Ars Artium: An International Refereed Research Journal of English Studies and Culture
ISSN: 2319-7889; E-ISSN: 2395-2423
Vol. 14, January 2026, pp. 58-73
Editor-in-chief: Vijay Kumar Roy
https://www.arsartium.org/

Received: 9 July 2025
Reviewed: 15 October 2025
Accepted: 20 October 2025
Published: 30 January 2026

Aging with Meaning: A Gerontological Reading of Mitch Albom's Memoir *Tuesdays with Morrie* and Florian Zeller's Film *The Father*

*Joel George Skariah**

Abstract

This article offers a comparative gerontological analysis of Mitch Albom's memoir *Tuesdays with Morrie* (1997) and Florian Zeller's film *The Father* (2020), exploring how both texts portray the psychological, emotional, and existential dimensions of aging. Drawing upon key theories in gerontology—particularly Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory of development, Robert N. Butler's concept of life review, and Gene D. Cohen's model of creative aging—this study investigates how narrative forms reflect and shape our understanding of old age. *Tuesdays with Morrie* presents the final months of Morrie Schwartz, a retired professor of sociology dying of ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis), who embraces his mortality with grace, emotional wisdom, and a strong sense of purpose. In contrast, *The Father* depicts the inner world of an elderly man grappling with dementia, capturing the gradual erosion of memory, identity, and autonomy.

Together, these works offer contrasting but complementary visions of aging: one characterized by clarity, emotional closure, and intergenerational teaching, and the other by confusion, dependency, and psychological fragmentation. By analyzing the narrative structures, character development, and thematic emphases of each work, this article highlights how aging can be understood not as a singular process but as a diverse and multifaceted human experience. Furthermore, it argues that literature

*Postgraduate Student, Department of English, Madras Christian College, Chennai - 600059, India. Email: joelgeorgejoelgeorgeskariah@gmail.com

© 2026 The Author. Published by Paragon International Publishers for World Association of Authors and Researchers, a Wing of Applied Education and Welfare Foundation®. Open Access Under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence (CC BY 4.0).

and film can serve as powerful tools for promoting empathy toward the elderly, challenging ageist stereotypes, and fostering a deeper public discourse on aging, caregiving, and end-of-life dignity. This interdisciplinary exploration situates narrative as a key medium through which the complexities of aging are articulated, interrogated, and made emotionally resonant for contemporary audiences.

Keywords: Aging, dementia, gerontology, identity, memory

Introduction

Aging is a universal experience that touches every human life, yet it remains one of the most misunderstood and underrepresented stages in contemporary cultural narratives. In a world where youth is idolized and old age is often associated with decline, dependency, and social invisibility, there is a pressing need to revisit and reframe how aging is portrayed. Literature and cinema serve as vital cultural texts that both reflect and influence public perception. Through the lens of gerontology—a multidisciplinary field that studies the biological, psychological, and social aspects of aging—these narratives can be critically examined to reveal how they construct meaning around the final stages of life.

This study undertakes a comparative gerontological analysis of two culturally significant works: Mitch Albom's memoir *Tuesdays with Morrie* (1997) and Florian Zeller's film *The Father* (2020). Both texts, although different in form and tone, place aging at the centre of their narrative concerns and portray it as a deeply complex, emotional, and transformative process. Albom's memoir presents the real-life story of Morrie Schwartz, a retired professor of sociology facing terminal illness. Through a series of candid conversations with his former student, Morrie reflects on life, love, death, and the importance of human connection. Zeller's *The Father*, on the other hand, immerses the viewer into the disoriented consciousness of an elderly man suffering from dementia. In this emotionally charged and psychologically intricate portrayal, the film unravels the fragility of memory, identity, and familial bonds. The significance of comparing these two works lies in their contrasting but complementary representations of old age. While *Tuesdays with Morrie* offers a hopeful and graceful depiction of aging marked by acceptance, wisdom, and intergenerational dialogue, *The Father* confronts the audience with the painful realities of cognitive decline, confusion, and emotional disintegration. Together, they offer a spectrum of experiences that move beyond simplistic binaries of successful or unsuccessful aging.

