

Ageing Writing in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*

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Abstract

Atwood's 2019 novel *The Testaments* expresses reflections on feminism, religion, and other issues. Previous studies still give too little attention to issues of old age. This paper holds that *The Testaments* constructs a special image of the elderly under extreme conditions. It presents a three-dimensional and multi-faceted image of an elderly woman through multiple narrative perspectives and provides an in-depth case for understanding the circumstances and ageing crises of older women. Starting from the perspective of literary gerontology, this paper analyses and discusses the writing about old age in *The Testaments*. It offers an in-depth analytical case for literary gerontology and attempts to offer enlightenment for individuals to cope with ageing in reality.

Keywords

Ageing Writing, The Testaments, Literary Gerontology.

1. Introduction

The Testaments by Margaret Atwood was published as the sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale* and won the Booker Prize again. Told through three voices, Aunt Lydia, Agnes Jemima from Gilead, and Jed, also called baby Nicole, the novel follows how these three women work together to bring down the Gilead regime after the events that closed out the first book. The academic community has already conducted in depth analyses of *The Testaments* from multiple perspectives. Scholar Wang Yunqiu, [1] in her paper "Event, Narrative and Subjectivity: Idea of History in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Testaments*," offers a sharp analysis from the angle of historical view. Scholars Wang Shiyu and Yuan Xia, [2] approach the novel from the dimension of memory in their study "The Ethics of Memory in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*," Tang Jiannan and Cai Shasha, [3] in "Three Spaces of Power Politics on *The Testaments*: From the Perspective of Space Theory," interpret the text through the lens of space. These multidimensional and insightful readings have laid a solid foundation for future research on the novel. Scholars have yet to produce substantial research analysing the novel's protagonist through the lens of literary gerontology, despite the recurring depictions of her old age, physical frailty and mental anguish throughout the text. If researchers strip away Lydia's identity as an elderly person, they will lose a crucial interpretative basis for understanding related issues, such as the ethical choices made by the protagonist in the novel and why she feels so mentally distressed. So, this paper adopts a literary gerontological framework to examine the aged narratives in *The Testaments*, drawing on theoretical works including *Aging and Its Discontents*, *The Double Standard of Aging*, and *The Coming of Age*.

2. Elderly Figures and Narrative Strategies of Ageing

In *The Testaments*, the image of Lydia, a 68-year-old sentimental elderly woman seeking revenge, is portrayed. Although the author does not explicitly mention Lydia's current age in the narrative time, many details from Lydia's manuscript reveal her age and piece together the trajectory of her previous life. According to Lydia's recollections, she was fifty-three years old

when the original national regime was suddenly overthrown and women were captured and threatened by the leaders of the new regime. In the years that followed, she and several other highly educated women were forced to serve as the founders of the Gilead regime system, drafting a series of laws and regulations that stripped women of all rights to uphold patriarchal dominance. Fifteen years later, Lydia recalled this incident while writing her manuscript. Based on these two chronological clues, it can be inferred that Lydia is approximately sixty-eight years old in the present timeline of the narrative text. Scholar Long Dan points out that literary gerontology divides human life into four age stages, and the 60 to 70 years old period where Lydia falls into belongs to the third age, namely the elderly stage. [4] In the novel, Lydia displays typical signs of the elderly crisis both physically and psychologically. Finally, she completed the recollection of her own life through writing. She has both the characteristics of an ordinary elderly person and a unique experience and way of dealing with the aging crisis, making her a special and typical image of old age in writing. In the novel, Lydia's age is not just a simple background information. The author extensively describes the impact of age on Lydia's appearance, physical condition, and revenge determination, seemingly reminding readers that Lydia is an old man at any time. And the author's description of Lydia has multiple angles. She portrays a mysterious, complex, and multifaceted image of an elderly person through the perspectives of Lydia herself, multiple male and female characters, and comparisons with the younger generation. By extrapolating to the extreme the situations that ordinary elderly people face, such as loss of power, gender discrimination, physiological decline, decreased sense of value, and difficulties in self-identity recognition, the image of Lydia as an elderly woman becomes more three-dimensional and profound. The novel consists of Lydia's manuscript and first person narration by Agnes and Jed. These characters reminisce about their own life journeys, while the three perspectives interact to describe each other, making the narrative of old age realistic and three-dimensional. This way of telling one's past in the first person vividly presents the crises and choices faced by the elderly. For readers, it feels like listening to an elderly person recount their personal experiences, which makes it easier to bridge the gap between fiction and reality, and bring them closer to aging. Readers can better feel the impact of age by examining Lydia's life through her own memories and "participating" in her current choices. The first person narrative perspective of the other two young women reveals a two-way scrutiny between the two generations. Lydia, Agnes, and Jed showcase the external contrast between youth and aging, as well as the contrast between deeper experience accumulation and naive mentality. At the same time, the intergenerational relationship between old and young is further presented in a conflict to cooperation manner.

