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The adventure of aging: Rethinking our metaphors for later life

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ABSTRACT

For many of us, aging can be viewed and experienced in what are implicitly tragic terms: in other words, as a narrative of decline, as a downward trajectory toward decrepitude and death. Such a way of "storying" later life can set us up for (among other things) narrative foreclosure, which may feed the mild-to-moderate depression to which we are susceptible in the face of aging's challenges and changes. This paper offers a more positive narrative of later life. Borrowing ideas from narrative gerontology and narrative psychology, it outlines how aging can be "re-genre-ated" from tragedy to adventure in at least four intersecting directions: outward, backward, inward, and forward.

The metaphor of aging as adventure

From time to time, we all tend to relish a bit of adventure to spice up our lives, whether it be para-gliding off a cliff, taking an impromptu road trip, scouting for love online, or flying from Toronto to Athens, like I did two days ago, to deliver this paper! Major or minor, direct or vicarious, intentional or accidental, adventures—which I'll "define" here very simply as experiences that take us outside our comfort zones into new territory (physical, interpersonal, professional, existential, etc.)—are critical, it's been argued, to a robust sense of personal identity (Scheibe, 1986). But the concept of aging itself as an adventure could seem a contradiction in terms, not to mention a naïve, even self-indulgent, perspective to entertain in a world as fraught with suffering as our own is today.

Let me confess straightaway that I'm not a therapist myself, though for years I coordinated a course called *Counselling Older Adults* for undergraduate students at my home university. People that young (and possibly some therapists too) may believe that older adults are simply too old and their issues too entrenched to benefit from counselling of any kind, and that it's, frankly, depressing to work with them. But what I stressed to my students is that older adults can in fact be quite fascinating to work with. Not only may they have rich stories to tell us but, if we are willing to listen to their stories carefully, we can have a therapeutic effect upon them simply by listening, by practicing what can be referred to as "narrative care" (see, e.g., Randall, 2012b, 2016, 2020b; Kenyon & Randall, 2015).

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And because older adults have that many more memories to reflect on, plus a typically greater openness anyway to symbol and metaphor, a capacity known as "post-formal thought" (Cohen, 2005, p. 36f), then a metaphor or image that emerges in the course of our conversations with them could, adeptly deployed, invite them to *re*-story their whole way of looking at life (see, e.g., Killick et al., 2016). What I'm proposing here is that the metaphor of life-as-story, which has been referred to as a "root metaphor" (Sarbin, 1986), can accomplish just that—partly because it implicitly invites us to extend it and to think of the story of aging as one of *adventure*. It's thus a metaphor we can not only live by (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) but age by too. And so, I offer it as my modest contribution to the positive psychology of aging and as a conceptual tool to use when counselling clients in the second half of life. First, though, let me say something about narrative gerontology.

Narrative Gerontology

Drawing on ideas from narrative psychology, narrative therapy, and (in my own case) narrative theology, narrative gerontology focuses on the *biographical* (or auto-biographical) aspects of aging as opposed to its biological aspects, or on what happens to our bodies (Birren et al, 1996; Ruth & Kenyon, 1996). It focuses on how human beings are *hermeneutical* beings, how we are makers of meaning, and how one of our main means of making it is by making up stories, big and little, long and short, about events, about our relationships, about our life as a whole. Overall, it focuses on the inside as opposed to the outside of aging, on its literary or "poetic" dimensions (Randall & McKim, 2008).

As Greek readers will appreciate, rooted in a land that is steeped in legend and myth, we are "the story species" (Gold, 2002). We experience our lives—our sense of identity or our self—as stories that are continually evolving, stories we not only have but are (Randall, 2014), stories we're in the midst of composing as author (or at least co-author), narrator, protagonist, editor, and reader more or less at once. Narrative gerontology focuses on how these self-stories—these "believed-in imaginings" (Sarbin, 1998), these guiding fictions (see Adler, 1922)—change over time, and the impact of that change on our mental and emotional well-being. It looks, too, at the storyline—or the script—that we subscribe to, mostly unwittingly, about Aging itself.

