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## **The Opposing Functions of Agedness and Retirement in Barbara Pym's *Quartet in Autumn* and Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea***

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### **Abstract:**

This paper explores the opposing functions of agedness and retirement in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) and Barbara Pym's *Quartet in Autumn* (1977). Agedness and retirement are considered as new constructs developed out of the capitalization and industrialization processes in the Western and other modernized societies. Neither the concept of old age nor retirement does seem applicable to the represented old man in Hemingway's novel. In other words, Santiago lives and works in a traditional and pre-modern society in which agedness and retirement are neither institutionalized by the state nor recognized by the society. Conversely, in the represented Modern society in Pym's novel, agedness and retirement play significant roles in the lives of the (female) characters. Pym presents them as the socio-economic constructs which configure the lives of the aged and retired characters.

**Keywords:** Elderliness, Retirement, *The Old Man and the Sea*, Ernest Hemingway, *Quartet in Autumn*, Barbara Pym.

When I see the young men play,

Young methinks I am as they;

And my aged thoughts laid by,  
To the dance with joy I fly:  
Come, a flowery chaplet lend me;  
Youth and mirthful thoughts attend me:  
Age be gone, we'll dance among  
Those that young are, and be young:  
Bring some wine, boy, fill about;  
You shall see the old man's stout;  
Who can laugh and tipple too,  
And be mad as well as you.

Anacreon (570-488 B.C.)

Perhaps, with full life-spans the norm, people may need to learn how to be aged as they once had to learn to be adult. (Ronald Blythe, *The View in Winter*)

## Introduction

This paper explores the opposing implications of *elderliness* and *retirement* in Barbara Pym's *Quartet in Autumn* (1980) and Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952). The paper argues that while the social constructs of elderly and retirement, as the discoveries of Western culture, are represented as the configuring social orders in Pym's narrative, the pre-modern fictional society in Hemingway's novel functions primarily without such orders. The two female characters in Pym's novel experience the fabricated institution of elderly by approaching another social and cultural construct—retirement. Conversely, Santiago, the main character in *The Old Man and the Sea*, works hard and fights difficulties in his old age because he does not experience retirement. In other words, elderliness is not imposed on him by the society he lives in.

*Quartet in Autumn* is a novel about the lives of four single and elderly characters who have worked together for several years. The word *quartet* in the novel's title encompasses two men and two women in their sixties—the autumn of their lives. These characters do boring jobs at the same office in London during the nineteen-seventies. Two of them live in small rented rooms, and the other two live in their own houses. They do not have any significant social relationships and they do not even see each other in their leisure time. Among them, Letty is the most cultured. She reads books and regrets that she never had the opportunity to marry. Marcia, by contrast, is an eccentric. She resists social connections and friendship. Edwin is a widower. He fills his free time with church activities. Norman has no social skills. He spends his lunch hour at the library, where he reads the newspaper. When the two women retire, their lives change to a great extent. Due to her pension cut, Letty unexpectedly has to move to another house because she does not have a house of her own. Her long-time plan to move to the country with a friend of hers, Marjorie, changes because Marjorie decides to get married. Thus, she is forced to rent a room in a house owned by another elderly woman. On the other hand, Marcia becomes fairly secluded. Alone in her house, she does not know what to do. She wears her old clothes and mostly forgets to eat. She even resists the well-meaning social worker knocking on her door and forgets to eat and dies of loneliness and dementia.

*The Old Man and the Sea* is a short novel about the struggles of an elderly Cuban fisherman named Santiago who insists on catching a huge fish. The young boy, whom Santiago has taught fishing, cannot accompany him since, on the one hand, Santiago has gone for a long time without catching any fish, and, on the other hand, the young boy's parents do not let him go fishing with the old man because he is considered unlucky for not having caught any fish for eighty four days. However, the young boy takes care of Santiago providing him food, drink, clothing and newspapers. One day Santiago sets out to the sea, ventures to the Gulf Stream and hooks a huge fish. Nonetheless, he cannot pull the fish towards the beach since he is not strong enough. Instead, the fish starts to pull the boat away. Several times he wishes the young boy had been there with him so they could pull it together. However, he does not let the fish go for three days and nights. When the fish pulls his boat very far from the beach, he does not lose his hope although he is exhausted. Similarly, when he injures his hand with the rope, he never thinks of cutting the rope and turning back to home. He is determined to kill the fish in order to repay his debts and live by the selling of its flesh. The old man's health deteriorates more by every passing

day and he nearly faints several times; however, he does not get discouraged and goes on with his struggle. In the third day, he finally succeeds at killing the fish. However, the sharks come and eat most of the fish on the way home. At his home, he is so weak and tired that he immediately falls into sleep and dreams of lions.

In *Quartet in Autumn*, the negative effects of retirement is mostly experienced by two female characters, namely Marcia and Letty. After getting retired, they undergo some complications and each one copes with her problems in her individual way ending at different destinies. While Marcia, adopting seclusion and desolation, gets dementia, forgets to eat and unconsciously starves herself to death, however, Letty tries to be a stereotypical retired woman. Marcia is a revolutionary figure in the way that she does not conform to the imposing socio-political conventions although she eventually pays dearly by her painful death. Likewise, Letty's adoption to retirement is a difficult and challenging process and takes much of her energy and time. Nevertheless, although Santiago is a very old character, much older than the retired characters in *Quartet in Autumn*, however, since he lives in a pre-industrialized society, he is not considered as elderly by his community. Moreover, there is no retirement for him since he owns his job and no institute or organization imposes retirement on him and he is capable to work until his death. He goes fishing all by himself in his old age, though he knows that nobody has gone to sea alone ever. He nearly catches and travels tolerantly with the biggest fish that he had ever seen in his life, kills it at last after a few days on the ocean, and defends the fish from the attack of the sharks until his last breathe although he is injured and hungry for days. Although the sharks have eaten all the flesh of the fish, but he has gained back his lost honour in his community since he has caught the biggest fish that every fisherman has seen all by himself.

### **1. Elderliness and Retirement: from Pre-Modern to Modern Times**

The shift from agricultural to industrial society brought about some fundamental changes. Retirement became institutionalized in the modern Western countries due to many factors: "The existence of a governmental social security along with private pension programs presumably takes the sting out of retirement. The net result of these two factors is the large-scale retirement of older workers with vast increases in the amount of free time available to them" (Phillipson 36). Furthermore, the time of elderliness, as Johnson argues, was meticulously defined by modern law as one of the various socio-economic policies in modern time, "The

institutionalization in the twentieth century of public and private pension systems which provides benefits at set ages, the associated development of formal retirement ages, and the establishment of a multitude of other age thresholds for inclusion or exclusion from certain groups, activities or entitlements had, by the 1970s, created a set of social conventions that old age began at 60 or 65” (3). Likewise, since the female characters in *Quartet in Autumn* are not young anymore and thus are no longer beneficial to the capitalist state, their organization puts a compulsory end to their jobs in the name of retirement, regardless of their economic and psychological needs to their jobs. Not having any plans for their post-retirement period, both of them face complications at the time of their retirement.

