truly empathize with older characters is often tied to their own age. Younger poets, novelists, and playwrights sometimes make the mistake of thinking that elderly characters lack emotional depth or the ability to surprise, overlooking the nuances of later life. While some younger writers possess the curiosity to bridge this gap, it's generally true that writers reach middle age and can tap into their own experiences to write more authentically about aging. The author emphasizes the advantage of writing about old age as an older person, which aligns with the above statement. According to her, it would be very difficult for someone younger to anticipate the years ahead and write about old age. For Lively, however, writing about growing old comes effortlessly, as she has experienced the passage of time and reached a position from which she can authentically render her lived experiences. She says, "One of the few advantages of writing fiction in old age is that you have been there, done it all, experienced every decade" (Lively, 2014, p. 19). According to Guillemot and Urien (2010, pp. 25–43), older adults' engagement in storytelling is driven by six intrinsic motivations that align closely with the concerns of narrative gerontology: flattering the ego - through the need for recognition; repairing the ego - alleviating discontentment; being remembered - way of accepting inevitability; sharing - to create social ties; transmitting experiences - to prepare younger generations for the future; and bearing witness - to preserve information for posterity. Together, these motivations highlight the potential of narrative gerontology to foster resilience at both individual and community levels. A sense of self-assurance resonates throughout Lively's narrative, stemming from her experience, and she acknowledges the authority of this experience in the text. Lively (2014) remarks that age allows a person to speak with a certain authority because they have become familiar with its realities and can look back on the accumulated weight and memories of a lifetime. Although the writer does not focus extensively on the losses of aging, an emphasis on psychological resilience remains evident. "Acceptance has set in, somehow, has crept up on you, which is just as well, because the alternative - perpetual rage and resentment - would not help matters" (Lively, 2014, p. 41). This is a form of ego repair. To be remembered is a recurring motive – "We go, but hang in for a while in other people's heads - something we said, something we did; we leave a ghostly imprint on our backdrop. A very few people go one further and are distilled into a blue plaque on a building" (Lively, 2014, p. 3). This awareness and desire to be remembered connects her personal narrative to transgenerational memory. Although Lively has written a personal memoir, it contributes to the collective understanding of old age. "There can be a certain detachment about it; the solipsism of writing about oneself tempered by the more compelling interest of general concerns - what it means to be old, what the long view does to us, or for us, how we mutate with our times" (Lively, 2014, p. 4). Thus, the narrative serves as a resource for mutual learning. The act of transmission and the shared nature of aging are also emphasised in the text. The work embodies the intrinsic motivations of narrative gerontology, and the author highlights the significance of both individual and community resilience through her narrative.

B. Cultural Gerontology and the Ethics of Representation in Helen Small's The Long Life

Helen Small's *The Long Life* is a paradigmatic text for cultural gerontology, as it examines literary and philosophical frameworks of Western culture. Philosophical underpinnings are also present in Lively's work, highlighting traditional philosophy as a domain that has largely neglected old age. Old age was historically considered an exceptional phase of life, and the author seeks to challenge this prevalent notion. The work encompasses both classical and modern philosophical perspectives, from Plato and Aristotle to contemporary theorists. It also references several literary texts, including Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, and works by Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and J. M. Coetzee. The purpose of integrating these perspectives is to explore the philosophical questions raised by old age. The book situates old age within contemporary discourse and highlights the challenges posed by aging populations in Western countries. It critiques the framing of old age as a social burden and instead calls for broader considerations of social justice and empowerment initiatives. In the Preface, Small (2007) observes that, instead of viewing the elderly as the problem, we should consider the deeper causes of the significant differences in life expectancies between countries. Instead of focusing on the 'burden of retirees,' we need to think more broadly about the overall nature and purpose of work. A persistent pattern in the author's observations of old age lies in its duality: "For every conventional negative association of 'old age' there is an equally recognizable counter-association: rage/serenity; nostalgia/detachment; folly/wisdom; fear/courage; loss of sexual powers and/or opportunities/liberation from sex; loss of the capacity or right to labour/release from a long life of labour" (Small, 2007, p. 2). Since antiquity, these opposing views have remained consistent, reflecting the ambivalent nature of aging and how cultural metaphors both hinder and enable individual experience.

