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The image of old age in selected cultural texts – an analysis of middle school textbooks for Polish classes¹

Streszczenie

Prezentowany tekst dotyczy obrazu starości w podręcznikach gimnazjalnych w zakresie kształcenia literacko-kulturowego. Wyodrębnione zostały na trzy obszary opisu: fizyczny, psychiczny, duchowy.

Słowa kluczowe:

starość, podręcznik, gimnazjum, teksty kultury

Abstract

The presented text concerns the image of old age in middle school textbooks for literary and cultural education. It is separated into three areas of description: physical, mental, and spiritual.

Key words:

old age, textbook, middle school, cultural texts

A student's work with his/her schoolbook is one of the most important ways of knowledge acquisition and consolidation. The main role of a textbook is its informative function which provides a student with information designated by the teaching programme. It also stimulates the learning process. A schoolbook may be a certain kind of a guide in a student's exploration of the world.

It's also worth mentioning that Polish language lessons do not only fall under the scope of subject education. The new assignments of Polish language education in middle school were clearly incorporated in new textbooks for Polish language teaching. Their purpose is not only literary or linguistic education but also cultural education of pupils. Polish language classes are therefore an important area of creation of life attitudes and value systems, as well as the implementation of the rules of social life (Podemska-Kałuża 2010: 255).

The knowledge of culture should help young people in better understanding of its various manifestations. According to Anna Janus-Sitarz, "teaching openness towards

¹ This Article is based on research carried out in the framework of the thesis titled *The Image of old age in middle school textbooks for literary and cultural education* written at the Institute of Education at University of Szczecin under the direction of Dr. Lidia Marek. The analysis was performed on 25 middle school textbooks for literary-cultural education of classes 1-3 of middle school. The list of the analyzed textbooks is located in the bibliography.

different conventions in art is over time likely to result in an attitude of openness towards others” (Janus-Sitarz 2004: 10). The image of old age that emerges from various cultural texts represented in middle school textbooks is an example of attitudes towards old age and its problems.

The described portrayal of old age can be broken down into three spheres: physical, mental and spiritual. The breakdown into the three indicated description fields of old age results from the characteristics of the aging process. Each of the separate areas draws attention to specific problems of old age:

- texts on the image of physical ageing refer to the experience of physical degradation of the body, often associated with disease and deteriorating of well-being,
- reflections on the portrayal of old age connected with the mental sphere of human life relate to characteristics, skills and intellectual and emotional competence,
- the last area concerns the image of old age in the spiritual realm, which refers to moral and religious values; this sphere is often accompanied by reflections on the meaning of life and death.

Holding on to the breakdown into the three separate spheres of description, it is worth noting that the features of physical, mental and spiritual sphere could usually be extracted from individual texts. The texts described below have been selected in order to show the rich diversity of aspects and complexity of this issue. Let us look then at the content of school textbooks, bearing in mind the following question: What is the picture of old age portrayed in middle school textbooks?

1. The image of old age in the physical sphere

The image of old age in the physical sphere emerging from texts of middle school textbooks is diverse. It relates primarily to the appearance of an old man. We can find the image of an old father in Rembrandt’s picture *Return of the Prodigal Son* [SnCz, class 1, p. 17]². Both the picture and the biblical parable create the image of an old father as caring, experienced, wise and gracious, and forgiving (white hair and a beard constituting a metaphor for these features).

Stereotypically gray hair, a long beard, and wrinkles are associated with wisdom and experience. The stereotype is challenged in the satire of Ignatius Krasicki *To the King* [Mn, class 3, p. 108–109]:

*because gray hair possesses talents,
because in wrinkles lives the mind, and where the beard is gray,
all perfection must exist.*³

² In brackets I give abbreviated titles of the textbooks and a description of the corresponding sources in the bibliography.

³ Own translation, original version:

Wszak siwizna zwyczajnie talenta posiada,

The author, by using irony, insinuates that in fact old age with its physical symptoms does not bear any special advantages. The wisdom and dignity were imputed as top-down, creating a stereotypical image of old age. However we must remember that stereotyping is an unauthorized, logical assignation of identical characteristics of each person belonging to a particular group, regardless of real, existing differences (Aronson 2002: 282). Old age in the physical aspect of old age is also associated with the weakening of body strength along with health deterioration and impairment of self-reliant movement. This issue was shown in the poem of Mark Skwarnicki *Conversation with the boy who is taking out a thorn from his leg* [PzCz, class 3, p. 211].

The main character of this poem compares himself to a boy who is pulling a thorn from his leg. Both suffer and limp, but for different reasons. The physical characteristics represented in this piece are slow movements, pain, weakness and loss of strength. Old age appears in the poem as a period of passivity and resignation. The old man can no longer take full part in social life; “the games and dances of the spring woods” are no longer for him. Old age is like a thorn – it deprives one of physical abilities, restricts, and is connected with pain and suffering.