The living and working conditions were much different in the pre-industrialized societies. There were not so many state-based jobs. People owned their jobs and most importantly, landowners were usually the elderly. As Achenbaum notes, they wisely supervised their land and properties. Their children and grandchildren worked for them in the prospect of inheriting the land. However, the economic status of the elderly changed dramatically after the industrialization and modernization of the Western countries. Handcrafts became luxury since machines replaced “traditional means of craft making.” The Elderly found their skills and experiences of little value in this modernized world. They were, in fact, unable to adapt themselves to the changing modes of production. The result of this procedure was disastrous: “Old workers were obsolescent. In the initial phases of industrialization the aged were treated as if they were disabled. Like the lame and blind they begged for money at the factory gate or at the saloon” (Achenbaum 26). As a result, retirement became a tool in order to get rid of the worn-out workers. However, the economic condition of the elderly was, as Achenbaum stresses, unacceptable: “The dream of genuine economic security has not been realized. The aged usually have lived at subsistence levels, rarely confident that they could survive once their resources were exhausted” (27). Letty and Marcia are among the workers whose age and condition make them unproductive for the system. Although they can continue working, the rules of retirement do not let them do so since they are no longer productive for the capitalist system. Additionally, the mechanization of the jobs they do and their being replaced with computers ironically signify the end of their careers, and thus the end of their lives.

Alan Sheldon et al. define retirement as “The mandatory cessation through age of ruminative full-time employment of a continued kind, or its voluntary premature cessation other

than sickness" (2). With the growth of industrialization, urbanization and establishment of the age groups, retirement has also become institutionalized in modern societies since, according to O'Rand et al., work institutions are the most essential "institutional structures affecting individuals' lives" in modern society, and "retirement is now a common feature of the socially constructed life course in industrialized countries." Retirement has also changed into a distinctive stage in life as a result of the advancements in its institution. In other words, as O'Rand et al. state, "In this modern life course division into separate age-segregated education, work, and retirement stages, each life segment occurs within a distinct set of social institutions" (35, 99 and 34).

Leslie Hannah also argues that age differentiation is a new phenomenon constructed by the modern organizations and laws, and since retirement was not so rampant, the elderly were not considered as a problem for the organizations, or for the societies: "Yet, undeniably, there was in nineteenth-century Britain less differentiation of people by age than has since become the norm. Sixty or sixty-five did not then mark the rite of passage for individuals which they have since become, and there was also much less contemporary awareness of the old generally as a social 'problem'" (17). For example, Santiago is not considered as a burden or a social problem for his community. Although he is very old, he is a very independent and self-satisfied character. Santiago does not beg money from anybody, or he does not ask for food, "The old man drank his coffee slowly. It was all he would have all day and he knew that he should take it, for a long time now eating had bored him and he never carried a lunch. He had a bottle of water in the bow of the skiff and that was all he needed for the day" (Hemingway 19). He even lies to the boy by telling him that he has food in his house while the boy knows the truth by calling what the old man says as "fiction" (Hemingway 9). He knows that "there was no pot of yellow rice and fish and the boy knew this too" (Hemingway 8). In fact, he goes fishing in order to give his debts and also provide himself for a while. In contrast, both Marcia and Letty are considered as a burden for their society and those who want to help them are doing it out of responsibility not out of love or friendship. Their colleagues do not do anything for them except giving advice. The social worker is happy to let Marcia alone because she is a very difficult person to deal with. Letty is also considered as a burden for her friend Marjorie as she advises her to stay in a nursing home.

Institutional care for the elderly is one of the crucial fabrics in the modern societies. According to Seal, "Widespread institutional care for elderly people is very much a phenomenon

of developed countries, adopted as a solution to the shortage of informal care in families available to elderly people. This in turn is caused both by demographic factors and features of the social organisation of advanced industrialised societies that often separate elderly people from mainstream social and family life” (381). Such social organizations also exist in Pym’s novel. Hulmhurst is the nursing home where Letty’s friend Marjorie thinks that she should move to. However, rather than going to such a place, Letty prefers to die in the worst conditions: “She resolved that a room in Hulmhurst was the last thing she’d come to – better to lie down in the wood under the beech leaves and bracken and wait quietly for death” (Pym 124). The characters in Pym’s novel are also aware of the existence of such organization for the elderly in their society: “there are organizations and people wanting to help ladies,’ said Edwin quaintly” (Pym 59). For example, Janice, the social worker who visits Marcia regularly, is a serious and well intentioned woman. She is surprised by Marcia’s eccentricity and arrogance. Marcia is an independent person who prefers isolation and does not accept any help. When Janice suggests her to get-together at the Centre with the other elderly, she refuses. On another occasions, when Janice wants to befriend Marcia, she rejects her impolitely.

Marcia’s arrogant behaviour is, in fact, her unconscious reaction to the policies of the state for the elderly and retired. On the one hand, the government forces them to leave their jobs and on the other hand establishes some organizations to help the elderly. She is the victim of socioeconomic policies that the industrialized society makes for the elderly. At the same time, she shows her resistance to such policies too. However, the manner of her resistance is different from that of Letty’s. She enters into a voluntary isolation and loneliness, cutting all her ties with society. She does not even keep a television set in her house. When Janice notices this, she wonders what Letty does in the evenings. Although the social organization she works for has urged her to make contact with the elderly, “make *contact*, by force, if necessary” (Pym 30), she finds it impossible to make contact with Marcia, who is “so difficult” since “people like that do not seem to want to be helped. And yet some of them are so grateful, it’s lovely, really, makes it all worthwhile [...] Marcia certainly wasn’t like *that*” (Pym 41). The rule of her organization is that the elderly must get help, whatever its consequences might be. However, people like Marcia ignore such help. When Marcia visits the doctor, he also emphasizes that “somebody should keep an eye on you” (Pym 43). In contrast, Letty is more dependent. She thinks she is in need of a person or an organization to care for her: “well, it’s good to know that people do care,’ said Letty

vaguely" (Pym 59). On the other hand, there is not such an organization in Santiago's society to take care of him. Despite the fact that he is a very old man and does not have a family to care for him, he does not feel in need of a social organization. As it is the case in the traditional societies, it is the care of the young boy that replaces the function of the so-called modern caring organization.

