

Research Article

The Loneliness of the Aging in Two Contemporary Novels

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Received November 21, 2013; Accepted March 24, 2014

Decision Editor: Helen Q. Kivnick, PhD

Abstract

Purpose of the Study: In *The Loneliness of the Dying* (1985), sociologist Norbert Elias claims that “aging” and “old age” have become frightening, almost taboo terms in Western society because death is increasingly made invisible in advanced societies. Years ago, death was a part of life and the dead were granted the honor of passing away in their homes, surrounded by their communities; in present-day society, most have never seen a corpse and are ignorant of anything related to death.

Design and Methods: According to Elias, the consequences of this distancing from death have been a distancing from the aging process as a whole. This paper aims to analyze to what extent Norbert Elias’s theories about death and the aging process are reflected in contemporary British fiction, using two novels as case studies.

Results: *Ending Up* (1974) and *These Foolish Things* (2004) depict older British characters who decide to share their last years when they realize that they are increasingly forgotten and invisible both within their communities and their families.

Implications: In each of their particular styles, bleak and ironic in the case of Kingsley Amis’s *Ending Up*, and refreshingly humorous and moving in the case of Deborah Moggach’s *These Foolish Things*, both authors reflect on possible outcomes for an increasingly aging population.

Key Words: Aging process, Loneliness, Death, Contemporary British Fiction

Contemporary society seems to be well aware of the fact that the worldwide population is aging, and various sources point out that the inversion of the population pyramid is happening faster than expected. Taking into account 2007 and 2008 demographic data and the present economic crisis, a United Nations document entitled, “World Population Aging,” estimates that one third of the population in developed countries will have reached their 60th birthday in 2009, compared with one fifth in the developing world (2009, p. ix). However, an increasingly aging population has not led to a commensurate interest in and sensitivity toward aging citizens. To the contrary, old age is still perceived as a life stage of little positive value. In his 1985 study, *The Loneliness of the Dying*, sociologist Norbert Elias analyzes

the concepts of death and dying in contemporary society. He establishes a link between the increasing invisibility and fear of death in advanced societies and the loneliness of the aging, and he denounces the mismatch between an increasingly aging society and flourishing ageism.

In the last few decades, fiction has come to be seen as a useful way to understand the experience of aging from multiple perspectives, approaching that experience without limits (e.g., objectivity and accuracy) required by disciplines such as gerontology and sociology. Fictional texts can be understood as the representation of an author’s view on a particular topic in a specific time and place, as well as experience with and observations of the author’s surroundings and communities. In fact, social gerontologists,

including Mike Hepworth and Julia Johnson, have identified literary works as rich data for understanding the vicissitudes of the aging experience from perspectives that may elude other disciplines. In his *Stories of Ageing*, Hepworth considers aging as a social and cultural construct as much as a biological experience. For him, looking at fictional contemporary texts means analyzing the existing and imagined possibilities of the aging experience and establishing a dialogue among body, self, and society. Body, self, and society—the way one is perceived, the way one perceives oneself within his or her own life span, and the relationship established between aging citizens and their communities—also inform and influence the experience of elders. As Hepworth (2000) explains, “because aging is ultimately about human constructs of the meanings of life and time, these ideas inevitably exercise a significant influence over the ways in which we make sense of growing older” (p. 10).

Julia Johnson gave credit to the “humanities turn” in a 1999 seminar at the Open University’s Centre for Aging and Biographical Studies that resulted in the publication *Writing Old Age*. Johnson (2004) explains the “humanities turn” as a need to account for “the subjective experience of aging as a lived process” (p. 1). She acknowledges fictional texts as a rich source due to their unconstrained nature because they are not bound by empirical research. Margaret Moganroth Gullette and Kathleen Woodward are prominent scholars who have also contributed to the “humanities turn” in aging studies. In *Safe at Last in the Middle Years: The Invention of the Midlife Progress Novel*, Gullette (1988) provides evidence for the appearance of the “progress narrative of the middle years” (p. xi). This is a narrative typology in which the life stage from midlife to old age is not described as a decline but rather is integrated within the life course, with its own ups and downs, as in any other stage in human life. Woodward (1991) acknowledges the supremacy of youth over old age due to an obsession with focusing on the external body, especially in the Western world. Woodward contends that literature and the humanities provide new perspectives on restrictive established conceptions of both the aging process and old age. As a result, Woodward asserts that we tend to establish an immediate connection between an old body and the loss of vigor and strength or, in other words, between old age and vulnerability.

