



**QUEEN'S  
UNIVERSITY  
BELFAST**

## **“To write my autobiography and get myself in focus genetically”: G. Stanley Hall’s Senescence (1922)**

Carney, G., & Hannan, L. (2021). “To write my autobiography and get myself in focus genetically”: G. Stanley Hall’s *Senescence* (1922). *Age, Culture, Humanities: an interdisciplinary journal*, 5. <https://doi.org/10.7146/ageculturehumanities.v5i.130995>

**Published in:**  
Age, Culture, Humanities: an interdisciplinary journal

**Document Version:**  
Peer reviewed version

**Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:**  
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

**Publisher rights**  
Copyright 2021, The Athenaeum Press at Coastal Carolina University.  
This work is made available online in accordance with the publisher’s policies. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher

**General rights**  
Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**  
The Research Portal is Queen's institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact [openaccess@qub.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@qub.ac.uk).

**Open Access**  
This research has been made openly available by Queen's academics and its Open Research team. We would love to hear how access to this research benefits you. – Share your feedback with us: <http://go.qub.ac.uk/oa-feedback>

**‘To write my autobiography and get myself in focus genetically’: G. Stanley Hall’s  
*Senescence***

**Gemma M. Carney and Leonie Hannan,**

**Queen’s University Belfast**

**Published in *Age, Culture, Humanities Special Issue: Narratives of Ageing in the Long  
Nineteenth Century***

**May 2021**

### **Introduction**

Age studies is, at its core, an inter-disciplinary endeavor, the trials and rewards of which are evident in the reading of Hall’s *Senescence* outlined in this article (Charise, 11).

This article analyses the writing of G. Stanley Hall (1846-1924) on the subject of his own old age in his last major academic work: *Senescence*, which was published in 1922. Whilst the book presents scholarship on ageing from a diverse range of disciplines, from literature to biology, it also contains two chapters of more personal reflection. As a recently retired professor of psychology with a distinguished career behind him, Hall uses this book to locate meaning and purpose in this, his last, stage of life. The writing is of its time and intellectual context, reflecting the nineteenth-century life of its author, the emergence of new social sciences in academia and the cultural concerns of inter-war America. As such, we have read the text with the particular and changing circumstances of its scholarly and societal backdrop in mind.

Of the nine chapters in Hall’s work, the penultimate is dedicated to ‘Some Conclusions’ and the book is prefaced by an Introduction which is part personal reflection, part plea for the future study of old age. The other chapters cover the history and literature of old age, statistical, medical and biological studies and a report on survey data concerning ageing. The final chapter is reserved for the ‘psychology of death’, appearing after his conclusions, this chapter might be viewed as an extension beyond his main topic. Here, we will focus our analysis on the Introduction and Conclusions, as they are particularly driven by Hall’s own experience.

The book’s thrust is, of course, utterly defined by the gender and class of its author, two social categories that were far from the minds of Hall and other scholars of the period. A strong element of Hall’s narrative concerns the decline of old age, a frustratingly stubborn driver of studies of ageing across disciplines to the present day (Charise, xxv; Oro-Piqueras and Falcus, 2). As such, we approach the text with a critical perspective on the decline narrative in ageing studies, but engaging with Hall’s narrative in the form of life story.

In our reflections, we discuss how Hall’s disgust with his failing older body is tied clearly to the masculine norms which give his life shape and direction. Hegemonic masculinity in

particular refuses the change in social role brought on by retirement. It is at this life juncture, that many men and women lose that major identity forming and status providing role in the workplace, in Hall's case, a high status job as President of Clark University, US. In the final analysis, we agree with Macnicol that the view of ageing established in this period represents a masculinist narrative and so must be judged with all the skepticism and skill that is available to a pair of twenty-first-century feminists (35).

We begin by sketching a brief biography of Hall's life and work. Next we offer an overview of senescence in the context of narratives of ageing in the long nineteenth century. The remainder of the article focuses on our analysis of the text, honing in on three main narratives - embodied ageing and delaying decline; old age as a personal experience and a social category, and the beginning of retirement as a socio-economic institution. We finish by offering some conclusions and reflections on the significance of assumptions underlying Hall's work in the enduring influence of *Senescence* in our understanding of human ageing.

### *Hall's Senescence as a narrative of his life and work*

G. Stanley Hall was a towering, if controversial, figure in the development of the discipline of psychology and his legacy includes the development of childhood studies and gerontology as distinct fields of research (Young, 195). His first secure academic position was held in the philosophy department of John Hopkins University where he spent six years (1882-8) and opened a psychology laboratory, which was the first of its kind in America. Hall was the first President of the American Psychological Association and established a new University – Clark – of which he was also President (Parry, 1161). Hall was involved as editor in several important academic journals, including the *Pedagogical Seminary*, a journal of educational and child development (re-named the *Journal of Genetic Psychology* in 1924), which published some of the prevalent eugenic thinking of the early twentieth century (Kohlman, 15). Describing himself as a 'genetic psychologist', Hall held highly racialised views on human evolutionary development and was intellectually enmeshed with the American Progressive Era's exponents of behavioural genetics and eugenics (Chynoweth Burnham, 464-5). Like many of his fellow scientists of this period, his scholarship aimed not only to describe human psychology, but also to shape human behaviours for the betterment of society as a whole.

