

Aging and Wisdom: A Philosophical Exploration in *A Man for All Seasons* by Robert Bolt

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Abstract

The paper delves into the complex interrelation between aging and wisdom through Robert Bolt's play. According to it, old age is not a decline but one of the most important stages of human life that can encourage a person's moral and philosophical growth. The essay uses Sir Thomas More as a figure who is sagacious and sticks to his principles. This is contrasted with other characters, who represent opportunism. The paper explores society's view of old age, which today is not always looked at in a positive light. However, it states that literature shows different views on aging; instead of foolishness, aging is portrayed as a source of wisdom. It focuses much attention on More's character, showing how his strong beliefs and honesty influence his concept of wisdom, which is an active process requiring thought and moral bravery. The paper shows that More's wisdom is different from that of other characters. True wisdom does not come through age but through a person's character and the choices they make. The essay, placing More's decisions in the broader context of the English Reformation, points out deeper themes in the play: personal integrity, moral challenges, and the deeper meaning of getting older. Lastly, it concludes that aging is accepted, and when it comes, significant light is shed on the reality of life and morality.

Keywords: Aging, Wisdom, Old, Integrity, Life, Morality

1. Introduction

The general theoretical concern of this paper is related to the philosophy of aging and the philosophy of wisdom, as far as they can be detected in the play and how they relate to the actions and decisions of the characters. The researcher attempts to explain these concepts as they are manifested in the text, particularly from the perspective of how they help explain these philosophical ideas. By analysing the actions and enthusiasm of the major character, Sir Thomas More, and the other characters, the play outlines contrasting views of the theme of foolishness and wisdom. Consequently, aging is introduced not merely as a physiological process but as a multifaceted phase that influences the characters' ethical and worldview orientations (Bolt, 1960). Therefore, the following points are developed to extend the discussion from the psychological and factual levels raised by the play to the philosophical questions related to aging and wisdom.

Aging is typically seen as something uncomfortable; it is often viewed as vulnerability, a retreat from youth, or even something shameful. This perception is visible in today's American culture, where the aging process is often considered to diminish what is sociologically and aesthetically valued in middle-aged men, such as libido. However, the great cultural structural frameworks of aging are illustrated by such aged characters as Fagin from Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* or Faust from Goethe's *Faust*, where aging is depicted either as folly or as great wisdom and discretion, respectively (Dickens, 1838 & Goethe, 1808). These views of aging also define the overall societal expectations of what aging should look like in the social hierarchy, thereby bounding expectations based on age.

This, therefore, makes the philosophical analysis of aging valuable, at least insofar as it raises questions about the human life cycle. Third, the worth of experience and the feasibility of using it in critical moral decisions are examined in *A Man for All Seasons*, with aging serving as a definitive aspect of dramatic conflict.

1.1. Background of the Play

A Man for All Seasons is specifically designed to dramatize episodes from the life of Sir Thomas More, a leading philosopher and Lord Chancellor during the Tudor dynasty under King Henry VIII. The play focuses on a significant period in More's life, with its dominant theme being More's unwillingness to accept the King's divorce and the establishment of the Church of England. More's firm commitment to stand for what is right, particularly on issues of religious faith, ultimately leads to his execution in the play (Bolt, 1960). This aligns the events of the play with the historical context of the English Reformation, which is closely linked to the philosophical aspects of More's choices.

The major characters in *A Man for All Seasons* are not only real historical figures but also dramatized representations of key existential themes: the conflict between individual conscience, state responsibility, and the state's moral stance. The two central themes in the play are the processes of aging—the extension of life and the term of years—and the concomitant wisdom that comes with it. For More, the central concerns are respect for the principles of integrity and wisdom, and the notion of not "selling our souls," while on the outside, when nothing remains.

1.2. Relevance of the Topic Concerning Aging and Wisdom

Old age and wisdom are an important aspect of *A Man for All Seasons* because the audience can blame all the characters for it. A sector of life, most often encountered as a social threat, or a realization mirage is depicted assertively as a natural occurrence that if perceived as a life's advancement makes for subsidiarily improved understanding. Still, the characters do not illustrate this knowledge all-inclusively. Instead, More has his knowledge and vision from life experience and belief systems, on the other hand, the characters like the Common Man do not have similar attributes (Bolt, 1960).

Because of the representation of the audience, the play also shows that there are different ways in which wisdom can arrive. So, there seems to be only one type of knowledge by practice – or let's call it 'practical knowledge.' At the same time, though, within the domain of philosophy, there is still a slower read of wisdom: the 'worldly withdrawal' or 'the things that happen.' This contrast best summarizes the major philosophical issue concerning how one ought to live as he or she grows elderly. The play brings questions as to the definition of wisdom and age. The discussion here is that wisdom is not age, but character, which one shall term as integrity, readiness to take the right moral stand (Socrates, 399 BCE).

