

AGING THRESHOLDS IN DEMOGRAPHY AND IN LITERATURE

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Abstract. In this paper, I focus firstly on the thresholds of old age and on the data measuring aging in Italy and in Europe. Then I describe some novels with the old ages as background to understand the link between literature and some issues of demography, such as ageing in the book “The old man and the sea”. This link is the purpose of my book “Letteratura e demografia” (Salvini 2023), that describes the demographic topics and some novels I read and loved in a special way.

1. Introduction

What is the definition (in individual and collective terms) of old age? And how has it changed over the centuries, according to different aspects? For example, England's Friendly Societies Act in 1875 defined “old age” as “any age after 50”; by contrast, in Scotland before the 19th century, “chronological” age was not a reason for applying for public assistance. A list, from the same period, of the registered poor people in a parish in Glasgow indicated many under 65 admitted in “old age” (Salvini, 1994).

In Western countries the definition of old age is substantially a function of the retirement age, although it is agreed that a more realistic definition must not only refer to chronological age, but must start from a functional approach, also and above all looking at the conditions of health (Livi Bacci, 1987; Caselli, Egidi, 1992). Therefore, a predetermined threshold should not be used, but, on the other hand, an answer to the question: “which parameters can be more representative for the purposes of a functional evaluation of old age?” has not yet been given with precision. At the same time, how have concepts and definitions changed over time, closely related to the increase in survival and longevity? Individual abilities and potentials must also be taken into account, being the result of the diffusion of education in the various social classes, education that brings with it interests and ways of life that are not (or should not be) the privilege of only the youth-adult age and which, if followed, therefore leads to an extension of active life.

The vision of the new old age and the division of the third from the fourth age (Laslett, 1989), leads us to talk about active aging, a process of optimizing

opportunities for health, participation and safety in order to improve the quality of life with advancing age. The European Union designated 2012 as the European Year for Active Aging and Solidarity between Generations. Beside the evolution of the old age thresholds, it is also important to describe the quality of life of old people, using, for example, the Global Age Watch Index. If the reflections on the threshold of old age involve on the one hand the demographic phenomena of longevity and, conversely, of mortality, these same reflections on the other hand lead to the description of the literature on old age which in the 19th and 20th centuries focused on these ages of life and on the generational relationships.

In this contribution, I intend firstly to examine the declination that, over time, the definition of old age in society has had together with the quality of life of old people and, secondly, I intend to dwell on literature, a mirror of society, where the elderly are the protagonists. I have chosen the following novels centred on old age to understand the evolution that time of life have had over the years: *Birds Rained Down* by French-Canadian writer Jocelyn Saucier, *The Weekend*, by the Australian novelist Charlotte Wood, *Wild Strawberries* written by the great Swedish writer and director Ingmar Bergman's, *The Old Man and the Sea* written by the American Ernest Hemingway, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*, a novel by the American Fannie Flagg, the books in the series *The BarLume*, the work of the forty-year-old Pisan (Italian) writer Marco Malvaldi (Salvini, 2023).

2. Senescence and longevity

Aging process is now very different than in the past. If we compare Leonardo Da Vinci's self-portrait (1513) with a selfie of Richard Gere (2012), we would find it hard to believe that they are two men of the same age, yet they were both in their early 60s. At what age does old age still correspond to physical and mental decay? Is it an inexorable decline? The images of old age are extremely diverse, not only because different definitions are over time imposed due to the change in the conditions of life, health and activity. There are differences even in the same historical era, depending on the point of view of who is setting his reflections. Frailty (essentially the decline of strength) and the wisdom brought by experiences are distinguished in old age.

In classical Greece, old age was considered a pathology: the aging process was seen as a progressive loss of heat and vital force which makes the body of the elderly increasingly cold and dry, similar to a corpse. On the other hand, Plato's reflection underlined that man's life depended only on the soul and the inner virtues. The old man rich in memory is the repository of knowledge. In Sparta, the over 60s governed

for a period, thus giving rise to a political summit defined by gerontocracy, a symbol of wisdom.