3. Aunt Lydia's Predicament in Old Age

This section primarily analyzes the physiological decline, mental crisis, and unique predicaments faced by Lydia in her old age under an extreme regime.

3.1. Physiological Predicament: Health Status and Remaining Lifespan

As pointed out in *The Coming of Age*, people's physiological condition will inevitably decline as they grow older. [5] Physical deterioration on the physiological level can nearly always be felt directly, which makes one conscious of their own fading and brings on an acute sense of time slipping away. People subsequently recognize their own aging by comparing their physical state to that of others, seeing their own reflections in those around them. In the novel, the author repeatedly emphasizes Lydia's physical condition and her sense of urgency regarding the limited time she has left, thereby highlighting her sober recognition of her own aging. In the manuscript written in the first person, Lydia brings up her various health troubles time and again: "My hand hurts, my back aches." "Readying myself for bed last night, I unpinned my hair, what is left of it." "I am not young, nor in the best of health." "She looked around, then sat down

heavily on the sofa." "The minor infirmities of age" "I hope you will live long enough to experience them." [6] From the detailed descriptions throughout the text, it is evident that 68-year-old Lydia is constantly facing physical decline. She clearly realized that these are old age disease, and they are inevitable declines brought on by aging. These physical declines also forced her to acknowledge the fact that she has entered the countdown of her later years. Her painful struggle with her own aging is a testament to the fact that even with a clear understanding, complete acceptance is not always achieved. As Kathleen Woodward repeatedly argues in her 1991 monograph *Aging and Its Discontents*, the experience of growing old is multifaceted and complex. [7] Staring at her thinning hair, Lydia is led to reflect on: "Which is true, but it is also true that hair is about life. It is the flame of the body's candle, and as it dwindles the body shrinks and melts away...The flame of my life is subsiding..." [6] Old people react differently to their bodies falling apart. For Lydia, physical decline like losing her hair made her anxious one way or another. She started worrying that she didn't have enough time left to take down Gilead and get her revenge. In the novel, Lydia connects her physical state to time. That means youth more or less equals energy. When she notices clear signs of aging in how she looks and feels, she also expresses envy and longing for youth and young bodies. For instance, she laments again and again: "We all looked different then: younger, trimmer, less gnarled", "How young they are, how frisky! I thought. How touchingly innocent!" [6] The decline of one's own body compared with the youth of young people makes it very hard for older people not to feel anxious and regretful. Then they start to feel even more strongly how cruel time is and how little of it is left. That is why Lydia cries out more than once: "Time, I plead to the air, just a little more time." [6] It is clear that at the age of sixty-eight, Lydia struggles with anxiety brought on by physical decline. Yet what frightens Lydia appears to be neither illness itself nor the death that follows it. Instead, she fears the slow fading of life that sickness signals, and the pressing sense that time is running out before she can fulfil all she set out to do. This shows elderly people can possess a clear understanding of their physical state. Still, such awareness and acceptance do not equate to full adjustment or freedom from anxiety. Responses differ from person to person. Anxiety over bodily decline does not always stem from fear of death. It can also grow out of regret and fixation on unaccomplished goals. This offers readers several key takeaways. One is that old age does not automatically mean loss of mental clarity. Older adults can fully grasp their own circumstances. Second, feelings of anxiety and regret in later life are entirely normal. It is wrong to equate anxiety and fear in the elderly solely with a dread of dying. People can no longer simplify the decline anxiety of the elderly as a mere fear of death. Instead, the society need to deeply understand the diversity and complexity of anxiety among elderly individuals. This will greatly assist the whole society in providing targeted assistance to help the elderly accept aging in real life.