Fictional texts are not only useful for observing and understanding concerns about the aging experience as expressed by a specific author in terms of his or her cultural and social background; they also help to negate preconceived beliefs about old age and death, questioning and subverting expected ways of acting and living by characters entering or in old age. In that regard, Deats and Lenker (1999), in *Ageing and Identity: A Humanities Perspectives*, define literary works as “cultural forms” that “construct as well as encode the conventional perceptions of individuals in a given society; they intervene in history as they reflect history. It follows, therefore, that literature, the arts, and the media not only mirror society’s conventions, but also

create them” (p. 19). When analyzing the influence of literary and cultural images of the aging process on a society’s everyday life, Featherstone and Hepworth (1995) refer to the fluid meaning of these images depending on how, when, and by whom they are interpreted. They state that “images can act as representations of the general ideals which shape the ‘appraisal’ of everyday social practices; as such their meanings are flexible and open to interpretation and reinterpretation in accordance with broader socio-historical change” (1995, p. 31). Literary representations of the aging process and old age can therefore portray and create understanding of the intricacies of aging as a complex and multifaceted experience within the life course, encouraging the reader to reconsider stereotypes and spare images of old age.

Kingsley Amis and Deborah Moggach, two British authors from different generations and with different interests and perspectives, offer two different imagined solutions for the increasing loneliness of the aging protagonists of their novels. Amis’s *Ending Up* (1974) and Moggach’s *These Foolish Things* (2004) focus on the lack of social space left to the elderly population in contemporary society. Kingsley Amis is well-known for the poignant plots, acerbic humor, and pessimistic vision of the world portrayed through his literature; he also aims to provoke the reader by pushing the limits of political correctness. Since the publication of his first novels in the mid-1950s, Amis was considered to be one of the “Angry Young Men,” a group of writers who criticized conventional British life through bleak plots and direct and ironic narrative. In contrast, Deborah Moggach, part of a younger generation of British writers, uses humor to depict the loneliness and isolation of her elderly British characters from both institutions and their families and friends. In *These Foolish Things*, she also presents a more empathic view of the topic than found in Amis’s novel. At the time their novels were published, which was 30 years apart, both writers were actually middle aged; Amis was 52 and Moggach was 56. The authors’ ages may explain their interest in a topic that, although still far from their personal experience, was of concern to them and present in their creative universe. Similarly, it is also noteworthy that sociologist Norbert Elias was 82 years old when he published *The Loneliness of the Dying*. As an aging and very active academic, especially after his retirement, he was particularly aware of the marginalization of older people, as portrayed by the novels of both Amis and Moggach from different perspectives.

Loneliness and Isolation in Old Age

According to Elias (1985), societies progress with advances in biology and technology, and as the quality of life improves, life becomes more predictable and secure. In this situation, “life grows longer, death is further postponed. The sight of dying and dead people is no longer commonplace. It is easier in the normal course of life to forget death” (p. 8). Individuals may start dreaming about the idea that

they are immortal, and for most of our lives we perceive death as too far away to be of concern. Conversely, any reminder of the fact that death is a natural and indissoluble part of life is unwelcome; Elias (1985) contends that “[t]he sight of a dying person shakes the defensive fantasies that people are apt to build like a wall against the idea of their own death. Self-love whispers that they are immortal: too-close contact with the dying threatens the wish-dream” (p. 10). In the past, the aging and death of an individual was a public event and a shared part of the community. Today, most are largely ignorant not only of the sight and smell of death but also of the vicissitudes of aging, until they themselves reach that stage: “never before in the history of humanity have the dying been removed so hygienically behind the scenes of social life” (Elias, 1985, p. 23). For Elias, this reality is exemplified by the fact that those in full vitality find it difficult to give support and solace to the dying; so old age and death are increasingly excised from everyday life. Elias emphasizes the need to revise conceptions related to old age and death in advanced societies and to come to terms with the fact that life is indeed a limited time span for every human being, without exception. Therefore, Elias calls for revisiting the standing of old age and death in advanced contemporary societies so that, as societies age, the increasing elderly demographic is not isolated and invisible. He also contends that the dying process must be central among our society’s concerns rather than increasingly distanced from our everyday lives: “[we] might see it as our task to make the end, the parting from human beings, when it comes, as easy and as pleasant as possible, for others and for ourselves” (Elias, 1985, p. 1).