To ground this exploration, the study draws on several foundational theories in gerontology. Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory of development—particularly his final stage of "Ego Integrity vs. Despair"—provides insight into how individuals evaluate the meaning of their lives in old age. Robert N. Butler's concept of "life review" further highlights the psychological importance of revisiting and making sense of past experiences as a way of achieving closure and self-understanding. Tom Kitwood's concept of personhood in dementia care provides an essential gerontological perspective that bridges the psychological and relational dimensions of aging. In *Dementia Reconsidered: The Person Comes First* (1997), Kitwood critiques the reductionist biomedical model of dementia, arguing that the disease should not be viewed merely as cognitive decline but as a condition deeply influenced by social interaction and emotional environment. Additionally, Gene D. Cohen's model of "creative aging" emphasizes the potential for older adults to engage in meaningful, expressive, and imaginative activities even in the face of physical or cognitive limitations. By applying these theories to both texts, this article aims to illuminate how narrative form—whether written or visual—can serve as a medium for articulating the nuanced experiences of the elderly. In *Tuesdays with Morrie*, the memoir's dialogic structure fosters an intimate space for reflection and philosophical inquiry, reinforcing the idea that aging can be a time of continued growth and teaching. In contrast, *The Father* employs disjointed editing, shifting perspectives, and spatial distortion to convey the interiority of dementia, inviting viewers to not only observe but viscerally experience the protagonist's cognitive collapse. These formal strategies are not merely aesthetic choices but are integral to how the audience understands and empathizes with aging.

Furthermore, this analysis positions narrative as a powerful tool for promoting social awareness and empathy. In societies increasingly affected by the challenges of elder care, chronic illness, and end-of-life decisions, cultural texts like *Tuesdays with Morrie* and *The Father* can reshape public discourse. They challenge ageist stereotypes, highlight the emotional labour of caregiving, and underscore the dignity of those living with age-related conditions. Literature and film, in this regard, become more than entertainment or personal testimony; they are acts of social engagement. The interdisciplinary nature of this study—bridging literary criticism, film analysis, and gerontological theory—underscores its broader relevance. Aging is not solely a biological inevitability; it is a deeply narrative experience. The way we tell stories about growing old reflects not only individual realities but also collective values, fears, and hopes. By juxtaposing a memoir that celebrates emotional wisdom with a

film that portrays psychological fragmentation, this paper calls for a richer, more empathetic understanding of aging as a multifaceted human journey. In conclusion, this seeks to demonstrate that the narratives we construct around old age—through memory, illness, relationships, and death—shape the moral and emotional contours of how society views its aging population. Through the comparative reading of *Tuesdays with Morrie* and *The Father*, this study contends that both texts, despite their differences, urge us to confront aging not as decline but as a narrative terrain filled with meaning, struggle, insight, and humanity.

1. Gerontology and Narrative Arts: A Theoretical Framework

Gerontology, as an interdisciplinary field, addresses the biological, psychological, and sociocultural dimensions of aging. While much gerontological research has traditionally centered on physical decline, healthcare, and demographic shifts, the study of aging through narrative offers a more holistic lens—one that captures the inner lives, emotional landscapes, and existential challenges of the elderly. Literature and film, in particular, humanize statistical abstractions, presenting aging as a deeply personal journey marked by memory, loss, resilience, and the search for meaning. At the core of psychological gerontology lies Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, which outlines eight stages across the human lifespan. The final stage, *Ego Integrity vs. Despair*, is especially relevant to aging studies. According to Erikson, individuals in the twilight of life are tasked with integrating their past into a cohesive narrative, arriving at a sense of completeness and acceptance. Success in this task leads to ego integrity—a feeling of coherence and satisfaction with one's life—whereas failure results in despair, regret, and a fear of death (Erikson 268). This theory provides a powerful interpretive framework for examining *Tuesdays with Morrie*, where Morrie Schwartz consciously engages in reflective dialogues that embody the pursuit of ego integrity.

