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Twilight Tide: Narrative of Aging in *Olive Kitteridge*

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Abstract— *Olive Kitteridge, the third masterpiece by contemporary American writer Elizabeth Strout, won the Pulitzer Prize in 2009 for its exquisitely detailed depiction of the daily lives of small-town residents. Against the backdrop of the increasingly prominent trend of global aging, the portrayal of the elderly in this book appropriately carries real-world implications. This paper uses narrative gerontology theory to analyze the loneliness experience of the elderly and its narrative presentation in the novel. In terms of narrative, the author uses the shift between an omniscient perspective and an internal perspective, combined with the characters' inner monologues and dialogues, to deeply bind the theme of loneliness with the physical and psychological experiences of aging. This highlights the role of "Narratives of Life" in narrative gerontology in constructing the existential meaning of the elderly, revealing the universality and complexity of loneliness among the elderly in modern society.*

Keywords— ***Olive Kitteridge, narrative of ageing, loneliness, aging, family relationships***

I. INTRODUCTION

Olive Kitteridge, penned by the contemporary American female writer Elizabeth Strout, is a critically acclaimed novel that intricately weaves together thirteen short stories to depict the life of small-town residents, especially focusing on the protagonist Olive Kitteridge, a complex and often prickly retired schoolteacher residing in the small coastal town of Crosby, Maine. Through a series of episodic narratives spanning decades, Strout portrays Olive's relationships—her strained yet loving marriage with Henry Kitteridge, her complicated bond with their son Christopher Kitteridge, and her interactions with the diverse townspeople. The novel uses Crosby as a microcosm to explore universal themes of human connection, loneliness, aging, and the inevitable passage of time. Strout employs plain narration and simple language to depict the townsfolk's lives, reflecting the anguish of urban dwellers, the alienation between individuals, and other contemporary realities. The novel has won widespread acclaim for its intense focus on modern life's realities and themes of self-redemption, with its characters' lives serving as a mirror to society. *Olive Kitteridge* has not only won numerous awards, including the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction but also presented the spiritual crises and familial conflicts confronting modern people and resonated widely with readers, offering a deep meditation on the complexities of the human condition.

Researches on *Olive Kitteridge* also abound in various topics. Studies of overseas mainly focus on miniseries adaptation and comparative literature studies. Scriptwriter Jane Anderson and filmmaker Lisa Cholodenko adapted this book into a television miniseries. In Delphine Letort's article, how the critical power of an adaptation that draws on the conventions of the woman's film for challenging social and cultural constructs of gender and age is explored(86). For Jelena Šesnić, she made a comparison between *Olive Kitteridge* and *The Country of the Pointed Firs* to distinguish differences between the two novels in the respect of "the different temporal and cultural context in which they strive to represent age and ageing"(444). In recent years, Chinese scholars like Qiu Minghui has analyzed the psychological trauma of the protagonist Olive Kitteridge from the perspectives of "the manifestation, the causes, and the recovery methods"(166). Gao Weihong and Lu Shuang, based on Tönnies' community theory, have delved into "the community of blood", "the community of place", and "the community of spirit" underlying *Olive Kitteridge*.

Other Chinese scholars also have interpreted this novel from the standpoints such as Lacan's mirror-stage theory, family system theory, Sartre's existentialism, ecofeminism, and so forth. However, scholarly exploration into the narrative of *Olive Kitteridge* remains underexplored in the field of narrative gerontology. Thus, this paper will analyze the novel through the lens of narrative gerontology.

The origin of narrative gerontology can be traced back to the late 20th century. Early scholars such as Jim Birren and Hans Schroots initiated research on metaphors of aging in the 1990s (Kenyon et al xi). They laid the groundwork for interpreting aging not merely as a biological process, but as a symbolic construct embedded within cultural narratives. Narrative gerontology has emerged as a groundbreaking framework in gerontological studies. According to Li Jing, Narrative gerontology primarily focuses on the aesthetic expression of aging issues, taking life experiences in late-life stages such as senescence, death, and aging as aesthetic objects, and examining the periodic connections between age and literary creation in aesthetic perception(154). This literary research paradigm posits that the narration of life courses constitutes "Narratives of Life", which embodies the fictional and imaginative qualities of literature, while also fostering the narrator's reflection on life and cognition of self-existence. The process of older adults telling life stories is a dynamic and open-ended one interpreted collectively by "narratives of which we are simultaneously author and narrator, character and reader"(Randall and McKim 6). The textuality of narratives of life and the openness of the narrative and reading processes endow narrative subjects with multiple meanings of memory, time, and existence, and can reflect the subjective initiative of narrative subjects. This paper primarily analyzes the narrative themes in *Olive Kitteridge*, exploring the novel's characteristics of narrative gerontology by integrating narrative identity, point of view, and internal and external dialogue.

II. AGING REPRESENTED IN PSYCHOLOGY: LONELINESS AS NARRATIVE THEME

Loneliness in aged adults refers to the feeling of being disconnected or in disharmonious relationships with significant others, leading to a sense of estrangement and belittlement(Wu 984). By a close reading of the novel, what can be discerned is that the theme of loneliness runs throughout the text, accompanied by the development of the plot driven by three characters this paper will analyze. As Shen Dan put it, "The mode of point of view is not innate but formed according to conventions. In the omniscient mode, internal perspective shifts permitted by conventions often occur"(55). In *Olive Kitteridge*, this theory of point of view and the theme of loneliness intersect in a profound manner. Through the omniscient mode with internal perspective shifts, the author Elizabeth Strout meticulously exposes the multi-faceted loneliness of the aged characters. Although Olive Kitteridge serves as the protagonist of the novel, threading through the entire narrative, the 13 stories focus on different characters' points of view, further reinforcing the theme of loneliness through narrative identity and internal or external dialogue. In the following, I will separately take Henry Kitteridge, Olive Kitteridge, and Jack Kennison as examples to illustrate how these narrative devices promote narrative gerontology.