Sociologists Turner (1995) and Hazan (1994) have also studied and theorized about the increasingly taboo condition of death in contemporary Western societies despite the exponential aging of the worldwide population, arguing that social death often precedes biological death. They contend that, in many cases, when people retire and transition into old age, they lose touch with their professional and social circles and are increasingly forced to choose between loneliness and the anonymity of institutions. For Hazan (1994), social death begins when “a person begins to lose roles and cultural identity prior to the termination of biological existence. The interval between social death and physical death may span a period of many years.” He argues that social death in old age occurs due to the negative connotations Western society has attributed to the process of aging. By its association with words such as ugliness, frailty, and disease, old age is perceived as “a dangerous area [...] located between life and death” (Hazan, 1994, p. 68). The message this conveys is that too much physical and emotional contact with those in old age should be avoided. Similarly, Turner introduces the concept of an “institutionalized dying process” (p. 125) to refer to a set of norms and practices to help ward off “contingent and disruptive events” (p. 125) that would threaten institutions that deal with the dying process openly, such as hospitals or nursing homes, as well as family and friends

surrounding the dying person. Turner (1995) considers the loneliness and isolation of the aging and dying process as a consequence of “the dislocation of the nuclear family from the community and the wider kinship system” (p. 127). In this scenario, older people are deprived of any important functions within their family and community and of their perception as role models with the acquired knowledge and experience of a long life, so “the authority of tradition is constantly undermined and challenged” (Turner, 1995, p. 127).

Biologist Tom Kirkwood also refers to the need to redefine the concept of death in contemporary Western society, given how scientific advances achieved over recent decades have improved quality of life in old age. In *The End of Age*, a compilation of Kirkwood’s Reith Lectures broadcast on BBC Radio 4 and published in 2001, he presents the topic as departing from an evolutionary premise that human beings are not designed to die but to survive. According to Kirkwood, there are no scientific reasons for aging and dying to be increasingly considered taboo topics in our contemporary society; they are as intrinsic to human beings as they are to all animal species living on the Earth. Kirkwood contends that research on the aging process in different fields of study actually contributes to the improved quality of life of an increasingly aging population and that negative stereotypes about the aging process undermine scientific advances. Therefore, Kirkwood (2001) argues that “[t]here is a great deal that needs to be done to develop a more positive attitude to the challenge of aging if the successes of the past, which have made our longer lives possible, are not to turn sour” (p. x). For Kirkwood, advances in science and technology that have enabled longer and more comfortable human lives do not have much value as long as old age is widely perceived as a taboo subject. Unfortunately, there is a gap between late middle age and death that is actually quite evident in cultural representations of age and death in contemporary Western societies.

In their study *Beyond the Body: Death and Social Identity*, Hallam, Hockey, and Howarth (1999) argue that, in a society in which control and regulation of the body have become key to maintaining a decent self-identity, “witnessing or experiencing the body in decline through death or decay forms a potent reminder of frailty, vulnerability and mortality” (p. 21). In line with Elias’s work, they contend that dying and dead bodies have become increasingly invisible and “replaced with sophisticated systems of representation” (Hallam et al., 1999, p. 23) that do not present death from a realistic point of view; rather, they help distance it from our everyday reality. Hallam and colleagues (1999) point out that the disappearance of death “from public and wider familiar experience” (p. 34) is a radical change that took place in the second half of the 20th century. Instead, in contemporary Western culture, death is either represented as a consequence of political and religious conflict or “through fantasized, cinematic violence” (Hallam et al., 1999, p. 34). In 2007, Glennys Howarth published *Death & Dying: A Sociological Introduction*, a

comprehensive study of conceptions of death and dying in Western societies. She begins by stating, almost in a very timid way, that death and mortality are more visible than a few years ago. An increase in global risks and the prospect of more people living into their second century have contributed to the growing visibility of death and increasing consideration of associated issues, including grief, caregiving, and the quality of dying. However, Howarth (2007) also points to the supremacy of medical science as promoting a “mirage of immortality” (p. 257). Although death is more apparent in today’s society and it is seen both as “a risk and as a certainty” (Howarth, 2007, p. 257), medical advances are still perceived as a powerful way of keeping old age and death at bay. As Howarth (2007) argues, “[t]he promise of control over mortality is extended in the shape of medical advances and risk-aversion strategies that focus on individual mental and physical health” (p. 257).