Along with age progression certain senses get worse. In the poem *Eyes* by Czesław Miłosz [Jest, kl. 1, cz. 2, s. 125] we read:

*My most honorable eyes. You are not in the best shape.
I receive from you an image, less than sharp,
And if a colour, then it's dimmed (...)
Now what you have seen is hidden inside
And changed into memory or dreams
Slowly I move away from the fairness of the world
And I notice in myself a distaste
For monkeyish dresses, shrieks, and drum beats.
What a relief (...)*⁴

Paradoxically, the weakening of sight is not a burden for the lyrical I, but rather a gift. “The world’s fairness” does no longer tempt through colour, shape or glamour.

*Wszak w zmarszczkach rozum mieszka, a gdzie broda siwa,
Tam wszelka doskonałość zwyczajnie przebywa.*

⁴ Translated, from the Polish, by the author, Carol Miłosz, and Renata Gorczyńska, <http://archives.newyorker.com/?i=2002-08-19#folio=076>. Retrived August 16, 2013.

Polish version:

*Szanowne moje oczy, nie najlepiej z wami.
Dostaję od was rysunek nieostry,
A jeżeli kolor, to przymgłony (...)
Teraz coście widziały, schowane jest we mnie
I przemienione w pamięć albo sny.
Oddalam się powoli od jarmarku świata
I zauważam w sobie jakby niechęć
Do małpowatych strojów, wrzasków, bicia w bębny.
Co za ulga (...)*

The more hazy the protagonist's physical vision becomes, the sharper his spiritual powers get, leading him in the direction of metaphysical exploration of his core (Zarębianka 2006: 483).

We can find rebellion against the stereotypical perception of old age in the physical sphere in the passage of Esther Vilar's piece *Old age is beautiful* [Jest, class 1, part 2, p. 120]. The author points out that contemporary culture with its cult of youth and beauty somehow puts an equal sign between the following words: young = beautiful; old = ugly.

You're saying that you want to give us youth, but then when you're palming all these wonderful anti-aging agents off on us, you mean nothing more than the word "young" means "beautiful" and the word "old" means "ugly". And if we continue to follow your recommendations, if we let you rejuvenate us, it will mean that we accept your views.

But we don't!

We don't want to get rejuvenated!

We are old!

OLD.

And that's why we will change the world so the word OLD means BEAUTIFUL.⁵

There is an objection to the contemporary culture that revolves around youth, beauty and success. It relegates old age with its experience and maturity to the margins, or hides it under layers of creams, powders and other "elixirs of longevity".

2. The image of old age in the mental sphere

Old age is often associated with passivity, resignation and lack of motivation for activity. The main character of the Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Old Man and the Sea* ignores the basic principles of nutrition, hygiene and dress, and does not care about his health. He is taken care of by a boy who meets the basic needs of the old fisherman.

(...) "I go now for the sardines," the boy said.

When the boy came back the old man was asleep in the chair and the sun was down. The boy took the old army blanket off the bed and spread it over the back of the chair and over the old man's shoulders. [ŚwS, class 2, p. 88]

⁵ Own translation; Polish version:

Mówicie, że chcecie nam podarować młodość, ale przecież kiedy wciskacie nam te wszystkie cudowne odmładzające środki, nie twierdzicie nic ponad to, że słowo "młody" oznacza "piękny", a słowo "stary" oznacza "brzydki". I jeśli będziemy dalej stosować się do waszych zaleceń, jeśli będziemy dawać się wam odmładzać, będzie to znaczyć, że akceptujemy wasze poglądy.

A my ich nie akceptujemy!

Nie chcemy się odmładzać!

Jesteśmy starzy.

STARZY.

I dlatego zmienimy świat, żeby słowo STARY znaczyło PIĘKNY.

The quoted passage shows an old man as a person that requires special care and protection. Manolin, an old friend of Santiago's, is very responsible for his age. The discussed section of the story is to be considered in the context of the entire piece, in order to see the complexity and ambiguity of the old fisherman's disposition. The character of old Santiago is an example that proves that passion and the setting of life goals can be a source of motivation and strength to battle fate. The old fisherman comes close to death, and this experience teaches him how precious life is and how important it is to find sense in it. *A man is not made for defeat* – says Santiago. *A man can be destroyed but not defeated*. The key statement made by the protagonist about the meaning of life shows that a man has great potential, regardless of age.