As a consequence of the policies of the capitalistic state and the great changes in the structure of social institution called family, lonely and unconnected people are forced to move to nursing homes after their retirement. Senior Houses and hospitals for the elderly have got important functions in the developed societies as Seal states:

Although most people who enter a residential institution for the elderly will eventually die there, these are not generally perceived as places primarily devoted to the care of 'dying' people. This is more normally the perception of hospices, although caring for 'the dying' is also seen as a legitimate part of general hospital care. A large proportion of people in developed societies die in hospitals, rather than at home or indeed in hospices. (381)

When Marcia is hospitalized for an operation for the first time, a chaplain comes to visit her before the operation. Being lonely and unrelated, she doubts whether her death would upset anyone: "The question of death did come into one's mind, and Marcia had asked herself the brutal question, if she were to die, having no close relatives, would it matter?" (Pym 20) Eventually, she dies when she is hospitalized for the second time. Her death is mostly because of dementia which deteriorates after her retirement mostly because of the lack of social connection that she experiences after that. Rather than being a puppet for the meddling social workers and policies of social organizations and institutions, she closes the doors of her house and gets ready for her death: "Already she had moved away from Janice and soon she would be out of the reach of all social workers trying to make her do things she didn't want to do, like going down to 'the Centre', buying fresh vegetables and taking a holiday" (Pym 141). Thus, Marcia's death can be considered as a voluntary act of resistance. Rather than being humiliated in the face of the society's well defined stereotypes of the elderly and retired, she chooses death. In Santiago's primitive society, however, there is nothing such as hospitals, doctors, nurses, social workers and elderly cares. He has never visited a doctor and has never taken any sort of medication. No social worker knocks on his door to ask him to take part in a gathering for the retired and elderly people. The primitive community in which he lives is much different from the community an

elderly person would face in a developed and modern society like Britain. The boy who visits and takes care of him does not have any official responsibility to do so. He helps him out of love and friendship, which are hard to find in Marcia's and Letty's society.

## 2. When it is Time to Retire: Letty and Marcia vs. Santiago

Elderliness and retirement are interlinked concepts in the modernized societies. Retirement is mostly understood as a rite of passage to enter into the category of elderliness, a controversial concept in the twentieth century. Old age, according to John Vincent, is a "social construction" particularly in the Western countries. Thus, *ageing* is mostly understood as "an organisation of time; a sequence of stages. It refers to the timing and sequencing in some specified process" (7). Vincent also emphasizes that in such societies ageing makes a person's life meaningful: "With human beings, it is ageing which gives the individual's life its rhythm, and links the duration, timing and sequence of stages in life. It is the social sequencing of the stages that creates the category 'old age' and gives the life course its meaning" (7). Therefore, elderliness is a meaningful step in one's life. It provides a chance for a person to look back to her past life and reflect on it, similar to what the old fisherman in Hemingway's novel does. Santiago's last journey to the sea changes into a process of recollection. He reviews his memories and experiences without which his old age would not worth much.

Elderliness has quite a different meaning for Letty and Marcia. Their aging is presented as a kind of burden both on themselves and on their society. Their retirement disconnects them from their jobs and their society at the same time. Unlike their situation, Santiago's community does not consider him weak, old, or a burden on themselves. They just think that he is unlucky, or as they call him "salao, which is the worst form of unlucky" (Hemingway 1), because of their superstitious beliefs. Although he does not have a family and his wife is dead, his society pays respect to him because of his age and skill. His last journey to the sea is considered to be his most important experience, an experience without which his craft of fishing as well as his character formation would remain incomplete. It is also presented as the hardest and most satisfactory trip since his primary purpose was to restore his long lost honour, "You did not kill the fish only to keep alive and to sell for food, he thought. You killed him for pride and because you are a fisherman" (Hemingway 97). He has a great self-confidence and hope to catch a big fish before setting out to the sea. The night before his sailing, he tells the boy:

“How would you like to see me bring one in that dressed out over a thousand pounds?” (Hemingway 8) He catches such a fish although he loses it to the sharks finally.

In most cultures, people's birthdates are not considered to be important. They do not count the days and the years that they are living according to a specific birthdate and thus the social construction of childhood, adolescence, youth, middle age and old age does not exist as it does in the Western culture. Likewise, according to Vincent, “it seems very odd for those raised in the British cultural tradition that some people do not know how old they are. It is hard to understand that in many cultures and societies it is not of significance and people simply have no reason to remember their exact chronological age. Birth dates, even if they are known, are not universally counted or celebrated” (Hemingway 8). In Santiago's society, age classification does not exist as it does in the modern countries, so neither he nor anybody else knows how old Santiago is, although it is stated that he is very old: “The old man was thin and gaunt with deep wrinkles in the back of his neck” (Hemingway 1).

“The ritual of counting the years,” Vincent argues, “create special moments which break up and pattern the uniform flow of time” (8). Thus, every phase in a person's life can be counted and there exists a rite of passage at the end of each phase which, according to Vincent, can be “used to mark transition from one life stage to another” and thus is used to “create a sense of historical identity and continuity” (8). Santiago achieves this sense of identity and continuity by his last time sailing. For instance, he understands that although he is intelligent and skilful, he has become old and weak, or is not the same strong young man anymore. He deeply feels in need of the boy's help both after catching the fish: “I wish I had the boy. To help me and to see this” (Hemingway 39). His wish of having the boy with himself, however, is beyond an egoistic desire. He mostly wants to transmit his knowledge and experience of the sea and fishery to the young boy. He is also aware of his own loneliness without the boy: “No one should be alone in their old age, he thought. But it is unavoidable” (Hemingway 39).