Fictionalizing a Shared Old Age

Kingsley Amis’s *Ending Up* (1974) and Deborah Moggach’s *These Foolish Things* (2004) reflect on the contradictions of an advanced society that is unable to reconcile having achieved a longer life span with an acceptable quality of life. Both novels present a group of elderly characters who decide to live together in order to face some of the vicissitudes of old age: solitude and lack of understanding from family and friends who are not old themselves on the one hand and shrinking economic circumstances on the other. Despite publication 30 years apart, the different generations to which the authors belong, and their particular writing styles, both novels depict the limited possibilities left to those who have reached old age successfully but are in the shadows, still present in advanced societies between late middle age and death. The characters’ biological ages and their physical signs of aging signal to others that they are in old age, so they find themselves increasingly removed not only from the social spaces they have been occupying for a good number of years but also from their own homes. The weakening of the nuclear family, as noted by Hazan (1994) and Turner (1995), is also apparent in both plots because none of the characters in the novels can actually count on their offspring and closer family. Thus, the characters decide to look for their own spaces—places where they can still count.

Kingsley Amis’ *Ending Up* presents five characters in their 70s who have decided to share their old age in Tuppenny-hapenny Cottage. The decision to share the place where they will spend their last years was not the result of a wide range of possibilities they could choose from, but rather a result of desperation at the realization that their bodies were starting to fail them and their loneliness and reclusion were becoming more acute. The inhabitants of the cottage are Adela Bastable, a single woman with a mild heart condition; her brother Bernard Bastable, who is suffering from a terminal disease; Shortell or Shorty, Bernard’s former butler and lover who is still reasonably healthy but

likes to drink; Marigold, Adela’s best friend whose husband died a few years ago; and Professor George Zeyer, Shorty’s brother-in-law, who is currently bedridden and suffering from nominal aphasia. Adela had bought Tuppenny-hapenny Cottage for Bernard, Shorty, and herself as a place where they could live quietly and comfortably after retirement, sharing the expenses and chores of living in a big house and keeping each other company during long winter afternoons. Adela purchased the house for a very good price and it was only later, once they were settled and the arrangements were in place, that she understood why:

Adela, to whom it had fallen to conduct all the dealings, had picked the place cheap from an artistic couple who said they had found it too large for them. They might have added that they had also found it too cold in winter, in too much disrepair to be renovated except at great expense, and too isolated: three miles from the nearest village and nearly seven from the nearest town, Newmarket. Nobody would deliver milk or newspapers (Amis, 1977, p. 8).

The house becomes Adela’s first letdown in her expectations of old age. Instead of a spacious and decent place to live with the quaint essence of its 18th-century origins, Tuppenny-hapenny Cottage is actually a decaying place situated quite a distance from the city and from any human contact. The only visitors Tuppenny-hapenny Cottage ever has, once a year for Christmas, are Marigold’s grandchildren and their families, who consider the house an emblem of decay and the inhabitants irremediably decaying like the cottage. The cottage represents not only their physical separation but also the social and cultural uprooting of this group of elders from their communities. The cottage actually represents the place where the five old characters can be independent, but at the same time are kept apart from the community. In that sense, Amis’s novel supports Haim Hazan’s thesis that social death starts much earlier than biological decay. Of those living in Tuppenny-hapenny Cottage, the only character who is bedridden and in weak physical condition is Professor George Zeyer. The others are actually quite active, people who could surely contribute to their communities in a number of ways; however, they are unable to find a suitable situation within the city where they have lived all their lives. Their neighbors and their families perceive them as reminders of the fact that old age and death are actually a part of life and so they treat them as a nuisance. As Norbert Elias contends in his postscript to *The Loneliness of the Dying* entitled, “Ageing and Dying: Some Sociological Problems,” in a society with an advanced process of rationalization, old age and death are perceived as threatening dangers that must be kept under control (Elias, 1985, p. 77). In that sense, Tuppenny-hapenny Cottage, with its decaying pathos, is depicted as the perfect place for those whose old age is evident in their physical appearance and who are approaching death.