Cicero recognized elders as having the fundamental qualities to guide society and future generations: wisdom, authority, prestige, experience and competence, dismantling one by one the clichés that see weakness in the elderly, but insisting - with unique foresight - on the importance of prevention and lifestyle for a serene, active and healthy old age. Already in the classical world, therefore, old age is not only a biological fact but also a psychological and historical-cultural destiny, which can be conditioned by practices, approaches and strategies. It is precisely here that the idea of active aging germinates for the first time. We pass from senescence to longevity: from *vetustas* to active aging.

The difficulty of looking unambiguously at the elderly derives in part from the very nature of the object we are investigating: who is the elderly? When does he become one? The answer is not immediate, because it is linked to the historical-geographical contexts and to the progressive increase in the average duration of life (in good health), which has prolonged the conditions of full self-sufficiency of the elderly over time. In the Middle Ages, a 15-year-old boy born into a wealthy family could expect to live to about 70, but birth and perinatal mortality was the order of the day, making old age an achievement reserved for the lucky few. Today, in Italy, there are 14 million over-65s and a person who has reached this milestone can expect to live for another 22.3 years. A similar figure was estimated for the inhabitants of Spain, France, Japan and Korea. In short, what was "old age" 500 years ago is no longer an exceptional phenomenon today but a widespread condition that has induced sociologists and scientists to move the onset of the third age ever further forward (followed by a fourth age and even a fifth). This process has made the definition of "elderly" more difficult, becoming a sort of umbrella term that refers to 4 different groups: young elderly (64-74 years), elderly (75-84 years), very elderly (85-99 years) and centenarians. As can be seen, the criterion of chronological age, once sufficient to identify the elderly, has become much more tenuous, losing much of its usefulness.

In the twenty-first century, aging should be understood, rather than as purely age-related issue, as a multifactorial process involving various aspects: biological, cultural, social and economic. It was once believed that old age coincided exclusively with a set of "losses": bone density decreases, cartilage lining joints thins, muscle strength declines, sensory abilities deteriorate, nerve signal advances more slowly, just to name a few age-related changes. Today we know that as the years go by, we also acquire new skills, of an affective, social and cognitive nature.

Today, people are living longer, but they are also living better: they may become old in life, full of aches and pains, but mankind spends about two decades in an ever-increasing middle age, the active third age, which includes people in their 50s but

also people in their 70s. Only the lengthening of the last phase of life (the fourth age) is, however, associated with a greater probability of developing chronic diseases and frail conditions that can seriously undermine the prospect of healthy aging. In Italy, over 85% of people over 75 suffer from chronic diseases, such as high blood pressure and diabetes.

3. The aging process in industrialized societies

The time of aging, i.e. when a person can be considered an old man/woman, has considerably expanded compared to 30 years ago. For the average lengthening of life expectancy at birth (in Italy 85 years for women and 82 for men) a new category of seniority has been created, as has already been introduced, dividing people over 65 between those who belong to the third age (conditioned by good health conditions, social integration and availability of resources) and to the fourth age (characterized by dependence on others and physical decay, the oldest old).

In the 63rd National Congress of the SIGG (Italian Society of Gerontology and Geriatrics) (Rome, November 2018) the concept of old age was redefined. The proposal that comes from SIGG is to update the concept of seniority, raising the ideal age for defining a person as elderly to 75. A person 65-year-old today has the physical and cognitive fitness of a 40-45-year-old of 30 years ago and a 75-year-old that of a 55-year old in 1980. Today the age bar is raised to a threshold adapted to current expectations of life in developed countries. Furthermore, the state of health is introduced in the definitions, i.e. classifying the ages according to the state of health and the presence of disability. Italy's position in Europe is not among the best. That is, if life expectancy in Italy exceeds other European countries, the same does not happen for life expectancy in good health. This is a consequence of the different infrastructures and therefore of public health expenditure, which is lower in Italy (Benini, 2018) than in other European societies. Today diagnoses are made largely by sophisticated machinery which therefore manages to provide individuals with the best means for treatment, even in old age. Alongside health services, a healthy constitution and an active life are the elements for living well for a long time.