“People in the West,” as Vincent states, “know their age because society regulates public life according to chronological age. Age is not only ritualised but it is also bureaucratised. There are legal rights and duties based on age. Institutions regulate access and prescribe and proscribe certain behaviours by age” (8). Thus, there is a necessity for the imagination and creation of old age upon which the capitalist system functions by employing workers, firing them whenever needed, and creating retirement time for them: “The single most important transition

that is seen to mark entry into old age is retirement. In contemporary Britain the terms ‘pensioner’ and ‘older person’ are used almost interchangeably” (Vincent 9). As it is implied in Vincent’s statement, the order of retirement imposes elderliness on individuals. Vincent, however, notes that this trend is specific to the modern Western cultures and countries since the definition of old age in the pre-modern communities greatly differs and has no connection to retirement: “In pre-modern times people were perceived as old at the age at which they ceased to be independent, economically or physically, and this varied among individuals” (9). As it is evident, Santiago cannot be categorized in this group since he has not lost his vigour and has no economic independence. The boy finds Santiago strong and healthy whenever he looks at him: “They were strange shoulders, still powerful although very old, and the neck was still strong too and the creases did not show so much when the old man was asleep and his head fallen forward” (Hemingway 10). When Santiago refuses to eat, the boy says: “You’ll not fish without eating while I’m alive.” The old man then accepts his suggestion by adding “Then live a long time and take care of yourself” (Hemingway 11). In fact, he himself also awaits a long life in old age.

The new pattern of elderliness is, however, difficult for many people to adopt. The construct of elderly, as Bill Bytheway notes, was fabricated by the discovery of the concept of age in the twentieth century after the modernization of the Western countries. He states that “indeed we are all, throughout our lives, oppressed by ageism, by dominant expectations about age, expectations that dictate how we behave and relate to each other.” These beliefs, Bytheway stresses, are the fundamental ideology of organizations and groups as they “generate and reinforce a lifelong fear of the ageing process, and they underpin presumed association between age and competence and the need for protection: being ‘too’ young and being ‘too’ old” (338-39). Such is the case in the company of the elderly people in *Quartet in Autumn*. Social organizations in Marcia’s and Letty’s society consider them as elderly, or “on the verge of retirement” (Pym 9). Thus, they are classified as elderly since, according to the ruling system, they are no longer beneficial to the state, or to the capitalist system. The elderly people are not even noticed in the society, or if they are, they are grouped in the category of the elderly. On the contrary, although the omniscient narrator in Hemingway’s novel includes Santiago in the category of elderly, something is still young about him: “Everything about him was old except his eyes and they were the same color as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated” (Hemingway 2). Moreover, the community that Santiago lives in does not think of him as an inefficient old

man, although they do doubt his luck. They consider him unlucky since he has gone eighty four days without catching a fish: "He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty four days now without taking a fish" (Hemingway 1). Nevertheless, the old man lives and works as the young people do in his community. His great vigour and determination are recognized in his society.

As it is true for the age of retirement, the concept of generation or age group is a new social construction in modern societies. In the pre-modern communities, a sharp distinction did not exist between different age groups. In other words, the sharp contrast among people with different ages is a modern phenomenon. In this regard, Vincent explains the construction of generation by referring to a concept named cohort: "The term 'cohort' refers to sets of people who are born at the same time. By virtue of this common characteristic, they age simultaneously, and consequently have many experiences in common. 'Generation' also has a number of alternative possible connotations, including successions of parents and children" (33). Thus, Marcia and Letty can be considered as cohorts since they are born nearly at the same period. They both experience retirement at the same time and are shocked by this experience although in different ways. Furthermore, they do not have any connection with the other age groups except Marcia's involuntary meeting with a young social worker named Janice. She is one generation younger than Marcia and wants to help her. Their contact, however, does not end in any kind of relationship mainly because of Marcia's rejection of her help. Similarly, Letty does not have any relationship with the other generations. For example, she does not develop a relationship with her house owner who belongs to an older generation. Their only purpose of living together is Letty's homelessness and the old woman's loneliness. They rarely speak with each other and their only entertainment is watching television in the evening. Letty's house owner is doubtful about her at the beginning, and inspects her belongings when she goes out. Despite being aware of this situation, Letty has to tolerate it since she has no other place to go. In other words, there is no such a thing as intimacy among the generations in *Quartet in Autumn* and everybody lives her own isolated, miserable life after retirement. Similarly, there is no co-understanding and cooperation between the members of the same generation. Letty and Marcia never keep in touch or become intimate with each other although they are both lonely spinsters. The intergenerational conflict in Pym's novel represents a socio-cultural reality. As Vincent argues, there are two factors that result in the conflict among generations after WWII in Britain: "It is argued that the

size of the post-war generation and the structure of the welfare state has produced a situation which has placed generations in conflict with one another” (53).

Vincent also argues that “age is a continuum; age groups are formed when a specific age range is differentiated and takes on a social significance” (32). The intergenerational interaction is not a universal behaviour. “Social groups,” according to Vincent, “can form on the basis of age. People move in and out of these groups as they grow older, but the age ranges and the social attributes of such age groups clearly vary greatly from society to society” (32). In the modernized society of Marcia and Letty, age groups are sharply contrasted and there is no connection and communication between them. Conversely, there is no such a distinction among different generations in *The Old Man and The Sea*. The young boy is at least two generations younger than Santiago. However they do not have any problem in communicating with each other. The old man loves the young boy and teaches him the skill of fishing and, in return, the young boy respects and loves the old man since he learns many skills from him. For example, the boy provides him with food, drink and newspapers whenever Santiago is in need. Although his parents do not let him go fishing anymore with Santiago, the boy helps him carry his fishing devices, takes food and drink to him, and speaks with him. They are great friends. In other words, there is a complete transition of knowledge and experience between the two unlikely generations and both of them are happy and satisfied in their relationship: “The old man looked at him with his sunburned, confident loving eyes” (Hemingway 5). The old man wishes the boy were his own son so that he could take him out gambling. In their relationship, neither generation nor age is a barrier for the transition of love, friendship and intimacy. The boy regrets having forgotten to bring him the things he needs: “I must have water here for him, the boy thought, and soap and a good towel. Why am I so thoughtless? I must get him another shirt and a jacket for the winter and some sort of shoes and another blanket” (Hemingway 11-12). Throughout his journey, Santiago misses both the boy and his help. When he comes back, he tells this to him: “I missed you” and the boy tells: “Now we fish together again.” Even without his parent’s consent since “I still have much to learn” (Hemingway 116). The boy worries a lot when Santiago does not return for several days and weeps whenever he sees the miserable old man and his injured hands: “The boy saw that the old man was breathing and then he saw the old man’s hands and he started to cry. He went out very quickly to go to bring some coffee and all the way down the road he was crying” (Hemingway 114).