The conservative views of the older generation and the youth's rebellion against it is one of the main topics of old age as motif in literature. Adam Mickiewicz gave full expression to this thought in *Ode to youth*, [Swoimi, class 3, p. 179]. The poem describes the contrast between the world of the young and the world of the old. The opposition between old age and youth is strongly associated with the antagonism between a classical and romantic view of life. In Mickiewicz's piece age is attributed to the bygone era of the Enlightenment, and is represented by people *without heart, without soul*. In their context, we see the image of an old man with wrinkled forehead, who in his perception of the world is limited by his age:

*Who by his elder age shall darkened be
His toilsome forehead to the ground bent low,
Let him no more perceive or know
Than his thus lowered selfish eyes may see*⁶

Youth is full of options, and it can reach new goals, pursue, acquire, and “*rise above*”. The world of the old is covered with fog, an *area of sloth drowned in the abyss*⁷. While describing it, the poet reaches for elements of ugliness and says that the old man is covered with *dead waters*. Old age has to go away and allow youth to develop and build a new reality. A youth that creates, develops and explores new paths is also shown in Adam Asnyka's poem *To the young* [Swoimi, class 2, p. 210]. The poet, by showing the tasks and challenges awaiting the young generation, gives them a lesson in humility and respect towards traditions and past eras:

⁶ *Selected Masterpieces of Polish Poetry*, translated by J. Zawadzki, <http://tlumacz-literatury.pl/polishpoetryfree.pdf>,

Original version:

*Niechaj, kogo wiek zamroczy,
Chyląc ku ziemi poradłone czoło,
Takie widzi świata koło,
Jakie tępymi zakreśla oczy.*

⁷ A. Mickiewicz, *Ode to youth*, in: *Selected Masterpieces of Polish Poetry*, translated by J. Zawadzki, <http://tlumacz-literatury.pl/polishpoetryfree.pdf>.

*But trample not the altars of the past!
Although you shall much finer domes erect.
The holy flames upon the stones still last,
And human love lives there and guards them fast,
And them you owe respect!*⁸

Old age, symbolized in the poem by the altars of the past, is a valuable source of knowledge and experience. The values that flow from it, although they may seem old-fashioned to young people, constituted the meaning of life for the last generation and so they must not be trampled upon. Youth does not last forever, so it is important to benefit from not forgetting about the past generation and its teachings.

In Martin Kuckenburg's text *Before writing was born* [Jest, class 3, part 1, p. 22] we find the proverb "Every old man who dies in Africa, is a library that burns". For illiterate cultures the memory of the elderly was the only source of knowledge and transmitter of cultural traditions. In today's information society, the development of new technologies is significantly overtaking the older generation. What is more, modern humans do not have to care about memory, because they have stored memory at hand in the form of books, hard drives and CDs.

Old age, although often described in a stereotypical way, does not need to be without a meaning of life and motivation for activity. The main characters of the poem *A tale of grandmothers* by Józef Baran know it well [J. Polski, class 1, p. 41]:

*they are born for the third time
in the halo of silver hair
and learn from grandchildren
how to take first steps
then they join them at the communion
it is hard to imagine
that once they were not grandmothers
immortal in their serenity
that shone, shine, and will shine
even if everything were to change for good
their husbands are long gone
or having gorged on life*

⁸ *Selected Masterpieces of Polish Poetry*, translated by J. Zawadzki, <http://tlumacz-literatury.pl/polishpoetryfree.pdf>,

Original version:

*Ale nie deptacie przeszłości ołtarzy,
Choć macie sami doskonalsze wznieść;
Na nich się jeszcze święty ogień żarzy
I miłość ludzka stoi tam na straży,
I wy winniście im cześć!*

*in disgust are facing the music*⁹

The protagonists of the poem find themselves in a newly-assigned social role – the role of grandmothers. Once they were children, then mothers; now, with the birth of their grandchildren, they begin their third incarnation. In Baran’s poem one can find elements of prefigurative culture (the elderly learn from the young). The grandmothers learn their first steps from their grandchildren. This allows them not to lose contact with reality, and to keep up with the changing world. This third incarnation of the grandmothers gives them new strengths and a new energy for life (Róžańska 2006: 655). They feel needed and loved, *immortal in their serenity* – always full of patience, joy and smiles. The grandmothers in Baran’s poem break the stereotype of decrepit old women, and show that in old age one can be also full of energy and joy.

3. The image of old age in the spiritual sphere

With age, habit and stabilization become increasingly important. One no longer looks with youthful impetuosity for new sensations; the lust for adventure diminishes. It is a time for reflection and contemplation on the meaning of life. In her late works, Anna Legeżyńska notices a characteristic motif of old age, namely a gesture of farewell (Legeżyńska 1999: 20). Old people part with youth, with relatives, with the world. This “gesture of farewell” is sometimes very painful, because people have to face the most difficult life experiences: dying, suffering and death. In the face of these extreme situations, spiritual reflections on the balance of life become a significant existential experience in old age (Gleń: 2008).

Usually it appears in conjunction with the theme of death and dying. In literary texts in school textbooks, rather than speaking directly about old age, the theme of *vani-tas* is explored instead.