Complementing Erikson's work is Robert N. Butler's concept of the life review, a psychological process wherein elderly individuals revisit, evaluate, and reinterpret past experiences, Butler argues that the life review is not simply a nostalgic activity but a developmental task that enables the elderly to resolve lingering conflicts, reinforce identity, and prepare for death with a sense of closure (Butler 66). Butler's theory is vividly illustrated in *Tuesdays with Morrie*, where Morrie uses his final conversations with Mitch Albom to conduct a guided review of his life, values, regrets, and beliefs. These conversations are more than reminiscence—they function as an emotional curriculum, transforming personal memory into moral and

philosophical insight. While *Tuesdays with Morrie* exemplifies a positive and conscious engagement with aging, Florian Zeller's *The Father* portrays the disintegration of this narrative coherence. The film demands a different theoretical lens—one grounded in cognitive gerontology and the psychology of dementia. Here, the work of Tom Kitwood becomes essential. In his theory of "personhood in dementia care", Kitwood posits that despite cognitive decline, individuals with dementia retain emotional awareness and deserve relational affirmation. He critiques the "malignant social psychology" that strips dementia patients of identity by focusing solely on deficits (Kitwood 67). Anthony, the protagonist of *The Father*, experiences profound disorientation and existential disintegration, yet moments of emotional truth persist—indicating the enduring presence of personhood even amid cognitive collapse. Moreover, the narrative structure of *The Father*—which mimics Anthony's own confusion by distorting chronology, character identity, and spatial continuity—resonates with cognitive literary theory. The film positions the audience inside the perceptual world of dementia, collapsing the boundary between viewer and sufferer. This aesthetic choice not only dramatizes cognitive aging but also evokes empathy and experiential understanding—a goal shared by narrative gerontology, a subfield that examines how stories contribute to the construction of meaning in old age (Randall and McKim 243).

In contrast to the depiction of cognitive breakdown in *The Father*, Gene D. Cohen's theory of creative aging offers a more optimistic paradigm. In *The Mature Mind*, Cohen identifies four phases of development in later life: midlife reevaluation, liberation, summing-up, and encore. His most relevant stage, the "summing-up phase," involves reflection, storytelling, and a drive to leave a legacy—characteristics embodied by Morrie in his final months (Cohen 67). Cohen asserts that aging can be a period of increased emotional richness, creativity, and contribution to society. *Tuesdays with Morrie* affirms this perspective by presenting Morrie as not only aging with dignity but teaching others how to live more meaningfully. Together, these theories provide a robust framework for interpreting how *Tuesdays with Morrie* and *The Father* articulate different aspects of the aging experience. The former aligns with positive aging models that emphasize resilience, purpose, and relational closure. The latter confronts the traumatic disruptions of dementia, revealing the fragility of memory and identity. Yet both texts engage in what Kathleen Woodward calls "narrative resistance" to ageism, offering stories that re-humanize the elderly and challenge reductive stereotypes (Woodward 149). By integrating gerontological theory with narrative analysis, this article situates *Tuesdays with*

Morrie and *The Father* as vital cultural texts that illuminate the emotional truths of aging. Their contrasting portrayals underscore the dual realities of late life: the potential for wisdom and growth, as well as the vulnerability to loss and fragmentation. Such narratives not only reflect gerontological concerns but also shape public understanding of what it means to age with—or without—meaning.

2. *Tuesdays with Morrie*: Life Review and Emotional Wisdom

Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie* (1997) transcends the genre of memoir, functioning as a collaborative narrative between a dying professor and his former student. It offers profound insight into the existential questions that emerge at the end of life. Through a structured series of intimate conversations, the book documents Morrie Schwartz's journey toward death and, more importantly, his process of meaning-making—a cornerstone of what gerontologists refer to as successful aging. The memoir serves as a narrative enactment of life review, as theorized by Robert N. Butler, and illustrates the emotional and spiritual resources available to individuals who face the challenges of aging with consciousness and grace. The structure of *Tuesdays with Morrie* mirrors a seminar or oral testimony. Each chapter is framed as a weekly "class" on life, with Mitch as the student and Morrie as the teacher. In this pedagogical space, Morrie reflects on key human themes—love, death, family, forgiveness, and aging itself. This ritualized narrative structure not only provides continuity for the reader but also mirrors the gerontological concept of narrative identity, where storytelling serves as a psychological resource for creating coherence out of life's fragmented events (McAdams 100). Morrie does not merely recount his life; he reinterprets it, filters it through his accumulated wisdom, and offers it as a living curriculum to Mitch and, by extension, to readers. From a gerontological perspective, Morrie's journey aligns with Erik Erikson's eighth and final stage of psychosocial development—Ego Integrity vs. Despair. According to Erikson, the primary developmental task in late adulthood involves coming to terms with one's life. Those who can look back with a sense of fulfillment achieve ego integrity, while those who are consumed by regret may fall into despair (Erikson 268). Morrie's reflections on his life, though not devoid of remorse or sorrow, are marked by gratitude, connection, and a deep sense of peace. His relationships, career, and personal philosophy coalesce into a sense of wholeness. He tells Mitch: "The culture we have does not make people feel good about themselves. And you have to be strong enough to say if the culture doesn't work, don't buy it" (Albom 35). Such statements not only convey life wisdom but reveal a coherent worldview—an indication of ego integrity in Eriksonian terms.