Helen Small contrasts Cicero's moralistic optimism on old age with the unflinching truth found in Horace, Ovid, Juvenal, and later literary figures such as Shakespeare (notably *King Lear*), Villon, Corneille, Molière, Proust, Yeats, Ionesco, and Beckett. *King Lear* has been interpreted as an early form of absurdist theatre, depicting old age as a state of detachment. The author illustrates how literature has served as a source for philosophical reflection. Philosophers have drawn on literature to elucidate the complexities of old age. For instance, Homer's Priam was used by Aristotle to discuss vulnerability in old age; Dickens and Beckett were referenced by Adorno to show the diminishing nature of old age; *King Lear* was employed by Amartya Sen to examine well-being over time; and Karel Čapek's *The Makropulos Case* was used by Bernard Williams to explore the tedium of immortality. These literary figures assisted philosophers in addressing abstract metaphysical issues related to aging. By situating old age at the intersection of multiple disciplines and perspectives, *The Long Life* deepens our understanding of old age not as decline but as a complex phase that highlights the need to address major societal concerns such as ageism and stereotyping.

"Ageism, defined as the systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, has been widely debated since first formulated by Robert Butler in the late 1960s. Initially, as Simon Biggs (1993) notes, the concept provided impetus to social movements (such as the Gray Panthers) that sought to challenge age-based discrimination. But the idea of ageism helped, in some measure, to raise the profile of social gerontology and was part of a broader critical agenda introduced by feminist and Marxist perspectives as applied to the study of old age" (Anderson, 2002, p. 46). Helen Small draws on her cross-disciplinary work on aging to raise awareness of the intricacies of ageist notions. The alienation and objectification experienced by older individuals in modern societies are foregrounded in Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist critique *La Vieillesse* (*The Coming of Age*), and Small contrasts this with the classical tradition. According to Beauvoir, the sufferings of the elderly are not natural but are exacerbated by social and cultural structures. She quotes, "We must assume a reality that is certainly ourselves, although it reaches us from the outside and although we cannot grasp it. There is an insoluble contradiction between the obvious clarity of the inward feeling that guarantees our unchanging quality and the objective certainty of our transformation. All we can do is waver from the one to the other, never managing to hold them both firmly together" (Beauvoir, 1972, p. 290). Beauvoir refuses to separate the phenomenology of aging from its representational dimensions, and this notion is highlighted by Small in her text. Small critiques the tendency of philosophy and social science to treat literary depictions of old age as mere representations of reality rather than as metaphorical constructions. For instance, *King Lear* is typically interpreted as a meditation on power or human suffering, and only rarely as a play about old age; yet its central dramatic tension is rooted in Lear's aging and his loss of authority.

Small situates her work within the broad field of cultural gerontology, which encourages the integration of literary, philosophical, and scientific approaches to growing old. The emergence of "critical gerontology" is also noted by the author, providing a critical stance toward the cultural construction of aging. Luborski and Sankar (2001) note that the primary objective of the critical gerontology (CG) framework is to recognise broader societal factors that impact the issues being studied, to investigate the process of theorising, and to evaluate the effects of various research methods and theoretical developments. Small's approach is eclectic, oscillating between philosophical argument and literary analysis, thus advocating the need to examine the cultural constructs of aging within a broader framework. A central concern in *The Long Life* is the ethics of representing old age, as it explores how cultural representations shape public attitudes as well as self-awareness among older individuals. Small is wary of certain storylines, particularly those that emphasise natural deterioration, and contends that they have the potential to reinforce ageist stereotypes. She emphasises that biological decline is inevitable but maintains that social and cultural contexts significantly influence the meaning of human life. Accordingly, she stresses the importance of understanding the uncertain nature of old age constructively. A rethinking of the relationship between longevity and the good life is necessary, according to her. Isolating the elderly as a 'problem' cannot address the challenges they face; instead, a broader reckoning to value older individuals is required. Helen Small notes: "In many respects I am starting where Simone de Beauvoir left off: with the recognition that, if we want to think differently about old age, we need to think differently about 'life itself'—and (I would add) about thinking itself. 'The whole system', as she put it, 'is at issue'" (Small, 2007, p. 21).