Hall published two 'great works', the best known being *Adolescence: Its psychology and its relation to physiology, anthropology, sociology, sex, crime, religion and education* in 1904 and *Senescence*, towards the end of his life, in 1922. The former has received substantial scholarly attention, especially around the centenary of its publication (e.g. Arnett and Cravens). However, Hall's *Senescence* is comparatively under-studied, despite its role in defining a new field of enquiry.

*Senescence* is often cited as the first major work to consider ageing as a field worthy of study in its own right and Hall is considered a forefather of modern gerontology. Hall combines reflection on personal experience with scholarship, admittedly separated by chapters, revealing an inability to separate the 'self' from his professional role, which had strongly shaped his personal identity. We might also infer that Hall viewed his own reflections as a valid form of data in his exploration of old age, as they take up a good deal of words in his

final ‘great work.’ His writing is deeply personal in tone, the text itself serving as a meditation on the meaning, or lack of it, in his own life’s experiences. However, the book reaches far beyond the personal in its recommendations for society in an age of ‘modernity’. As Cole has emphasised, Hall’s thinking was inflected by the ‘religiously sanctioned virtues of independence, self-denial and work’ underpinning his upbringing in rural New England, but over his lifetime, ‘this Protestant, bourgeois ethos was slowly giving way to a secular, scientifically sanctioned culture of health, self-fulfillment, and consumption’ (361).

It is difficult to ignore the presence of ‘Modernity’ in *Senescence* - in terms of Hall’s descriptions of American society, the attitudes and behaviours of the young and the role of ‘science’ in that society. Hall, at the end of his life, sees a ‘brave new world’ but one that he is convinced will miss its opportunity to rationalise its ‘hereditary strengths’ and fulfil its powerful potential. As Robert Bud and Morag Shiach have described, in the early years of the twentieth century, ‘science’ was an encompassing term and common perceptions of societal ‘progress’ included anything from technological innovation to social and educational reform (1). For those of us interested in the twenty-first-century interplay of science and culture, considering the mind-set of turn of the century ‘moderns’ is a fruitful exercise.

### **The Concept of Senescence and Old Age at the Turn of the Century**

G. Stanley Hall was himself a product of a nineteenth-century, Massachusetts farming community with parents of the professional class. The origins of a number of paradoxes of ageing that persist to the present day, have been located by historians in the cultural currents of post-Civil War America. For this article, we have drawn on three particularly insightful overviews of cultural and social representations of old age over the long nineteenth century. These include Achenbaum’s 1978 history - *Old Age in the New Land* – a study of ageing in America from 1790 to the 1970s. We also consult Chase’s more recent (2009) study of old age in Victorian England which draws on a wide variety of sources from social statistics to the works of authors such as Charles Dickens in order to paint a vivid picture of ageing in England at that time. Finally, Charise’s (2020) *Aesthetics of Senescence: Aging, Population and the Nineteenth-Century British Novel* provides important insights into the perspective of older writers at the time, which informed our reading of *Senescence* and our analysis of Hall as an older male writer of that period.

Despite coming at the topic from different starting points, historian-turned gerontologist Achenbaum, and literary scholars, Chase and Charise, all identified a dissonance between old age as a personal, lived experience and old age as a social category emerging in this period. As Achenbaum has noted, in Hall’s lifetime, a discourse that posited ‘solutions’ to the ‘problems’ of old age took hold in academic circles. This shift ‘took place at the interface of cultural assumptions and statistical realities’ (Achenbaum, 125). This phenomenon is well expressed by Chase who quotes an 1881 essay for *Fraser’s*, entitled ‘Concerning the Cheerfulness of the Old’, which explains one of the central paradoxes of old age – that chronological age is rarely a reliable indicator of health at the individual level:

For the present let it be accepted that a man between forty and fifty is growing old. Between fifty and sixty he is somewhat advanced in life. Between sixty and seventy

he is old...But here the idiosyncrasy is everything. It all depends on the individual man. (*Fraser's* qtd. in Chase, 4).

Social statistics allow us to see the general picture of how a population is ageing, but they offer few insights into why some people make the venerable age of eighty while others do not. This tension between the randomness of ageing at the individual level and the sense that we can generalize about older people or even birth cohorts continues to occupy gerontologists even today.