Robert N. Butler's concept of life review also provides a powerful analytical lens. Butler defined life review as "a naturally occurring, universal mental process characterized by the progressive return to consciousness of past experiences, and, particularly, the resurgence of unresolved conflicts" (Butler 72). In Morrie's case, these resurging memories and reflections are not merely retrospective but transformative. His conversations with Mitch become a vehicle for emotional reconciliation, particularly concerning his own childhood, his estranged relationship with his father, and his growing dependence due to ALS. Each conversation allows Morrie to settle a portion of his inner life, creating a sense of closure that aids in his dying process. As a result, the narrative becomes a kind of verbal hospice, where reflection and human connection are forms of palliative care. In addition to Erikson and Butler, Gene D. Cohen's theory of creative aging further illuminates Morrie's experience. In *The Mature Mind: The Positive Power of the Aging Brain*, Cohen argues that the final stages of life are marked not by cognitive decline alone, but by potential for psychological and spiritual creativity. The "summing-up phase," according to Cohen, is characterized by a need to give back, to find meaning, and to leave a legacy (Cohen 14). Morrie exemplifies this phase with remarkable clarity. Despite the physical toll of ALS, he insists on continuing his dialogue with Mitch, turning his slow decline into a philosophical and emotional offering. His dying process becomes his final act of creation—a "last class," where the lesson is how to live while dying. Moreover, *Tuesdays with Morrie* actively resists cultural narratives that devalue the elderly. In a youth-obsessed society where aging is often viewed as decline, Morrie's voice asserts the value of emotional maturity, presence, and interdependence. He speaks openly about his fears, frustrations, and bodily deterioration but never loses his emotional composure or intellectual curiosity. His repeated refrains about the importance of love, human connection, and emotional transparency stand as countercultural manifestos. "Love each other or perish," he tells Mitch, echoing W. H. Auden (Albom 91). In doing so, Morrie becomes a literary model for resilient aging, defined by gerontologists as the ability to maintain emotional and psychological well-being in the face of physical decline.

Significantly, Morrie also redefines dependency—often perceived as a loss of dignity in old age—as a return to emotional intimacy. He states, "When you're a baby, you're dependent on others to survive. When you're an adult, you're supposed to be independent. But guess what? When you get old, you're dependent again. It's not so bad" (Albom 116). These reframing challenges ageist paradigms, which frequently associate worth with autonomy and productivity. Instead, Morrie presents

aging as a full circle, where dependency becomes a return to the relational essence of being human. Morrie's intergenerational relationship with Mitch is also noteworthy. Their renewed bond bridges the generational divide, reflecting the gerontological ideal of generativity, as theorized by Erikson and later expanded by George Vaillant. Vaillant, in his longitudinal studies on adult development, notes that the happiest and healthiest elderly individuals are those who maintain meaningful relationships and mentor the younger generation (Vaillant 238). Morrie's influence on Mitch not only transforms the latter's outlook on work, relationships, and mortality but also affirms Morrie's own sense of purpose. Through dialogue and storytelling, Morrie engages in narrative generativity, offering not just life lessons, but a legacy.

Finally, the memoir's reception itself underscores its cultural significance. *Tuesdays with Morrie* has become a staple in classrooms, book clubs, and therapeutic settings, indicating its wide appeal as a guide to aging, grief, and meaning. This resonance suggests that narratives of conscious aging—especially those that embrace vulnerability, reflection, and connection—continue to serve as powerful cultural correctives to a world that often silences the old. In sum, *Tuesdays with Morrie* is more than a sentimental farewell; it is a richly layered gerontological text that portrays aging not as a pathology, but as a stage ripe with potential for insight, healing, and legacy. Morrie Schwartz, as represented in Albom's memoir, exemplifies what it means to age with emotional wisdom and existential courage. His life—and his dying—becomes a model for how literature can bear witness to the human dimensions of growing old.

