Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century

Alice Crossley, Odd Age, Old Age, and Doubled Lives: Asynchronicity and Ageing Queerly in Israel Zangwill's Short Stories. *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 32 (2021) <https://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.3478>

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Odd Age, Old Age, and Doubled Lives: Asynchronicity and Ageing Queerly in Israel Zangwill's Short Stories

Alice Crossley

This article explores ageing in the short, comic fiction of the Anglo-Jewish New Humourist writer Israel Zangwill. In a range of short stories, which reflect on the ways in which *fin-de-siècle* culture tends to align later life with decline and diminishment, Zangwill reveals the paradoxes of ageing by playing with such assumptions. These texts subvert conventional views on ageing, challenge the binary opposition of youth and old age, and critique the physiology of ageing through intergenerational difference and familial relations. The article argues that Zangwill's texts emphasize the capacity for ageing — as a subjective experience, social identity, and means of elucidating the variable self through time — to be understood as a site of resistance or mode of subversion. In particular, his story 'An Odd Life' establishes creative ways to conceptualize age, as ageing is experienced by the protagonist outside the constraints of temporal realism. Willy Streetside's anachronistic ageing — as he can be seen as simultaneously a child, in midlife, and an elderly man — manifests through a queerly asynchronous temporality, which operates beyond the expectations of reproductive futurism. Through this protagonist in particular, Zangwill establishes an alternative, non-normative model of age.

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Resistance to normative patterns of ageing is a feature of fiction at the *fin de siècle*.[1] Across numerous texts of the period are characters who experience disproportionate longevity, such as the witch Gagool and powerful queen Ayesha of H. Rider Haggard's imperial adventures *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) and *She* (1887), as well as boys and girls who avoid growing old altogether: most infamously in J. M. Barrie's quasi-children's tale *Peter Pan* (1911). Popular novels of the period depict figures whose relationship to age is ominously mutable and unfixed, like the vampire count in Bram Stoker's Gothic horror *Dracula* (1897). They represent characters who discover some mystical means to defer the onset of old age as in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) by Oscar Wilde, or those who manage to reverse the ageing process, as experienced by the title character of the farcical *The Rejuvenation of Miss Semaphore* (1897) by Hal Godfrey (the pen name of Charlotte O'Conor Eccles). Such figures symbolize ageing as a source of anxiety, centring especially on later life as a stage that challenges individual identity, agency, and status as much as physical vigour. These *fin-de-siècle* fictions, which seem to contravene a correlation between chronological age and its naturalized embodiment, are particularly suggestive, because they rely on the structural mechanisms by which ageing can be recognized, but also subvert age expectations.

Andrea Charise has drawn attention to such tendencies, noting that '*fin de siècle* writing regularly employed pathologically oldened subjects (odd women, the aged child or *puer senex*, and so on) as vehicles for exploring innovative fears of the new'.[2] It is within this context of fictional age subversion and pathologization that Israel Zangwill (1864–1926) writes often comical stories, preoccupied with both the meaning of age in modern society and with demonstrating the potential for a reorientation of the ageing process away from conventional configurations of the life course (*Fig. 1*). As this article shows, Zangwill's writing tests the parameters of age ideology at the *fin de siècle*. His short fiction adopts a provocative stance by inviting reflection on alternative ways to conceptualize age and ageing through its defamiliarization as a (potent but always unstable) component of identity.

Zangwill's writing contests the presumed banality and invisibility of ageing (after all, we all have age, and all grow older as we live: as Devoney Looser explains, 'not only the "old" have "age".').[3] His short stories, such as 'An Odd Life', 'The Choice of

[1] In completing this article I would like to express my thanks to Dr David Ibitson, who first introduced me to the work of Israel Zangwill and to the curious tale that is 'An Odd Life', a text to which my thinking about Victorian ageing has consistently reverted for the last couple of years.

[2] Andrea Charise, *The Aesthetics of Senescence: Aging, Population, and the Nineteenth-Century British Novel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020), p. 138.

[3] Devoney Looser, 'Age and Aging Studies, From Cradle to Grave', *Age, Culture, Humanities*, 1 (2014) <https://ageculture-humanities.org/WP/age-and-aging-studies-from-cradle-to-grave/> [accessed 16 February 2021] (para. 3 of 6).

Fig. 1: Photograph of Israel Zangwill, date unknown, George Grantham Bain Collection, Library of Congress, Washington DC. Wikimedia Commons.

Parents', 'The Grey Wig', and the tales combined in *The Celibates' Club* (1898), expose the constructedness of age identity by dismantling conventional binary oppositions of youth and old age. In doing so, I argue here, Zangwill's texts emphasize the capacity for ageing — as a subjective experience, social identity, and means of elucidating the variable self through time — to be understood as a site of resistance or mode of subversion. This article will firstly contextualize Zangwill's treatment of old age through the deficit model of ageing, or what Margaret Gullette has theorized as the dominant Western 'narrative of decline' which tends to accompany the arc of the life course into its latter, final stages.[4] Zangwill draws attention to this age ideology by detailing the pathos of old age, specifically in his story 'The Grey Wig' (in his 1903 collection *The Grey Wig: Stories and Novelettes*). This story illuminates the way in which the elderly

[4] Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Midlife* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997).

— and particularly older women — could be marginalized or dismissed in a largely gerontophobic patriarchal culture, and yet find ways to manifest power through the conditions of their age and gender. In other tales, such as the story 'A New Matrimonial Relation' in *The Bachelors' Club* (1891), 'The Choice of Parents' in *Without Prejudice* (1897), and 'The Memory Clearing House' in *The King of Schnorrers* (1894), generational gaps are used to reveal inescapable assumptions about the correlation between discrete age stages, responsibility, and capacity, while the cultural and biological markers through which age tends to be categorized are subjected to playful inversion.

I will then turn to one specific short story, 'An Odd Life' (1894) to examine in greater detail the way that Zangwill uses this narrative to align age away from temporal stability and essentialist views of age-based identity. Zangwill finds creative strategies to conceptualize age in 'An Odd Life', in which ageing is experienced by the protagonist outside the constraints of temporal realism. This reveals the challenges presented across the life course by subverting the normative, seemingly coherent, pattern of accretive ageing as a 'stream of life'.[5] The protagonist Willy Streetside, who embodies simultaneously 'the wisdom of an old man and the heart of a little child', lives a literally 'dual existence' in 'the privilege of double birth' (pp. 267, 269). I argue that Willy's asynchronous age, erosion of chrono-normative growth, and his embodiment of multiple age-signifiers simultaneously (he possesses the body of an infant but the mind of an elderly man during the entirety of his narration), collectively exhibit a queer relationship to the widespread cultural imperative of what Lee Edelman has referred to as 'reproductive futurism'.[6] In doing so, I suggest, Zangwill articulates a fantasy of embodied age as a mode of difference that at once threatens and promises a radical alternative for youth-centric culture at the *fin de siècle*. Zangwill proposes an abortive model of cyclical chronology for his protagonist; Willy's transtemporal trajectory means that while being defined almost entirely by his perverse chronological age, he is also an age outlaw, beyond a normative age imaginary.

