

# Screening the Tracing and Stressing of Gerontology: A Study of Lord Alfred Tennyson's *Tithonus*

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## Abstract:

The term 'gerontology' basically suggests the study of old age. The phenomenon of gerontology reflects a universal approach. The concept and study of biological gerontology is not a newer one for the human world, while the study of socio-psychological gerontology is a comparatively newer field. The study of socio-psychological gerontology can be further analysed in a better way through one socio-psychological theoretical approach – disengagement theory, which telescopes old age in negative terms. There are a lot of older persons throughout the world who are in solidarity with the limelight of this negatively connoted disengagement theory and they are greater in numbers as compared with the psychologically positive bent of older persons of the entire world. The perspective of disengagement theory can be perceived in a more refined way through the domain of literature which ultimately reflects and reinforces our society. Lord Alfred Tennyson through his titular character Tithonus in his poem has framed the concept of disengagement theory in a more concrete way.

**Keywords:** gerontology, universal approach, disengagement theory, domain of literature, Tithonus.

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“And no Grand Inquisitor has in readiness such terrible tortures as has anxiety, and no spy knows how to attack more artfully the man he suspects, choosing the instant when he is weakest, nor knows how to lay traps where he will be caught and ensnared, as anxiety knows how, and so sharp witted judge knows how to interrogate, to examine the accused as anxiety does, which never lets him escape, neither by diversion nor by noise, neither at work nor at play, neither by day nor by night.” (Kierkegaard, 1844, as cited in Stossel, 2013).

This above mentioned statement is woven with all the negative connotations of old age.

The word ‘gerontology’ derives from the Greek word ‘geront’ meaning old man. This term ‘gerontology’ is a global phenomenon and so it is to be found in all cultures. It is an umbrella term as it definitely has an interdisciplinary approach, the inclusion of which can be found from biology to psychology, society, literature, art, music and so on. Old age is generally about the issue of an apocalyptic physical and psychological concern. Thus, aging can be defined as a process in which a paradigm shift can be marked from an independent, able bodied jovial person to a dependent senior citizen with a gradually dilapidated physical condition along with a crooked psychology. Montaigne has defined aging as a ‘strange metamorphosis’. The concept of aging mainly refers to the physical changes a person witnesses in his or her physical body. According to disengagement theory, aging is an inevitable biological and chronological process in which stage an old person (sixty-five years is generally considered to be the beginning of old age) generally wishes to withdraw or disengage himself or herself from all the spheres of society and its norms and this process is considered to be a natural one. As there is not a single generic cause of aging, so effect. However, another important term associated with the field of gerontology and the concept of aging is ‘senescence’ which refers to the gradual deterioration of physiological functions before a final deletion in the form of death.

Social and psychological aspects of gerontology is a major drive in the field of aging. Probing into the particular question: “What does it mean to be old?”, invites the interest of gerontological critics of humanities along with the biological ones. Chronological aging is a constant process of physical transformation from a better towards a worse condition. In case of biological aging, physical abilities and attributiveness of youth begin to loose and thereby lose in old age. There is no specific yardstick to measure or decide if the decision to disengage oneself from everything in society is a rational thinking or not. Disengagement theory was based on the negative attitude and crooked psychology of an older person regarding his or her status as an older one. Thus, this theory promotes the concept of subjective disposition in old

age and thereby highlights negative aspects of old age. The concept of old age and the differentiation of it from the young stage of life not only have physical implications, also have psychological implications. One of the central causes of depression in old age lies in the deterioration of health condition along with a loss of independent physical activities of youth. The final destination of disengagement is death. According to Tobin and Neugarten, disengagement is related to a lesser life satisfaction. Thus, disengagement theory talks of total role loss of an older person. However, according to disengagement theory life satisfaction is the best yardstick of social and psychological adjustment in old age.