One of the main motivations that encouraged some of the characters to move into the cottage was the fear of dying alone. Adela had accepted her brother's and Shorty's offer to live with them and help them with the housekeeping because of her fear of "falling helplessly ill and having nobody in charge" (Amis, 1977, p. 9). Marigold Pyke is described as a woman who is aging well; however, when her husband died, she found herself alone, without a house and an inheritance of just a few hundred pounds. Marigold, like Adela, dreaded the prospect of ending up like "a vegetable" (Amis, 1977, p. 47) and found it comforting to be able to talk to someone about her fears regarding her own old age. Both women express their fears of growing old, infirm, and alone because they are aware of the plausibility of such scenario. For his part, George Zeyer had decided to join his contemporaries in Tuppenny-hapenny Cottage as the only alternative he had to spending his last years in a medical institution. Amis introduces the character as maintaining his intelligence and sensitivity in spite of his worsening physical condition:

George Zeyer, Emeritus Professor of Central European History at the University of Northampton, was lying in bed upstairs waiting to be done. [...] Five months previously, George had had a severe stroke that had incapacitated him with hemiplegia, that condition in which the motor muscles of half of the sufferer's body are paralysed. In this case, George being right-handed, it was the right half. He had come, or been brought, to Tuppenny-hapenny Cottage because, as Adela had observed earlier that morning, and many times earlier than that, he had nowhere else to go, except into a hospital ward (Amis, 1977, p. 13).

In Tuppenny-hapenny Cottage, George is another inhabitant who offers constant interesting conversation and up-to-date knowledge in exchange for care and moral support. None of the characters sharing Tuppenny-hapenny Cottage had previously imagined spending his or her old age in an expansive, decaying mansion with others like themselves. However, when the time came, they found sharing the place was a good antidote for growing fears that accompanied them into old age: being ill, alone, and not well cared for. They have to adapt to and often cope with each other, but they are able to find some solace in sharing the vicissitudes of the aging process, overcoming the inability of their society to cater to their needs as retired but still active people. Nevertheless, the tone of the novel, along with the characters' dialogues and internal monologues about their perceptions of the aging process at an individual and community level, suggests that feelings of isolation and mortality are never entirely absent from the characters or the place. Accordingly, the novel has been described as a black comedy with an omniscient narrator who shows little compassion for the characters he is describing because each of them is presented as having an innocent vice that makes them appear to be caricatures.

The five elderly characters and their day-to-day tasks and worries are presented through constant scene changes and shifting points of view so that, as Dale Salwak points out, "a mood of futile anxiety" (Salwak, 1992, p. 189) is created. Marigold is always busy repetitively rearranging the same things, whereas she keeps forgetting basic information. Bernard spends his time thinking about what tricks he can play on the other residents of Tuppenny-hapenny Cottage, just for the satisfaction of making them suffer. Adela and Shortell run the house, but although Adela is becoming increasingly aware of its deterioration and isolation from outside society, Shortell attempts to cheer himself up by having a shot of whisky or a glass of wine several times a day. In other words, the inhabitants of Tuppenny-hapenny Cottage mostly ignore the decaying situation of the house as well as their increasing isolation and instead spend their time worrying about minor issues.

As the novel progresses, the reader has the impression that the characters do not have any real motivation in their lives; they perform their everyday tasks and continue on, but their lives lack any meaningful sense, despite their support of each other. According to Dale Salwak, apart from some bursts of acerbic humor, *Ending Up* is dominated by a tone of decadence. In fact, by the end of the novel, the characters die one by one in sadness and in somewhat strange circumstances as a result of Bernard's tricks and the poor conditions of the house. Yet, this atmosphere of decadence and mortality also cries out for love and companionship, values that seem to be increasingly far from the lives of the characters as they age. Dale Salwak suggests that "the house is pictured in terms that both symbolise its occupants' conspicuous difference and detachment from the community and prophesy the dreadful development and outcome of the story" (Salwak, 1992, p. 192). Tuppenny-hapenny Cottage is a possible future that Amis envisioned for those aging in a society in which values such as communication and respect among generations are becoming part of the past. Amis does not side with his characters when presenting them as powerless old people who are unable to find active and creative answers to their isolated reality. The novel also questions the moral value of its younger characters, such as the couple who sold the house to Adela and Marigold's grandchildren and did not treat the older characters as complete human beings.