By tracing the development of narratives of ageing during that period, it is possible to gain insight into the complex interaction between culture and 'science' in the construction of societal attitudes to the old. The term 'senescence' is mentioned by many authors of that time. Some refer to Hall's work directly, or to its antecedents in the work of earlier writers. For instance, Achenbaum argues that 'The significance of Hall's proposition lies not in what he said, but rather in its underlying assumption that older Americans could improve their situations by mobilizing their own resources and potential' (118). Chase examines 'the elusiveness of senescence as an experience and social performance' (6). As we will discuss below, this same elusiveness is apparent in Hall's reflections on old age, his narrative failing to explain the precise benefits of the aged wisdom he promotes. Charise employs the term 'senescence' for its 'evocative interdisciplinary life-course of growing older' with a particular focus on the capacity of the concept to capture the paradox of ageing which can be both public and private, individual and societal and positive and negative (xli). The encompassing quality of this term has proved very useful in our analysis for just the same reasons – 'ageing is never this, or that alone' (Charise, 143).

The sense of loss and the decline that emerges after adolescence, through mid-life and then old age, is captured by this word, senescence, the loss of vitality, health and status. As Charise has eloquently discussed, the legacy of Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834), the influential cleric and early demographer is still felt in gerontology and demography to this day. By 'introducing the concept of "population" as a character into the cultural landscape in the early years of the [nineteenth] century [Malthus] helped reconceive older age as a biopolitical stage of life' (Charise, xxiv). Indeed, she identifies the long nineteenth century as a period that produced a raft of intellectual works that are immediately pertinent to age, the most notable being 'Malthus's *Essay*... and Charles Darwin's theorization of natural selection' (Charise, 148). By the end of the century, there is a clearer sense of 'the "elderly subject" as a category in medical and sociological research, a late-century effect of the developing discipline of gerontology' (Chase, 6). Hall's own career developed and flourished in this same period and his identification of life stage as a valuable object of study for the new field of genetic psychology owes much to these works.

In nineteenth-century writings, we see the paradoxes of old age as something to celebrate, enjoy but also to dread and endure. From the perspective of social science, this was the period when we began to see the 'science' of social statistics (for example, Charles Booth, see Chase for a full discussion of his work) and biological knowledge about senescence and the physiological changes that accompany old age begin to be understood. Emerging social scientific disciplines brought a new sense of certainty to matters of psychology, economics and society. These new fields of scholarly enquiry were heavily applied in their emphasis and often led to interventions in social policy (Cravens, 185; Kohlman, 12; Brown 3-4). Social

statistics provided the evidence to produce public policy, as detailed in Chase's account of Booth and the Pensions Bill in Victorian England (240). Although, in both Britain and America, it seems that age discrimination and the de-valuing of old age preceded the large increases in older people as a proportion of the population, which did not emerge until the mid-twentieth century (Achenbaum, 59; Chase, xx). In Hall's work we can trace the categorization of age and old people as 'the elderly' a de-humanising mass, allowing those in charge of budgets to decide that 'we are too many' (Lively, 15), at least according to the 'decline narrative' (Gullette, xviii). The resilience of these negative categorisations of old age lead us to conclude that to investigate narratives of ageing from the past, we must engage with how personal and public concern about old age combine.

So, here we have chosen to focus on three themes in our reading of *Senescence: the last half of life*. We begin with a discussion of Hall's embodiment of old age and the gendered aspects of his conclusions. Next, we draw out a central paradox of ageing in the nineteenth century, the realization that it is both a personal, lived experience but also a social category for analysis, of particular interest to reformers at the time. Finally, we discuss the role of retirement as both a signifier of death and as an emergent socio-economic institution.

### **1. Embodied Ageing: Delaying Decline**

In the opening pages of the book, Hall describes a process of self-examination and reflection that he began upon retirement (viii, xiv). To this end, he conducted a 'physical inventory', 'visited doctors' and undertook a 'hygienic survey', but despite the dispassionate language, this was an intensely personal 'self-survey'. Hall's aim was to understand 'what age was' but he was to do so by considering what it 'meant for himself' (viii). This research project formed part of his wider 'process of reorientation', part investigation and part acclimatisation to the last part of life (Hall, xix). Hall's narration of his experiences of ageing frequently connect personal experience with broader trends determinable by 'scientific' scrutiny. For example, he 'felt impelled ... to write my autobiography and get myself in focus genetically', commenting that this urge was 'natural enough for a psychologist' (Hall, xix). Whilst his findings were not included in *Senescence*, despite being 'laid safely away' for possible future publication, this focus on himself and use of the language of genetics as a means of extrapolating to the wider population is a feature of his writing in this volume (Hall, xix). Hall further justifies a focus on the self by referencing Socrates' argument that self-knowledge is the hardest and last knowledge to come by, thus leveraging the weight of Classical thought to justify the distinctively 'modern' ideas presented in *Senescence* (xiv).

As Twigg and Martin argue, we should be mindful of the relative privilege of our subject when discussing Hall's personal experience and embodied ageing (354). Furthermore, Hall's writing was deeply political. The main objective of *Senescence* was to argue that an 'intelligent and well-conserved senectitude has very important social and anthropological functions in the modern world not hitherto utilized or even recognized' (Hall, 405). Hall proposed that old, white, male intellectuals such as himself had much wisdom, or capacity for 'synthesis' at their disposal, capacity that this 'very complex age' desperately required (405). Hall sees these older men as having the ability to see the pattern amidst the chaos, to stand back in order see the whole, and to, ultimately, offer an answer to the questions of the day.