Gerontology in general, it can be claimed, is dominated by a biomedical model which, with the best of intentions, pathologizes aging as a problem (physical, fiscal, societal) to be solved, as a fate to be defied with all manner of "anti-aging" products. *Narrative* gerontology, however, offers a different starting-point for exploring the internal complexities of later life, or its "biographicity" (Alheit, 1995, p. 65). Rather than defaulting to a vision of aging as a narrative of "decline" (Gullette, 1997)—which many older adults unconsciously internalize, as do some therapists—narrative gerontology views aging in a more optimistic light. It views aging as a stage that abounds with its own brand of purpose, meaning, and wisdom (Randall & Kenyon, 2001). It views aging, on the inside at least, as a process of *growing* old and not just—passively and resignedly—getting old. It views aging as a narrative of discovery and not merely decline.

Unquestionably, aging has its negative dimensions (disability, disease, and dementia, to name but a few). However, a narrative gerontology views aging in general as not a Tragedy but as, just possibly, an Adventure, part of the adventure of life as a whole. In the words of the advertising slogan used by the retirement home where my mother resided until she died at 102, "Aging Means Endless Possibilities".

Admittedly, I use terms like Tragedy and Adventure rather broadly, for each is a complex genre in its own right. For instance, tragedy in the classic sense tends to have a redemptive dimension. In the course of their demise, protagonists often waken to some profound moral principle to which their hubris had rendered them blind. In that sense, things turn out not quite so tragically after all. By the same token, any adventure worthy

of the word entails risk and uncertainty, challenge and danger, and the possibility at any point of outright failure, of things turning into a "mis-adventure" or "tragic adventure" instead. Otherwise, however, it's not an adventure at all but merely a commute, like driving to work in the morning or going to the store to buy a loaf of bread.

Narrative foreclosure

The narrative of decline about aging exerts a powerful influence in many modern cultures. If we're not careful, we can absorb it into our psyches where it can exacerbate the many challenges that come anyway with later life. I'm referring as well to the *narrative* challenges that can underlie the medical ones which aging, sooner or later, brings with it (Randall, 2020b, p. 448). These include: "narrative loss" (Baldwin et al, 2015a, 2015b), "narrative dispossession" (Baldwin, 2006), and, so to speak, "narrative imprisonment," where the therapist's task is to help clients break free, for example, from the regret, anxiety, or guilt in which they're confined. But let me focus on the challenge of "narrative foreclosure" (Freeman, 2000; Bohlmeijer et al., 2011).

To be narratively foreclosed is to be convinced that our *story* has essentially ended, that no new chapters are apt to open up, no new events will take the plot in new directions. While our *life* itself keeps chugging along (we go on walking, talking, eating, breathing), our "story" is essentially over, or if it isn't, then we feel more like we're the victim in it than we are its heroine or hero (see Rogers et al., 2023). We can also be said, though, to be narratively foreclosed when--as with celebrities or politicians (presidents even!) for whom image and ego are everything—we are stuck in a storyline so seductive and strong that it closes us to other possibilities for being who we are. We become, as the saying goes, "a legend in our own mind," a legend hard to relinquish.

The point is: we can be narratively foreclosed at any age. When you're fifteen and your boyfriend or girlfriend bids you goodbye, you can suffer an excruciating case of it, and hurling yourself into the Aegean seems a reasonable thing to do. Why go on?! The story—of the two of you living happily ever after—will not come true! Or a cancer diagnosis at age 25 can have a similarly foreclosing effect. With our mortality staring us starkly in the face, our story can feel all but finished. But with the accumulation of losses that it typically entails, later life, I fear, can render us especially susceptible to this condition. It makes us susceptible as well to the depression we might be diagnosed with and the pills we're accordingly prescribed, when a dose of narrative care might work equally well.

Here's how it happens … We retire from the career that defined our identity and our self-story loses an important source of support. Our children and grandchildren move away, and our story-world shrinks even more. Our life-partner dies or develops dementia and takes with them our *raison d'etre*. Our vision and hearing, mobility and autonomy, become increasingly limited, until we need to be moved to a nursing home where our world is reduced to a single room. Though our life itself keeps going along, "the story" is all but over. Intensifying our sense of loss is, of course, the master narrative of decline that permeates our culture and, if we're not careful, penetrates our hearts. But again, it's not the only narrative available. Our stories, our guiding fictions, our personal myths, are scarcely cast in stone. We get to choose the narratives by which we age. And the key, you could say, is to keep ourselves narratively open, rather than foreclosed.