A range of modern attitudes towards age and ageing were codified during the nineteenth century. These changes in outlook culminated at the *fin de siècle* through, for example, the establishment of old age state pensions, increasing attempts at age classification, studies in longevity, and the emergence of geriatrics and gerontology as disciplines, as well as a range of fiction which deals with ageing as a prominent issue. This period gives rise, Andrea Charise suggests, to 'the broader *fin de siècle* tendency to

[5] I. Zangwill, 'An Odd Life', in *The King of Schnorrers: Grotesques & Fantasies* (London: Heinemann, 1894), pp. 259–72 (p. 263).
[6] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 28.

invoke senescence under the banner of chronic social and evolutionary decline', linking the perceived qualities of individual old age with social degeneration. The result is a '"senile topography" [...] in which aging and older age emerge as topics of concern in disciplines as diverse as medicine, psychology, popular media, and literature' (Charise, pp. 102, 104). The alliance of late life with decline is crucial for this article and my reading of Zangwill's work. Margaret Gullette claims that the dominant ideology at work in Western culture — since at least the nineteenth century — is predicated on a temporal schema of ageing-into-old-age as a process of decline.[7] Gullette's work in age studies, however, encourages theorists to recoup those ageist mechanisms of decline perpetuated by a culture that allies old age with presumed deterioration or diminishment. Zangwill's accounts of transgressive ageing engage in just such a practice of resistance by seeking alternative models for age. Tales such as 'An Odd Life' subvert the coherent linearity of the life course through the protagonist's parthenogenetic rebirth into a second life, and 'A New Matrimonial Relation' illustrates contemporary prejudice towards late life by amplifying ideas about generational differentiation. Zangwill operates within a paradoxical mode that underscores the 'acculturated side of age' or 'master narrative of aging' that Gullette identifies, obtained through mainstream age-inflected discourses to which his texts mount a challenge (*Aged by Culture*, pp. 104, 130).

This resistance manifests age, especially in 'An Odd Life', within a matrix of queer temporality. In this tale Willy Streetside embodies a form of 'imaginative life schedule' that queer theorist Judith Halberstam exemplifies as the 'nonnormative logic' of queerness.[8] Willy's 'anomalous corporeality' also indicates what Cynthia Port traces as the fundamental alliance between old age and queer subjectivity, both figured 'outside mainstream temporalities and standing in the way of, rather than contributing to, the promise of the future'.[9] Willy's asynchronous experience of ageing, his anachronistic position as a fugitive of normative time, and his resistance to heteronormative reproductive imperatives, demonstrate a queering of age in *fin-de-siècle* fiction.

Zangwill and 'topsy-turvey' age discourse

An Anglo-Jewish writer best known for his depictions of Jewish life, Zangwill was termed 'the Dickens of the Ghetto'; he was '*the* literary lion of Anglo-Jewry' in the 1890s

[7] See, in particular, Gullette's formulation of the cultural discourse of decline in *Aged by Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) and *Declining to Decline*.

[8] Judith [Jack] Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), pp. 12, 20.

[9] Cynthia Port, 'No Future? Aging, Temporality, History, and Reverse Chronologies', *Occasion*, 4 (2012), 1–19 (p. 3).

and ‘the first Jewish celebrity of the twentieth century’.[10] While read only infrequently today, he was a significant figure in the literary milieu of *fin-de-siècle* London and a prominent figure in Jewish political history. Beyond the locked-room detective story *The Big Bow Mystery* (1892), his most celebrated texts remain those which treat explicitly the question of Jewish identity, such as his collected ‘ghetto books’ (e.g. *Children of the Ghetto: A Study of a Peculiar People* (1892), *Dreamers of the Ghetto* (1898), *Ghetto Tragedies* (1899), and *Comedies* (1907)) and several of his numerous plays, the best known of which is *The Melting Pot* (1908). His literary output largely reflects his political activism and demonstrates his keen, deeply vested interest in issues of Zionism, territorialism, and the question of Jewish assimilation. Zangwill responded in both creative and journalistic writing to the intersecting discourses about nation, race, ethnicity, sovereignty, and migration that developed prominently in Europe and America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

A writer explicitly concerned with the status and treatment of Jews and the construction of Jewish identity, there exists in his work a complex, occasionally ambiguous political and social outlook regarding the relative value or advisability of Jewish integration set against urgent campaigning for a globally recognized Jewish state.[11] His views on these issues were subject to change throughout his career. Meri-Jane Rochelson, Zangwill’s recent biographer and the most prolific critic of his work, observes that the author was writing in a society which continued to articulate the status of Jews in the modern world in terms of a dilemma and, as such, Zangwill’s writing might reveal ‘a reflection of [his] own internal divisions’ on the topic.[12] Rochelson has also claimed elsewhere that ‘Zangwill’s attitudes toward Judaism and his relationship to Christianity have continued to make him a paradoxical and controversial figure among readers and scholars of Jewish literature’, contributing to his posthumous lack

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[10] Emanuel Elzas, ‘Israel Zangwill: A Sketch’, *San Francisco Call*, 25 August 1895, p. 16; Joseph H. Udelson, *Dreamer of the Ghetto: Life and Works of Israel Zangwill* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990), p. 110; and Meri-Jane Rochelson, *A Jew in the Public Arena: The Career of Israel Zangwill* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), p. 3.

[11] Meri-Jane Rochelson, for example, notes that ‘Zangwill as an author rejected both ghettoization and literary assimilation’. See Meri-Jane Rochelson, ‘Israel Zangwill’s Early Journalism and the Formation of an Anglo-Jewish Literary Identity’, in *Nineteenth-Century Media and the Construction of Identities*, ed. by Laurel Brake, Bill Bell, and David Finkelstein (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 178–94 (p. 191). His ambivalence on the best solution to the pressing problems of homeland and status for Jews may be traced through his early support for Theodor Herzl and the Zionist movement, and his break with the Zionist cause when in 1905 he formed the oppositional nationalist group, the Jewish Territorial Organization (ITO), and his positive appeal to visions of integration as imagined in his dramatic text *The Melting Pot* about an American utopia that promises ethnic, racial, and national unity.

[12] Meri-Jane Rochelson, ‘Israel Zangwill’s *Italian Fantasies*: Constructing a Self Beyond the Ghetto’, *Partial Answers*, 13 (2015), 137–53 (p. 138).

of popularity.[13] The indeterminacy of aspects of his outlook is also remarked by Will Abberley, who has suggested that

> on one level, Zangwill's writings were simply contradictory, caught between a Zionist–Territorialist desire for racial distinction and a pacifist, cosmopolitan ideal of human unity. Yet he also groped toward a reconciliation of these aims by sometimes invoking a non-essentialist vision of identity.[14]

As Abberley indicates, especially in relation to *The Melting Pot*, Zangwill's writing often articulated ambivalence through the desire to reconcile oppositional perspectives; while the fictional texts I examine here are not those that take as their focus specifically Jewish subjects, the paradoxical and contradictory subtleties of Zangwill's thought on Jewish identities may be seen to nonetheless extend to his writing about ageing. In his work age signifies in contradictory ways and becomes a topic ripe for the paradoxical treatment often a feature of his New Humour writing, giving rise to sometimes inconsistent articulations about identity as both 'internal and essential' and 'external and acquired' (Abberley, p. 187). In tandem with his Jewish writing, therefore — which could manifest a much more serious tone — Zangwill's analysis of discrete stages of life in his lighter fiction draws on multiple discourses that define age in terms of calendrical markers and biological essentialism, as well as on those that emphasize the importance of the social and cultural means by which age is constructed. The topic of ageing and its treatment in Zangwill also resonates with his later involvement in the female suffrage movement, which Rochelson identifies as 'integral to the larger body of his life and work'.[15] A 'leading male figure' in the movement, and a champion of those relegated to the margins (both disenfranchised women and the Jewish people), Zangwill's strategies for revising the social liminality of old age may also be considered in parallel with his gender politics and activism in pursuit of female emancipation in the early twentieth century.

Despite his serious political role in debating such issues, Zangwill was initially renowned as a comic writer. Much of his short fiction reflects the light-hearted, deceptively casual tone adopted in his early journalism (in periodicals such as *Ariel*, which he himself edited, the *Pall Mall Magazine*, *Lippincott's*, and *To-Day*). He frequently

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[13] Meri-Jane Rochelson, '"They That Walk in Darkness": *Ghetto Tragedies*: The Uses of Christianity in Israel Zangwill's Fiction', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 27 (1999), 219–33 (p. 220).

[14] Will Abberley, *Mimicry and Display in Victorian Literary Culture: Nature, Science and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination*, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture, 123 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 185.