Although, tellingly, Hall fails to provide tangible examples of such synthesis, so the concept feels quite abstract in the text. This high-handedness and arrogance of intellect was a trait already recognised by Hall's critics (Young, 201). As such, Hall was not any old man reflecting on his own hopes and fears, he was a high-profile intellectual who dedicated his life to the study of genetic psychology proposing a route to 'improving' American society (Young, 197; see also Ross).

Illuminating his disgust at his own decline, and his wider sense that genetic inheritance held the key to individuals' societal role and value, the body's messy functionality comes to the fore in this text. Hall comments that the process of sorting and shedding personal possessions had 'many analogies with those by which the body is rid of waste material', describing the result as a 'dumpage' of his life's accumulation (xvii). In this way, his throwing away of books, papers and the most personal of possessions is described as a clarifying process required for clarity of mind, even cleanliness, in the last life stage. His efforts to de-clutter, invoke the body and its disciplining through self-control: 'This riddance of the residue of superfluous printed matter is not unlike anti-fat regimens, which are disagreeable but strengthening' (Hall, xviii). As Thomas Cole has argued, Hall's Victorian moral values of prudence and self-denial form a significant part of this regime of self-cleansing (364). For Hall, self-denial was a key strategy for successfully occupying the older body:

In all of us oldsters the problem of personal hygiene looms up with new dimensions. In our prime we gave little attention to health. The body responded to most of the demands we made upon it. ... But now our credit at the bank of health begins to run low. We must husband our resources lest we overdraw them. (399-400)

However, for all of Hall's concern with self-discipline and the avoidance of the increased 'individuality' of the aged (his belief that old people become more self-absorbed), his narrative is not without sentiment, at times his writing is highly emotional (413). For example, the body – this time after death – makes an appearance in his recollection of disposing of his mother's letters. Having saved a few of her best, he watched the rest 'burn in the grate one solitary spring at evening twilight' Once it was done, Hall 'felt that I had completed a filial function of interment of her remains' (xix). In this way, Hall's narrative faces up to the bodily change that he believes is required by his retirement, and whilst his first step is to divest himself of personal possessions, ultimately, the process anticipates his own dissolution – hoping to delay that process by maintaining as orderly a body and mind as possible.

Hall's writing appears to search for order in the chaos of his own ageing. His discussion of the body – and in allusion to the body – reveals a desperate and urgent need to retain the ageing body's integrity in the face of an inevitable unravelling. He writes about shedding unnecessary possessions like shedding the rolls of fat about his middle and in terms of discharging his bowels. Although it is worth noting that he resists a common trope seen in the work of older male writers described by Segal as 'the narcissistic mortification when the penis "let them down"; post-Viagra, "erectile dysfunction disorder" is the "illness" this feeling has spawned' (33). However, Hall's work is brimful of gender stereotypes often directly relating to the decline of sexual activity in older age. He contrasts his male experiences with a caricatured description of female experience. In Hall's narrative, women's ageing acts as a foil for his own idealized version of productive, intellectual and male ageing:

Thus, woman is older than man in the same sense that the child is older than the adult, because her qualities are more generic and she is nearer to and a better representative of the race than he and also in that she sublimates sex earlier and more completely, entering the outer shadows of senectitude in the thirties. (389)

Hall discusses the advantages and disadvantages of what he regards as women's inherent characteristics (for example, their urge to care for others) in relation to the process of ageing. He is concerned that sexual desire ought to diminish for the ageing man, and observes that this happens earlier and more naturally for women:

The sexes approximate each other in both traits and features as they grow old and thus if we can no longer love women sensually, we have a new appreciation of the eternally feminine, its intuitive qualities, and its more general and moral interests. Old women acquire a new power of sensing things from man's point of view and hence companionship between old men and women may become a noble surrogate for carnal love. (Hall, 394-5)

However, for all the positives possible for companionship, Hall invokes an age-old pejorative in his assertion: 'Youth is her glory and she has more comeliness to lose than man, who can, however, never quite rival the hag in ugliness' (387). Thus, in this first work of 'science' dedicated to the last half of life, we see the figure of the 'hag' make her inevitable appearance.

*Senescence* is much more of a treatise on the life of the man and his narrative, influenced by the time he lived in, than it is a text bearing witness to a false consciousness that we must shake off. Contemporary writings of older women on the subject of ageing are often political and the focus is intersectional exclusion (see Segal, 31; Lively, 16). The aspirations of these writings are a far cry from the social realities of the nineteenth century where Chase reports, in England at least, 'shutting up old women' in institutions was the norm (Chase, 14). In literature of the period, the very sight of old women is used to remind readers of the 'problem' of old age:

although shunted to the social margins, the old woman remained figuratively pervasive. She is the outsider who stays the strong British arm, the ghost who depletes resources, the phantom whose growing numbers ominously swell census reports and warn of a great social problem in the making. (Chase, 17)

For Hall, the challenge is to resist a very new form of exclusion, which is his marginalization from a high status position that has, in hindsight, been more privileged than he realised. In many ways, Hall appears to be suffering from the ill effects of internalised ageism, the tendency for negative views of old age to reflect back onto the viewer, once he is old enough to recognise himself as belonging to that category of 'elderly' (Laslett, 97).