Alternative narratives of later life

In *The Wounded Storyteller*, sociologist Arthur Frank (1995) reflects on his time in hospital as a cancer patient. He identifies three broad narratives by which people in such situations—old or young--can "story" their experience: First is the *restitution narrative*, where you think "this too shall pass; I'll be back to normal in no

time". Second is the *chaos narrative,* where the doctor says you have only months to live and your life story is thrown into a state of confusion from which you might never recover. Third is the *quest narrative*, where you interpret your illness, however serious it is, as an opportunity to grow and to learn, to live your life on a deeper, more soulful level.

We can enlist Frank's typology to interpret aging itself in these same broad ways. The restitution narrative goes like this: "If only I do more Sudoku puzzles, go to Pilates more, and drink less tsipouro, I will extend my life … indefinitely." Such a storyline fuels the ideal of "successful aging" that is frequently, if unfairly, espoused (Rowe & Kahn, 1998; Baltes & Baltes, 1990). I say unfairly because it implies that we can *fail* at aging! Then there is the chaos narrative: "I'm old; I can no longer do X, Y, and Z, so my life is basically over." This narrative can fuel the depression, if not despair, to which, as I say, many older adults—especially men perhaps—can silently succumb. It's a recipe for narrative foreclosure.

Third is the quest narrative: "True, I can no longer do X, Y, and Z, but this is just one more chapter in my story. And there's something new to be learned and seen in it that I couldn't learn or see before. This is new territory with new horizons." This narrative underlies the bias toward "positivity" (Carstensen & Mikels, 2005) which many older adults will exude, despite—and possibly *because* of--the troubles that they've seen. I think of the high proportion of centenarians in the "Blue Zone" of Ikaria (Beuttner, 2008). It's as if—as Wise Elders perhaps—they've transformed their troubles into a good strong story (Randall, 2013; 2012a), a resilient, open-ended narrative, a narrative of adventure.

Aging as adventure

Aging as *adventure* … while this is clearly not the whole story of later life, it deserves consideration. In fact, I've spent the last three years giving it such consideration to where I have in excess of three hundred pages of single-spaced, typewritten notes that I'm aiming to work into a book. So far, I've organized these notes around four main directions: *outward*, *backward*, *inward*, and *forward* (Randall, 2022a, 2023a). I see these directions, though, as intertwined. Movement in one is eventually movement in another. Also, movement in certain directions may come more naturally for some individuals than for others; for instance, people high on particular personality traits like openness to experience, extraversion, or (in the case of the adventure inward) introversion. By this I mean people who operate out of a "growth narrative" and are drawn to "eudaimonic well-being", as opposed to having a "security narrative" and being drawn to "hedonic well-being" (Bauer & Park, 2010); in other words, people for whom later life is a time not for taking risks but for avoiding them, for remaining in their comfort zones and playing it safe.

The adventure outward: Widening our worlds

Depending obviously upon our finances and our health, aging can usher us into a stage of life where we embark on all sorts of new activities and endeavours. Once we've retired—assuming "retirement" is a possibility, since for many nowadays it isn't—this can mean, if not para-gliding, then learning another language; taking up painting or pickle ball; going on that long-dreamed-of cruise to Patagonia; or doing any number of things that we've added to our "bucket list." In the process, we can become acquainted with sides of ourselves that, hitherto, we barely knew existed, and thicken the plot of our lives in ways that were impossible amid the hectic mid-years of our lives.

With each such outward venture, we open up new subplots, welcome new characters, and weave new themes into the stories that we are. Our horizon keeps widening, including our horizon of self-understanding. In other words, aging as an outward adventure, though that's what we might instinctively associate with the idea of aging as *adventure*, especially in so-called "young old age," is merely the tip of the iceberg.

The adventure backward: Probing our pasts

By the adventure backward, I mean examining our past, or at least—given the capriciousness of memory—the comparatively few stories by which in fact we *remember* our past. These in turn, though, can be countless in number. At the same time, the "past" is continually changing inside of us. It is "never static," writes the poet May Sarton (1977), "never 'placed' forever like a book on a shelf" (p. 231). For we inevitably look at the past through the lens of the present in light of whatever futures we may hope for or fear, and both—experienced present and anticipated future—are themselves forever changing. What I'm talking about is the process of *life review*.