The concept and study of social gerontology are comparatively newer one across the globe which has been becoming increasingly important. Social gerontology has its introduction as a discipline in the late 1940s, after the World War-II. The concept of gerontology now a days takes into account also health and overall life style. One of the primary mottos of gerontology is to uphold the Human's ontological struggle for survival. Old age for most of the older people appears to be a burdensome one. With the gradual approaching towards aging various skills of a person begins to decrease as a continual process along with the gradual losing of authority over their own bodies. At this stage a person begins to lose all the freedoms and independence of young age. Thus, in old age, generally people of any society, become biologically and psychologically marginalized characters. The term 'elderly' signifies frailty, disability, senility. In all the societies of all ages and of all the countries across the globe, younger generation generally associates all the negative physical and psychological attributes to be an integral part of old age, while in most of the cases disregard all the positive entitlements (if any). In other words, older generation in society is generally considered (by younger generation) as the socially segregated 'Other'. American journalist Walter Lippmann in his 1922 book *Public Opinion* opined that people notice a trait that focuses on a certain form and "fill in the rest of the picture by means of the stereotypes we carry about in our heads." (Lippmann, 1922, p.89). Again, Margaret Gullette in her *Declining to Decline: Cultural Combat and the Politics of the Midlife* has opined: "The basic idea we need to absorb is that whatever happens in the body, human beings are aged by culture first of all." (Gullette, 1997, as cited in Hamilton, 2011). However, the progression of chronological age is straight forward and irreversible. It is generally assumed that in old age most of the older people like to disengage themselves either consciously or subconsciously from the full pace of societal networks. Giacomo Leopardi has rightly said: "Old age is the supreme evil, because it deprives

us of all the pleasures, leaving us only the appetite for them, and it brings with it all the sufferings.” (Costa et al. 2016).

Social and psychological institutionalization of gerontology within the framework of literature is one of the important and relevant areas of discussion. The study of gerontology in relation to literature may be regarded as how the concept and facts of old age are perceived by older characters in literature. Anne M. Wyatt-Brown has highlighted in the first and second editions of the *Handbook* that gerontology in the field of literature has been developed since 1970s. Sociologist Mike Hepworth has considered literature as an imaginative resource to understand the varieties of meanings of aging. Linton has highlighted seven universal age statuses – infant, male child, female child, male adult, female adult, male elder and female elder. However, old age has been described by Mr. Bernstein in *Citizen Kane* as “The only disease... that you don’t look forward to being cured of.” (Welles, 1941, 1:59:00). Macbeth also upholds the concept of old age in negative terms: “I have lived long enough. My way of life/ Is fall’n into the sere, the yellow leaf...” (Shakespeare, Trans. 1997, 5.3.22-23). The titular King Lear has been labelled as: “... poor old man/ As full of grief as age; wretched in both!” (Shakespeare, Trans. 2007, 2.4.68-69). Again, in the play *As You Like It*, Melancholy Jaques has termed old age as: “... second childishness and mere oblivion, / Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.” (Shakespeare, Trans. 2000, 2.7.165-166). Again, in “Sonnet 73” Shakespeare has portrayed old age in negative terms: “In me thou seest the glowing of such fire/That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,...” (Shakespeare, 2010, p.257). Not only Shakespeare, also Matthew Arnold in his poem “Growing Old” has harped on the negative aspect of old age, where he has described the loss of physical beauty, lustre, strength of youth in old age: “It is to spend long days/ And not once feel that we were ever young;/ Deep in our hidden heart/ When we are frozen up within, and quite/ The phantom of ourselves,...” (Arnold, 1867). W. B. Yeats has defined an aged person in his poem “Sailing to Byzantium” as: “... a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick,...” (Yeats, 1927). Thomas Hardy in his poem “I Look Into My Glass” upholds a kind of oscillation between a youthful spirit with a growing old body. In his poem “Youth and Age” Coleridge has drawn a darker picture of old age: “Dew drops are gems of morning,/ But the tears of mournful eve!/ Where no hope is, life’s a warning/ That only serves to make us grieve/ When we are old:” (Coleridge, 1823-32).