The biological determinism that underpins much of Hall's commentary places the aged physical body at the centre of his understanding of human ageing. This facet of his work represents one of the major contributions of gerontology as a discipline and is not something that can be easily discarded. Though, as feminist gerontologists have shown, old age is, itself, feminized as retirement requires men and women to withdraw into domestic space and failing



bodies pose challenges to various forms of masculinity (Hurd Clarke). In Hall's claims for the benefits of an intellectual 'synthesis' only possible in old age, he casts a Utopian vision of 'graybeards' leading the frenetic, youth-obsessed twentieth century to the zenith of its potential:

What the world needs is a kind of higher criticism of life and all its institutions to show their latent beneath their patent value by true supermen who, like Zarathustra, are old, very old, with the sapience that long life alone can give. We need prophets with vision who can inspire and also castigate, to convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment. ... Otherwise humanity will remain splendid but incomplete. (411)

The uncomfortable relationship that Hall experiences with his own ageing body is visible in twenty-first-century anti-ageing movements, revealing the deep cultural roots of narratives of aged decline. We refer to this again later, in the section identifying how retirement and obsolescence of older workers became an important aspect of early twentieth-century ageing. Next, we examine the second relevant realisation of nineteenth-century scholars – that old age is both a personal experience and a social category.

## **2. Old Age as a personal experience and a social category**

As Achenbaum has argued, Americans between the Revolutionary wars 'would have been surprised to learn that the elderly as a group would be described one day as roleless and unproductive persons who inevitably and willingly disengage from active life' (9). Where previously wisdom was valued and old people were often viewed as 'Guardians of Virtue' who served others (Achenbaum, 17-19), they were gradually made redundant and old age came to be seen as something to dread, on a personal level. Perhaps most interesting is the early work of Booth and Beatrice Webb in the British context (see Thane, 233) and the early social statistics of William Barton in America, whose works and campaigns established old age as a social category with implications for the rest of society, particularly in terms of costs (Chase, 10). The dissonance between the general belief of Victorians that 'ageing now occurred as a mass event that could scarcely be solved one case at a time' allowed the significance of social statistics to emerge (Chase, 86). In the British context, Booth's work on poverty made a clear-cut connection between old age and poverty, maintaining that old age, in and of itself, was enough to drive a person into poverty. The result, in Booth's England of the nineteenth century, was that two thirds of occupants of the workhouse were aged 60 or over (Chase, 5). The conclusion was now reached that some people were poor *because* they were old.

The situation in England contrasted with America where, Achenbaum reports, the century began with Barton using 'Tables of Longevity' to demonstrate the greater life expectancy of Americans and to advertise and endorse the 'New Land' as healthier than many European countries (Achenbaum,12). In America, there was a particular focus on the role of diet, exercise and personal ambition in the maintenance of good health through virtuous habits (Achenbaum, 15). This later translated into lower numbers of older people making claims for financial aid in America as compared to Europe (Achenbaum, 85). Hareven reports that

towards the end of the nineteenth century, a shift from concerns with increasing longevity were replaced with a focus on the physiological changes of ageing, through the concept of senescence (120). The American paradox of old age as a stage of life to be simultaneously dreaded and admired continued well up until the time that Hall was writing first *Adolescence* (1904) and later *Senescence* (1922). Some of the earlier positive views of old age as ‘the culmination of life’, when mixed with Darwinian notions of the survival of the fittest, produced a confused and contradictory set of messages. Older people were simultaneously admired for their resilience and fortitude while being generally denigrated for the diseases they carried and the obsolescence of their knowledge (Achenbaum, 39).

Hall experiences senescence, not as a slow and gradual withdrawal, but as a short, sharp shock. He explains that the sudden nature of experiencing decline is felt by both genders, but differently by women. Hall’s perception of the human life course is much more rigid, focusing on loss, decline, and even recognising mid-life as a ‘dangerous age’ where hopes can be lost:

Both sexes realize that they face the bankruptcy of some of their youthful hopes, and certain temperaments make a desperate, now-or-never effort to realize their extravagant expectations and are thus led to excesses of many kinds, while other capitulate to fate, lose heart and perhaps even lose the will-to-live’ (2).