To prove these theses there are international studies on the so-called "blue zones" of the world, those places where high numbers of centenarians are concentrated. Research shows that the populations residing in these places, including Ogliastra in Sardinia, have very healthy plain lifestyles: they walk a lot because they live in mountainous areas, carry out agricultural work, have a healthy diet rich in fruit, vegetables and unrefined cereals and live in communities where the relationship with the other inhabitants is fundamental. Constant physical activity and proper nutrition are therefore confirmed as determining factors for keeping fit. If we add to this an

active lifestyle and remaining in contact with other people we will be more likely to age well and in physical and mental health.

In 2019, more than a fifth (20.3 %) of the EU-27 population was made up of people aged 65 or over. Looking at the oldest-olds, the proportion of people aged 80 and over in the EU-27 population is projected to be 2.5 times higher in 2100 than in 2019, rising from 5.8% to 14.6%. In the European Union, the population does not age equally everywhere. In fact, there are clear geographical differences both among member countries and within them. This was stated in the report “The demographic landscape of EU territories”, recently published by the Joint Research Center (JRC), the CNR of the European Union (European Commission 2021; Istat, 2021a). The survey starts from the observation that life expectancy has increased significantly during the last one hundred and twenty years and, as a result of the falling birth rate, the proportion of elderly people over 65 has also increased. By 2020, 21% of Europeans - more than one in 5 - have entered their senior years and no particular change in these trends is expected, although the Covid 19 pandemic has cast serious doubts on the continuation of past trends.

The comparison between the percentage of elderly people and that of young people under 15, who together make up only 15% of EU citizens, makes it clear that demographic phenomena are destined to profoundly change the socio-economic context of the Union and that they are also an urgent issue of health welfare (Chignoli 2021). The percentage of over 80 is almost doubled in the period 2001-2020 (Istat 2021a). By 2050 persons aged 65 and over could account for 35% of the total according to the median scenario of Istat projections, while the 90% confidence interval presents a range of variation between a minimum of 33.1% and a maximum of 36.9%. In any case it will therefore be necessary to adapt social protection policies even more to such an increasing share of the elderly population (Istat, 2021b). Looking at the share of people aged 65 and over in the total population, Italy (23 %), Greece, Finland, Portugal, Germany and Bulgaria (all at 22 %) have the highest shares, while Ireland (14 %) and Luxembourg (15 %) the lowest. Over the period 2001-2020, an increase in the share of people aged 65 and over could be observed in all Member States, from the highest increase in Finland (+7 percentage points, p.p.) to the lowest in Luxembourg (+1 p.p.). The share of people aged 80 and over increased in all Member States between 2001 and 2020, with the exception of Sweden where it remained constant (5%). In some Member States, this percentage has more than doubled: in Lithuania and Croatia from 2% in 2001 to 6% in 2020, in Romania, Bulgaria and Slovenia from 2% to 5%. Turning to young people, the highest shares of those under 20 in the total population were found in Ireland (27 %), France (24 %) and Sweden (23 %), while the lowest shares were recorded in Malta, Italy and Germany (all 18%). In the period 2001-2020 there has been a decrease in the share of young people in all Member States, from the largest decrease in Malta

and Cyprus (-9 p.p.) to the lowest observed in Sweden (nearly -1 p.p.) and Belgium (-1 p.p.). France and Sweden present the highest level of fertility in Europe, due to the investments in family, children and youth.

Another way to analyse the aging of society in the EU is to look at the median age of the population. The median age increased over the period from 2001 to 2020: from 38 years in 2001, to 41 in 2010 and 44 in 2020. This means an increase of 6 years in the median age in the EU during this period. Among EU Member States, the highest median age in 2020 was observed in Italy (47 years), Germany and Portugal (both 46 years), Bulgaria and Greece (both 45), and the lowest in Cyprus and Ireland (both 38) and Luxembourg and Malta (both 40). During the period 2001-2020, the median age increased by 7 years or more in Romania, Lithuania, Portugal, Italy, Slovakia, Spain and Greece.

In short, the various parameters available identify Italy as the “grayest” country in Europe. The consequences are known to all. From the increase in pensions to the criticality of the increasingly aging labor market, everything describes a generational imbalance that must be interrupted if we want a society responsive to the phenomena of innovation, technological and otherwise: we are facing “the demographic winter” (Rosina, Impicciatore, 2022).