Dale Salwak considers the deaths of the protagonists of *Ending Up* to be "bizarre and grisly," contributing to "the novel's powerful sense of mortality" (Salwak, 1992, p. 194), whereas Richard Bradford, who has analyzed Kingsley Amis's literary career, argues that the dying process in this novel, characterized by loneliness and treated with bitter irony, forces the reader to reflect upon death and the dying process in general. According to Bradford, "[t]he end has the grim textual symmetry of a Shakespearian fifth act. The overcrowded cottage is like the stage. The characters carry the entirety of their lives into this compressed textual space, and as we leave it so do they, alone"

(Bradford, 2001, p. 289). Within Amis's social reality and through his particular style and background as an author, *Ending Up* can be read as a bleak representation of the gradual narrowing of options left for those in old age, as also stated by sociologist Norbert Elias in *The Loneliness of the Dying*. The inhabitants of Tuppenny-hapenny Cottage have access to medical advances of contemporary society but are isolated from the community. Amis goes one step further by suggesting that the elders themselves accept that situation and finally die in sad and absurd circumstances, instead of actively seeking their own individuality within the community that has ostracized them.

The reality depicted by Kingsley Amis in his novel corresponds to an imaginative representation of a very small segment of British society in specific social circumstances. The characters come from different economic and cultural backgrounds, and different lifestyles and life conceptions. Finding themselves sharing their old age in a decaying mansion can be interpreted as a warning about the need to revise and redefine notions about old age and death in the Western world. Tuppenny-hapenny Cottage mirrors the decaying bodies of the protagonists, whose future dramatically ends in their senseless deaths. In that regard, Woodward (1991) acknowledges that "[t]he body in advanced old age not only represents death; it is close to death and will in due time be inhabited by death" (p. 19). Amis's novel depicts a bleak outcome of this contemporary cultural belief; the characters in Tuppenny-hapenny Cottage unsuccessfully try to continue their lives, but finally succumb to absurd deaths. They resign themselves to the fate of their old bodies as painful, constant reminders that frailty and mortality are actually part of human life, as argued by Elias (1985) and Hallam and colleagues (1999). In this sense, Amis is ruthless in portraying an entire society as unable to transcend individual satisfaction and appearance.

Deborah Moggach's *These Foolish Things* (on which the 2012 movie *The Best Exotic Hotel Marigold* was based) deals with the topic of old age in contemporary British society. More specifically, she focuses on a society in which everyone has to work hard in order to maintain their upper-middle class status, so there is no time to care for their elders; instead, old age is increasingly removed from everyday reality. The novel begins with Dr. Ravi and his cousin Sonny deciding to establish a retirement home in India. It is supposedly to enable senior citizens who feel lonely, abandoned, and bored to spend their last days where they are well cared for and respected, and where they can also enjoy the sun and freedom to choose among multiple possibilities. In the novel, the retirement residence is advertised as:

The Dunroamin Retirement Hotel combines the tranquillity of yesteryear with exciting shopping and sight-seeing opportunities. Enjoy the ambience of a bygone age with the advantages of modern living [...]. Come and pamper yourself! You deserve it (Moggach, 2004, p. 23).

It soon becomes obvious both to the reader and the future residents that the portrayal of the retirement home as a long-term holiday conceals the intended exploitation of British elders who are alone and potentially a burden on their families and the state. Moggach (2004) explains on her webpage that *These Foolish Things* came about because she had "been thinking a lot about growing older, about what is going to happen to us all" (p. 1). She is aware our society is aging and that a long old age may not be fruitful and full but rather the opposite. The seven elderly characters who decide to move into Dunroamin Retirement Hotel believe that they are moving to a place where they will neither be a nuisance nor, even worse, invisible. They are: Dorothy Miller, a former BBC presenter living on her own; Evelyn Greenslade, who is left penniless after her husband dies; Muriel Donnelly, also living on her own and whose only child is on the run from police; Douglas and Jean Ainslie, who are unable to make ends meet with their pensions; Norman, who dreams about having endless sexual experiences; and Madge, who is looking for a Maharaja.