C. Two Voices on Aging

The paper illustrates two distinct perspectives in the portrayal of old age. A parallel analysis of Penelope Lively's memoir *Ammonites and Leaping Fish* and Helen Small's philosophical study *The Long Life* applies an intersection of narrative gerontology and cultural gerontology. To explore aging as a lived experience, Lively employs a personal narrative, whereas Small interrogates cultural representations of old age through literary and philosophical interpretative lenses. Together, these works provide complementary frameworks for understanding aging as both a subjective and cultural construct.

Narrative gerontology focuses on how life stories shape identity in aging, and Lively's memoir exemplifies this notion. Her narrative is structured around *Ammonites* and *Leaping Fish* as metaphors for memory and time. 'Ammonites,' a fossilised remnant, symbolises layered history, while the 'leaping fish' represents the transient nature of vitality. The emphasis of narrative gerontology on both the continuity of life and the fragmentation or disruption of aging is evident through these dual metaphors. Lively reflects: "A lifetime is embedded; it does not float free, it is tethered - to certain decades, to places, to people. It has a context; each departure leaves a person-shaped void - the absence within a family, the presence lost within a house, in a community, in society itself" (Lively, 2014, p. 3). In the final section of her text, Lively identifies six objects that, for her, encapsulate who she is. These objects serve not merely as personal belongings but as anchors of memory, functioning as narrative devices that counter reductive stereotypes of decline. By foregrounding these material traces of her past, Lively challenges the notion that aging follows a simple, linear trajectory. She observes: "We are the people we have always been - splendidly various, and let us respect that. The young are in control, which is as it should be, and mostly we wouldn't wish to be out there now taking the flak, though there have always been majestic exceptions, with politicians the high fliers: think Churchill, Prime Minister at eighty, think Gladstone, think Bismarck. But we do not wish to be arbitrarily retired" (Lively, 2014, p. 21). This assertion foregrounds the writer's narrative agency, which remains a central concern within the framework of narrative gerontology.

Cultural gerontology examines the societal discourses that construct the idea of aging, and Helen Small's work seeks to deconstruct the dominant Western cultural narratives. Small analyses literary texts by Cicero, Beauvoir, and others to expose the nature of cultural binaries and how these binaries obscure the complexity of aging. She critiques the

Bildungsroman as an "upward mobility" narrative, demonstrating how literature and other cultural scripts impose progressive expectations that are often unfit for later life. According to Small, cultural constructs that sentimentalise old age constrain autonomy, and this notion aligns with the emphasis on power dynamics in cultural gerontology. It can be observed that while Lively grounds aging in the material engagements of memory—for instance, the fossils, books, and keepsakes that anchor her past—Small, in contrast, investigates aging in relation to abstract philosophical conceptions of time, including Aristotelian teleology, the narrative unity of time, and metaphysical boundaries. Thus, a dialogue emerges between the palpable experience of time lived and the cognitive structures through which time is defined. When Lively asserts authority as a "native of old age," writing as one who inhabits that stage and speaks with the authority of presence, Small—who writes in midlife about a concept that lies ahead of her—positions herself as an observer who calls for philosophy to take old age more seriously as an abstract category. This contrast draws an analogy between lived witnessing and critical distance: one experiential, the other analytical. Lively foregrounds personal objects such as ammonites, ducks, fish, and books as loci of identity, treating them as archives of her selfhood. Conversely, Small turns to canonical texts by Plato, Cicero, Beauvoir, Dickens, and Coetzee as cultural artefacts that shape how old age is conceived and narrated.