Losing the will to live is a recurrent theme throughout the book. There are numerous references to suicide (e.g. 9; 17; 46; 59; 89; 130; 201; 203; 229; 262; 439). In most cases, suicide is presented as a socially acceptable solution for those who do not wish to face the downfall and obsolescence that is old age. This premise must at least in part be based on the clear belief of Hall and his contemporaries that there is nothing to be achieved, enjoyed or celebrated past the age of 40, much less past the age of 60. It is also worth noting, that over Hall’s lifetime he had abandoned the religious beliefs of his upbringing and adhered to an atheist outlook. In Chapter III: Literature By and On the Aged he cites the novel of Anthony Trollope *The Fixed Period* which envisages a college of old men who can resort to chloroform as an appropriate solution for those who do not wish to see old age through, a kind of suicidal care home (130-132). Again, there is a deep-seated disdain for old age and older people at the heart of Trollope’s novel which concludes that sexagenarians are not just a harmless drain on resources, but rather, are responsible for great mistakes:

As it can be maintained that all the great advances have come from men under forty, so the history of the world shows that a very large proportion of the evils may be traced to the sexagenarians nearly all the great mistakes politically and socially, all of the worst poems, most of the bad pictures, a majority of the bad novels, and not a few of the bad sermons and speeches’ (Trollope qtd. in Hall, 4).

Hall concedes that Trollope’s plan for compulsory suicide at the age of 67 and a half does not come to fruition because it was never supported by the women and those who supported it when young, changed their minds as they aged. Nevertheless, he is certain that ‘the misery, uselessness, troublesomeness and often obstructiveness of old age still remain’ and so ‘something like this must surely sometime be’ (132).

It is worth noting that Charise sees *The Fixed Period* as a lens offering clarity on the ‘perceived problems of an aging population and that of the aging writer’ (144). Chase is

attracted to *The Fixed Period* for its representation of the central paradox of old age in the nineteenth century – the horror at the disease and decline of old age and the subsequent struggle to provide for it (98). Trollope's novel allows us to see how institutionalised ageism, through the narrative of demographic burdens, can be internalised and acted upon by older people themselves. This phenomenon offers some insight into the difficulties that older writers (particularly older male writers) experience in trying to separate their own personal experiences of ageing from the negative narratives of old age. They often resist the label 'elderly' for fear of being added to the category which is classed as a 'useless burden' in public debates on ageing and older people at the time.

The trope of old age as preparing for the ultimate exit begins with the institution of retirement, which for men like Hall, constituted considerable loss of social status, so this is where we now turn our attention.

### **3. The beginning of retirement as a socio-economic institution**

The nineteenth century was a time of important systemic change in social and economic life. In both Britain and America, the century saw the transformation of life from rural to urban, and from agrarian to industrial (Achenbaum, 114). This did not happen overnight, but over the course of the century, more people moved from living in multi-generational households in rural areas to living in smaller family units in urban centres, often in the shadow of large factories. This change, the inexorable, slow and unfolding shift towards 'Modernity' affected more than people's location and type of work; it fundamentally altered the relationship between people and their labour. Whereas at the end of the eighteenth century people may have worked in small groups, as artisans, becoming expert wood carvers, stonemasons or seamstresses, now they worked in large-scale factories where the tasks involved in making one chair or basket were fragmented into many smaller jobs, each performed by an individual worker. This transformation of the workplace changed the value ascribed to different forms of work, particularly in terms of who did the work. This had a direct implication on the status of older people in the workplace. A lifetime's work experience on the farm or as an artisan maker in the city, previously seen as vital to survival in colonial cultures like America, was no longer viewed as high value. The shift in focus towards vitality and physical energy, and away from wisdom and skill, meant that workers could be made redundant earlier, in some cases leading to the complete degradation and dismissal of older people, first as workers and later because of their becoming 'dependent.' By the end of the century, it was apparent 'that an increasing number of firms appreciated the need to establish some sort of policy to remove older workers from the labour force' (Achenbaum, 49). Quadagno's 1982 study of ageing in early industrial societies cuts to the chase: 'retirement is initiated as a social substitute for death' (85).

Having described his experience of extracting himself from his professional and institutional life and roles as a university founder and professor, Hall equates his retirement with social death:

Thus, I am rather summarily divorced from my world, and it might seem at first as if there was little more to be said of me save to record the date of my death--and we all know that men who retire often die soon afterwards. (p. xii)

The increasing pace and challenge of modern, industrial society permeates Hall's work. As a scientist, Hall would have seen himself in the forefront of the 'progress' brought by this changing, 'modern' world. Indeed, ideas about science, modernity and progress were inextricably linked in this era and these interconnections permeated cultural production (Bud and Shiach, 4-6). Hall writes with a real sense of urgency, as his society moves forward at a faster and faster pace, he worries about where its feet are placed and who decides the direction of travel. In the second decade of this new 'modern' American century, Hall feared the worst for old age – that it would suffer the combined insults of a state sanctioned age of retirement and the stigma of poverty and chronic ill-health (Cole, 362). He feared that in the poor state of the 'elderly', America might see its own reflection as a maturing but declining civilization. His work shows a sharp awareness of the general view in America that 'Modern conditions' increasingly 'required youth, not age, to assume the roles of advancing society and putting life into perspective' (Achenbaum, 51).

Retirement looms large in *Senescence* as the text is imbued with the significance of Hall's career as a 'genetic psychologist.' His narrative lacks chronology or structure, perhaps due to the loss of professional status, which provided the narrative structure for his life before retirement. The centrality of Hall's 'scientific'-self overwhelms his own narrative, which loses coherence in his groping for a meaning in an experience (retirement) he does not really embrace. At this juncture in his life, Hall is searching for a narrative to make sense of his own and other people's ageing.