Dorothy Miller, an older single woman who had been a successful BBC journalist, realizes that since her retirement, she had been increasingly confined to her home with fewer and fewer visits from friends: "[i]ncreasing years, of course, render us invisible as if in preparation for our eventual disappearance" (Moggach, 2004, p. 49). Yet, Dorothy seems to accept her retreat from public life, including her job as well as her social circles, as an expected consequence of her age, despite still feeling full of energy. Evelyn Greenslade has had quite a different life from Dorothy Miller's. As a housewife and mother, she had felt happy and fulfilled with these roles. When her husband dies and her children suggest she move somewhere with other elders, she realizes, almost all of a sudden, that she is an old woman and that there seems to be no place left for her: "[t]he thing is, I was married for a very long time. It's quite a shock to come out into the real world. Until then you don't think you're old. You've been together for so many years you're somehow the same people as when you first met" (Moggach, 2004, p. 174). The first thing Evelyn misses when she becomes a widow is human contact: "[s]he missed being touched. [...] Without casual contact of skin upon skin she felt brittle and unwanted; she felt like an old schoolbook, filled with irrelevant lessons, that somebody had shoved into a cupboard. The only hands upon her belonged to professionals" (Moggach, 2004, p. 39). Evelyn did not expect the loneliness and increasing isolation in which she finds herself in her old age; so she ends up agreeing with her children that a sunnier and less formal society is a better option than staying in cold England, both in terms of weather and of human relationships.

After having been mugged, Muriel realizes that she is afraid of everything that surrounds her, not even feeling safe in her own home. Thus, moving to Dunroamin Retirement Hotel with a few of her British contemporaries seems to be a good alternative to feeling lonely and frightened. Douglas

and Jean Ainslie and Norman and Madge decide to move to India in order to have a second chance, believing that their aging bodies, the ones that show their biological age, actually hide their real ones. Douglas and Jean Ainslie refuse to conform to the expectations British society has for them as elderly people with shrinking economic resources, whereas Norman and Madge see India as their last opportunity to enjoy their sexuality without being judged. In *These Foolish Things*, Deborah Moggach suggests, always in a humorous tone, that the redefinition of retirement as a time of leisure may conceal the inability of contemporary society to deal with an aging population, not only in economic terms but also socially and culturally.

As do the characters in Amis's novel, the characters in Moggach's *These Foolish Things* come from diverse social and economic backgrounds and choose to move to India as an alternative to either loneliness or institutional care when they advance into old age. Yet, the decision to move together to Tuppenny-hapenny Cottage on the outskirts of a British city in Amis' *Ending Up* and moving together to Dunroamin Retirement Hotel, a similarly run-down mansion in India, in Moggach's *These Foolish Things*, have completely different outcomes for the elderly characters in each novel. The characters in Amis's novel lead monotonous and meaningless lives, whereas the characters in Dunroamin Retirement Hotel discover new dimensions of themselves, though neither the managers who established the home nor the protagonists themselves expected this. For the older protagonists in Moggach's novel, moving away from their birthplace means finding an alternative to a restricted vision of old age and the opportunity to redefine themselves within a different social and cultural environment. In Dunroamin Retirement Hotel in Bangalore, they are no longer old people dragging themselves through their last years. They realize it is time for them to let go of the constraining beliefs about old age and death that they have learned from their society. In India, they do not feel they are a burden; on the contrary, they rediscover parts of themselves they had either forgotten or had never considered appropriate for their age. As Sonny, one of the managers in the hotel, tells his guests after a few weeks in the Dunroamin Retirement Hotel, "it's gratifying to see you flourishing in our sunshine, for as many of you have been so kind as to say, our country has given you a new lease of life" (Moggach, 2004, p. 259). Although there is a clear commercial intention behind Sonny's words, he describes, probably unintentionally, how the characters who moved to the Dunroamin Retirement Hotel actually feel. Similarly, Norbert Elias argues that the experience of aging cannot be understood without awareness that the process of aging implies both a change in a person's position in society as well as in their relationships with others (Elias, 1985, p. 72). In India, the British protagonists not only look at themselves and their aging process from a different perspective, they also realize that they can establish new relationships more in accordance with their present concerns

and situation. They had adjusted to the expectations of families and friends as elders in England. When they meet at the Dunroamin Retirement Hotel, however, they realize that they do not have to conform to such limiting expectations; they now see that each life stage, including old age, requires its own readjustments. For example, when Evelyn Greenslade's daughter Theresa comes to visit, she realizes that "[s]he wasn't the same person who had arrived so apprehensively three months earlier. Now she felt freer, with her bare legs and her new young friends. [...] And then there were her fellow residents who were by now so familiar that they were almost family" (Moggach, 2004, p. 201). Moving away from England allows the elderly characters to look at old age as part of the continuum within their life course, rather than as a stage with only decrepitude and death awaiting them in the future.