3.2. Spiritual Predicament: Elderly Mindset and the Search for Life's Meaning

In *The Double Standard of Aging*, Susan Sontag argues that society's double and multiple forms of discrimination against elderly women deserve urgent attention. [8] Lydia is also in a state of doubt and self-deprecation due to the conflict between external wrongdoing and her inner moral bottom line. The extreme praise and promotion of women's reproductive value and youth by the Gilead regime in the text. As a knowledgeable woman who once possessed a high degree of feminist consciousness, Lydia finds it difficult to accept these two points. This resulted in a serious disconnect between Lydia's real self and her true self, and she was deeply immersed in spiritual questioning of herself in her old age. The text particularly highlights the limitations on the value of women. The novel sets that the only social value of women under the Gilead regime is reproduction. Under the Gilead regime in the novel, a woman's sole social worth lies in childbearing. So, men marry young girls raised from childhood to be wives, and once the girls are no longer young or pretty, they find various ways to poison them and marry again. Lower-class girls are trained to be Handmaids, whose job is to get pregnant, give birth, then move to

the next household and do it all over again, carrying on the genes and reproducing the species. Under Gilead, whether a girl is well-born enough to become a Commander's wife or a Handmaid meant for breeding, her value as a woman comes down to youth and fertility. Beyond the system itself, the text repeatedly shows, in various ways, a reverence for these two and only two qualities in women.

For her contribution to the founding and legislation of Gilead, Lydia is set up as a model and great woman, with statues erected and worship paid to her. At the start of *The Testaments*, the novel describes Lydia's statue: "My statue is larger than life, as statues tend to be, and shows me as younger, slimmer, and in better shape than I've been for some time." [6] It can be seen that even Lydia, a woman at the top of Gilead, is still held to standards of youth. In the same way, for girls who have grown up in Gilead since birth, the glorification of youth is rooted all the more subtly in their values. Agnes, raised from childhood to be a Commander's wife, upon meeting the aged Lydia, quietly judges: "She smiled. It was like an old turnip smiling." "Aunt Lydia smiled her wrinkly old-turnip smile." [6], Jed called Lydia: "mean old queen bee of Ardua Hall" [6]. All these metaphors serve to lay bare how the society within the text glorifies women's youthful worth. As an elderly woman, therefore, Lydia cannot escape double discrimination. One is that as a woman living under Gilead's radical patriarchal regime, even if she survives on account of her utility and holds all authority only through the Commanders' mercy, she must commit unceasing cruelties to stay alive, narrowing the living space of all women in Gilead. Second, as an aged person, she endures the "trial of youth" handed down by younger girls and public opinion alike. She has drafted the very codes that strip women of their rights and worth, and reaps special privileges and prestige from these laws. Notably, she was raised in a normal world with a full university education, and retains the independent female identity forged in that life. Lydia is constantly weighed down by guilt over the harm she inflicts: "None of us is exempt from sin." [6] The tension between reason and reality led Lydia to lament at the very opening of the novel: "Already I am petrified." [6] She thus defined the very meaning of her existence as vengeance to overthrow the regime and to face trial. It follows that Lydia's mindset in old age was a fragmented, wounded and negative state rooted in intense vengeful hatred. She took pride in her capacity to secure her hold on power. On the other, she was tormented by guilt and loathing toward herself: as a woman, she had turned into a perpetrator who undermined and suppressed the rights of other women. Through Lydia's recollective narration, readers piece together the full arc of Lydia's life and share in Lydia's late-life reflections on the meaning of existence. Before the fall of the old national government and the rise of the Gilead regime, Lydia spent decades studying hard to become a fair judge on the family court. She carried out her official duties, volunteered for charity work, and took part in elections, living out every virtuous act. Years later, Lydia looks back and says: "Though I realized how very wrong I had been about this, and about many other things, on the day I was arrested." [6] At this moment, Lydia felt a great rift and confusion between what she was about to do and what she had always insisted on doing in the past. This confusion lasted from her arrest at fifty-three to the time she recalled at sixty-eight, and ran through her thoughts on self-worth, future life, and the meaning of death. In her recollections, Lydia, in the tone of repeatedly questioning herself, kept asking: "How can I regain myself? How to shrink back to my normal size, the size of an ordinary woman?" [6] The novel does not explicitly state at which specific moment Lydia thought about the meaning of her life, thereby driving her to steadfastly carry out a revenge plan that could lead to the end of her reputation and life. Lydia only realized through constant recollection and reflection that she was not entirely a villain, and what she had been doing was already the best choice at the moment. Whether her dormant self-preservation, aged 53 to 68, the long power struggle with the other female colleagues, or the determination to seek revenge and secretly preserve evidence of overthrowing the regime, Lydia may gradually realize the meaning of her existence. The things around her, power, religion, and regime, vary depending on each person's