3. *The Father*: Disorientation and the Fragmentation of Self

Florian Zeller's *The Father* (2020) presents a profoundly unsettling yet empathetic portrait of aging through the lens of dementia. Unlike traditional narratives that portray Alzheimer's disease from the perspective of caregivers or external observers, Zeller's film uniquely positions the viewer within the fractured consciousness of Anthony, an elderly man experiencing cognitive decline. This stylistic and narrative decision transforms the film into an immersive gerontological case study—one that deconstructs time, memory, space, and identity. From a critical aging studies perspective, *The Father* represents a radical departure from redemptive or reconciliatory narratives of old age, instead dramatizing what it means to inhabit a disintegrating sense of self. At its core, the film explores what Kathleen Woodward calls the "shattered mirror of identity" in old age, especially under the conditions of cognitive impairment (Woodward 86). As the narrative progresses, the viewer

becomes as disoriented as Anthony: characters inexplicably change actors, rooms shift layouts, and conversations contradict one another. These narrative disruptions are not stylistic flourishes but are integral to the film's central goal—simulating the phenomenology of dementia. In doing so, *The Father* exemplifies the aesthetic principles of what some scholars' term "narrative gerontology", wherein the storytelling itself reflects the psychological and existential states of the aging subject (Kenyon et al. 4). In this sense, the film becomes a vessel for both emotional understanding and critical reflection.

Anthony, portrayed masterfully by Anthony Hopkins, resists the common cinematic portrayal of dementia as merely tragic or pitiful. His character retains emotional depth, flashes of humor, and a fierce need to preserve autonomy. He clings to material markers of self—his watch, his flat, his furniture—not just for routine but as anchors of identity. His repeated question, "Where is my watch?" becomes a powerful metaphor for the fragmentation of temporal awareness and self-certainty. As Tom Kitwood argues, the erosion of memory does not equate to the loss of personhood. Instead, dementia should be understood relationally, wherein the person with dementia continues to seek validation, emotional resonance, and meaning (Kitwood 81). The tragedy in *The Father* lies not in Anthony's cognitive deterioration alone, but in the failure of his environment and relationships to affirm that personhood. The film also explores the disintegration of spatial and temporal coherence, two cognitive domains heavily affected by dementia. The familiar morphs into the strange; trusted people become ambiguous or hostile. Zeller disrupts the viewer's expectation of continuity, enacting a kind of narrative dementia. This aligns with what Stephen Sapp identifies as the theological and existential dislocation of individuals with dementia, which exists in a liminal space "between presence and absence, memory and forgetting" (Sapp 312). In one moment, Anthony confidently asserts control over his life; in the next, he is a frightened child in a care facility, sobbing for his mother. These emotional shifts resist chronological progression and instead highlight what gerontologists call affective memory—the way emotions persist even as facts fade.

Anthony's regression—particularly his final cry for maternal comfort—also demands a psychoanalytic reading. Erikson's model of psychosocial development, while offering the ideal of ego integrity, also acknowledges the possibility of despair when life loses coherence. In *The Father*, we do not witness ego integrity, but rather it's unraveling. Anthony's inability to make sense of his relationships, environment, or even his own thoughts represent a failure of narrative closure. Yet,

in this failure lies the film's ethical power. It forces us to recognize the fragility of the self, the pain of dependency, and the emotional depth that persists even when cognitive capacities falter. The burden of care is also poignantly portrayed through the character of Anne, Anthony's daughter. Her quiet suffering, her cycles of patience and frustration, and her struggle to balance autonomy with obligation reveal the ethical and emotional terrain of caregiver stress. Scholars such as Carol Gilligan have emphasized the importance of relational ethics—what she terms the "ethic of care"—particularly in feminist and aging studies. Anne's choices, complicated by love, guilt, and exhaustion, mirror the challenges many adult children face when parenting their parents. The film's emotional impact derives in part from this dual tragedy: Anthony's cognitive loss and Anne's emotional depletion. Institutional care, while necessary, is shown as cold, clinical, and ultimately alienating. Anthony's relocation to a nursing facility marks the end of his spatial autonomy and, metaphorically, the final stripping away of his selfhood. The sterile white walls of the institution contrast sharply with the warm hues of his former home. In gerontological discourse, this spatial shift from home to institution is often described as "environmental dislocation", which can accelerate psychological and emotional decline, especially in individuals with dementia (Rowles and Bernard 95). The design of the film—where spaces subtly transform without clear markers—reproduces this experience of loss not only for Anthony but for the viewer as well. Moreover, the film invites broader questions about how societies care for the aging. While *Tuesdays with Morrie* celebrates intergenerational connection and narrative healing, *The Father* offers a sobering critique of the systemic and emotional inadequacies of modern elder care. It forces us to ask: what does dignity look like when memory fails? What does identity consist of when narrative collapses? Can there be beauty or meaning in the fragments?