As Jan Kochanowski said in its epigram *About human life* [SnCZ, class 1, p. 149]:

*There’s nothing certain in the world,
In vain one tries to rule.*

⁹ Own translation; original version:
*rodzą się po raz trzeci
w aureoli srebrnych włosów
i uczą od wnucząt
stawiania pierwszych kroków
potem przystępują z nimi do komunii
wprost trudno sobie wyobrazić
że nie były kiedyś babciami
nieśmiertelnymi w swej pogodzie
które świeciły, świecą i świecić będą
choćby się wszystko zmieniło na amen
mężów ich dawno już nie ma
albo przejeźdzeni życiem
z niesmakiem dopijają nawarzone piwo*

*Nobility, beauty, power, money, fame,
All this will pass away like fields of grass;*¹⁰

fleeting. There is nothing certain in the world. In one instance such unequal goods as money and fame, beauty and nobility are evoked. This combination performs the function of an unusual hyperbole, which intensifies the sense of the futility of human life.

The theme of *vanitas* (Latin for vanity) is a religious-artistic theme of art, cognizance and time. This motif is most prominent in the Middle Ages and the Baroque, although the fascination with death and dying is reflected in art and literature in different eras.

A reflection on dying appears in Czesław Miłosz's poem *What books* [Bs, class 1, p. 38]. A man's dying is compared to the durability of books:

*[...] We exist – they said, even as their pages were getting ripped out
Or the letters were licked off by the roaring flames.
How much more durable than us, whose crippled heat
Cools down with memory, disperses, perishes.
I imagine the earth when I'm gone
And no, no loss, continuous oddity...*¹¹

Human physicality is imperfect, with ageing one's memory gets worse and the body "disperses", as it slowly dies. Human's life is a trifle, after one's death there will be "no loss" on earth; the world will continue its rhythm.

A beautiful portrayal of maturation to old age can be found in a passage of the book *Oscar and the Lady in Pink* by Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt [BS, class 2, p. 275]. While the main character is a boy of ten, it is he who gives a very important lesson in preparing for old age. In the face of an extreme situation, namely death, his experience is similar to what elderly people go through. The initial protest and refusal to leave this world are overcome, paradoxically, as the boy matures into old age.

Oscar is a very mature boy. His reflections on life and death lead him to a very important conclusion: old age, as no other stage of life, appreciates the beauty and the meaning of human existence. Such an attitude requires a major effort. One has to overcome

¹⁰ Own translation; original version:

*Nie masz na świecie żadnej pewnej rzeczy,
Próżno tu człowiek ma co mieć na pieczy.
Zacność, uroda, moc, pieniądze, sława,
Wszystko to minie jako polna trawa;*

¹¹ Own translation, original version:

*[...] Jesteśmy — mówiły, nawet kiedy wydzierano z nich karty
Albo litery zlizywał buzujący płomień.
O ileż trwalsze od nas, których ułomne ciepło
Stygnie razem z pamięcią, rozprasza się, ginie.
Wyobrażam sobie ziemię kiedy mnie nie będzie
I nic, żadnego ubytku, dalej dziwowisko, [...]*

the fear of nearing death, and take advantage of every moment of life; one has to become a gourmet of life.

The spiritual sphere of old age is connected with the mystery of cognizance of the world and the values that life brings with it. Often in the face of death come reflections on life and its meaning and sense. In this sphere we find the image of religion as well as old people's attitude towards God and faith. Although it may initially take the form of rebellion and disapproval of death, it is often the case that prayer and God's guidance bring serenity and a sense of meaning to life.

4. What is the portrayal of old age in middle school textbooks?

On the basis of the selected texts described above we can conclude that middle school textbooks display various embodiments of the motif of old age. In physical terms ageing is a disease, lack of strength, and helplessness. The image of old age in the mental sphere is associated with a sense of loneliness and misunderstanding. One can also see the distance between generations, which is characterized by a rebellion of the youth against the norms and principles of the elderly. The theme of life balance, summaries, settlement and reflections on death are characteristic of the spiritual realm. Elderly people are often portrayed as religious and having a strong long-established system of values. The knowledge and experience of elderly people are also highlighted.

It is worth pointing out, however, that texts concerning old age and ageing quite rarely appear in middle school textbooks and do not function independently (the theme of old age is usually associated with intergenerational relationships and the subject of death and dying). Quite often the discussed texts treat the theme of old age in a stereotypical way. However, most importantly, the image of old age included in the analyzed texts can contribute to a deeper reflection on old age and its place in modern society. The motif of old age in the cultural texts of education was obviously not exhaustively examined in this study. It is therefore worth paying attention to the texts presented to young people and the possibility of using various forms of media to shape positive attitudes towards old age. Taking up this subject can help in better understanding the needs and desires of the elderly.

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