For Erik Erikson (1963), this is a critical task in the eighth and final stage of his iconic scheme of identity development. It is key to achieving some measure of "ego integrity" and it is, quintessentially, a narrative task. I call it *the autobiographical adventure*. Like any adventure deserving of that word, however, it is characterized by both revelation and risk, both gain and pain, both promise and peril (Freeman, 2010). It's also an adventure that presents itself to us naturally, of course, to the degree that time-past becomes more compelling for us to contemplate than time-future. And there are countless strategies we can use in doing so, from writing a memoir to reminiscing with friends to researching our family genealogy—so many strategies that it calls for a whole other paper to properly acknowledge them (see, e.g., Bohlmeijer & Westerhof, 2011).

But the adventure backward is said by some to be prompted by changes in our brains themselves, such as improved cooperation between left and right hemispheres, plus—and this is connected to the idea of post-formal thought that I mentioned earlier—increased tolerance for, and indeed openness to, paradox and contradiction, ambiguity and uncertainty, metaphor and symbol. All of this, it's been suggested, intensifies "the autobiographical drive" (Cohen, 2005, p. 23).

Responding to that drive with the aid of a trained listener, there are discoveries for me to make, patterns for me to discern, dark corners to investigate, traumas and regrets to acknowledge, and overall, pieces of the puzzle of my life to try and put together. But as I process my past, as I ponder the mystery in my story, I might well find that I've gotten the story wrong, that the past wasn't as horrible as I'd assumed. In the words of psychiatrist, Ben Furman (1998), "It's never too late to have a happy childhood." On the other hand, I might find themes and issues lurking inside me that I haven't previously addressed, let alone acknowledged.

The adventure inward: Discovering our depths

The adventure backward is, eventually, the adventure inward. As a kind of "natural monastery" (Moody, 1995, p. 96) or, if you like, a *pilgrim-age*, later life invites us to undertake an internal exploration into the intricate mixture of memories and emotions—melancholy, regret, nostalgia, and the like--that swirl around inside of us. Later life allows us time to tackle the "philosophic homework of later life" (Randall, 2022b), something that can be difficult to do in the outward-oriented, youth-obsessed culture within which we live. To cite the phrase inscribed on the Temple of Apollo, it is not easy—perhaps never has been easy—to "know thyself."

Nonetheless, "for the ageing person it is a duty and a necessity," insists Carl Jung (1976), to "devote serious attention to himself" (p. 17). In other words, it is a duty to turn inward. "The longest journey," echoes Dag Hammerskjöld (1964), former Secretary-General of the UN and himself a closet mystic, "is the journey inward" (p. 48). Longest, often loneliest, and potentially most painful, as we look honestly at the good, the bad, and the ugly within our own nature. However, as we face our inner conflicts and contradictions, our dark sides and demons, our unlived lives and "lost possible selves" (King & Mitchell, 2015); as we move from Ego to Psyche and endeavour to "possess all that [we] have been and done", to quote Jungian analyst Florida Scott-Maxwell (1968), writing in her 80s, we may stand to become "fierce with reality" (p. 40).

The adventure forward: Facing our futures

This is the most controversial direction to consider, so I present it here as an option only. In what kind of universe, we are justified in asking, does aging as adventure *forward* make any sense at all!? *We're born, we suffer, we die*: That's it! What, possibly, is there to look forward *to*?!

Here is Scott-Maxwell (1968) again, alluding to the elephant in the room where discussions of aging are concerned, namely the subject of death: "We are people," she writes, referring to fellow octogenarians, "to whom something important is about to happen … All is uncharted and uncertain, we seem to lead the way into the unknown" (p. 139). ["Uncharted", "uncertain" and "unknown"—these are quintessentially adventure words!] In her little book (her journal actually) entitled *The Measure of My Days*, she has this to say as well: "I remember that in the last months of my pregnancies the child seemed to claim almost all my body, my strength, my breath, and I held on wondering if my burden was my enemy, uncertain as to whether my life was at all mine. Is life a pregnancy?" she inquires rhetorically, to which she replies "That would make death a birth." (p. 76).