The film's final image—Anthony curled into the arms of a nurse, whispering that he feels he is "losing all [his] leaves"—evokes both a natural metaphor for mortality and a stark image of existential diminishment. Yet the moment is not devoid of tenderness. In the nurse's arms, Anthony experiences fleeting comfort, if not understanding. This scene affirms what dementia scholars such as Steven Sabat and Naomi Feil advocate: even in advanced cognitive decline, emotional connection and empathy remain vital forms of communication (Sabat 92; Feil 143). Anthony's confusion may be irreparable, but his humanity is not. In sum, *The Father* is a cinematic tour de force that shatters the illusion of narrative wholeness often associated with literary or cinematic representations of aging. It does not offer

catharsis or closure but insists on emotional realism. By simulating the perceptual and psychological dimensions of dementia, it confronts viewers with the vulnerability, unpredictability, and emotional intensity of aging when cognition is no longer reliable. As a companion to *Tuesdays with Morrie*, it complicates the gerontological narrative: while some may age into wisdom and resolution, others may drift into fragmentation and fear. Both realities deserve attention, compassion, and critical reflection.

4. Comparative Analysis: Aging Across Contrasts

Aging is not a linear or universal experience; it is shaped by an intricate interplay of memory, cognition, relationships, physical health, and sociocultural context. When examined through a gerontological lens, *Tuesdays with Morrie* and *The Father* offer contrasting, yet mutually illuminating, portrayals of the aging experience. Morrie Schwartz and Anthony, the protagonists, serve as literary and cinematic case studies—one exemplifying the ideal of aging as a reflective, spiritually fulfilling process, and the other embodying the terrifying descent into cognitive decline and existential dislocation. This comparative section seeks to examine both characters and narratives in five key domains: memory and life review, communication and disorientation, autonomy and space, dignity and dependency, and finally, the spectrum of aging identities.

4.1 Memory and Life Review vs. Cognitive Erosion

Morrie Schwartz's process of dying becomes, in essence, a process of self-integration. Rooted in Robert N. Butler's theory of "life review", Morrie's weekly conversations with Mitch act as a deliberate excavation of memory that helps create coherence in the life narrative. Butler posited that reviewing one's life, when done constructively, fosters psychological resolution and mitigates despair at life's end (Butler, *Why Survive?* 45). Morrie does not simply remember; he reinterprets the past to transmit wisdom, symbolizing what Erik Erikson termed "ego integrity"—a state of acceptance and wholeness. By contrast, in *The Father*, Anthony's world is one where memory no longer serves as a source of coherence. His episodic memory deteriorates, and with it goes the possibility of narrative wholeness. The loss is not only cognitive but existential. Steven R. Sabat notes that individuals with dementia often retain emotional and relational identities even as declarative memory fades. However, Anthony's identity becomes increasingly fragmented, showcasing how severe cognitive decline erodes even emotional memory and sense of self. The film's disjointed chronology and shifting characters reflect the neurological disarray of dementia, a clinical and phenomenological reality supported by neurological gerontology (La Rue 49). Morrie

constructs his legacy through intentional storytelling; Anthony lives in a perpetual present with no stable past to return to. This contrast articulates how the capacity for "life review" versus the experience of "memory loss" profoundly shapes the meaning of aging.