*Senescence* contains some passages, which could be said to identify old age as 'obsolescence' (Achenbaum, 55). In reviewing his own papers and old lecture notes, he bemoans their loss of pertinence and importance:

And how many special themes in my field, once central, have lapsed to secondary importance or become obsolete! Such breaks with the past, which psychology regards as analogues of a catharsis that relieves constipation, have a certain insurance value not only against ultra-conservatism but against the inveterate tendency of the old to hark back to past stages of life. (Hall, p. xix)

Despite his palpable upset at the redundancy of work that was once vivid, exciting and – crucially - recognised, he tries to understand these 'breaks with the past' as important to his discipline but he does so with a less-than-lofty reference to the 'catharsis that relieves constipation'. Again, 'dumpage' is on Hall's mind as he prunes a lifetime of material accretion. Hall's feelings about his retirement are conflicted by his personal experience of being dumped with his more scientific view that retirement is an important process for ensuring the continued development of a productive and improved human race. In short, he becomes a victim of the masculine, age-based gender norms that had provided him with the benefits of white, male privilege earlier in the life course.

## **Conclusions and Reflections**

*Significance of Hall is in the underlying assumptions in his work*

If Hall's life is a story, then his reflections on himself in *Senescence* can only be described as an Afterword, the text exhibiting the signs of what has been described as 'narrative foreclosure' (Randall and Kurshid, n.p.). The ultimate narrative foreclosure is to end one's life, and suicide is a theme that runs through *Senescence*. Charise (146) recognizes elder suicide as a phenomenon recorded in literature as far back as the seventeenth century. It is also worth asking whether the prevalence of death in life at the time, as a consequence of both the Great War (1914-18) and the Spanish flu epidemic (1918) may have made discussions of death, particularly around the giving up of one's life for the greater good, a popular position to take in this period.

Perhaps we should not judge Hall too harshly for struggling to offer a clear and compelling narrative because in the status of academic 'lone wolf' he lacked the 'social nature of personal narrative' the 'co-authoring' that is required to make a narrative coherent (Cruikshank, 354). Hall also lacked the humility to create a life story as an act of reconciliation (Randall and Kurshid, n.p.). The inability to construct a meaningful story of one's life is something that has been identified in other male narratives of older age. Chase reports how Booth suffered similar delusions of omnipotence when he 'assumed a carefully constructed persona of a male narrator whose scientific knowledge of a class would shed light on "darkness"' (Chase, 243). We believe that the masculinist narrative open to Hall is extremely narrow, there is only one character – Hall himself - with a few grotesques and a reference to his mother representing the entire experience of human ageing from the female viewpoint. When we use a man like Hall to discuss issues of identity and subjectivity (Twigg and Martin, 353), we have to recognize that this is an odd thing to do because he is the antithesis of the kind of individual that the cultural turn calls on us to engage with. He is not marginalized, quite the contrary, but he feels marginalized by his own ageing.

By taking a closer look at ageing in the past, and by spending some time in the company of Hall and his associates as well as the scholars who have invested years in researching the period, we have learned this: narratives of ageing in the nineteenth century reveal it as both a personal experience and a societal issue. This is what makes it so exceptionally challenging to experience and so endlessly fascinating to study. Hall's *Senescence* offers the reader a complex and, often, meandering narrative which is comprised of personal reflection and public manifesto. Whilst Hall's reflections on his own life are alive with intimate detail, his proposals for society are oddly intangible. As such, it is the underlying assumptions of his work - his belief that ageing equals decline and loss - that still hold sway in most mainstream gerontology research.

In the process of writing this article, we have discussed the reasons why we think the personal is so prominent in the book, drawing on some commentaries on Hall's earlier work *Adolescence*, and on what is known about his personal life at the time of writing (see Young, Arnett), though a detailed discussion was beyond the scope of this article. We also used our feminist training and our experience of living in a patriarchal society to cast a critical eye on Hall's 'masculinist' narrative, asking whether and how it is appropriate for white, middle-class men of this period to speak about 'women' or 'older people' in generalized terms as if they belong to some undifferentiated mass. We are particularly mindful of the fact that Hall had limited experience of anything other than a life enjoying the many privileges of being a white man of science in the long nineteenth century.

In the final analysis, we conclude that Hall, despite his best efforts at scientific research, rationality and objective reasoning, fails to convince us of his pitch for a productive old age. However, we wonder whether his inadvertent legacy, is not the establishment of senescence as the enemy of productive men, but rather a deep insight into the perpetual human battle between ageing as a trial of experience, versus ageing as a 'social problem' (Achenbaum, 5; Charise, xxv). Certainly, since *Senescence* was published, the work of gerontology has been to view ageing as a challenge to be overcome by technology, by medical science or by some other endeavour, facilitated by humanity's capacity for innovation and adaptation. Hall shows us that old age (and death) are part of life, and that as much can be learned from the *experience* of living through old age as can be from the study of it as a set of conditions, maladies or statistics that apply to someone else.