To speak of the adventure forward, like the adventure inward, means looking eventually, then, at the links between aging and "spirituality," broadly defined. I did this a few years ago in a public lecture at my university in which, intrigued by the problematic nature of "endings" in narrative generally (Miller, 1978), by what science writer Danah Zohar (1991) calls "quantum immortality" (pp. 123-135), and by research into so-called "near-death experiences" (or NDEs), such as Jung himself (1963, pp. 289-96) claimed to have had, I stressed that aging is, in more ways than the obvious one, a near-*ing* death experience (Randall, 2020a, 2023d).

In several books, including *Consciousness Beyond Life: The Science of the Near Death Experience* by Dutch cardiologist, Pim van Lommel (2007), whose research on the subject has been published in no less prestigious a journal than *The Lancet* (van Lommel et al, 2001), various common elements are identified in what NDE'rs report, regardless of their culture, gender, or age--or for that matter their religion, if they have one. Besides a panoramic look at one's life that is more intense and more simultaneous than Erikson's life review, these include: a feeling of being loved and accepted, unconditionally; an awareness of the interconnectedness of all things and all life; and an enlarged sense of Time and Reality. Among the after-effects of this life-transforming experience are a decreased attachment to material possessions; an increased capacity for psychic intuition; a heightened awareness of meaningful coincidences, or synchronicities; a nostalgic sense that this world, real as it is, is not our *real* home; and an insatiable hunger for knowledge and learning (see also Greyson, 2021). "Live as if you were going to die tomorrow," advises Mahatma Ghandi, echoing this insight; "but learn as if you were going to live forever."

Above all, there is a significant reduction in one's fear of death. Death is perceived as transition, not termination, as "crossing the bar", to quote Tennyson (1889), as "crossing the threshold", to paraphrase Socrates (Plato, 1953, p. 62f); as a doorway into what neuropsychiatrist, Peter Fenwick, a key UK figure in NDE research, calls "the last great adventure"(Fenwick, 2013; Fenwick & Fenwick, 2008)—the very view which, in some form or other, the world's great spiritual traditions have long maintained, although a view which materialist-reductionist approaches to science tend to rule out as … impossible.

Recently, I was asked to write an article on the theme of "soulful aging" (Randall, 2023c). In it, I pondered how aging has so far been for me a matter of going slower, deeper, and wider into the landscape of later life. By *wider*, I mean a broader horizon of understanding—a bigger story, as it were—that moves discussions of aging and dying out of the biomedical context where they so often end up, and situates them within the multi-dimensional mystery of the cosmos itself. Admittedly, this opens a Pandora's Box of topics such as psychic

phenomena, extra-sensory perception, parallel universes, and the like. By the same token, it calls for a more expansive brand of Science itself (see Sheldrake, 2013), and not just a *narrative* gerontology but a *cosmo*-gerontology as well.

Psychologist Mark Freeman (n. d.) has written about "the transcendent horizon of the life story" (Randall, 2023d), a theme which theorists of "gerotanscendence" (Tornstam, 1997) and "transpersonal gerontology" (see, e.g., Wacks, 2011) are, understandably, open to entertaining. It is a theme that Scott-Maxwell (1968) also points to with her musings on life as pregnancy and death as birth. And it is a theme which the paleontologist-priest, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1964), alludes to with his cryptic phrase, "the hidden mystery in the womb of death" (p. 107).

Assuming there is something to such language besides fanciful metaphor or wishful thinking, then it may be said to constitute a Copernican revolution in our understanding of later life. It amounts to a paradigm shift in our thinking about aging, a shift from tragedy to adventure. It's possible, in other words, that we have the whole story of aging wrong. To the extent this is the case, then the perspective I'm proposing here can help to turn things around.

Where to from here?

These are still early days in what has become for me an odyssey of ideas. What I've shared here is the sketch of a much larger project (Randall 2022, 2023a, 2023b). And who knows where it will lead? I'm certainly discovering many questions in the course of my quest. Among them is this: "where is the *adventure* in *dementia*?!"