4.2 Communication and Dialogue vs. Disorientation and Isolation

Morrie's life is characterized by openness—his aphorisms, smiles, and reflections reveal a man deeply invested in human connection. He sees dying as an opportunity to teach others how to live. His relationship with Mitch is dialogic, mirroring what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as "dialogism"—a space where truth emerges through relational interaction rather than monologue (Bakhtin 93). Morrie's voice grows weaker physically, but becomes stronger symbolically. Anthony, in stark contrast, exists in a narrative of fractured communication. His conversations are circular, broken by confusion, suspicion, and occasional aggression. The viewer is placed within his perceptual frame, experiencing the distortion of language and time as he does. This experiential strategy aligns with phenomenological aging theory, which stresses the "lived experience" of old age over objective measures (Kahana & Kahana 247). Anthony's growing inability to communicate effectively signals not just cognitive decline, but an erosion of his relational world. His disconnection from others leads to a form of "ontological loneliness"—a state in which the very boundaries of self-become uncertain (Mijuskovic 87). Thus, where Morrie thrives in dialogue and connection, Anthony deteriorates within silence and misrecognition. This juxtaposition emphasizes that "communicative context" is central to aging with dignity.

4.3 Agency and Environmental Stability vs. Dislocation and Confusion

The physical environments in both narratives mirror their protagonists' psychological states. Morrie's home is warm, predictable, and deeply personal—it is filled with symbolic items, from the hibiscus plant to the books and aphorisms that reinforce his identity as a teacher and philosopher. According to Environmental Gerontology, place attachment and environmental stability play key roles in supporting well-being in late life (Rowles & Bernard 88). Morrie's environment enables him to remain the author of his life until the very end. In *The Father*, spatial disorientation is a central narrative device. The apartment's layout, furniture, and even the identities of people change frequently. This reflects Anthony's confusion, but also mirrors how institutionalization or unfamiliar living conditions can exacerbate cognitive symptoms in dementia patients—a fact well documented in Kitwood's Personhood Framework (Kitwood

45). The shifting physical space not only disrupts Anthony's orientation but also erodes his autonomy. He is unable to anchor his identity to any spatial or temporal constant, a hallmark of late-stage dementia. Where Morrie finds sanctuary, Anthony finds entrapment. The built environment thus becomes a site of either reinforcement or dissolution of identity.

4.4 Dignity in Control vs. Vulnerability in Decline

Dignity in aging has been a major concern in bioethics and palliative gerontology. Morrie orchestrates his death with philosophical calm and social purpose. He discusses burial arrangements, his fears, and even his bodily decline with candor. His death is framed as a continuation of life—a final "class" from which lessons are to be drawn. This exemplifies Daniel Callahan's concept of "natural death with moral meaning" (Callahan 87). Anthony, however, is stripped of such agency. He becomes increasingly dependent on others, unable to remember names, recognize faces, or follow conversations. His sobbing in the final scene, where he says, "I feel as though I'm losing all my leaves," is perhaps one of the most poignant cinematic expressions of existential fragility. Yet, as Carol Gilligan asserts in *In a Different Voice* (1982), dependency should not be viewed as the opposite of dignity; rather, dignity can and must be preserved through compassionate, relational care (30) This comparison reveals a critical truth in gerontological ethics: "aging with meaning" may not always mean aging with memory or autonomy, but it must always include empathy, support and respect.

4.5 Toward a Spectrum of Aging Realities

Together, *Tuesdays with Morrie* and *The Father* articulate the spectrum of aging—from clarity to confusion, from autonomy to dependency, from wisdom to vulnerability. Margaret Gullette, in her work *Agewise: Fighting the New Ageism in America* (2011), criticizes the dominant decline narrative of aging, urging for representations that accommodate diversity and resilience (Gullette 23). Morrie offers a counter-narrative to decline, showcasing how even terminal illness can be met with dignity, purpose, and pedagogical intent. Anthony, however, returns us to decline, but not as failure—instead as a call for greater understanding of aging's cognitive and emotional complexities. By reading these two texts together, we are reminded that there is no singular way to grow old. Aging is at once physiological, psychological, social, and deeply individual. The aging self may speak in confident maxims or may tremble in confusion. But both selves deserve our scholarly attention and social compassion.

Conclusion

Aging, as revealed through the comparative lens of Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie* and Florian Zeller's *The Father*, is not a monolithic experience but a multifaceted and deeply personal journey shaped by memory, cognition, relationships and meaning-making. This paper has argued that narrative—whether literary or cinematic—is a powerful medium through which the emotional truths and existential complexities of aging are both represented and understood.