[15] Meri-Jane Rochelson, 'Israel Zangwill and Women's Suffrage', *Jewish Culture and History*, 2.2 (1999), 1–17 (p. 2).

penned pieces written in a satirical, New Humourist vein. For this type of work, Zangwill remains best known for his involvement in the regular column of the 'Idler's Club' in the *Idler*, alongside the magazine's co-editors Jerome K. Jerome and Robert Barr, as well as for his collected stories in *The Bachelors' Club* and its sequel *The Old Maids' Club* (1892). Carolyn Oulton notes that New Humour was viewed as an accessible, informal style of writing, which drew widespread criticism for its lack of seriousness, presumed vulgarity, adoption of an anti-intellectual stance, and cultivation of literary personalities who relished the absurdities of modern life:

> The New Humour exerted a populist appeal that [...] [incurred] hostility among many reviewers. [...] To its critics the exuberant comic writing of Jerome and his circle was anti-intellectual literary slapstick, produced by non-university educated writers for a newly literate mass readership.[16]

Zangwill's writing revels in the artificiality of style and tone adopted by New Humour. The genre, Laura Kasson Fiss establishes, mimics the, 'light, self-deprecatory, conversational humour characteristic of table talk or club chatter' which was perceived by those who disliked it as indicative of a wider moral malaise in the 1890s.[17] His facility in this territory, however, led to Zangwill's equivocal identification as 'the champion' of New Humour, according to one critic in the *Speaker* of 1894.[18] This is not to imply, however (as some of the more reactionary or unkind reviewers did at the time), that Zangwill's comic writing necessarily lacks serious meaning. His light fiction provided amusing entertainment; it was nonetheless an effective vehicle through which his satirical engagement with more sober issues could be addressed. He possessed, according to a review of 1898, an 'extraordinary quickness for whimsical contrast' and 'absurdity': 'if an inversion was suggested' in a tale, the anonymous reviewer complains, 'the inversion was made.'[19] This tendency features prominently in his comic fiction. He often reflects, in the texts examined here, on presumed fixities, destabilizing the cultural apparatus by which they are maintained. The treatment of age benefits from this usage, as polarities and doubles are often humorously inverted in his fiction to reflect acerbically on modern age-ideologies at work in the *fin de siècle*.

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[16] Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton, '"Making Literature Ridiculous": Jerome K. Jerome and the New Humour', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 48 (2017), 273–84 (p. 274).

[17] Laura Kasson Fiss, '"The Idler's Club": Humor and Sociability in the Age of New Journalism', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 49 (2016), 415–30 (p. 420).

[18] 'Humourists and New Humourists', *Speaker*, 17 March 1894, pp. 303–04 (p. 303).

[19] 'Mr. Zangwill's Early Humour', *Academy*, 3 September 1898, p. 227.

In his mock essay 'The Philosophy of Topsy-Turveydom', Zangwill asserts the benefits of inversion, expressed in part through an analysis of that same quality in Oscar Wilde's epigrammatic turn of phrase. 'I have always looked down on you with admiration', Zangwill claims of Wilde, 'You are much too important to be discussed seriously, and if I take the trouble to give you advice, it is only because I am so much younger than you.'[20] Zangwill's inversion of opposites — asserting that serious topics require humorous treatment, and that advice can only be given by those with less wisdom — brings together issues of style (parodic writing) and age (the relative positions of naive youth and experience). 'Paradox is the only truth,' Zangwill writes, tongue-in-cheek, 'for it cannot be denied; including, like the world, its own contradiction. Topsy-turveydom unfolds our musty ideas to the sun and spreads them out the other way' (p. 142). To adopt this manner of perversely instructive writing is to be both 'flippant jester' and 'philosophic thinker', he winks (p. 142).

Zangwill extends his application of parody, paradox, and inversion to the consideration of ageing and the life course. He subverts the temporal continuity of the life course in the conceit that underpins 'The Choice of Parents'. In this tale Zangwill turns on its head the idea that living, and growing older during a lifetime, facilitate individual agency. Instead he tells the farcical story of a writer who, rather than looking forward to recognition of his talents from those who are already alive, has conversely found fame by publishing books for the 'unborn' of 'Ante-land', writing for 'pre-natal populations', and preaching to his preconception readership about the importance of making 'the choice of their parents before they are born'.[21] The structural integrity of the normative temporal line connecting childhood, youth, adulthood, old age, and death is undermined by proposing a new hierarchy in which ante-life manifests as a moment of opportunity and agency, while the vital life course after birth is merely a relic of that choice. According to this view, an individual is able to control the mode and moment of their initial existence, but the remainder of their life is largely set in stone from birth to death. This involves a regression of the dominant cultural tendency to view youth as a period of dynamic elasticity, while old age is imagined as a period of ossification and decline. The polarity of youth and age is maintained but extended

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[20] I. Zangwill, 'The Philosophy of Topsy-Turveydom', in *Without Prejudice* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1896), pp. 137–44 (p. 140). This is the same essay, first published in 1892, in which Zangwill claimed 'proof that prophecy has not yet died out of Israel', as his 'remedy' for the paradoxical writing of Wilde was 'a little knowledge of life, and twelve months' hard labour' (pp. 140, 141). Unsurprisingly, there were accusations of bad taste that accompanied Zangwill's subsequent republication of such comments, in light of Wilde's infamous trials and criminal sentencing.

[21] 'The Choice of Parents', in *Without Prejudice*, pp. 194–207 (pp. 195, 196).

further backwards in an implicit conflict between precognitive, 'unborn' subjectivity and fatalistically determined successive chapters of life.

A further text which draws on the temporal linearity associated with the coherent life course, 'The Memory Clearing House', offers another fantastic plot to cement the correlation between the past and present by a declaration about the importance of memory to identity construction. Here, the accretive character of memories, continually laid down and increasing as we age, is initially characterized as an encumbrance. The protagonist's friend O'Donovan therefore invents a 'memory-transferring machine' for 'cast-off memories'.[22] Disburdening oneself of unnecessary information or unwanted memories, O'Donovan declares, will increase longevity: 'we shall all live longer through it — centenarians will become as cheap as American millionaires' (p. 190). O'Donovan's memory exchange includes sale and hire. As a result, 'people who were tired of themselves came here to get a complete new outfit of memories, and thus change their identities', and so 'double lives became a luxury within the reach of the multitude' (pp. 195, 198). The story therefore rests on the correlation between identity, the passage of time, and the corresponding accumulation of memories as a crucial component of the subjective self. Growing older, the story implies, involves the accretion of a host of remembered moments from our personal histories and recalled facts that, combined over time, curate who we are. Gullette draws attention to this, as 'age identity is an achievement of storytelling about whatever has come to us through aging' (*Aged by Culture*, p. 124). In Zangwill's tale customers are able to abruptly change themselves, negating the data of their previous lives. In her account of age identity, Gullette reiterates the importance of recounted events, as both epiphany and 'long time' combine into a dynamic of self-construction:

> Identity over time can be seen as a sense of an achieved portmanteau 'me' — made up, for each subject, of all its changeable and continuing selves together — connected in different ways, or intermittently, but sometimes barely at all, to a sensuously material body. (p. 125)

As we age, the 'agglomeration' of events, memories, and moments facilitates our sense of self — a process that Zangwill's short story humorously acknowledges (Gullette, *Aged by Culture*, p. 125). Altering one's memories, Zangwill's text implies, involves an alteration of subjective experience and the historical formation of identity over time. O'Donovan's 'Anodyne' produces 'Cheap Forgetfulness — Complete or Partial. Easy

[22] 'The Memory Clearing House', in *The King of Schnorrers*, pp. 183–204 (p. 191).

Amnesia — Temporary or Permanent. Haunting Memories Laid! Consciences Cleared. Cares carefully Removed without Gas or Pain' ('The Memory Clearing House', p. 200). The process facilitates the removal of moments in peoples' storied lives, offering to sever the individual from painful memories or to synthesize new ones. This exacerbates the text's emphasis on the correlation between memory and identity (which has been extensively explored in age scholarship on dementia studies), because, as Jan Baars comments, 'someone's personal identity cannot be understood without stories.'[23] Zangwill explores the potential for stories-as-memories, accumulated throughout a long life, to be manipulated, altering age identity.