The invisible condition of the older characters in their native society in Moggach's *These Foolish Things* is made evident when Norman, one of the guests, dies of a heart attack. Norman's daughter and son-in-law immediately leave everything behind to deal with their dead relative, whereas, while he was alive, they were extremely reluctant to take a few days off from their busy lives in order to visit him. The other guests at the Dunroamin Retirement Hotel do not understand their rush in handling arrangements for Norman after his death because they saw him as a nuisance when he was alive. When the manager of the hotel announces that Norman's family will be staying for a few days, Douglas, one of the older characters, thinks to himself: "[i]t seemed you had to die before people travelled across the world to visit you. Neither of Douglas's children was coming for Christmas; that must be because he and Jean were still alive" (Moggach, 2004, p. 229). Norman's death reminds the British residents of the Dunroamin Retirement Hotel that their decision to move away from their native country was a response to the failure of their society, and Western society by extension, to accord them some significance in their contemporary communities. As in Amis's novel, despite a different context and ending, Moggach's *These Foolish Things* depicts older characters who are not only marginalized symbolically but are also uprooted physically from their respective communities. Despite the positive effect that moving to India has on each of the characters in Moggach's novel, the underlying assumption present throughout the novel is that their society is unprepared to deal with a growing aging population. The novel conveys the sentiment that it is easier for authorities and families to send that population to a place where they will not remind younger generations that old age presages death.

Conclusion

Tuppenny-hapenny Cottage, dark and decrepit, and Dunroamin Retirement Hotel, lively and comfortable, represent two sides of the same coin: a group of older

characters in their 70s, with plenty left to offer society, who are shunted aside and made invisible. Although Western society is still neither socially nor culturally ready to fully accept and integrate the growing elderly population, contemporary authors depict the demographic changes they perceive and observe around them by expanding their imagination and their creativity. The increasing separation of old age and death from everyday life, outlined and denounced by Norbert Elias in 1985 and further elaborated by sociologists specializing in aging studies, Hazan, Turner, and Howarth among them, is a concern also shared by contemporary authors such as Kingsley Amis and Deborah Moggach. These authors question their own future as British elders while imagining possible outcomes of the contradictions in a society that is growing old at the same time as it is distancing itself from old age and death.

Despite the cultural reluctance to confront old age and death, Amis and Moggach dare to deal with the two topics openly and bring to the forefront that, whether we are ready to accept it or not, they are indeed part of life. As Julian Barnes reflects, as both a British contemporary writer and critic and as an aging person himself, “[if] death ceased to be talked about when it first really began to be feared, and then more so when we started to live longer, it has also gone off the agenda because it has ceased to be there, with us, in the house” (Barnes, 2009, p. 133). The 30-year difference and different generations of Amis’s *Ending Up* and Moggach’s *These Foolish Things* illustrate that old age and death are still taboo topics and that the standing accorded to old age and death in Western society is still uncertain. *These Foolish Things* imagines a brighter future, opening up possibilities for British elders who are ready to reimagine themselves and the last stage of their life course in a different context and to establish new and fruitful relationships. Moggach wraps her novel in an optimistic aura without minimizing the difficulties her aging protagonists face in seeking a significant place for themselves in society. In contrast, *Ending Up* presents a dramatic ending to the futile lives of its characters by blaming both younger generations and the passive attitudes of the older characters. An ending other than solitude and death following old age seems unlikely given the acerbic tone of Kingsley’s gloomy novel. Kingsley’s characters are entrapped in traditional limiting conceptions of old age just as they are entrapped in Tuppenny-hapenny Cottage. Kingsley does not actually encourage those conceptions in the context of the novel because he never sides with his characters; however, he presents such a reality to the reader without sparing the morbid details.

Despite the different ways in which Moggach and Amis describe and present their characters’ trajectories to the reader, both authors bring to the forefront two

subjects that still make advanced societies uncomfortable, namely, old age and death. The authors invite the reader to reflect on old age and death by creating new links and new expectations in the case of Moggach, and by turning them into a nightmare in the case of Amis. As Elias (1985) contends in *The Loneliness of the Dying*, the aged in advanced societies are protected by the state to the extent that it helps with medical care and meeting their basic needs. However, as portrayed in both novels, the more advanced the society is, the less its elders may feel the human comfort of being surrounded by family and friends.

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