If, until recently, there was talk of migration replacing the falling birth rate, today it must be acknowledged that even immigrants will not be able to counterbalance the unborn. Immigrants also grow old, of course, and their fertility, often higher than the native population when they arrive (BIBLIO), then adjusts to that of the destination population, not to mention that the structure of the immigrant population according to nationality tends to change and today's immigrants come largely from Eastern Europe, with fertility as low as that of Southern Europe. Today, as average life span extends over time, the aging of advanced societies transforms something that in the past was in many ways exceptional into a mass problem. The “old”, or rather who are now referred to as the “oldest old” become, tomorrow, the majority, with the costs involved (costs of pensions and of sanitary services) and the related economic activities, in every field. They represent not only a physical but a mental condition and a potentially large market.

4. Old age in the literature

Limiting my descriptions of the theme of "old age" in 19th and 20th century literature, many great romances come to mind which paint a picture of old age and then paint over events of a different nature. Always remembering the temporal change of the threshold of old age, in general the books with old age as a background can be divided into two parts: those giving an optimistic picture of it and that make

elderly characters speak of vivid memories, and those offering a sad and regretful imagine. The difference lies precisely in the words "memories" and "regrets". The former tell us about life courses, albeit alternatively happy and unhappy, thought positively, the latter complain of things not done, adventures not experienced, unhappy loves: in short, regrets.

It Was Raining Birds by French Canadian Jocelyn Saucier is an original book, centred on the old age of the characters. George Bernard Shaw wrote that old people are dangerous, because for them the future is completely indifferent, and this could be the "moral" of this novel, because its protagonists are elderly hermits who have withdrawn from society. A utopia of a future, certainly short, remains. And therefore, also a utopia of freedom, considering that brevity is always something relative. It is the story of a professional photographer in search of the survivors, now very old, of the great fires that devastated Québec in the early 20th century, destroying forests, crops and entire cities. The woman is on the trail of a man who, as a young man, managed to save himself from the fire and who, half-blinded, kept wandering among the smoking ashes, looking for some other survivors. The photographer is not lucky enough to find him alive: the man, sheltering in a hut in the northern forests together with two eighty-year-olds like him, is dead, having come to the end of his life as a hermit to get away from a world that the three old people abhor, the world of pensioners reading the newspaper on a bench in the city. But can an old man survive in the woods like this? Evidently yes, if he is in the company of two men who, in exchange for the possibility of quietly cultivating marijuana in the area, supply themselves with what they need and above all defend their privacy. The three (by now two at the time of the narration) are hermits, fugitives, who have voluntarily separated themselves from the world and who, of course, know that they must soon die, but not when Death wants them to, but when they decide to: for the purpose, they have set aside a jar of strychnine. The arrival of the photographer calls into challenge the lifestyle of the two hermits, as she enlarges the community to include an old woman who has fortunately escaped from the asylum, and even opens up the possibility of love. Death can wait; what really counts are the years, however few, that remain to be lived to the full. The novel is pleasant, somewhat sentimental, well-constructed and enjoyable, even endowed with a happy ending - this one, perhaps, a little bit contrived. On the one hand the glory of pristine nature, on the other the memory of the fires - which the once young man feverishly painted before his death, leaving behind a series of pictures where, if read carefully, his true story unfolds. A strange novel, where old age has two faces: isolation, that is, waiting for death far from the city crowd, and at the same time the company of a few with the same thoughts and desires.

The weekend, by Charlotte Wood (2019), is a book about elderly women, a group of four friends who suddenly find themselves down to three, due to the death of one

of them, Sylvie, the one who was the group's cohesive force. Seventy-year-olds Jude, Wendy and Adele are lifelong friends and, for the first time, are faced with an event - Sylvie's death - that overturns all their certainties (and insecurities) about being together. Their friendship goes into crisis with the loss of Sylvie. *The Weekend* is a richly textured novel, it's about so many things that it is difficult to describe them all. Ideas about friendship, aging and grief keep coming up, they are constantly in the three women's thoughts, with memories of the past finding their way into the present because, despite their seventies, the women are busy, difficult, vulnerable and engaging, in short very much alive. *The weekend* talks about aging, but approaching it not as an end-stage, but as a time of choosing things yet to be done, representing the future. While Adele finds herself once again relying on her charm to stay afloat, Wendy's conclusion is blunt: "Nobody wants you when you're old. [...] You have to face the future [...] you have to prepare yourself".