Not all of Zangwill's plots of age identity necessarily rest on inversion and topsy-turveydom of the life course. 'The Grey Wig' provides a more realistic account of two impoverished elderly ladies and their desire to purchase new grey wigs to replace their current, anachronistically colourful wigs of youthful hair, which in their richness and vibrancy they find increasingly inappropriate for their aged frames: 'Time wrote wrinkles enough on the brows of the two old ladies, but his frosty finger never touched their glossy brown hair, for both wore wigs of nearly the same shade.'[24] As their hair, mismatched against their ageing bodies, becomes a source of genteel embarrassment to both, they desire to be 'crowned with the dignity of age' which they feel their hair disbars (p. 24). Instead of masking their senescence, their desire for grey wigs evinces a healthy attempt to embrace old age rather than denying it through unseemly youthful masquerade.[25] However, their blinkered obsession with a grey wig also reveals a blindness towards the more valuable opportunities of senescence to be found in the intimate camaraderie of female sociality in old age. The emphasis on appearance is revealed as a trivial concern. One of the women is eventually murdered, leaving the other to reflect too late on the value of her friendship with the dead woman and, in so doing, to eventually recognize that their shared aspiration for a grey wig was 'a petty

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[23] Jan Baars, *Aging and the Art of Living* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), p. 187. For recent work on ageing studies and dementia, see, for example, Sarah Falcus and Katsura Sako, *Contemporary Narratives of Dementia: Ethics, Ageing, Politics*, Routledge Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Literature, 97 (New York: Routledge, 2019).

[24] 'The Grey Wig', in *The Works of Israel Zangwill*, 14 vols (London: Globe Publishing, 1925), VIII: *The Grey Wig: Stories and Novelettes*, p. 4.

[25] This 'effort to erase or efface age (or to put on youth)' is the subject of Kathleen Woodward's essay 'Youthfulness as a Masquerade', *Discourse*, 11.1 (1988–89), 119–42 (p. 120). Teresa Mangum has also explored the popularity and significance of rejuvenescence literature in relation to the New Woman, which is especially relevant to Zangwill's *The Old Maids' Club*. Zangwill's book is in some ways a satirical critique of rejuvenation fiction and draws on concepts of the New Woman and the unmarried spinster as a combined threat of age and gender. See Teresa Mangum, 'The Unnatural Youth of the Old "New Woman"', in *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Aging in Nineteenth-Century Culture*, ed. by Katharina Boehm, Anna Farkas, and Anne-Julia Zwierlein (New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 75–91.

and futile aspiration' ('The Grey Wig', p. 32). The story is full of humorous sympathy. Zangwill depicts the pathos of the elderly women's situation within an ageist culture that polices their appearance and judges their perceived deviance from social codes of appearance so harshly that it comes to dominate their lives and exacerbate their penury in their efforts to obtain new hairpieces. It also indicates the (failed) consolations of elderly female community, which are fully appreciated too late by Mesdames Dépine and Valière.

The two women in 'The Grey Wig' find their ageing bodies a source of sorrow, which rests on an acculturated view of female old age reflected back to them by their society. Zangwill's account of the removal of Madame Dépine's chestnut wig makes the state of her ageing body seem pitiably repellent, as the mark of time operates irrevocably as a lingering source of distress. She 'removed her wig and exposed her poor old scalp, with its thin, forlorn wisps and patches of grey hair, grotesque, almost indecent, in its nudity' (p. 22). As scholars have noted, women's bodies in particular as they age can be seen as a canvas that provokes the same discomfort suggested by Zangwill's description. In Western history, Karen Chase admits, there exists a marked 'cultural animosity against older women'.[26] In a culture that prioritized reproductive capacity (a biological faculty retained for significantly longer by men), post-menopausal women could be treated harshly, which is visible in *fin-de-siècle* periodical debates about the redundancy of older, single women especially. Although Zangwill recognizes the capacity for older women to be categorized as a threat in his society (even while his depiction of old age in the narrative is not uncomplicated), he also provides narratives of aged femininity rooted in power and agency, in which old age is allowed to positively affect women's sense of their identity. Fundamentally in 'The Grey Wig', after all, the women's friendship, which emerges only in their later years, initiates profound meaning in their otherwise empty, solitary lives.

As well as community, Zangwill identifies other means of symbolic power for ageing women in the period. In the pseudo-fairy tale, 'Santa Claus: A Story for the Nursery', a small homeless boy sheltering in a doorway wishes for stockings so that he can hang one up and get Christmas presents like other (rich, privileged, middle-class) children. A fairy, disguised as an old woman, instructs him how to magically obtain a pair of stockings (by wishing them off someone else's feet), and so little Bob eventually gets a stocking full of gifts. Zangwill paints the old fairy-woman herself as a grotesque figure, a source of magic but otherwise 'a wretched old creature', 'broken-down', and

[26] Karen Chase, *The Victorians and Old Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 123.

who, exemplifying the violence aimed towards older women's bodies, has lost her fairy wings because 'they had been amputated in a surgical operation'.[27] The aged fairy-woman rewards Bob for a kindness to her, and her power facilitates the reassertion of moral balance in a world that lets a proportion of society live in luxury while others, like Bob, suffer needlessly.

Anna Lepine has also identified Zangwill's narrative representation of the ageing single woman as a source of subversive potential, as she claims that his 'light fiction demonstrates the persistence of the Old Maid as a disruptive figure in Victorian culture'.[28] In *The Old Maids' Club*, Zangwill critiques the way in which nineteenth-century society seeks to allocate primary importance to marriage and childbirth for women, satirizing the conventional dismissive or condescending view of elderly spinsters. In the novel a young woman establishes a club for old maids, but her attempt backfires as none of the women who want to join remain eligible for membership, and the protagonist herself eventually marries her patient suitor in the novel's comic conclusion of multiple marital pairings. Lillie Dulcimer establishes her Old Maids' Club in an attempt at 'the depolarization of the term "Old Maid"; in other words, the dissipation of all those disagreeable associations which have gradually and unjustly clustered about it'.[29] Her decision, at seventeen, to be an old maid may be seen as subversive: a robust challenge to a patriarchal status quo in which unmarried older women might be unfairly dismissed as unfulfilled, redundant, or discreditable in their aged celibacy. However, the text also reveals the hypocrisy of Lillie's intentions, as 'disappointed, soured failures were not wanted [for the club]. There was no virtue in being an Old Maid when you had passed twenty-five. Such creatures were merely old maids' (p. 351). The text is therefore ironic, as Lillie's club, operating from a position of privilege, can do nothing to mitigate the disenfranchised position of old maids, as it only welcomes those who would not attract social censure, ridicule, or pity as 'old maids' in the first place. Lillie's adoption of the Old Maid moniker, by choice and without qualifying for the characteristics that are used to marginalize such women, is simply a masquerade of single old age and its concomitant social liminality. Nonetheless, one aged female figure in the text, Lepine suggests, finds power in senescent femininity. Little Dolly, the last prospective Old Maid seeking admittance to Lillie's club, is the only one who actually conforms to conventional codes. She is 'an ancient lady' with 'cracked and quavering'

[27] 'Santa Claus: A Story for the Nursery', in *The King of Schnorrers*, pp. 297–301 (p. 299).

[28] Anna Lepine, 'The Old Maid in the Garrett: Representations of the Spinster in Victorian Culture' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Ottawa, 2007), p. 140.

[29] 'The Old Maids' Club', in *The Works of Israel Zangwill*, v: *The Celibates' Club*, p. 351.

voice, a 'withered face', a 'wild' and 'wandering' gaze, dressed in symbolically old-fashioned attire (p. 658). Little Dolly cannot recognize her own physical decrepitude, though, persisting in the erroneous fiction that she is still 'young and beautiful' and misguidedly seeking to punish an erstwhile lover from her faded youth by joining the club (pp. 657, 659). Lepine observes:

> Dolly is mad and pathetic, but she is oddly powerful. Not only does she take over the space, forge kinship with Lillie and Wee Winnie, and reduce the heroine to hysterics, but she immediately forces the dissolution of a Club whose aim is to obliterate the kind of spinsterhood she represents. (p. 139)

Little Dolly is a 'strange apparition', the unvarnished representative of aged femininity whose 'ghastly' presence reveals the sham and posturing of the swiftly dissolved Old Maids' Club (pp. 657, 658). Nonetheless, her presence facilitates the text's resolution and the closure of a club founded on the artificial opposition of youth and age, which abjured spinsterhood in all but name.