## Works Cited

- Achenbaum, W. Andrew. *Old age in the new land*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978. Print.
- Achenbaum, W. Andrew. "Looking backward while gazing ahead: an historian of aging reflects on time's borders." *Societies*. 7:9 (2017): 1-8. Web.
- Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen and Cravens, Hamilton (eds). G. Stanley Hall's *Adolescence: A centennial reappraisal*, *History of Psychology*, 9:3 (2006).
- Barton, William. *Observations on the Progress of Population and the Probabilities of Duration of Human Life in the United States of America*. Philadelphia: Aitken, 1791.
- Brown, JoAnne. *Definition of a profession: the authority of metaphor in the history of intelligence testing, 1890-1930*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992. Print.
- Bud, Robert and Morag Shiach. "Being Modern: introduction". *Being Modern: the cultural impact of science in the early twentieth century*. Ed. Robert Bud, Paul Greenhalgh, Frank James and Morag Shiach. London: UCL Press, 2018. 1-19. Print.
- Charise, Andrea. "The future is certain: manifesting Age, Culture, Humanities." *Age, Culture, Humanities*. 1 (2014): 11-16. Web.
- Charise, Andrea. *The aesthetics of senescence: aging, population, and the nineteenth-century British novel*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2020. Print.
- Chase, Karen. *The Victorians and old age*. Oxford: OUP, 2009. Print.
- Chynoweth Burnham, John. "Psychiatry, Psychology and the Progressive Movement." *American Quarterly*. 12:3 (1960): 457-65. Print.
- Cole, Thomas R. "The prophecy of *Senescence*: G. Stanley Hall and the reconstruction of old age in America." *The Gerontologist*. 24:4 (1984): 360-6. Print.
- Cravens, Hamilton. "History of the Social Sciences." *Osiris*. 1 (1985): 183-207. Print.
- Cruikshank, J. *Life lived like a story: Life Story of Three Yukon Native Elders*. US: University of Nebraska Press.
- Gullette, Margaret Morganroth. *Ending ageism, or how not to shoot old people*. Rutgers University Press, 2017.
- Hall, G. Stanley. *Adolescence: its psychology and its relations to physiology, anthropology, sociology, sex, crime, religion and education*. vols I, II. London: Sidney Appleton, 1904. Print.
- Hall, G. Stanley. *Senescence: the last half of life*. New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1924. Web.

- Hareven, T. "Changing images of ageing and the social construction of the life course." *Images of aging: cultural representations of later life*. Ed. Mike Featherstone and Andrew Wernick. London: Routledge, 1995. Print.
- Katz, S. "What is Age Studies?" *Age, Culture, Humanities*. 1 (2014): 17-23. Web.
- Kohlman, Michael. "The Sociological roots of Eugenics: demographic, ethnographic and educational solutions to the racial crises in Progressive America." *One World in Dialogue*. 3:2 (2015): 12-27. Print.
- Laslett, Peter. *A fresh map of life: the emergence of the third age*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989. Print.
- Lively, Penelope. *Ammonites and leaping fish: a life in time*. London: Fig Tree, 2013. Print.
- Macnicol, John. *The politics of retirement in Britain, 1878-1948*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Print.
- Oro-Piqueras, M. and S. Falcus. "Approaches to old age: perspectives from the twenty-first century." *European Journal of English Studies*. 22:1 (2018): 1-12. Print.
- Parry, M. "G. Stanley Hall: Psychologist and Early Gerontologist in Hall, G Stanley *Senescence: the last half of life*. 1922." *American Journal of Public Health*. 96:7 (2006): 1160-2. doi:10.2105/ajph.96.7.1160. Web.
- Quadagno, J. *Aging in Early Industrial Society: Work, Family, and Social Policy in Nineteenth-Century England*. New York: Academic Press, 1982.
- Thane, Pat, "'An Unfailing Zest for Life': Images and self-images of older people in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries". *Old age in English history: past experiences, present issues*. Ed. Pat Thane. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. 259-85. Print.
- Twigg, Julia and Martin, W. "The challenge of Cultural Gerontology." *The Gerontologist*. 55:3 (2015): 353-9. Print.
- Randall, W. and K. Khursid. "Narrative development in later life: a novel perspective." *Age, Culture, Humanities*. 3 (2016): no page numbers available. Web.
- Ross, D. G. *Stanley Hall: the psychologist as prophet*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1972. Print.
- Segal, L. *Out of time: the pleasures and perils of ageing*. London: Verso, 2013. Print.
- Trollope, Anthony, *The Fixed Period*. NY: Phantasma Press, 1885. Web.
- Young, J. L. 'G. Stanley Hall, Child Study, and the American Public' *The Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 177:6, (2016): 195-208, DOI: [10.1080/00221325.2016.1240000](https://doi.org/10.1080/00221325.2016.1240000). Web.