In case anyone has missed the books in the *BarLume* series, they must absolutely fill the gap. The books I'm talking about are by Marco Malvaldi, a Pisan writer (Malvaldi, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018). The setting is Pineta, completely fictional Tuscan seaside resort and the protagonist is Massimo, the owner and gruff "barrista" (no, it's not a mistake: in Tuscan it is spelled with two R's) of BarLume. The character of Massimo, a former mathematician divorcee, is rather stormy and full of obsessions. The bar's clientele during the day habitually includes four sprightly old men: Massimo's grandfather, Amperio, Aldo the restaurateur, Del Tecca, a former municipal employee, and Rimediotti, who always occupy the same table and get mad as hell if anyone sits there. Massimo and the fantastic four old men have a deadly penchant for investigating various crimes and amidst Tuscan jokes and various amenities, they eventually manage to solve the intricate cases, not without causing a lot of trouble for the police. The characters of the almost octogenarians and their dialogues are the outline of the detective stories in the various novels, which are a great pleasure to read. Maybe it is because I am Tuscan, or maybe because Marco Malvaldi might have been a student of mine (even though he is a chemist, but he might be a statistician), I have become fond of the books, the Author and the old men. The detective stories that the novels tell are really "belline" (that means pretty said in Tuscan language..). If these novels have in common the trait of seeing the "barrista" Massimo lose his patience, exasperated by the chatter of the spry octogenarians, the narratives are each a small miracle of cheerfulness and liveliness, where the crime and the relative investigation are merely only the excuse for the exchange of hilarious jokes between the elderly, Massimo, Tiziana (such a beautiful girl!, his helper in the bar) and the unfortunate protagonists of each crime. Old age sparks at the BarLume, and these novels describe a life where there is not a sad and lonely old age. The card games, the free cappuccinos, the non-stop chatter, the detective genius that can't wait to find some good story to unravel and that their

acumen will unearth... well, they are all descriptive characters that have nothing to do with old age as narrated in so many past and present novels where one lives the last years lost in memories and regrets. Of course these stories are not milestones of literature, but their pleasantness is undoubted and - while reading them - one feels like being in Pineta, breathing the sea air, playing cards and drink the *chinotto* that Massimo appreciates at any time.

If demography deals objectively with the different ages of life, but transversally to other disciplines it favours the productive and reproductive ages for obvious connections with the phenomena of population renewal, these light novels remind us how the aging process can be experienced with the same instincts of youthful age. As Battiato wrote (1983), “desires never grow old with age”, and the desire to know, to investigate, to solve cases is for the four old men still alive and dominant.

There is a melancholy atmosphere in *The Place of Strawberries*, a screenplay based on the author's film by Ingmar Bergman (1960). What is the strawberry place a symbol of? It is a place reconstructed in memory where our childhood, our adolescence, our childish self is hidden, with all the hopes we had, when life was all ahead of us, everything was to be chosen, to be tried, to be experienced. Perhaps this place also persists over the years, up to our old age, but we are not sure, we do not see it for sure even in our memories. They are the wild strawberries (the fruit of the title) collected in the garden of the childhood home of Isak Borg, an old, solitary and selfish professor, traveling from Stockholm to Lund for his university jubilee, which represents the culmination of his status of prestigious doctor and researcher. Ingmar Bergman narrates the life of the old professor between the idea of death and the encounters that distract and cheer him up during the journey to Lund. The positive encounters are those with the boys whom he gives a lift, Victor and Anders, with their quarrels about God, and Sara, full of will to live, while the bad thoughts come from the incident with a couple in eternal mutual torment and from the visit to his mother who reminds him of his failures and his loneliness. The Sara he meets takes the form of another Sara, the beloved cousin he sees in his dreams. Old age is today, but childhood and youth represent a full past and mix with questions about the existence of God, missed opportunities, “nostalgia” and love. All the themes dear to the great Swedish writer and director can be found in this novel about old age and its regrets.