By applying key gerontological theories—Erik Erikson's psychosocial development, Robert N. Butler's life review, Gene D. Cohen's creative aging, Tom Kitwood's personhood in dementia, and insights from narrative and cognitive gerontology—this study has illuminated the distinct aging trajectories embodied by Morrie and Anthony. Morrie Schwartz's experience exemplifies the ideals of ego integrity, life reflection, and emotional legacy. His dialogues with Mitch reflect a conscious and creative engagement with death, marked by love, wisdom, and resilience. Anthony's journey, on the other hand, portrays the internal disintegration caused by dementia—his narrative collapses under the weight of cognitive loss, spatial disorientation, and identity fragmentation. Yet even within this decline, *The Father* reveals flickers of personhood, dignity, and emotional truth, resisting reductive portrayals of dementia as mere emptiness.

Ultimately, this paper suggests that aging is a narrative process as much as a biological or psychological one. Whether one reaches the final stage of life with coherence or confusion, with legacy or loss, every aging narrative holds value. *Tuesdays with Morrie* and *The Father*, when read side by side, articulate the spectrum of aging—from clarity to chaos, from self-possession to self-fragmentation. Both invite us to listen more attentively to the voices of the elderly—whether they speak in measured wisdom or disoriented vulnerability. In an increasingly age-segregated and age-averse society, these works function as narrative correctives. They ask us to hold space for both the dignity of conscious reflection and the tragedy of cognitive erosion. Aging, as these narratives reveal, is not simply a descent into decline, but a powerful phase of the human experience where memory, identity, and meaning intersect. To age with meaning, then, is not always to age with mastery—but to be seen, heard, and held in one's wholeness, however fractured. That, perhaps, is the ultimate lesson offered by both Morrie and Anthony—and the enduring call of narrative gerontology.

Works Cited

Albom, Mitch. *Tuesdays with Morrie: An Old Man, a Young Man, and Life's Greatest Lesson*. Broadway Books, 1997.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Translated by Caryl Emerson, U of Minnesota P, 1984.

Butler, Robert N. "The Life Review: An Interpretation of Reminiscence in the Aged." *Psychiatry*, vol. 26, 1963, pp. 65–76.

____. *Why Survive? Being Old in America*. Harper & Row, 1975.

Callahan, Daniel. *The Troubled Dream of Life: In Search of a Peaceful Death*. Georgetown UP, 2000.

Cohen, Gene D. *The Creative Age: Awakening Human Potential in the Second Half of Life*. HarperCollins, 2000.

———. *The Mature Mind: The Positive Power of the Aging Brain*. Basic Books, 2005.

Erikson, Erik H. *The Life Cycle Completed*. Extended version, W. W. Norton & Company, 1997.

Feil, Naomi. *The Validation Breakthrough: Simple Techniques for Communicating with People with Alzheimer's-Type Dementia*. Health Professions Press, 1992.

Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Harvard UP, 1982.

Gullette, Margaret Morganroth. *Agewise: Fighting the New Ageism in America*. U of Chicago P, 2011.

Kahana, Eva, and Boaz Kahana. "Conceptualizing Successful Aging: A Proactive Adaptation Perspective." *Journal of Aging Studies*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2003, pp. 243–261.

Kenyon, Gary M., et al., editors. *Narrative Gerontology: Theory, Research, and Practice*. Springer, 2001.

Kitwood, Tom. *Dementia Reconsidered: The Person Comes First*. Open UP, 1997.

La Rue, Louis. *Aging and Neuropsychological Assessment*. Plenum Press, 1992.

McAdams, Dan P. *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self*. Guilford Press, 1993.

Mijuskovic, Ben Lazare. *Loneliness in Philosophy, Psychology, and Literature*. iUniverse, 2012.

Randall, William L., and Elizabeth McKim. *Reading Our Lives: The Poetics of Growing Old*. Oxford UP, 2008.

Rowles, Graham D., and Miriam Bernard. *Environmental Gerontology: Making Meaningful Places in Old Age*. Springer, 2013.

Sabat, Steven R. *The Experience of Alzheimer's Disease: Life Through a Tangled Veil*. Blackwell, 2001.

Vaillant, George E. *Aging Well: Surprising Guideposts to a Happier Life from the Landmark Harvard Study of Adult Development*. Little, Brown Spark, 2002.

Woodward, Kathleen. *Aging and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions*. Duke UP, 1991.

Zeller, Florian, director. *The Father*. Performances by Anthony Hopkins and Olivia Colman, Sony Pictures Classics, 2020.

❑❑❑