Thus, when looking at More's character and his covetousness for knowledge, one realizes that the want for the books he seeks is not only scholarly but also for moral and existential knowledge. He is provided a case in which he is to use his brain more than ever before and use the case to get rid of something about him. Aging, as mentioned above, is not a pathology for him, and therefore the Latin phrase *senex non timendum est* translates as 'the old man is not to be feared but rather is to be integrated into his existential and philosophical disposition.' It is obvious that in More's life, wisdom was not the capacity to face supplied suffering or, to avoid death, but to endure it with unimpaired determination and undisturbed perseverance (Bolt, 1960).

1.3. Cultural Model of Aging

Culture begins with ideas—basic assumptions that shape societies, such as the tension between individualism and collectivism. Cultural attitudes toward aging vary significantly across different value systems, beliefs, and historical contexts. In some cultures, the elderly are revered as the storehouses of knowledge, while in others, aging is associated with decline and loss. These differing perspectives shape societal attitudes toward aging, wisdom, and the elderly. This section examines the cultural aspects of aging in Japanese and African literatures, as well as the philosophical perspectives from Confucianism and Hinduism.

Examples from different cultures:

- Japanese Literature: *The Tale of Genji*

In Japanese literature, aging has long been regarded as a natural, God-given process that corresponds to wisdom, virtue, and even physical beauty. One of the most momentous works to articulate this theme of aging is Murasaki Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji* (1000), which ages its eponymous protagonist, Genji, from youth to старость. Genji feigns ignorance at first, but he eventually learns the futility of trying to hold on to the beauties of life as he matures. The novel depicts aging not as a loss but as a source of wisdom. The idea of *mono no aware*, the sensitivity to beauty that comes from knowing that things are impermanent, informs the Japanese cultural attitude toward aging. Older characters in this context are wise and have been changed by a life that has left them with a great appreciation of the brevity that life affords. This cultural perspective fits with the wide overall Japanese respect for old age, which has figured as a source of spirituality and ethical teachings.

- African Literature: A Critical Analysis of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

In African writing, old age is almost always a symbol of traditions, power and moral leadership. In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), the Igbo elders play the role of moral guides and guardians of social and cultural values. One such elder, Ogbuefi Ezeudu, is depicted as a figure of wisdom due to his age and experience, embodying the respect that society affords to the elderly. In the Igbo society represented in the novel, elders play a crucial role not only in offering wisdom but also in passing down cultural heritage and knowledge. Among the Anioma people and in traditional Igbo society, aging is seen as a source of power, deserving of respect and honour. However, Achebe's novel also highlights the tension between tradition and

modernity, as the younger generation begins to question the role of elders in the changing world.

- **Philosophical Contexts: Confucianism and Hinduism**

In many philosophical traditions, aging is associated with wisdom, respect, and moral authority. Confucianism emphasizes respect for the elderly through the concept of filial piety, which mandates that children honour their parents and elders. Values such as marital obedience and reverential attention from children reflect Confucian ideals that connect age with moral strength, necessary for the proper functioning of families and society (Yang, 2003). In this tradition, old age is viewed as a position of high authority and responsibility, where one's accumulated knowledge is seen as vital for the well-being of the community.

In Hinduism, aging is deeply intertwined with spirituality and the stages of life. The Hindu life cycle is divided into four stages, with the third stage, *Vanaprastha*, signifying the transition from worldly duties to a more spiritual life. During this stage, an individual withdraws from social and material concerns to focus on reflection and spiritual growth. This stage of life represents a philosophical approach to aging, emphasizing the pursuit of knowledge and spiritual fulfillment as one ages (Radhakrishnan, 2014).

Historical Contextualization

Throughout history, the perception of aging has evolved in response to changing societal values and structures. In ancient societies, elders were highly respected as the bearers of wisdom. The role of elders was a religious and a social one, they were responsible for teaching the younger generations. Many Indigenous cultures revered elders as leaders and custodians of the moral and spiritual fabric of society, shaping the norms and values that were maintained by the individual members of the community.

Thematic Connections: The Theme of Wisdom vs. Folly

The tension between wisdom and folly, especially in old age, is a recurring theme across cultures. In Greek tragedies, older characters embody earthly wisdom, leading them to end up on the wrong side of noble ideals of aging, like the cultural potential for hubris.

Note that in Scandinavian sagas, an older hero reflects on his actions, balancing the immediate precepts of his duties with an intimate ethical consciousness. That tension is key to unlocking an

understanding of the dual realities of aging in the texts. Aging isn't only depicted as a time of gathering precious lessons, but also a time when one grapples with old mistakes or sins.