Of all Hemingway's wonderful novels, the most poignant is in my opinion *The Old Man and the Sea*. Santiago, the old fisherman, and Manolin, the boy he teaches to fish and who gives him the strength to go back to the sea, are the protagonists, together with the sea. The plot of the book focuses on the duel between the old fisherman, who recalls his youth and his adventures in some flashbacks, and the swordfish, the prey that finally interrupts the long period (eighty-four days!) in which Santiago had been unable to catch anything due to terrible bad luck. The fight lasts

three days and both are very tired, but neither of them wants to give up. The old man would like to have the boy beside him to help him, but also just to feel his presence. Finally, Santiago has the upper hand: the swordfish is exhausted, the line is getting closer and closer to the boat, the old man kills it with his spear and returns home. However, the fishing is not successful because Santiago's boat is followed by sharks, attracted by the blood of the towed fish, and when the old man reaches his fish hut, only the fishbone remains. The consolation comes from the presence of Manolin, who offers him a beer and his understanding. The background to the novel is the sea, adverse and friend at the same time, which Hemingway loves, as he loves fishing and nature in general. It is in the sea that the challenge, cruel and intimate at the same time in complete loyalty, between the old man and the fish takes place. The underlying theme is the profound union between man and nature. The old man feels strongly immersed in the environment in which he has always lived, the long-awaited prey is not an enemy, but an opponent to whom, in the long struggle, the old fisherman addresses with respect, because he sees it as the symbol of nature. It would seem a useless old age, Santiago's, but passing on skills, as happens with Manolin, is already a victory, as the teacher in me would say.

Fannie Flagg's *Whistle Stop Coffee Fried Green Tomatoes* became a real literary case, an international best seller. It is a wonderful book that has seen great notoriety thanks also to the 1991 film which, although beautiful and with extraordinary actors, does not live up to the book. The book has various facets, moments rich in humour and dramatic phases, set in Alabama in the present day and after the Great Depression. The present is Mrs. Couch's life, the past are the reminiscences of old Mrs. Threadgoode, anecdotes she tells her attentive friend Evelyn Couch. The protagonists of the memories are Ruth, a very sweet and quiet girl, and Idgie, a young woman with the attitudes and behavior of an enterprising tomboy. The two women are owners of the Whistle Stop, a café opened in an isolated location in Alabama, in the deep south of the United States. It is there that encounters of varied humanity take place, decent people and bandits, violent and boorish as well as victims of the Great Depression. The society that stops at the Whistle Stop café in the 1930s and 1940s does not accept the "different", such as the black population, except as members of the servitude. Even less a homosexual love like the one that binds Ruth and Idgie who find themselves involved in a murder case, but who manage to overcome adversity and get themselves out of trouble. Fannie Flagg, pseudonym of Patricia Neal, was born in Birmingham in 1944, and is an openly homosexual American writer and actress; in her novels, in fact, are often found references to LGBTQ situations, characters and relationships. The various characters are described in an evocative manner and the elderly Mrs Threadgoode, the narrative voice of the events of the bar and their owners, is an unforgettable figure. An old woman is described here, with a very vivid memory, close to the young women

whose lives she narrates, for whom she does not feel envy but rather affection, with a free spirit of help and consolation for Ruth and Idgie, that are embodied by her listener Evelyn, afflicted by self-esteem problems, but who will re-evaluate herself through Mrs. Threadgoode's story and words.

5. Some conclusive remarks

Aging is now a widespread phenomenon in most industrialized countries. Southern Europe (with Italy) is at the top of the ranking of the oldest regions in the world. The causes of the process are essentially the falling birth rate and the increase in survival to old age. The migratory movements are not able to balance the falling birth rate and only partially the demographic decrease that now defines the future of Italy. The growing proportion of the elderly population aggravates the cost of healthcare and pensions. On the other hand, the role of the elderly is becoming increasingly important both as a support for children and grandchildren and as a resource in the economy and in society. Considering the forward movement of the old age threshold in the contemporary world compared to the past, active old age represents a truly important contribution to socio-economic development. In this contribution, in addition to describing the Italian and European aging process and discussing the progressive change in the thresholds of old age, some literary references have been included that have as background old age. Novels that help to understand the lives of people who - despite not being young anymore - manage to live a life full of meaning, interests and willingness to relate to the younger generations. I chose these novels because they represent some literary pillars of my youth and adulthood and I decided to revisit them through my academic specialization: demography.

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