current choices and experiences, and the only meaning lies in living itself and experiencing. Therefore, Lydia realized soberly that the best answer to the meaning of life is simply to make the best choice of what she wants to do in the present moment.

3.3. Special Predicament: The Absence of Normal Rights

Beyond physical and psychological predicaments, what makes the novel text special is that it pushes the plight of the elderly to the extreme. In this novel, Lydia is an elderly woman. Due to Gilead being under wartime rule, supplies are scarce in daily material life. Even with certain privileges, the quality and variety of food available to Lydia remain limited. Beyond this, women in Gilead lack the freedom to read and write. Surveillance permeates every corner, stripping Lydia of all personal privacy. Lydia is thus an older woman living under extreme conditions, granted a handful of special entitlements yet deprived of many basic human rights. The so-called privileges she holds merely amount to the ordinary human rights every person enjoys in a normal modern society. Thus, starting from Lydia's unique and specific troubles in old age, including insufficient material security, double discrimination faced by elderly women, and the violation of personal privacy, if we view these issues from a broader lens covering all elderly people in modern society, we can easily see that financial strain, power imbalance, age discrimination and physical decline trouble most ageing individuals alike. Although the manifestations of Lydia's predicaments are diverse, their common root lies in fundamental social operating mechanisms such as power, gender, and economic security. This enlightens society to assist elderly individuals in coping with aging, which is not only a matter of providing good material security, such as external conditions like nursing home facilities and social pension insurance. It is also related to increasing concern for the spiritual needs of elderly individuals, and the focus is on balancing the changes in the elderly's mentality with the external environment. For people of other age groups across society, it is vital to break rigid stereotypes about the elderly. Everyone ought to cultivate a mindset of respect and care for senior citizens, so that a wholesome social culture centred on supporting the elderly can take shape.

4. The Awakening of Lydia in Her Later Years

Gullette, in *Aged by Culture*, argues that the narrative of decline around aging shapes how individuals perceive and make ethical choices. [9] Lydia, in her later years, faces both physical and mental hardships, but age also gives her the courage to live toward death and the time to heal old wounds.

4.1. Ethical choices of the elderly: facing death and living

The experience and wisdom of old age endow Lydia with the courage to make just and ethical choices. At the age of 53, Lydia was arrested. After witnessing killings and being threatened with violence, Lydia chose to compromise in order to survive and was forced to participate in the design and maintenance of the Gilead regime. At the age of 68, she risked her life to secretly write a manuscript recalling her past and exposing the crimes of the Gilead regime and collecting evidence. During this period, Lydia mentioned several times in her manuscript recollections: "Patience is a virtue. Vengeance is mine." "None of us is exempt from sin." "I've become swollen with power, true, but also nebulous with it- formless, shape-shifting." [6] Regarding her past, Lydia exhibits a sense of guilt and resentment. In her recollections, she describes her experiences over the years as a state of perpetual competition, treading on thin ice, and constantly seeking to protect herself. Conscious of the past where Lydia was forced to commit evil deeds, and Lydia clearly recognizes that she was coerced and sinful. The obsession with seeking revenge and retribution has sustained her from middle age into old age. However, upon entering old age, Lydia did not hesitate to sacrifice everything to expose the Gilead regime.