Though both works emphasise how meaning is stored, the difference lies in the fact that one does so through personal relics, while the other relies on societal traditions. Lively makes an effort to show how aging is shaped by historical contingency, noting how life expectancy in earlier centuries rendered her own longevity an exception. She illustrates that aging as a process is not influenced solely by biological factors but is also significantly shaped by historical circumstances that are contingent or accidental. She highlights that life expectancy in earlier centuries was generally much lower, making her long life unusual when compared to typical lifespans in those periods. She underscores that aging and longevity must be understood within specific historical contexts because what counts as normal or exceptional can vary dramatically depending on the era in which one lives. Meanwhile, Small insists that old age is an unavoidable universal reality, and that all who live long enough must confront bodily decline. Both authors trace how aging differs across periods and contexts, yet they also affirm that it remains a universal and inevitable aspect of human life. In Lively's work, she tempers the discomforts of aging with wit, anecdote, and ironic distance, finding play even in decline. Small, however, while acknowledging cultural ambivalence, operates within serious philosophical frameworks—justice, virtue, and metaphysics—that treat aging as a problem of meaning. Thus, the juxtaposition reveals two modes of coping with old age: one employing humour as a survival strategy, and the other employing argument as a form of intellectual resistance.

Looking at the parallels between the works, both texts reject decline narratives. Time is subjective— a backward glance of memory — for Lively, whereas for Small it is cultural, or a critique of life as narrative. The meaning of selfhood appears as varieties of one's own self for Lively, but as a dialectic of self and other representations for Small. Concerning agency, in Lively's memoir it emerges as a narrative reclamation, whereas in Small's inquiry agency operates as resistance to cultural determinism. Lively portrays memory as a ballast against dementia, while for Small it is an ethical duty toward complex representation. Lively's nonlinear memory parallels Small's critique of teleological life models. Together, Lively and Small reframe aging as a dialogic process. Lively's memoir demonstrates how her personal narrative counters omission; as a writer in her eighties, she asserts authority against ageist dismissal. Urging critical engagement, Small shows how philosophical traditions inform modern stereotypes. Both works emphasise heterogeneity. Thus, both texts demand a nuanced representation and understanding of aging.

V. Conclusion

A complex and multifaceted understanding of aging is provided by the parallel study of Penelope Lively's *Ammonites and Leaping Fish: A Life in Time* and Helen Small's *The Long Life*. It shows how both narrative and cultural gerontology help to reframe old age as a significant, intricate, and dynamic stage of life. The research highlights the importance of integrating personal narrative and cultural scripts to foster an inclusive and holistic understanding of aging. Lively's book emphasises the power of lived experience and provides a rich context to analyse through narrative gerontology. Her reflections are active, engaging with memory, identity, and time, rather than meditating on passive memories of the past. By deploying 'ammonites' and 'leaping fish' as metaphors, Lively transforms old age into a period rich with memories and meaning. She challenges linear, diminished portrayals of old age prevalent in public discourse, and presents later life as a stage of continuity and adaptation. As Lively demonstrates, recalling memories is a way of situating oneself with time, place, and social context. The primary focus of narrative gerontology is on how storytelling constructs identity and fosters resilience in later life, and this focus aligns with the recollections and assertions that Lively makes through her authoritative voice. Helen Small's *The Long Life* questions the social, philosophical, and literary structures that have shaped people's understanding of old age and appropriately frames it for the critical lens of cultural gerontology. Small places aging at the intersection of multiple disciplines and underscores the drawbacks of approaching old age solely from a scientific or economic perspective. She advocates for a more comprehensive analysis of social justice and representation. This critique of ageism illuminates the dangers of pathologising old age, and the writer therefore calls for a more holistic approach to the challenges of old age. Through the intersection of narrative and cultural gerontology, the need for a more comprehensive understanding of aging becomes evident. The study shows that aging is not merely about getting older physically; it is also shaped by stories, beliefs, and expectations—both those people create for themselves and those society imposes. Thus, aging is shaped by culture and narrative, not solely by biology or time. To create a more inclusive

and empowered view of aging, a dialogic relationship between self and culture, memory and representation, is required. In conclusion, Lively and Small's works illustrate how the humanities enrich the emerging field of gerontology through both personal narratives and cultural understanding. By offering tools for empathy, self-reflection, and social change, they assist us in moving beyond negative representations of aging. As the world's demographics shift and the proportion of older people rises, such humanistic and interdisciplinary approaches are essential to building communities that value, empower, and learn from elders. The paper reinforces the need to reconsider what it means to live and age well.

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