In both, however, the governing theme of aging patriarchs is generally framed less in terms of their sanguinary capacity than their moral (and spiritual) capacity. The duality of wisdom versus folly, then, depends on the values of culture: for some, aging symbolizes moral refinement and caution, while for others, it is an ugly acceptance of one's inadequacies and failures.

Such cultural perspectives set the stage for *A Man for All Seasons*, and are useful to keep in mind, particularly in the character of Sir Thomas More. Like the elders in *The Tale of Genji* or *Things Fall Apart* who are associated with wisdom gathered from age, More also has a wisdom that comes from the particulars of his life. But his wisdom is not without the tears that haunt Greek tragedies or Scandinavian sagas. More dies a martyr for his moral principles, which echoes the reverence for elders in Confucian and Hindu philosophies. In this way, one can appreciate More's character as embodying the wisdom symbolized within these cultural frameworks of aging.

2. The Concept of Wisdom

The concept of wisdom serves as a crucial lens through which to analyze the main character of the play, Thomas More, and the ethical dilemmas he faces. Many people often confuse wisdom with knowledge, but these two concepts are not the same. Wisdom is the ability to reason well and make sound decisions on matters concerning life, people, and situations. In *A Man for All Seasons*, experience is not portrayed as a byproduct of age, but rather as a manifestation of character and a clear moral vision (Aristotle, 350 BCE).

The word "wisdom" has Scandinavian origins and is related to the Old English word *wise*, meaning knowledge that is applied correctly and beneficially. Wisdom has long been a favorite topic among philosophers, yet it remains an elusive and often vague concept. It is frequently described as insight, and many link it to reasoning and expertise, positioning it as a sense of ethics. In his *Republic*, Plato defined wisdom as the capacity to distinguish right from wrong, regardless of the potential consequences (Plato, 380 BCE).

Wisdom also involves the ability to foresee the broader consequences of a single action and to act according to one's principles and ideals, even if those principles run counter to prevailing cultural or political powers. In the case of Thomas More, the personal danger he faces is evident, but his refusal to

support the King's break from Rome exemplifies this form of wisdom. More does not refuse out of self-interest; rather, he remains steadfast in his moral and philosophical convictions (Bolt, 1960).

In the play, wisdom is juxtaposed with more selfish motivations, as embodied by characters like Thomas Cromwell. Cromwell is willing to bend any rules to benefit the King, viewing wisdom as a strategic tool in political manoeuvring. In contrast, Thomas More seeks wisdom as the only means to uphold the truth. The difference between these two characters highlights a tension between earthly wisdom, which is utilitarian and politically driven, and superior wisdom, which is guided by moral and philosophical principles (Bolt, 1960).

A Man for All Seasons portrays aging not only as a physical process but also as a profound experience imbued with wisdom and potential. While the play acknowledges the theory of physical decline with age, it also challenges it, presenting aging as a time for a deeper understanding of one's actions and reasoning. Through the life of Thomas More, Bolt suggests that it may be wiser to stand firm in one's convictions and die for them, rather than to live a life of knowledge without the courage to act upon it. The play thus presents aging as a moment for self-reflection, where one can integrate past experiences to discover the nature of life, truth, and morality (Bolt, 1960).

3. Aging in Literature

Aging, as a recurring theme in literature, often reflects the values, cultural beliefs, and societal structures of various periods. Depictions of elderly individuals vary across cultures, with aging sometimes portrayed negatively and at other times more positively. Literature frequently associates aging with wisdom, which in turn influences how societies perceive the elderly.

Traditionally, the elderly have been portrayed in two contrasting ways in literature. Older people were considered wise in earlier texts because they had been around for long enough to learn from experience. This wisdom is often regarded as a product of aging, as older people should counsel you based on their experiences. More contemporary texts also refer more frequently to frailty and physical decline as part of the aging process, depicting older characters suffering illnesses or as burdens on society.

This shift in attitudes is reflected in society's attitude toward aging in literature: There are two notable examples from *A Man for All Seasons* referenced above. Robert Bolt's representation of old age is two-dimensional because age is not merely physiological degeneration.

Sir Thomas More, for example, awakens to his mortality but remains faithful to his principles and beliefs. So aging is not simply a process of decay but an opportunity for thought at deeper levels, wisdom and strength that emerge through hardship. The play posits that even, or perhaps especially, in death, the old, like More, may retain some dignity and moral clarity.

3.1. A Definition of Aging from a Historical Perspective

Our attitude toward old age has changed greatly over the centuries and so has the representation of aged people in books. Aging in ancient Greece was a parallel connection to wisdom, and when it came to elderly individuals, women, especially, were revered as stewards of knowledge and culture. Wisdom and age were synonymous, with older individuals often serving as respected philosophers and guides. This connection between aging and wisdom was also present in other ancient societies, where elders were valued for their life experience and insight.