According to James Dowd, as a person’s health declines with age, he or she loses status and power and this phenomenon is associated with aging and it becomes a kind of advertisement for disadvantageous position of an older person in case of power and independence. The term

'aging' is generally associated with the physical decline, chronic illness and a failure to thrive and this perspective has been superbly embodied by Tennyson through his character of Tithonus, who in his old age is constantly aware of the shortness of his physical strength, vitality, energy and lustre and is no doubt perfectly able to perceive the fact that due to the loss of these, he is in a decrepit, dilapidated situation in spite of having bestowed with the blessings of immortality of age by Aurora, the Goddess of Dawn. For Tithonus, old age appears to be like a 'trauma', filled with a sense of nadir of despair, loss, pain and phenomenon of similar kinds. He explores a stressful mental condition through which he has been passing in his old age. Negative effects of old age are the hindrances from positive self-image, self-worth, self-evaluation and independence needed for a healthy, satisfying, enjoyable life. Thus, the psychological condition of Tithonus in his old age is replete with a sense of nullity which forces him to disengage himself from all the spheres of a full-fledged society. Old age and depression are almost complimentary to each other. In other words, with the process of aging, there also begins a certain kind of mental depression which is the root cause of the decline of mental health in old age. In the poem "Tithonus" the titular character is an epitome of it. He appears to be devoid of the fluid of any kind of positivity or positive psychological performance and this kind of mental depression in case of Tithonus gradually appears to be a chronic one. The objective health of Tithonus has its effects (negative) on his subjective health, thereby making him a vulnerable character. He, in his old age, is in a condition of loneliness and isolation which highlights his psychological impairment to its extreme degree. His life in his old age (both biologically and psychologically) is in a disordered, depressed and dysfunctional state and has been decreasing more as more days pass by. Thus, immortality of old age bestowed by Aurora on Tithonus appears rather than a divine blessing to be something like a curse or real threat for the latter which gradually turns his physical health into a painfully irrelevant one. Tithonus' anxiety, depression and 'phobia' for being old gradually exhibits his decrepit psychological personality. Thus, there is a kind of 'angst' to be observed within the psychology of Tithonus. According to Paul Tillich, a theologian, angst is a reaction quite natural to 'fear of death, conscience, guilt, despair, daily life, etc.' Here, in case of Tithonus, it is about the despair of being physically and chronologically old in his daily life. Paul Tillich's central question is: "Are we safe in some deity's care...?" (Stossel, 2013). This question quite relevantly and meaningfully pertains to the 'existential' condition of Tithonus in his old age as Aurora, the Deity of Dawn, has taken care of Tithonus' prayer of bestowing the blessings of immortality of age on him. Yet in this case, Tithonus is not at all safe by the investment of the blessings of Aurora, as he is devoid of Aurora's 'sweet sounding' blessing of immortality of youth. Charles