The intersection between age and gender is also made apparent in the treatment of male anxiety about public perceptions of ageing in the earlier companion volume to *The Old Maids' Club*, *The Bachelors' Club*. The chapter 'A New Matrimonial Relation' reveals the cultural apparatus of perceptions of age difference in operation. The presumed binaries of young and old are demonstrated through the male figures of Oliver Green and his uncle. Oliver, known by his bachelor friends as a young(ish) man in his early thirties, leaves town during his uncle's visit from India to care for his relative, as Oliver reveals he 'required a good deal of looking after'.[30] Modelled as a physically dependent subject in need of nursing, the narrator Paul thinks with resentment about Oliver's needy, reliant (presumably) aged uncle: an 'old fogey of a relative', 'with his parchment-coloured visage, and his gouty toe, and his disordered liver' (p. 214). Paul's assumption that Oliver's uncle is 'an apoplectic old egotist', plagued by age-induced ailments, is subsequently exploded as, when searching for the nephew and uncle at a seaside resort and anticipating finding his friend wheeling the aged uncle in a bath chair, he finds Oliver instead with 'a little dark-featured toddler, of about five or six' playing on the beach (p. 216). Initially assuming that the 'pocket-edition of Oliver' is his friend's son, Paul discovers that the 'little lad' is, in fact, Oliver's uncle (p. 218). Oliver reveals that his own mother was born when his grandmother was very young, at fifteen, whereas little Oliver's mother was born when her own mother had been 'at the

[30] 'The Bachelors' Club', in *The Works of Israel Zangwill*, v, 214.

abnormal age of forty-eight, which is almost the extreme possible limit', to explain the apparent inversion of their generational exterior and the quirk of their age disparity (p. 220). The humorous, convoluted working through, on paper, of Oliver's family tree, also reveals that the bachelor had lied about his own age to his club confrères. He made 'false declarations' to hide his immaturity and is only twenty-three rather than the thirtyish years he had claimed (p. 220). The crisis of the tale rests on Oliver's attempts to conceal from others that his uncle is so much younger than he is himself which, he feels, would result in humiliation and inevitable mockery if widely known. His 'mature appearance' that had allowed him to pass as older than his age, he claims, makes his 'avuncular relation all the more ridiculous' (p. 220).

In order to prevent the surprising age discrepancy becoming common knowledge, Oliver determines to marry little Oliver's aunt-through-marriage, and thereby regain the superiority that he assumes should attach to his more advanced age. 'As Oliver's nephew I am the scoff and byword of the kingdom. [But] by marrying his aunt I become his uncle', Oliver reasons, in his attempt to regain the status and authority of his position as the elder. After much attempted, humorous interference by the narrator, Oliver Green eventually marries the aunt Miss Blossom — herself over fifty — in a move through which 'normal [generational] rôles are restored' (p. 225). Zangwill's approach to age discrepancy is playful. The story in this chapter of *The Bachelors' Club* explores the significance of age through cross-generational dynamics. Zangwill toys with expectations of presumed normative familial kinship by exposing multiple connections and points of fissure in connection with age discourse, exploited through comic inversion.

As Zangwill's short stories explored here indicate, the way that lived time is measured becomes a crucial component for identity construction. His tale 'An Odd Life', as I argue in the next section of this article, demonstrates that the meanings invested in age often relate to how the life course is marked out into measurable stages. As Charise recognizes in the *Lebenstreppe* or 'steps of life' that were still in popular circulation during the nineteenth century, 'the journey of modern aging [was imagined] as much a spatial as a temporal organization of one's life.' This results in a see-saw view of the life course from cradle to grave, visualized as 'the upward ascent of childhood and youth, the peak of man's "perfect age," followed by the downward slope of later years', which envisages a restrictive model of growing older (Charise, p. xxxvii). Zangwill deliberately complicates this arced trajectory of ageing, finding instead a vein of humour and pathos in his topsy-turvey depictions of age-inflected experiences. As

one reviewer proclaimed, ‘Mr Zangwill is nothing if not startling, and half, or entirely, paradoxical.’[31] Zangwill’s view of age is no exception. His writing in his short stories exposes the paradoxes of age; it challenges the popular adage of age discourse which selects old age as a period of inevitable decline and subverts culturally determined expectations about progressive stages of life. These characteristics dominate his short story ‘An Odd Life’, as Zangwill deploys narrative temporal asynchronicity to reveal the unstable, anachronistic, and queer potential of ageing.

From ‘infant phenomenon’ to ‘Second Childhood’ and back: age and ageing queerly in ‘An Odd Life’

Kathleen Woodward, in her landmark study *Aging and Its Discontents*, recognizes that ‘we cannot detach the body in decline from the meanings we attach to old age. The inevitable and literal association of advanced old age with increasing frailty and ultimately death itself presents a limit beyond which we cannot go.’[32] Zangwill’s short stories explored here, however, often refuse either to abide by temporal realism or to follow patterns of chrono-normative experience, and in so doing these texts attempt to decouple later life from inevitable decline. In ‘An Odd Life’ Zangwill’s enterprising protagonist navigates away from the conventional ‘meanings we attach to old age’ by literally overcoming both death and ‘advanced old age’ through a post-mortem rebirth. The text relays the comic-fantasy tale of an unusually precocious dying infant, Willy Streetside. The ill child informs his attending physician (the text’s first-person narrator) that although he is currently just one year and nine months old, he has, in fact, already lived to be an elderly man of seventy-seven, having recently died and been reborn to live a second life. Rather than experiencing the life course like a linear ‘flowing […] stream’, moving from childhood inexorably onwards towards senescence and death and thereby conforming to biological inevitability, Willy’s mother, he explains, had wished that her child would first live the ‘odd’ years of his life (one, three, five, etc.) and then return to live through the even years (two, four, six, etc.), so that her son would be ‘armed with all the wisdom of […] age’ in the second half of his life to avoid ‘the common burden of continuous existence’ (‘An Odd Life’, pp. 263–65). Her child becomes, therefore, a living embodiment of cultural age-anxiety rooted in a fear of various types of decline associated with later life, rejecting the teleological arc of the rise and fall represented visually by *Lebenstreppe*.

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[31] Review of *Without Prejudice*, *Practical Teacher*, January 1897, pp. 370–71 (p. 370).

[32] Kathleen Woodward, *Aging and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 18–19.

In the narrative Willy has doubly cheated death, initially by skipping past the fatal second year in his first life, and then by re-emerging after his death-in-old-age as a child once more. This perverts the naturalized linear life course. It also disrupts the progressive continuity of each stage of life and the meanings conferred on them. Willy's mother hopes fervently that her child could lead a sort of repeated (double) life, to benefit from the knowledge and experience of his first life on arrival into his second:

> What is the use of experience, of knowledge of past bits of the route, when no two bits are ever really alike, when the future course is hidden and is always a panorama of surprises, when no life-stream knows what awaits it round the corner every time it turns, when the scenery of the source avails one nothing in one's resistless progress towards the scenery of the mouth? What is life but a series of mistakes, whose fruit is wisdom, maybe, but wisdom overripe? We do not pluck the fruit till it will no longer serve our appetites. [...] If we had had at least two lives, we might profit in the second by the first. (pp. 263–64)

Therefore, each of Willy's two projected lives is technically a half-life (divided, as his mother wishes, like each side of a London street). Each year he lives is followed by a missed year, in which Willy's body has nonetheless grown older. This is obtained through temporal elision that distorts his lived duration as he 'advanced to manhood, skipping the alternate years' (p. 265). 'When I was in my fifth year', he explains to the doctor, 'attested by my birth certificate [...] you will of course see that I was really in my ninth' (p. 265). Willy's life follows a different pattern from the accretive 'life-stream' that facilitates presumed wisdom in old age, when it is — his mother thinks — too late to be profitable.