Retirement is nowadays a *normal* step in an employee's life. Setting a specific age for retirement has been controversial and a matter of debate among the scholars since the policy does not consider an individual's specific physical, psychological, social and economic positions. According to Alan Sheldon et al:

work is commonly thought of as a means for personal as well as social salvation, thereby ranking among the highest goals that life has to offer. Modern Western nations have regarded old people as people who do not work. Since To be deprived of work is to lose the opportunity for meaningful living. Hence the expression "retirement" is used without qualification, a life sentence to social death. (1)

Retirement and elderliness are so much interwoven that the concept of retirement unconsciously brings forth the idea of death to the characters' minds. Retirement is considered as a gateway to death. The characters other than Letty and Marcia are also the victims of retirement. Edwin takes part in the memorial service of a lately retired colleague. He thinks to himself: "A Memorial Service for a man who retired before we came'" (Pym 78). Edwin is also on the edge of retirement. However, he is represented as being haunted with the thoughts of his own funeral: "A pair of lovers sat opposite him but he did not notice them. He was thinking of his own funeral—he would hardly rate a 'Memorial Service'—a proper requiem, of course, with orange candles and incense and all the proper ceremonial details" (Pym 81-82).

On the other hand, Santiago never thinks about his death. Although he is very old, he lives and works as a young man. He has dreams in his old age and is so obsessed with his dreams of catching a big fish that when the young boy tells him to keep warm, not to catch cold, he replies: "'The month when the great fish come ... Anyone can be a fisherman in May'" (Hemingway 5). He has big dreams in his old age. Also when the young boy asks him to wake him in the morning, he says: "'Age is my alarm clock ... Why do old men wake so early? Is it to have one longer day?'" (Hemingway 9) He is full of life and a desire to live longer. He is, moreover, aware of his own strength and willpower: "Although it is unjust, he thought. But I will show him what a man can do and what a man endures" (Hemingway 24). After he kills the fish he thinks to himself: "I am a tired old man. But I have killed this fish which is my brother and now I must do the slave work." Nevertheless, somewhere in the novel, when he wishes the young boy was with him, he thinks: "No one should be alone in their old age ... But it is unavoidable" (Hemingway 18). His will of catching a fish is so strong that he sets off to the great

sea alone in his old age although he knows “no man was ever alone on the sea” (Hemingway 52). Abhorring weakness, he struggles hard in his old age to satisfy his needs. When he catches the huge fish, he does all he can to show his will and strength. He creates an imaginary dialogue between himself and the fish: “I wish I could show him what sort of man I am” (Hemingway 55). Although he is aware that their power is not equal, and the situation is unfair, but he struggles to do his best and kill the fish: “Although it is unjust, he thought. But I will show him what a man can do and what a man endures” (Hemingway 57).

Thus, rather than retirement itself, the main problem in modern societies is compulsory retirement intentionally. Putting an end to one’s job has always existed in the pre-modern societies, as it is seen in Santiago’s society. He is aware of his old age although he regularly goes fishing. In other words, an organization does not impose retirement on him at a particular age. According to Hannah Leslie:

The practice which can most clearly be branded as ageism is that of compulsory retirement at some arbitrarily defined, fixed retirement age. This practice was rare in the nineteenth century, and many early pension schemes were extremely flexible about retirement age. This does not, of course, mean that compulsory retirement was then unknown. It was natural for an old employee who could not do his job to be dismissed, and, according to the customs of the trade, locality or firm, he might or might not be offered a light job or an ex gratia pension to compensate. Yet it became increasingly common in the twentieth century to require employees to retire at sixty or sixty-five, irrespective of their physical or mental condition. (134)

Despite being a compulsory stage of an employment in modern time, the real nature of retirement is totally incomprehensible for the people in a typical society. As Freya Dittmann-Kohli suggests, only when one gets retired, does s/he come to understand what it is: “Only during retirement can the status of not working be wholeheartedly appreciated, while identification with one’s former occupation may persist.” This mainly stems from the value that society and culture in the modern era put on work: “During working age, those who have paid work perceive their status as positive; having work is considered as valuable. Statements on work include possible improvements in self and work environment, as well as (deficits in) competencies, work motivation, and feelings” (283). Working is considered as a high value in

modern world. Anybody who does not have a job is considered useless for the utilitarian society and its public.

Having compared her own status to that of Marjorie's, Letty finds out that she is a useless retired woman while Marjorie is on the verge of marrying a clergyman. She believes that Marjorie will be a good wife to the clergyman, helping him with the parish work. Following such perceptions, she says: "I sometimes think I ought to get another job, 'part time, perhaps'" (Pym 103). For Santiago, work and life are not separate from each other. He has always been working in his life. In other words, working is not considered a value in itself. Rather, it is a means to live. Fishing is an inseparable element of his life. In other words, working is not a part of his life but indeed his life since life without work does not have any significance for him

Enforced retirement results in the economic and spiritual impoverishment of the retired people because of their change of status. In this case, Johnson argues that: "The discourse on the socio-economic position of older people in modern society embodies a strong belief that the twentieth century has witnessed a significant marginalization of the aged. This is most clearly articulated in arguments about declining economic standing of older workers in the labour market as retirement has become formalized as a key institution for exit from the labour force" (6). The retired lose their income and instead their ends must be met by the little pension that they are given by the government until their death. Homeless retired people are the most vulnerable ones since most of them must move to nursing homes. Vincent also discusses the economic difficulties that the retired people face. According to him, "loss of income" (16) is a significant hardship which is common among the retired people since they have to live on merely a pension which is not enough for meeting their needs in their old age. Furthermore he states that "the changing material circumstances of older people are a further experience of old age example of the impact of social institutions on old age. The possibilities of living a satisfactory old age are severely constrained by how much money they have. Many older people, even in the developed world, continue to live in relative poverty" (16-17). Likewise, the retired characters in *Quartet in Autumn* live alone. They have nobody to care for them. Letty's case is the most tragic. In addition to being childless and lonely, she does not own a house and has economic problems. She is continuously troubled with the thought that she cannot rent a house by herself. Therefore, she should either find a room in another person's house or move to a nursing home. Marcia is also single and does not have any relatives or connections although she has a house of her own.

She is completely torn down after her retirement since her relations with other people end as she isolates herself in her house and dies of loneliness. In contrast, although Santiago lives alone since his wife is dead and he has no children to take care of him. His community to some extent looks after him. The young boy treats him as his father and the community he lives in does not isolate him. The nature of relation in these two societies is also quite different. In his pre-industrialized society of Santiago, the relation between people is not based on a person's being beneficial to an institution or other people. In contrast, in the modern society of Letty and Marcia, when a person loses his or her productivity, the company which s/he works for dismisses her/him.