Darwin has written in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*: “If we have no hope of relief, we despair.” (1872, as cited in Stossel, 2013). Tithonus also does not have a slight ray of hope of being rescued from his mental agony, stresses and ‘trauma’ of being separated from the immortality of youth and the lustre of it and so he is in a condition of despair and hopelessness. He, due to the gradual ineffectuality of his physical conditions, totally fails to confront the negative stereotypical attributions of old age with courage and with an evergreen youthful spirit. Tithonus’ spiral decline of his physical condition is liable to provide him with a sense of escape from his psychological freedom. Thus, he, in his old age, appears to be like a faraway creature devoid of the din and bustle of mainstream of life force along with a certain kind of threat of loss of physical vivacity. Thus, the physical and psychological burden of old age have been constantly whipping Tithonus, ‘pregnant’ with a sense of being divorced from the equilibrium of physical calibre and mobility of youth. There is no coping strategy in the hands of Tithonus about the stress and ‘trauma’ of the degrading condition of his physical and psychological stature in his old age. That is why Tithonus finally prays from Aurora ‘euthanasia’. Thus, in the character of Tithonus, the readers can easily find out a spiral decline of the level of self-esteem and self-worth. Tithonus along with his progressively deteriorated physical stature is also in a situation which is highly indicative of his psychologically almost ‘extinguished’ character: “Release me and restore me to the ground;/ Thou seest all things, Thou wilt see my grave;” (Tennyson, 1860). Constance Rooke has used the term ‘Vollendungsroman’ (‘winding up’), which highlights the ‘disengagement’ and ‘deconstruction’ of ‘ego’ in old age. Tithonus’ low spirit with a miasma of despair in his old age has been expressed properly through his monologue: “I wither slowly in thine arms, / Here at the quite limit of the world, / A white-hair’d shadow roaming like a dream...” (Tennyson, 1860). Thus, Tithonus, in his old age, psychologically appears to be a proper ‘signifier’ of a terrible feeling of powerlessness (the ‘signified’). In other words, for Tithonus, old age appears to be only in revulsive and disengaged terms. Thus, it may safely be asserted that disengagement theory telescopes a certain kind of demotivated spirit of an older literary person like Tithonus and his monologue clearly reflects that.

Tithonus appears to be a bio-psychologically depressed character in his old age. How the biological and chronological process of aging can affect a character negatively thus has its evidence through the Tennysonian aged character Tithonus. In other words, the character of Tithonus is the accumulation of such negative issues as anxiety, depression, frustration, irritability and so on. Dr. W has rightly asserted: “Man alone, can be happy. But, man, alone,

can be worried and anxious.” (Liddell,1949, as cited in Stossel, 2013). Thus, Tithonus can be considered to be in solidarity with disengagement theory. Palmore has detected nine negative stereotypes about older persons – sick, useless, isolated, depressed, impotent, ugly, senile, mentally ill and poor and the first five epithets can certainly possess the potentiality of defining the character of Tithonus in his old age. Again, Metchnikoff has richly stated: “I think it extremely probable that the scientific study of old age and of death, two branches of sciences that may be called gerontology and thanatology, will bring about great modifications in the course of the last period of life.” (Metchnikoff, 1903, as cited in Maddox et al. 2001). The examination of the mental condition of a person depends on some issues like – general appearance and behaviour, speech and thought processes, mood and affect, mental content, sensorium, intellectual function, insight and judgement and all these issues are in a negative situation in Tithonus in his old age. George and Bearon have suggested four characteristics to be prime in the lives of the older people to judge their quality of life – general health and functioning, life satisfaction, self-esteem and socio-economic status; among which the first three above mentioned can be considered as yardsticks for judging the character of Tithonus. The Rand Medical Outcome Study’s multicome scales of the SF-36 proposed eight concepts – physical functioning, physical role, bodily pain, general health, vitality, social functioning, emotional role and mental health. All these eight concepts can be used as yardsticks to measure and judge the character of Tithonus.

Social and psychological concepts of gerontology uphold the realities of old age. Tithonus is an embodiment of psychological pessimism in his old age. In other words, in his old age Tithonus appears to be psychologically almost dead being biologically segregated from all the positive aspects of life. Actually, subjective psychological evaluation of one’s self in old age by that person himself or herself provides a psychic insight into person (whether positive or negative – in case of Tithonus, it is in negative form). According to Bernard Strehler, a famous gerontologist, with the passing of more time in one’s life, the effects of aging on him or her also become more prominent.

Like the theorization of biological and chronological processes of aging, socio-psychological theorization of aging is also no doubt a necessary one. Disengagement theory has a tremendous effect on the field of gerontology, more specifically on the field of social gerontology. In order to avoid the psychological state like Tithonus, everyone should be prepared mentally before hand for the arrival of old age. Thus, from all the above all discussions it may safely be asserted that the term ‘gerontology’ or ‘aging’ can be regarded as a multifaceted academic discipline due

to its concern not only for biological and chronological processes of aging, also for socio-psychological one.

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