Jacob Jewusiak has investigated the way in which different strategies for representing duration in fiction will impact on ageing depicted through narrative. Novelists like Thomas Hardy, he suggests, reveal ageing as an indicator of dynamic possibility by interrogating counterfactual possibilities and exploring opportunities for thinking about temporality beyond the rigid linear imperative of clock time. Like Jocelyn Pierston in Jewusiak's analysis of Hardy's *The Well-Beloved*, Willy Streetside also exhibits an inventive restructure of normative transitions between stages of the life course. Willy's simultaneous embodiment of multiple stages of life in a single moment accords with Jewusiak's claim about Jocelyn, as

> old age emerges as more than the endpoint of linear and developmental models of the human lifespan, [...] as the nexus where the collision of multiple temporalities

> becomes most legible, where the counterfactual play of past and present becomes most fully realized.[33]

Willy's life is characterized not only by the promise of an alternate life in the future that he presumes will follow his second birth (although this possibility is then frustrated by his unanticipated death as a child). His literal embodiment of polymorphous ages in light of such 'counterfactual play of past and present' sets him apart. He admits, 'if I had taken my second year in its natural order, I should have been cut short by croup at the outset. [...] I think one ought to be satisfied with having survived himself by thirty odd years' ('An Odd Life', p. 268). Willy survives his own death twice.

In some ways, and despite his non-normative ageing, Willy is the singular embodiment of population statistics for an average man of late Victorian Britain. Firstly, he lives a healthy, long life before a natural death at the (relatively) old age of seventy-seven, experiencing reasonable longevity for the period. Secondly, however, he also suffers from the demographic issue of high child mortality rates that plagued the nineteenth century, by dying before he reaches his second birthday: infant death was a not uncommon occurrence for the period. Thirdly, and at the same time, he could also be said to live to an average age by dying at thirty-nine: this roughly maps onto the statistical midpoint of life expectancy (36 in 1801 rising to 48 by 1901), a figure which was artificially depressed by the high incidence of child death in the period.[34] Willy is therefore an unremarkable, statistical everyman according to accounts of life expectancy data for late Victorian Britain. But the exceptional trajectory of his life also means that Willy embodies multiple stages of life as well as being a statistical figure. He is at once a little child (in body, and in freshness of outlook), old (as he retains all the memories and sensations of having been an elderly man), and approximately middle-aged (experiencing thirty-nine years of life). In this story Zangwill therefore reimagines the very nature of what it means to age, as his tale challenges typical checks and balances of biological, calendrical, and cultural age construction.

In a period that valorized youth, writers of late Victorian and early twentieth-century fiction were wont to explore their society's fetishization of childhood and adolescence (such that John Neubauer terms the European *fin de siècle* a 'culture of adolescence').[35] However, in conjunction or in consequence, there developed a pervasive

[33] Jacob Jewusiak, *Aging, Duration, and the English Novel: Growing Old from Dickens to Woolf*, Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture, 120 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 108–09.

[34] These figures are cited in Kay Heath, *Aging by the Book: The Emergence of Midlife in Victorian Britain* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), p. 9.

[35] John Neubauer, *The Fin-de-Siècle Culture of Adolescence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

sense of anxiety provoked by senescent decline in old age, as noted by Charise among others. Britain at the century's end was a largely gerontophobic society beset by well-publicized fears about national and personal degeneration. Allied with discourses of evolutionary decline and moral decay, fatigue and sapped vitality came to characterize the sense of social, cultural, and (by extension) individual deterioration, which was so often mapped against age(ist) narratives.[36] Elderliness equated to reduction, depletion, and exhaustion.

Zangwill's short story draws on such ageing scripts, modelled on decline and diminishment in later life. 'An Odd Life' acknowledges, established through the mother's age-anxiety which fuels her wish, that with advanced age comes physical frailty, infirmity, and reduction in status. Willy himself can only face with equanimity the indignities of becoming elderly in the knowledge of his forthcoming Lazarus-like rejuvenation. The septuagenarian experiences 'the loss of teeth, the gradual baldness, the feeble limbs [...] of [...] Second Childhood' as he approaches 'the Great Change' of his death and rebirth (p. 266). Advanced age for men in particular leads to what Kay Heath terms 'age-based emasculation', as power, status, and physical strength are all reduced (p. 13). Willy's reflections on his own ageing therefore initially seem to support conventional views about various age markers at particular points in a lifespan. The decrepit body, wrinkles, sagging skin, follically challenged pate, and jaded tastes that he possesses as an aged man gesture towards conventional negative characteristics of the later years of a long life. But he is able to overcome this presumed debilitation in his anticipated rebirth:

> Oh! The glory of growing old without dread, with the assurance that age, which is ripening you, is not ripening you for the Gleaner [...] and that every tottering step is bringing you nearer, not the Grave, but the joyous resurrection of your youth! (p. 266)

Old age is abjured as a pathology to be overcome. Nonetheless, it still possesses agency that childhood lacks in the narrative. Willy makes strategic decisions in old age about arranging his end-of-life care and financial affairs, while as an infant he is dependent on others, and subject to their diminished view of him, as when he is approached by

[36] The correlation between the fatigued social and physical body is made evident in Steffan Blayney, '"Drooping with the Century": Fatigue and the *Fin de Siècle*', in *Progress and Pathology: Medicine and Culture in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Melissa Dickson, Sally Shuttleworth, and Emilie Taylor-Brown (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), pp. 153–72.

a woman in the street who treats him unambiguously like a small child: ‘now it’s laughing, my petsy-wootsy!’, she coos at him, to his irritation (p. 267).

Re-entry into childhood, for Willy, involves both the continuation of a static self but also its disruption. He relishes the way that his outlook on the world had been reset, triumphing over the conventional alliance of ageing with increasing decline: ‘An exquisite curiosity played like a sea-breeze about my long-stagnant soul. All my early interests revived; [...] everything was shaken by the moving spirit of youth’ (p. 268). He has even relinquished his taste for fine cigars now that he is a baby, he reveals smugly. But he still retains the memories of his prior self, which suggests some continuity to anchor and inflect his fluctuating age identity. In this, however, the vigour of his rejuvenated state is tempered by a renewed fear of old age and death, as a hangover from his past life. The ‘privilege of double birth’ is also a ‘curse’, as his foreknowledge of life can enliven but also haunt this second iteration: the ‘darker side of [his] dual existence’ (p. 269), for all its new freshness of outlook, descends into a nightmare vision of a redundant future that recapitulates the onward rush into each stage of life and then death:

> I came to realise that life for me held no surprises, no lures to curiosity, that the future was no enchanted realm of mysterious possibilities [...]. Conceive the horror of foreknowledge: of having no sensations to learn and few new emotions to feel; to have, moreover, the enthusiasm of youth sicklied over with the prescience of senile cynicism, and the healthy vigour of manhood made flaccid by anticipations of the dodderings of age! I foresee the ever-growing dismay at the leaps and bounds with which my youth was fleeting. I see myself, instead of profiting by my experience, feverishly clutching at every pleasure on my path, as a drowning man, borne along by a torrent, snatches at every scrap of flotsam and jetsam. [...] I see a panic terror close upon me with every hurrying year at the knowledge that my hours were thirty minutes and my months virtually fortnights, and that I was leading the fastest life on record. (pp. 270–71)

Willy’s anticipation, his vision of what his second life would have been like, serves to illuminate the conventional journey across the life course as a privilege not to be wasted. He admits he squandered his first life, presuming himself safe in the knowledge that he could make different, better choices the second time around:

> I see myself dissipating a youth which I knew would recur, throwing away a manhood which I knew would come again, and sinking into a sensual senility which I

> knew would pass into an innocent infancy. I see myself rejecting the best gifts and the highest duties of To-Day for the illusory felicities and the far-away virtues of the Day-After-To-Morrow. (pp. 269–70)

A kind of selfishness attaches to Willy's life, in the wasteful attitude facilitated by his first life. *Carpe diem*, his tale suggests, recognizing the benefits to be found across each moment of the life course, and the pleasurable intensity discoverable in all ages even when risk rather than security coheres with ageing: each age should be relished for its own experiences and potentiality.