Throughout history, people have always been voluntarily and consciously putting an end to their jobs as the consequence of ageing, illness and many other reasons. However, compulsory retirement has never existed as normal practice in history. Hannah's statement in this case is true about the two very different societies of England and Cuba,

The modern idea of retirement has a long and venerable history; but the twentieth century has fundamentally transformed its nature. Modern retirement practice has a number of distinct characteristics. First, it is a general rite of passage which almost all adult employees can now expect to undergo. Second, it is more likely to be compelled at a fixed chronological age, rather than to be initiated by failing physical or mental powers. And third, the financial status of the retired has greatly improved, so that this form of retreat from the world of work is less commonly seen in negative terms than was once the case. These diverse elements have given rise to a rich variety of interpretations of the reasons for the modern growth of retirement. (122)

Furthermore, the modernized society obliges individuals to adapt themselves to retirement in order to lead active and healthy lives. It encourages the elderly to make the best of their time and money in the capitalist society. For example, when Marcia is invited to her neighbor's house for the Christmas, she faces their grandparents who "led such useful and busy lives in their retirement in Buckinghamshire – every day for them was so full and interesting and their stay with Priscilla in London would be filled with worthwhile activities, visits to theatres and art galleries. What did Marcia do, or rather what would she do when she retired next year?" (Pym 72). Marcia is unable to adapt to retirement and her health, physically and mentally, begins to deteriorate on the first day of her retirement. All day long, she does so many meaningless jobs,

such as classifying her tinned food and plastic bags, that she forgets to eat anything. Moreover, her appearance worsens after her retirement since she was never greatly concerned about her appearance and clothing and there is nobody anymore to see her: "Marcia had not bothered to touch up the roots of her hair which now stood out snowy white against the stiff, dark brown of the rest" (Pym 99). Accordingly, when she goes to an appointment with her colleagues, they are unable to recognize her: "Marcia was thinner than ever and her light-coloured summer coat hung on her emaciated body" (Pym 106).

Unlike her, Letty has become an ideal retired person. She enjoys eating, drinking and watching TV in her retirement so much that she gains weight since she takes care of herself and her food. For a while she tries to study sociology seriously; however she quits it by saying: "But you were supposed to enjoy retirement, at least the first weeks of it. Have a good rest, do all those things you've always wanted to do, people had said" (Pym 98). Santiago's case is quite different from that of Letty's and Marcia's. Since his society does not impose retirement on him, his life in old age does not differ much from his younger age. He neither experiences the disillusionment nor the desolation that both Marcia and Letty experience. He goes on fishing and seems to be even more willing and powerful in his old age. The decision to catch a huge fish indicates that old age does not have any effect on his will and determination. Moreover, after having caught the huge fish, he does not let it go although he is injured, has become weak, and has not eaten for several days: "he tried to settle more comfortably and to steer and from his pain he knew he was not dead" (Hemingway 109).

The creation of the institution of retirement and, thus elderliness, not only resulted in the modern individual's social and economic difficulties but also a suitable for the old and retired people. They should not expect much either from society or from the other people. Referring to David Troyanski's statement in this case, Johnson holds that, "the category of old age was constructed in moral ways both to laud and censure forms of behavior deemed appropriate or inappropriate, just as the modern concept of retirement has, according to some sociologists, been constructed and reconstructed in the twentieth century to suit the shifting needs of capitalist labour markets" (4). Moreover, the change in the structure of the society which was brought by the capitalist system resulted in the alienation of the previously active employees from their workplace and society. This was not the case in the pre-industrialized society. As it is the case with Santiago, the experience and knowledge of the elderly were considered to be important both

by their colleagues and by the new generation. However, neither Marcia and Letty's colleagues nor their organization value their experience, and that is the main reason of their feeling valueless after retirement. Johnson also argues that "In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the age structuring of the life course has been heavily determined by actions of institutions, particularly those of a central state and local state, while in earlier times spiritual influences were of greater significance" (4). As it is evident in Pym's novel, there is no transition of either knowledge or experience and the characters leave their offices as they have never belonged there. In contrast, during his long life, Santiago is deeply involved in his job and his workplace is his boat on the sea.

Working in the Capitalist system makes the employees alienated from their jobs, especially after the retirement, while working in the pre-industrialized society makes Santiago identify with his job and even with the fish that he catches: "The fish is my friend too ... I have never seen or heard of such a fish. But I must kill him" (Hemingway 66). Several times in the novel, he doubts killing the fish since he considers him more worthy and respectable than most people. He talks to his fish and makes a great friendship with him although he knows that he is obliged to kill him in order to survive: "I love you and respect you very much. But I will kill you dead before this day ends" (Hemingway 46). His dialogue with the fish lasts for a while. He searches for the reasons to kill the fish. He does not want to do so since it seems to him more dignified than any person: "how many people will he feed, he thought. But are they worthy to eat him? No, of course not. There is no one worthy of eating him from the manner of his behaviour and his great dignity" (Hemingway 67). Santiago identifies with the fish so much that he thinks it is better for the fish to kill him not the other way round: "You are killing me, fish, the old man thought. But you have a right to. Never have I seen a greater, or more beautiful, or a calmer or more noble thing than you, brother. Come on and kill me. I do not care who kills who" (Hemingway 84). Later in the novel, when the sharks attack the fish and eat it, he regrets greatly having caught the fish and feels guilty by thinking: "I wish it were a dream and that I had never hooked him. I'm sorry about it, fish. It makes everything wrong." He is terribly regretful and sorry when he looks at it "drained of blood" (Hemingway 101). He loses all the meat of the fish to the sharks at the end although he kills some of them. Nothing remains of the fish except its head and the skeleton and he thinks nobody is worthy to eat the wise and respectable fish.

Retirement, or the rite of passage that society has created for entering old age, also requires people to change their behaviour after the retirement period because of the change in their social and economic status. Just before her retirement Letty says: "I expect something will turn up when I retire –after all, I haven't retired yet" (Pym 59). Retirement is considered to be a difficult stage in an individual's life since it mostly results in great changes. Moreover, it changes the perception of the other people towards the retired.