She constantly questions herself during the process of recalling: "How will I end? I wondered. Will I live to a gently neglected old age, ossifying by degrees? Will I become my own honoured statue?" "My larger fear: that all my efforts will prove futile, and Gilead will last for a thousand years." "My control over Ardua Hall would be complete and my honoured old age secure...I waver, I waver." [6] Lydia kept weighing how two separate paths might shape her old age down the line. Her private notes laid bare her wavering mind. She feared her revenge plot would fall flat. Even so, she pressed ahead with every step of her plan to get even: "Not for nothing had I been photographing the Ardua Hall top-classification crime files over so many years." [6], and see her own future as: "Not whether to die, but when and how. Isn't that freedom of a sort?" [6] In her old age, Lydia's fear and determination for revenge coexist. Essentially, Lydia is not "afraid", but rather "uncertain". Having received a higher education and once striving for justice in everything she did, Lydia could no longer bear the moral state of "guilt" in her old age. Therefore, Lydia, who described herself as having been "petrified alive" since the day she was forced, turned her fear, like her determination for revenge, into the driving force that propelled her to take the risk of exposing and overthrowing the Gilead regime. It is Lydia's melancholy and unreserved fear of failure that reveals Margaret's portrayal of an ordinary elderly woman who is pushed to the brink, making her more relatable to readers than the cold and heartless protagonist throughout the story. At the age of 53, fearing death, Lydia had to go against her education and instincts to help establish the Gilead regime. In her first-person recollections of the past at the age of 68, readers get a glimpse of the ruthless and unforgiving matron in the eyes of others, who becomes increasingly clear-headed and determined day by day. For Lydia, her shattered present life is far more terrifying than death. At fifty-three, stripped of dignity, faith, morality, and every right to be seen as human, Lydia clings to vengeance as her sole reason to live. Old age brings a ticking clock toward death, which only stokes her drive to hasten the day of reckoning. Years of daily rumination and plotting break free from all restraints to unfold once she grows old. Old age becomes both her justification and boldness to burn all bridges. Her choice to lay bare all evils emerges as the fruit of her resolve to live, knowing death awaits.

4.2. Trauma healing in the elderly: integration of life

Writing serves as Lydia's coping mechanism and therapeutic strategy for healing the traumas she encountered in her middle and old age. Initially, Lydia wrote the manuscript with the intention of adding evidence to the overthrow of the regime. However, during the writing process, she gradually came to terms with the sudden changes in her life and the moral choices she faced. As she wrote, Lydia had no idea whether anyone would ever read her manuscript: "Who are you, my reader? And when are you Perhaps tomorrow, perhaps fifty years from now, perhaps never." [6] Therefore, this manuscript often seems more like Lydia's process of self-talk and self-healing. Decades of hard work in her career, studying to become a righteous judge, and experiencing marriage, divorce, miscarriage, and dealing with lovers in her personal life, Lydia was generally satisfied with her life before the age of 53: "I'd assumed I was living virtuously; I'd assumed my virtue would be moderately applauded." [6] Yet in her middle and later years, Lydia undergoes an abrupt rupture in the course of her life. Her faith in justice, pursuit of female worth, and sense of dignity are all shattered to the core. Witnessing a shooting, being forced to take part in the erasure of women's rights, and scraping by under brutal patriarchal rule redefine every remaining part of her life. Even after turning fifty-three, though granted special privileges for her contributions, Lydia still: "Simply by being female I was excluded from the lists of potential usurpers" [6]. She is a "tool" in the eyes of the male elites in Gilead, and a frightening old crone in the eyes of the girls in Gilead. In social relations: "Having no friends, I must make do with enemies." [6] Living in a privacy free environment filled with surveillance cameras, phone calls being monitored, and writing and reading being privileged, loneliness and isolation are the scars and pains that Lydia suffered after experiencing life changes. For Lydia, writing means telling her true feelings and opinions about her inner world.