Helen Small has observed that 'the age we feel is not necessarily our calendrical age, nor is it the same as how we are perceived, or how we register ourselves being perceived by others'.[37] In this sense, identifying age is possible through fluid constructions reliant on fluctuating processes of interior and exterior calibration. As Mary Russo indicates too, age (especially 'the taboo category of the old', with its 'extremes and excesses') is almost always anachronistic.[38] Willy's life exacerbates this, his reflections indicate. Such multifaceted awareness of age and its implications for how age is identified and experienced (which are not the same thing) are at the forefront of Zangwill's short story. Willy's first 'practice' life does not follow normative temporal regularity in its progression: how can he feel like an old man when he has only lived to middle age? How can he be a baby when he retains all the sensibilities of senescence? Willy's life is typified by moments of absence, and temporal haste or compression, as his alternating missed years are omitted from his temporal existence while they remain an accepted part of his physiology. It is therefore a life of excessive rapidity, due to the uncanny speed of his ageing according to regularly measurable calendar time; yet it is also a life of insufficiency, due to his incomplete arc of longevity, such that this septuagenarian man has only lived to middle age and technically dies an infant. It is anachronistic. The tale of Willy Streetside therefore dramatizes the othering that ageing involves. Zangwill's story provides for the *fin de siècle* a provocative account of the alienating complexities associated with individual ageing and especially the polarization of dependent infancy and the second childhood of advanced old age. Ageing asynchronously exacerbates its inherently anachronistic qualities.

The humorous conceit of the story's playful account of ageing is highlighted by the doctor's proposed tribute for Willy's gravestone (p. 272):

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[37] Helen Small, *The Long Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 3.

[38] Mary Russo, 'Aging and the Scandal of Anachronism', in *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*, ed. by Kathleen Woodward (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 20–33 (p. 27).

HERE LIES
WILLIAM ('WILLY') STREETSIDE,
WHO LED A DOUBLE LIFE,
AND DIED IN BLAMELESS REPUTE,
AT THE AVERAGE AGE
OF 39 YEARS.
'*And in their death they were not divided.*'[39]

The biblical passage of the epitaph, taken from II Samuel 1. 23, refers to Saul and Jonathan, father and son, who died in the same war and are mourned together by King David. Reference to this particular Bible story, in conjunction with the doctor's reductively logical approach to age definition in the epitaph, facilitates multiple interpretations of Zangwill's tale. Firstly, it underscores the notion of an essential self over time, of an integral identity that produces a coherent selfhood that remains the same as a largely fixed point from childhood to senescence. The instability of Willy's fluctuating age is, in the text, mitigated by the presumed retention of what makes him who he is at the core. According to this perspective, the fundamental self remains consistent, although scholars in ageing studies have long pointed out that such an approach is problematic for its presumption of individual stasis through continuity. But the inscription also gestures towards the way that age has the ability to fracture one's sense of self, speaking to a sense of identity difference and propagation that obtains over time — a recognition that one's age possesses the fundamental capacity to impact a subjectivity that is itself already fluid.

Each of these possibilities is considered by Jan Baars in relation to life writing and the construction of narrative identity in life stories: 'on the one hand, there is continuity and a certain intimate familiarity with the person whom we have been during our lives, but on the other hand, we also become, to a certain degree, strangers to ourselves' (Baars, p. 183). In living a 'double life' Willy also experiences that same alienation, as ageing involves an inevitable othering that makes us, in some ways, unfamiliar 'strangers to ourselves'. As Helen Small proposes, 'we have multiple ways of being; we live also not merely as isolated units but caught up in, and in important ways inextricable from, other lives' (p. 106). Willy's life consists of hidden 'multiple ways of being', which his death, the doctor suggests (viewing counterfactual possibilities as fractured division rather than constructively proliferative), coalesces and thus resolves. Read in this

[39] This biblical epitaph had been more famously used in fiction by George Eliot to unite brother and sister after their death in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). Rather than indicating two figures united, in Zangwill's text it alludes to two sides of Willy's life, used — I argue — to rectify the incoherence of his ageing.

light, Willy's life — or double lives — offer the potential for other ways of being, and especially other ways of ageing, even while these are neutralized by the proposed gravestone inscription with which the doctor closes the narrative. The epicene third-person pronoun attached to Willy in the doctor's epitaph, 'In *their* death *they* were not divided', also confronts identity as multiplicity, in a suggestive move away from essentialism. Normative, linear ageing and its alternatives are at the forefront of the text, which applies a model of cyclical chronology, asynchronous duration, and an abortive potentiality across the life course.

In the Bible story of the proposed epitaph, King David has formed a covenant with Jonathan before his death and their relationship is variously held up as an example of platonic friendship, homosocial male bonding, or as suggestively homoerotic. This latter interpretation perhaps finds resonance in Zangwill's text through the secretive 'double life' of 'blameless repute' the doctor assigns to Willy: his 'odd life' privately encodes its queerness. Pursuing the homoerotics of Zangwill's story rests on the significance of Downton, Willy's manservant and chosen heir. Downton is evidently displeased at the doctor's suggested epitaph, 'glaring furiously' to insist that the unusual nature of Willy's life remain secret (p. 272). Downton's access to Willy is unparalleled, and his weeping at Willy's death implies emotional intimacy, all of which supports such a reading of the text's homoerotic potential. Described as 'the strange, silent serving-man' who is 'the only other occupant of the luxurious and artistically furnished flat' where Willy resides, Downton is the 'faithful body-servant' who performs all the necessary care for Willy in both his vulnerable old age and his infancy, facilitating his master's transformation in the exotic Orient, and standing as the acknowledged heir to Willy's estate (pp. 259, 266).

However, Willy's queerness extends beyond any clues about just his sexual identity, centring instead the morphology of his age identity. Recognizing the significance of queer temporalities, numerous critics envisage queerness as a politicized 'resistance to normativity' revealing a valuation of 'alternative lives', and deprivileging reproduction.[40] Judith Halberstam encourages 'queerness as an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices', thereby decoupling queer from sexual identity alone, enabling those reference points of 'nonnormative logic and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time' that collectively signify Willy's own queer ageing (*In a Queer Time*,

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[40] Jane Gallop, *Sexuality, Disability and Aging: Queer Temporalities of the Phallus* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), p. 7.

pp. 12, 20). Heather Love has also identified an impulse to backwardness as queer, an impulse to which Willy's regressive cyclicality gestures.[41] Disordered temporalities are also constituted queer according to Elizabeth Freeman's suggestive analysis of modes of resistance to chrono-normative patterns. These can involve the 'derangement of bodies and sequences' that Willy himself exemplifies as an outlaw from systematic age and time.[42] Willy therefore represents what Halberstam terms 'lives lived otherwise'.[43] The counterfactual possibilities of his life, his residence within multiply signifying age brackets, and his ultimate resistance to normative, reproductive, future-oriented patterns, all indicate that the protagonist operates within a queer temporality.

These elements underpin the queerness of Zangwill's text. Willy functions beyond normative temporalities in his defamiliarized corporeality and asynchronously experienced existence as an ageing individual. His queerness also emerges, according to Halberstam's formulation, as Willy is positioned 'outside of the conventional narratives of family and reproduction'; he is akin instead to those figures who, at the *fin de siècle*, were perceived by many as disruptive and resistant to 'conventional narratives' of stability and progress (positions that might be aligned with the homosexual or even the New Woman in the period), rather than operating from within a normative familial, reproductive structure ('What's That Smell?', p. 2). As such, although Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* articulates his theory more fully in relation to a later cultural and temporal moment, Zangwill's late nineteenth-century protagonist may nonetheless be considered through Edelman's critical lens, which critiques conventional society's compulsory futurism and its adoption of a reproductive imperative. According to this ideological apparatus, which Edelman suggests is the result of a long heritage, the child becomes the privileged symbol of a heteronormative future, while queerness figures as its radical disruption and refusal. In Zangwill's turn of the century narrative, Willy is a curious subject in relation to the 'Ponzi scheme of reproductive futurism' that Edelman sardonically identifies (p. 4).