Although Marjorie is as old as Letty, she regards her as an elderly after her retirement. It is as if retirement is a turning point after which people get older. In fact, Marjorie can be considered as the representative of the society's preconceptions toward the retired. She treats Letty in a humiliating way calling her "dear old Letty" (Pym 46). Although she is as old as Letty, she does not consider herself old since she does not have a job in an organization and thus does not get retired to consider herself as old as Letty. Marjorie even suggests that it is better for Letty to take a room at Hulmhurst: "It occurred to me that you might like to take a room at a nursing home, I *think* there may well be a vacancy shortly (due to death, of course!)" (Pym 46). Similarly, the other people treat Letty as an elderly woman although she is lively and healthy. Even Norman and Edwin, who are themselves on the verge of retirement and are almost as old as Marcia and Letty, change the way of addressing them: "Edwin noted that Letty and Marcia, previously 'the girls', were now 'the old dears'" (Pym 104). In another occasion, Edwin emphasizes on the right of the elderly to receive social work: "I think Letty is more likely to be on the receiving end of the social worker's ministrations," said Edwin. After all, she is a retired person, a senior citizen, you may say" (164). Letty does not think of herself as elderly believing that Edwin is unfair to her. She feels that Father G., a clergyman she is introduced, "seems to draw away from her at this unattractive classification. He did not much care for the aged, the elderly or just old people', whatever you liked to call them" (Pym 157). Marcia also does not have any plans for her life after retirement. When her social worker Janice asks her what she will be doing after her retirement, she gets confused: "'You'll be retiring ... Have you thought at all what you're going to do?' 'Do?' Marcia stared at her blankly. 'What do you mean?'" (Pym 90). Conversely, Hemingway's Santiago sets out to the sea every day even if he does not catch any fish. The state does not force him to leave his job. Thus, although his community believes that he is unlucky, however, the day of his retirement is the day he dies: "'Fish," he said softly, aloud, "I'll stay with you until I am dead"' (Hemingway 19). His life and his work are so much

interwoven that he cannot imagine a day being separated from his work. His work is his life as he identifies with the fish he catches.

Retirement has become a serious business and an inseparable part of life since the twentieth century. According to Cameron Graham's argument, "the subject of retirement looms on the horizon of every citizen in contemporary Western society, whether as a dream or as a specter." He also adds that retirement became "institutionalized in the 20th century as social systems developed to simultaneously permit and coerce older workers to down tools" (25). Thus, people's retirement in Western societies is presented as a gift in order to make retirement legal and logical. Because of that, the organizations and institutions, like Letty and Marcia's, give a sort of retirement party when one of their employees retire: "The organization where Letty and Marcia worked regarded it as a duty to provide some kind of retirement party for them, when the time came for them to give up working." The same organization, however, does not spend too much on such an occasion since "their status as ageing unskilled women did not entitle them to an evening party" (Pym 83). The employees nevertheless do not understand the meaning of retirement and the things that are going to happen to them after that while, as the narrator ironically emphasizes, it should be considered seriously:

Retirement was a serious business, to be regarded with respect, though the idea of it was incomprehensible to most of the staff. It was a condition that must be studied and prepared for, certainly – 'researched' they would have said – indeed it had already been the subject of a seminar, though the conclusions reached and the recommendations drawn up had no real bearing on the retirement of Letty and Marcia, which seemed as inevitable as the falling of the leaves in autumn, for which no kind of preparation needed to be made. (Pym 83)

In the modern societies, however, retirement is represented as a natural stage of life that everybody must experience during his/her lifetime. Nevertheless, due to its artificiality, nobody does comprehend it fully. Being an institution of the Western societies in the modern era, retirement exists as an inevitable reality in the lives of the characters in Pym's novel. Likewise, according to Peter Coleman et al., it is a "symbolic construct" whereby individuals "attempt to make sense of the later part of life" (2). Each of the characters in Pym's novel experiences retirement in a different way. Letty has planned to share her friend Marjorie's cottage in the country, however, she has to cancel her plan due to Marjorie's marriage. Afterwards, she

reluctantly moves to an elderly woman's house as a tenant. Likewise, Marcia becomes isolated in her big house. Conversely, in the traditional fictional world of Hemingway's character, Santiago does not have to change his lifestyle in his old age. He has a simple life and his needs are not much. His monotonous lifestyle does not, in fact, change until his death. No shocking or unexpected event happens in his life as he can work as long as he lives.

Santiago's society does not categorize his life into different phases. Categorization of the work life into different phases, as Vincent argues, is a modern construction:

The modern structure of the working life has segmented the life course into pre-work, work and post-work phases. The conventional definition of chronological old age as starting at 60 or 65 stems from standardisation and bureaucratisation of the life course around the administration of retirement experience of old age pensions. This contrasts with the situation in more traditional rural environments. (9-10)

Britain was very quick in adapting the construction of retirement and applying it to all the employees without considering their particular physical, social, and economic state. The definition of old age in the pre-modern times in Britain was individualistic and flexible. However, over a period of time from 1850 to 1950, a new, more rigid definition of old age developed. During this time, fixed retirement ages became normalized and the association between a person's physical condition and her giving up work lost its significance. Before the early nineteenth century individuals retired from their occupations whenever they felt unable to carry them out. In Britain the first fixed retirement age was introduced in 1859 for civil servants and was set at the age of 65. The establishment of a widely uniform age of transition from work to retirement created the norm of the old age for people beyond 65, who are without occupations (Vincent 10).

Ageing is a sociocultural construct in the capitalist societies, and the institution of retirement is the main marker of elderliness. In other words, retirement is considered as the main gate to old age. Shulamith Shahar also highlights the constructed nature of age in the modern time. Agreeing with Shahar's theory, Johnson states that in medieval Europe "it was also true that authority and role were not based on an ascriptive criterion of age, but rather on functional capacity. While there are rare examples of upper and lower age limits ... in general no preference was given to the elderly on the one hand, but nor were they obliged to retire as long as their functional capacity did" (6). Thus, Johnson also confirms that retirement is a modern

construction which came about with the rise of capitalism in the Western countries. Chris Phillipson also believes that retirement emerged as an aftermath of modernity: “Retirement and the welfare had developed (along with biomedicine) as two of the ‘big ideas’ of modernity. They formed part of the development of the modern life course, with individuals constructing their lives around what Best (1980) was to describe as the ‘three boxes’ of education, work and leisure” (43).