For many, the matter of dementia puts the lie to all talk of aging as possessing positive possibilities. I wonder, though, if rather than the unmitigated tragedy we assume it must be, dementia is ultimately just consciousness of a different kind--not inferior, just different. At the risk of making light of the suffering it can entail for loved ones looking on, it conceivably aids in the process of "unselfing" that, according to the theory of gerotranscendence, becomes natural, if not essential, the closer we approach death. This is a possibility that Freeman (2008), for one, has cautiously raised in his reflections on what he calls "dementia's tragic promise". In a touching memoir about his relationship with his mother during her journey into the land of dementia, he has this to say: "Unintentional and uncultivated though my mother's unselfing was, the effects of the process were in some ways akin to those attained through more intentional and practiced means"—e.g., via mindfulness and meditation practices. "The inner critic is largely gone. The 'monkey-mind' … may be in abeyance too, leaving one to be more fully present to the world than is ordinarily possible … one may be so readily and fully 'in the moment' that every moment is as new and engaging and, in some sense, *surprising* as the last" (Freeman, 2022, p. 127f).

In any case, my efforts to argue that aging in general can be seen as an adventure may prove to be a wild goose chase, as we say in Canada. We'll see … But is this not the mark of a genuine "adventure"? We set forth, like Odysseus of old, with no clear knowledge of where we'll end up. Amid the twists and turns, surprises and setbacks, with which we must contend along the way, we don't know—*can't* know—how things will turn out. Yet we continue all the same, with courage and curiosity, openness and hope.

The metaphor of aging as *adventure* will of course not be everyone's cup of tea, nor will it be every clinician's (Randall, 2023b). But for those readers who are counsellors of older adults—and, coincidentally, are aging yourselves—who are agents of "restorying" (Kenyon & Randall, 1997) in older people's lives, who are "story companions" (Scheib, 2016, pp. 61-77) as they navigate the churning inner currents of later life—whether or not you buy into the metaphor yourself, you might find that they are open to considering it. If so,

then questions to assist them in doing so could include: How has aging been for you—or might it become—an adventure *outward*? An adventure *backward*? An adventure *inward*? An adventure *forward*?

Ethically, of course, you might fear that you are giving your clients false hope, inviting them to play with a vision of reality that is ultimately an illusion. But what, I ask, do we know with absolute certainty about the cosmic context of our existence? If the metaphor of aging as adventure—outward, backward, inward, and maybe even forward too—enables them to feel more at home in the universe, if it enhances their sense of agency and meaning amid the challenging realities of their lives, if it provides them with a more invigorating narrative for envisioning their own aging journey, then what, I wonder, do we have to lose?

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ΒΙΒΛΙΟΓΡΑΦΙΚΗ ΑΝΑΣΚΟΠΗΣΗ | REVIEW PAPER

Η περιπέτεια της γήρανσης: Αναθεωρώντας τις μεταφορές μας για την ύστερη ενήλικη ζωή

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ΛΕΞΕΙΣ ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ

Γήρανση
Αφήγηση
Συμβουλευτική
Ηλικιωμένοι
Μεταφορά
Περιπέτεια

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ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Για πολλούς από εμάς, η γήρανση μπορεί να ιδωθεί και να βιωθεί μέσα από όρους που υποδηλώνουν σιωπηρά τραγικότητα: δηλαδή ως μια αφήγηση παρακμής, ως μια καθοδική πορεία προς τη φθορά και τον θάνατο. Ένας τέτοιος τρόπος αφήγησης της μεταγενέστερης ζωής μπορεί να μας οδηγήσει (μεταξύ άλλων) σε πρόωρη αφηγηματική λήξη, η οποία ενδέχεται να τροφοδοτήσει την ήπια έως μέτρια κατάθλιψη στην οποία είμαστε ευάλωτοι μπροστά στις προκλήσεις και τις αλλαγές της γήρανσης. Το παρόν άρθρο προτείνει μια πιο θετική αφήγηση για τη μεταγενέστερη ζωή. Αντλώντας ιδέες από την αφηγηματική γεροντολογία και την αφηγηματική ψυχολογία, περιγράφει πώς η γήρανση μπορεί να επαναπροσδιοριστεί ως προς το αφηγηματικό είδος από τραγωδία σε περιπέτεια, τουλάχιστον προς τέσσερις αλληλοδιαπλεκόμενες κατευθύνσεις: προς τα έξω, προς τα πίσω, προς τα μέσα και προς τα εμπρός.

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