This is because Zangwill's story certainly avoids the mid-Victorian reproductive, future-oriented mandate that still lingers at the *fin de siècle*. Firstly, although Willy operates from a privileged financial position through his own personal wealth, he is otherwise disconnected from the matrix of chrono-normative structures and institutions that Cynthia Port identifies as the province of the elderly, drawing on

[41] Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

[42] Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 3.

[43] Judith Halberstam, 'What's That Smell?: Queer Temporalities and Subcultural Lives', *Scholar and Feminist Online*, 2.1 (2003), 1–9 (p. 2).

Roderick Ferguson's identification of this group who are situated 'outside the rational time of capital, nation, and family'.[44] Willy's only familial avatar is the enigmatic Downton, which might suggest a non-normative kinship structure as Downton could stand in as father (in the provision of care and guardianship), partner, or son (as the beneficiary of Willy's life assurance policy). Bachelor Willy also resists the trammels of reproductive futurity, as he reveals 'I missed marriage; it probably fell in an even year' (p. 269). Any interactions with women, except his deceased mother, are limited and couched largely in terms of disgust (Willy laughs at the woman who tries to coddle him as a baby, and refuses to hire a nursemaid: possessing adult sexual consciousness but placed within his child's body, the idea of breastfeeding presents a heteronormative maternal proposition that Willy refuses to confront). Not only does Willy not subscribe to the heteronormative conditions of marriage and reproduction, but his own rebirth could even be considered a form of non-reproductive parthenogenesis, while his second childhood is also symbolically redundant in its emphatic rejection of futurity. Even in youth, he fails to embody the future-oriented, symbolic child that Edelman identifies, as his infancy presages his death.

Willy's national identity also resides in a lacuna of uncertainty; born a British boy, he is mystically reborn in the 'African deserts', having 'retired to Egypt' to effect his death and rebirth away from society's eyes (p. 266). The African continent facilitates the deceit practised on British society, as Willy reinvents himself as a different person under the pseudonym of Streetside rather than trying to '[pass] as my own child' (p. 266). His transition from old age to infancy is shrouded in mystery, as the occult process is effected in the wilds of an Egyptian desert. Zangwill's choice of setting nods to the contemporary fascination with Egypt as a site of ancient civilization which was popularly repurposed as an orientalized threat in tales of Gothic horror. This was complicated by 'the Egyptian Question' in British foreign policy, but nonetheless it was established as a popular trope in Gothic fictions at the time Zangwill was writing, many of which variously drew on mummies, sacred cults, and ancient deities brought back to life. These were all focused through the threat of corruption represented by alien Egyptian culture in their lurid tales (e.g. in Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* (1897), 'Lot No. 249' by Arthur Conan Doyle (1892), or Bram Stoker's *The Jewel of Seven Stars* (1903)). The protagonist of Zangwill's tale gestures towards the occult Egyptian other through his rebirth in an exoticized, foreign nation. Combined with his idiosyncratic financial

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[44] Roderick Ferguson, in Carolyn Dinshaw and others, 'Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion', *GLQ*, 13 (2007), 177–95 (p. 180), cited in Port, p. 5.

and (non)-reproductive positions, he is therefore queerly placed beyond the ‘rational time of capital, nation, and family’ identified by Cynthia Port.

However, Willy’s threat to conventional temporal logic is, at least in part, potentially neutralized by the final lines of Zangwill’s text. A representative of the medical establishment and of mainstream respectability in Victorian British society, the doctor proposes the gravestone inscription with which the narrative ends, and in so doing he also limits the disruptive potential of Willy’s subversive ageing. It is he who confirms the death by writing the certificate after Willy dies and the patient’s voice is suddenly cut off midway through speaking; it is he who inscribes the patient’s life within the conventional mechanisms of public record. Willy’s ‘Odd Life’ becomes just an anecdote for the doctor to recall, and transgression is nullified. Nonetheless, Willy is still rendered a ‘queer subject’ in the way that his life operates outside of the heteronormative cultural imperative in several ways. His stance is non-reproductive, non-familial, and while we might see him as inhabiting a ‘stretched-out adolescence’ (to use Halberstam’s term) in his refusal to accommodate the trammels of conventional maturity, he is also always an aged man, as well. As such, Willy is queerly old in his equivocal status as ‘child-man’, as he embodies the paradoxes of ageing.[45] In this tale he stands for the potentiality of resistance to restrictive age ideologies at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Conclusion

Many of Zangwill’s comic narratives result in an inevitable return to the established social hierarchies of order. Marriages and deaths provide the structural narrative climax in *The Celibates’ Club*, ‘The Grey Wig’, and ‘The Memory Clearing House’, and the threatening instability of Willy Streetside’s odd life is at least partially neutralized by the doctor’s proposed epitaph. However, the radical possibilities in Zangwill’s disruption of normativity in these short stories nonetheless offers a key to thinking about the limitations and restrictions late Victorian culture placed on ageing. By imagining fantasies of unconventional ageing, Zangwill draws attention to the impact of age on identity. He does so by comically isolating age as the most significant facet of subjective selfhood, freighted with the weight of cultural expectation that aligns with

[45] Halberstam observes that ‘the notion of a stretched-out adolescence, for example, challenges the conventional binary formulation of a life narrative divided by a clear break between youth and adulthood; this life narrative charts an obvious transition out of childish dependency through marriage and into adult responsibility through reproduction’ (*In a Queer Time*, p. 266). The term ‘child-man’ is used in Claudia Nelson’s literary analysis of nineteenth-century literature that also figures characters whose chronological age is dismantled in her book *Precocious Children and Childish Adults: Age Inversion in Victorian Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

late-life decline ideologies. His fiction highlights the complexity of age and provokes reflection on how ageing at the *fin de siècle* may be calculated, defined, recognized, and performed. The texts collectively are an indictment of ageist attitudes in the late nineteenth century, revealing tensions at work in the matrix of dominant cultural scripts for old age in particular. Late life, his fiction suggests, can subvert gerontophobic cultural tendencies by offering possibilities beyond fatigue, decline, and the presumed stagnation of old age at the century's end.

In 'An Odd Life' especially, Willy Streetside's idiosyncratic ageing — anachronistically excessive and yet also symbolized by inadequacy — stands in for the problem of thinking about old age and ageing at the *fin de siècle*. Willy's age inversion results in the logical structure of linear progress becoming fragmented through phantom replication, as the second part of his double life is never realized. This fragmentation, and the moments of hiatus or acceleration his life exhibit, force the reader to re-evaluate what it means to age 'naturally', and so to challenge categorization of the neat age-as-stages model of the life cycle. Despite its reductive tendencies and flippant style — both stylistic qualities of Zangwill's brand of New Humour — the story of 'An Odd Life' therefore poses thought-provoking questions about the meaning of age. The lacunae of time which facilitate Willy's progenesis or accelerated development correlate with the other, elective 'gaps' which Willy experiences, such as his deferral of participation in heteronormative, future-oriented institutions like marriage and reproduction. Willy also embodies multiple stages of life simultaneously, subverting linear scripts about progressive stages of the life course: occupying only half a lifespan, he nonetheless inhabits an 'odd' double life. Zangwill's story therefore identifies in this particular protagonist several types of hetero- and chrono-normative resistance, which resonate with his playful iterations of non-normative ageing elsewhere in his short fiction. These alternative ways of ageing and of inhabiting temporal duration within the lifespan are, I propose in this article, also ways of ageing queerly.