The Beholders' Eyes

Stories Reveal Victorian England's Struggle with Aging

By Gary Kuhlmann

When Teresa Mangum became interested in studying old age, she turned to Victorian England. Her research required travel to English libraries to dig for riches in the literature and culture of the past. It also took her back to her first love.

"I fell hard at a young age for Charles Dickens, and quite simply, I still love a good story," says Mangum, associate professor of English in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. "But by examining Victorian literature critically, I also can get a grasp on what the British were thinking."

Mangum, a widely published expert on British literature, has drawn from primary sources in the British Library, the National Library of Art at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the National Portrait Gallery. She has analyzed medical texts and sociological studies together with fictional representations in novels, gothic literature, paintings, magazines, and other cultural artifacts. She says her cultural analysis shows how the newly industrialized world of late 19th-century England came to define old age.

"Dramatic developments in medicine, politics, and the arts all lined up to redefine what it meant to be old," says Mangum, who plans to publish her findings in a book on the Victorian invention of old age. "Victorians saw the rise of geriatric research, heated parliamentary debates over mandatory retirement and a national pension plan, sociological studies that stunned England with accounts of its aging poor, and the prolonged reign of an aging queen."

Thanks to the increasing power of newspapers and magazines to spread word of these developments, Victorians looked old age in the face daily, Mangum says. And they did not like what they saw.

“The young became fearful of what they imagined to be a growing class of older people,” she says. “It’s not that there were more older people than before, or that people were living longer. But it seemed that way to young Victorians because of new arbitrary distinctions about who got called old.”

The new distinctions included a set retirement age, pension eligibilities, and even identification of new diseases associated with old age. Mangum contends that these distinctions conspired to erase the individuality of the elderly and reconfigure them as a separate class—a faceless collective the young saw as a national problem weighting down the economy.

Mangum finds a flood of examples in literature that reflect Victorian England’s anxiety about old age. Popular books like Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and H.G. Wells’ *The Time Machine* cast the elderly as an anonymous mass. Fear of supporting the elderly abounds in the language, characters, structures, and fantasies of a host of gothic tales—for example, Bram Stoker’s undying Dracula embodied the younger generation’s fear of supporting a growing group of elderly who seemed to be living longer. And in Oscar Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray*, Lord Henry seduces Dorian into wishing his soul away for prolonged youth: “When your youth goes, your beauty will go with it...”

Age is such a preoccupation, Mangum says, that it permeates even the landscapes in stories by Charles Dickens, who describes in lavish detail the gnarled and crumbling buildings of the world his older characters walk through. Magazine advice columnists chastise older women for indecorous dress, and even children’s stories present unflattering views of old age, such as Edward Lear’s wicked “old persons” in *Nonsense Verses*, Lewis Carroll’s murderous Queen in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, and James Barrie’s Peter, who adamantly refuses to grow up in *Peter Pan*.

Not every Victorian portrayal of the elderly is harsh. Mangum sees empathy for the elderly in the sentimental paintings of parents left at home reading letters from sons who emigrated to the colonies to find work, and in the novels of Elizabeth Gaskell and Margaret Oliphant, whose stories describe how fashion constrains women into age-related social roles, from daughter and wife to spinster and widow.

Mangum also finds that animals emerge in stories as a new way to express, without reservation, sympathy for the elderly. Sentimentality for older beings does not disappear but is displaced in animal narratives like *Black Beauty* and in paintings of old dogs, such as the famous 1899 Francis Barraud portrait, *His Master’s Voice*, which later became the visual brand of RCA Victor.

Novelists also stage debates through their characters, Mangum says, challenging harsh treatment of the elderly. The narrator of Charles Dickens’ *The Old Curiosity Shop*, contemplating the enfeebled grandfather’s confusion, chastises society’s use of the phrase “second childhood” as a way of describing senility: “Where, in the dull eyes of doting men, are the laughing light and life of childhood...?”

Mangum, who joined Iowa’s faculty in 1990, holds a master’s degree from North Carolina State University and a doctoral degree from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She plans to submit her manuscript to publishers next year and hopes her work will challenge conventional wisdom.

“When my students go to the library to research 19th-century magazines and writers, they’re shocked to find that things don’t seem that different from where we are today,” says Mangum, who received the University’s President and Provost Award for Teaching Excellence this past March. “Jostling up against the recent past can produce helpful questions to ask about how we’re shaping our own society. My work shows how one society established artificial and arbitrary divisions of people into watertight compartments. I hope my work also might encourage people to regard this group we call the elderly with a little more imagination.”