Similarly, Johnson affirms that categorization of a person’s life’s into several phases is a modern concept. In the pre-capitalist societies, older workers were a salient part of the active society. They would work until they became ill or weak and they themselves decided to quit their jobs. However, as Dillon et al. argues, according to the perspective of the theory of modernization, “traditional farming protected older workers, while industrialization undermined their status and impoverished them” (32). The elderly have been viewed with mistrust by the procedures of modernization and industrialization mainly because of the fact that, compared to them, there are more beneficial, younger people easily accessible in society:

One of the perspectives prevalent in the scholarly history of old age was that reformers in the early twentieth century in industrializing societies, argued that the shift from an agricultural to a manufacturing economy rendered older workers obsolete, as a result of their loss of control over the workplace and the efficiency demands of employers and managers in factories. (Dillon et al. 32)

Upon entering the minimum age for retirement, Letty and Marcia are considered to be old and unable physically and mentally to continue their jobs. Ironically, it is their separation from their job and the working environment that make them weaker, ill and isolated. Vincent restates his definition of old age by relying on what three scholars, namely Thompson, Itzin and Abendstern, have said about old age in the context of Britain:

Elderly people in Britain have to manage a discrepancy between the cultural expectations of the elderly and their own feelings about themselves. You can feel old at any point in adulthood. Men and women in their twenties or thirties or forties can feel they have failed to find the right person to marry, or have made the wrong career choice, and that they are ‘too old’ to start again. Feeling old is feeling exhausted in spirit, lacking the energy to find new responses as life changes. It is giving up. Feeling ourselves means feeling the inner energy which has carried us thus far in life. (28)

Neither of the characters in Pym's novel feels old or *exhausted*. Retirement has a shocking effect on their mentality. Ironically, it is the retirement, not old age, that makes them unable of finding a solution to their problems and unable of "starting again." Marcia's health deteriorates after her retirement mostly because she loses her only company of colleagues and does not care about herself anymore. Unlike her, Letty is totally aware of her situation, her loneliness, homelessness and economic difficulties.

The imposition of forceful retirement has a great impact on the physical and mental wellbeing of the two female characters in *Quartet in Autumn*. According to Thomas E. Anderson, besides being a change of status, retirement has a great effect on the overall being of a retired person: "In a complex technological society, retirement does not consist of a relatively simple change in status from the role of worker to that of non-worker but has important interpersonal and intrapersonal implications that affect the retired person's personal and social existence" (iii). Moreover, retirement, as Anderson argues, is beyond imposing an end to a person's working life. Besides losing her job, a person loses many other important things as well, "the job itself is perhaps a small part of what is lost, for many functions are subsumed in the work situation. The process of retirement affects not only the individuals, but many other systems in the individual's life" (12). Thus, the process of retirement has a great impact on a person's life since it is "a loss, a change and a new state. The process involves the preparation of alternatives. The response to change, and the process of transfer through the change, and accommodation to the new pattern" (12).

Because of the advent of various technological devices like computer, people with Letty's and Marcia's skills are not needed anymore. After their retirement, they are replaced by a computerized system and consequently, the modern and industrialized system ignores them: "The most significant thing about it was that nobody was replacing them, indeed the whole department was being phased out and only being kept on until the men working in it reached retirement age" (Pym 84). On the first day of her retirement, when Letty is passing by the library, she experiences a strange sensation remembering that nobody has already replaced her and Marcia: "It gave her the feeling that she and Marcia had been swept away as if they had never been. With this sensation of nothingness she entered the library" (Pym 94). She re-experiences the same absurd sentiments when she visits her colleagues in the office. She notices that "the men now seemed to occupy all the space that had once accommodated the four of them" (Pym

106). Again she experiences the feeling of nothingness, “when it was borne in on her so forcibly that she and Marcia had been phased out in this way, as if they had never existed” (Pym 106). Thus, the advent of technology contributes to a great extent to the capitalist state. The kind of job Letty and Marcia used to do probably needed no intelligence and thus can be carried out by computers.

While visiting her former workplace, Letty is unable to see any proof of her existence there. Conversely, Santiago in Hemingway’s novel is a respectable fisherman in his society. He owns his job and therefore can decide when to start and finish his work. In other words, there is no need for him to put an end to his job as he has got no retirement period. Since his job is not given to him by the state, a retirement time is not imposed on him. The fact that Santiago does not ever retire from his job, empowers him to catch a huge fish in his old age. Unlike Letty and Marcia, whose lives and health conditions get worse after their retirement, Santiago has the will and strength to continue working efficiently in his old age. Towards the end of narrative, there are some indications that Santiago will not put an end to his job even after his last journey to the sea. He and the boy have plans for fishing in near future: “Now we must make our plans about the other things” (Hemingway 116). The boy promises to accompany him in the next sailings and when Santiago says that he is not lucky, he replies: “I’ll bring the luck with me” (Hemingway 116).

In Paul Johnson’s words: “The experience of the old age in the past was not the result of a ‘social construction’ of categories by regulatory agencies. Nor was it simply a ‘natural’ response to physiological ageing” (1). Here, the *past* can be considered equivalent to the pre-industrialized society in which Santiago lives. There is no organization or agency in his pre-modern community to impose either retirement or elderliness on him. Likewise, Johnson also states that: “Exactly when the individual ageing process makes an adult ‘aged’ or ‘elderly’ is a matter of social convention and legal and administrative definition” (3). There is no institution in Santiago’s society to mark him as aged as it does mark Letty and Marcia, and nobody or no organization can retire him from his fishing job. Although there is a common belief among people in Santiago’s traditional community that he has no luck in catching a fish, however, nobody considers him weak or elderly and unable of working. Thus, he continues doing his job more determined than ever.

## Conclusion

As we have seen in the chosen novels by Pym and Hemingway, (old) age is mainly a sociocultural fabric rather than a physiological fact. The meaning and significance of age varies from one society to another. People in the pre-industrialized societies are not as age conscious as they are in modern societies since they do not experience retirement which is the touchstone for elderliness in industrialized societies. The former does not classify people into different age groups while in modern societies people are classified into groups such as the children, adolescent, youth, middle aged, and elderly. The fabrication of the institution of retirement began with the industrialization of the Western countries since the highly improving assembly lines of the industrialized world considered the elderly as futile, incompetent, and inefficient. The institution and the practice of retirement has had great impacts on the lives of the elderly. Having lost their jobs at a specific age, they find themselves as ineffectual elders. Conversely, the institution of retirement does not exist in the agricultural (pre-industrialized) societies in which people are primarily the owners of their jobs. Their lives and their works are interwoven. However, the layout of the families has been altered in the developed societies. Families are no longer ardent to be attentive to their elderly parents and grandparents. In a similar way to Letty and Marcia, most of the elderly people in the developed societies live alone or die in hospitals and nursing homes. Their society and its people classify them as elderly from the time they get retired. Each of them deals with this problem in a different way. While Letty adapts herself to the society's image of the retired elderly woman, Marcia's resistant manner leads her to be an autonomous and self-sufficient person, although it ends in her death. She casts out the image of the retired woman that society offers by willingly choosing death. In Santiago's pre-modern society, his life and work are interwoven and retirement is an unknown concept for him. He is the master of his job and no organization or institution imposes retirement on him through accusing him of inefficiency. That is why he has an everlasting dream of catching (a huge) fish in his old age.

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