However, the Roman Empire marked a shift in these perceptions. The early Roman attitude toward aging began to change, and the elderly were no longer universally seen as wise, revered figures. Instead, aging was often portrayed negatively, with a focus on the physical decline that accompanied it. Roman literature began to reflect a new, more critical attitude toward the elderly, framing aging as a transition into a "hideous monster" characterized by decaying beauty, loss of love and diminished intellect and strength (Horsfall, 2011). This shift represents the emergence of ageism, where the elderly were increasingly seen as burdens rather than as sources of wisdom.

In contrast, traditional Chinese culture continued to emphasize the importance of elders, viewing old age as the pinnacle of human life. Elders were respected for their accumulated knowledge and experience, and age was associated with high status and power. In China, elders were often promoted to the most prestigious positions, as it was believed that age brought wisdom and leadership ability (Yang, 2003).

These cultural differences were also reflected in the literature of various periods. Early Western literature, for instance, often portrayed older individuals as noble and dignified figures, embodying the virtues of wisdom and integrity. However, in later periods, such as the Romantic era, literature began to explore the complexities of aging with greater depth. Elderly characters were still depicted as noble, but their aging process was often portrayed as more nuanced, highlighting both the wisdom gained over time and the inevitable decline of the body and mind. This shift in perspective mirrors the changing cultural values and political beliefs of those eras, as noted by Bennett in *Some Theory of Archives* (2018).

3.2. The Role of Aging in the Play, *A Man for All Seasons*

Aging in *A Man for All Seasons*

Aging in *A Man for All Seasons* is far from simple or one-dimensional. The aging process in the play is intricately linked to the moral compass of the characters and their underlying philosophies. Sir Thomas More, the protagonist, is portrayed as an esteemed gentleman in his fifties, respected for his wisdom. However, his wisdom is not merely a product of age; it stems from his moral values, personal integrity, and steadfast principles (Bolt, 1960). Aging, in More's case, is not about becoming a passive victim of time but represents a logical progression of self-development, leading to religious enlightenment and a deeper sense of self-organization.

Contrasting with More, other characters in the play, particularly the Common Man, offer a different perspective on aging. The Common Man, who assumes multiple roles throughout the play, is not the embodiment of Socratic wisdom. Rather than seeking wisdom or self-improvement, he is driven by basic survival instincts. His approach to aging is pragmatic and self-interested, focused more on avoiding risks than on gaining knowledge. This stands in stark contrast to More, who is willing to sacrifice everything—his life, wealth, and status—to remain true to his moral convictions (Rood, 2016).

The play explores aging as a process in which one strives to acquire knowledge and wisdom. More's wisdom is not simply a result of age but is enriched by his years of service, experience, and, most importantly, his ability to reflect on and analyze life's challenges. In his dealings with King Henry VIII and others, More demonstrates that wisdom is not defined by age alone. Rather, it is about one's capacity to think critically, make righteous choices, and stand firm in one's beliefs, regardless of the pressures of the world or politics.

The relationship between wisdom and age in Christian thought is often conventional, but *A Man for All Seasons* complicates this view. According to the play, aging does not automatically lead to wisdom. It is not wealth, choice and, most importantly, integrity that are the main determinants of wisdom (Evans, 2012, p. 22). More's wisdom does not arise from a mere accumulation of facts or experiences; it derives from his absolute fidelity to his moral and philosophical principles, principles he holds to the point of death. This highlights the idea that wisdom is not merely knowledge, but a complete ethical framework one uses to navigate their existence.

3.3. Aging and Wisdom: A Complex Relationship

This paper argues that *A Man for All Seasons* does not offer a straightforward, linear relationship between aging and enlightenment. The play hints that its wisdom may be a punishment, as even the wise grow older; it gives the implication that growing older does not guarantee wisdom. In the instance of Sir Thomas More, wisdom is illustrated not as a gradual byproduct of age, but as an ongoing trajectory for individual growth. It is an aggregation of the wisdom in More, grounded in his character—his profound familiarity with the principles of human life, his steadfast commitment to moral integrity, and his imperviousness to the pressures of others and moral standards that shift (Bolt, 1960).

This perspective is starkly different from other characters — like Thomas Cromwell and the Duke of Norfolk, who, despite their life experiences, put power and self-interest at the front. These characters are willing to do Henry VIII's bidding for their gain, revealing that age alone does not guarantee wisdom. Instead, the passage of time in their lives deepens their commitment to self-serving motives rather than to reason, reflection, and moral wisdom. As Rowles and Howard argue, their characters underscore the idea that aging can, in some cases, reinforce selfish desires and the abandonment of ethical principles (Parsons, 2014).

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