These secrets that cannot be confided in anyone in reality are released through venting, releasing her suppressed emotions and even grievances, effectively sorting out Lydia's psychological pressure and trauma. Furthermore, in the process of writing and reminiscing, Lydia's need for self-confirmation was met. She examined the reality of her own wrongdoing, the implementation of her revenge plan, and the consequences of its implementation, and clarified that the self who assisted in wrongdoing was not her true self. She faced up to the disconnect between the two and further held the Gilead regime accountable. In addition, Lydia repeatedly remembered and called on the readers of her manuscript during the writing process, implying that Lydia hoped to gain empathy from the readers in her imagination. To a certain extent, Lydia's negative emotions were vented and relieved, and her mental crisis was alleviated and intervened, achieving psychological self-rescue. Lydia's memories of her life in writing are to some extent objectively and from a third perspective, describing "my pain" and "othering" her own pain, thus achieving psychological "self-salvation".

5. Literary Enlightenment: A "Prescription" for Coping with Aging

Writing for recollection and guidance is an effective remedy for dealing with mental difficulties in the elderly. Although the situation of Lydia, a 68 year old woman, appears more extreme compared to real life, the elderly dilemma she faces and her approach to combating the crisis of decline have a certain universality for the elderly to cope with the crisis in modern aging society. Firstly, Lydia suffered from both physical decline and the dual exclusion of elderly women's rights. Although old age may not necessarily equate to loss of power, the transfer and iteration of power are inevitable. In the text, Lydia was excluded from the power struggle of the Gilead regime due to her female identity, and was also in a more disadvantaged position in the power competition due to her elderly status. For elderly women in real life, they may also face double discrimination in their old age. This enlightens that in modern society, countries, collectives, and individuals still need to make greater efforts to provide women with more equal resources in society, such as women's voice, career opportunities, marriage rights, and other aspects. On this basis, further attention should be paid to the status of elderly women, reducing the discrimination they may face in society, and calling for individuals and even society to form a more friendly elderly care atmosphere. The way Lydia copes with ruin, finding healing through writing, offers valuable lessons for elderly people navigating ageing in real life. In modern society, constrained by machinery, rationality and technology, older adults face physical deterioration as they grow old. Society no longer has much use for them, leaving them vulnerable to marginalisation, a diminished sense of worth and anxiety over their own identity. Writing can help clarify their thoughts and provide a good outlet for emotions, allowing them to be in a good state of being heard, thus completing the affirmation of their own life value and the integration of the meaning of life.

6. Conclusion

This paper analyzes and interprets the elderly writing in *The Testaments* from the perspective of literary gerontology. The first person manuscript of Lydia in the novel, along with Angnes and Jed's first person narration, presents the aging crisis and coping strategies of the 68 year old. The entire text provides a literary inspiration for modern aging society and has strong practical significance. Using the analysis framework of gerontology, firstly in terms of narrative strategy, the novel adopts a first person perspective. The self-narratives of three women, spanning two generations, and the identity of a close knit person give this 68 year old woman a natural sense of reality in the physical and mental crises she faces. The three women are mirror images of each other, and these different perspectives from their respective positions have pieced together a complex and three-dimensional image of an elderly woman. The text

extensively describes the objective circumstances faced by the elderly. At the age of old age, Lydia faced physiological decline such as reduced hair, digestive system problems, and pain in various body parts, which led to aging anxiety. The author also strives to highlight the mental crisis of old age. The anxiety of running out of time, the difficulties and obstacles faced by revenge plans, one's own melancholy and wavering, extreme and special external difficulties, such as loss of privacy, exclusion of power, and lack of material security. The interweaving of these multiple dilemmas has pushed the individual's aging crisis to the extreme. However, the novel does not only stay at the level of exposing problems, but also provides the "literary prescription" of writing through Lydia. In her old age, Lydia sorted out and objectively evaluated her past through writing, which eased her suppressed emotions in the process. Upon closer inspection, Lydia's dilemma is also that of ordinary elderly people, and her coping strategies also provide reference for dealing with aging anxiety in reality. In the modern digital society, individuals can sort out and vent their past through writing and writing memoirs. For society, to cope with the arrival of an aging society, it is not only necessary to have good material conditions, but also to create a good social atmosphere and public opinion environment for elderly care. Ultimately, *The Testaments* offers a vivid literary practice for gerontology, profoundly presenting the crisis and response of Lydia, the third age elderly subject. And the perspective of literary gerontology has also injected new impetus into understanding how Lydia understands her past and how she continues her life after physical aging.

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