III. LONELINESS INCURRED BY THE EXCLUSION OF FAMILY MEMBERS

Henry Kitteridge is the protagonist of the first chapter Pharmacy. This chapter recounts Henry Kitteridge's experiences as a pharmacist, his relationship with his wife Olive, and his interactions with employee Denise Thibodeau. The theme of loneliness is already revealed at the beginning of the novel when the daily routine of Henry Kitteridge is described. "Retired now, he still wakes early and remembers how mornings used to be his favorite, as though the world were his secret"(Strout 3). Even after retiring, he still wakes up early, missing the solitude of driving to work in the morning. There is no doubt that going to work at the pharmacy is a delight for Henry. He loves the smell of pine trees, the saltiness in the air, and even the chill of winter. The pharmacy served as his haven, offering him temporary comfort. The wide array of things in the pharmacy became his companions which are "altogether steady and steadfast"(Strout 4). Things are his friends rather than humans. In other words, Henry would rather stay with things. In the pharmacy, Henry feels "cheerful" to help others, for "any unpleasantness that may have occurred back in his home...receded like a shoreline as he walked through the safety of his pharmacy"(Strout 4). Conventionally, what is universally acknowledged is that home is the cozy shelter for family members, but why does Henry prefer to stay in the pharmacy instead of home? What makes home unhomely? It is the loneliness and sense of not belonging in Henry's heart at home that are at play. According to Tong Ming, an important concept in Freudian psychoanalysis is the "return or recurrence of the repressed", or the "repetition compulsion". In his 1919 essay "Das Unheimliche" (The Uncanny), Freud elaborated on "The Uncanny/Unheimlich" as another articulation of the "return of the repressed"(106). That is to say, some sudden experiences of panic are indescribable, abrupt, and strange, but their namelessness is not without

reason. The present panic can be traced back to a certain source in the history of psychological processes. Therefore, the unfamiliar is actually familiar, and the illusion of "non-home" always has the shadow of "home", lingering and acting secretively. This antinomy of the familiar and the unfamiliar, and the association between the non-home and the home, constitutes the "uncanny" in the sense of psychoanalysis. For Henry, his own home evokes a sense of the uncanny, and his "retreat" into the world of the pharmacy is a manifestation of his loneliness. Facing Olive's sarcastic remarks and snubs like "Then that's that, Mr. President...Give your order to the cook"(Strout 6) when Henry makes the suggestion to invite the young Henry couple to have a meal that day, and facing Christopher sitting sideways at the table and "slumped in adolescent gracelessness"(Strout 6), completely ignoring the guests' caring greetings, Henry just feels like an unexpected fury sprout inside him because all of these as if will unveil "something unpleasant not expected to be found in the Kitteridge home"(Strout 6). It makes Henry feel like he "would find himself to be the odd man out"(Strout 5). On top of that, Olive's taunts have never ceased. When Henry suggests that Olive accompany him to church, she bursts into curses and snaps: "Yes, it most certainly is too goddamn much to ask!", "You, Mr. Head Deacon Claptrap Nice Guy, expect me to give up my Sunday mornings and go sit among a bunch of snot-wots!"(Strout 9). The external dialogue makes Henry feel "A darkness had rumbled through him; his soul was suffocating in tar."(Strout 9) internally. This home for Henry is unhomely as if what Olive and Christopher did seems a public exposure of familial failure. His relationship with his wife and son lacks the emotional connection that could alleviate the sense of alienation, and the shifting narrative perspective underscores the contrast between his external behavior (leaving for work early and lingering at the pharmacy) and his internal sense of loneliness. In this sense, Henry is lonely because of the exclusion from family members.

The omniscient narrative mode allows readers to sense that the pharmacy, for Henry, functions as a heterotopia not only because he can fulfill his desire for order and the companionship of inanimate objects—such as the neatly arranged items and medicines, along with the familiar scents in the pharmacy, but because he can stay with Denise Thibodeau, representation of the vitality of youth. In the pharmacy, the author uses rhetoric devices of simile to describe how compatible the relationship between Henry and Denise is and the pharmacy is his paradise: "Denises nature attached itself to his as easily as aspirin attached itself to the enzyme COX-2"(Strout 13), which makes him move through his day pain-free, and during the happy days Henry sometimes deems that the pharmacy is like "a healthy autonomic nervous system in a workable, quiet state"(Strout 13). However, happiness comes to an abrupt end in the following. The author first narrates in a humor tone that when the evening comes, adrenaline will pour through Henry for Olive's complaint: "People just waiting for me to serve them, with their faces hanging out" (Strout 13), which is an "alarm" that makes Henry's arm tingle. Such a sense of uncanny recurs when Henry stays at home. The home co-established by Henry and Olive has long lost its youth, and the aged couple has devolved from young lovers to middle-aged partners caught in endless bickering over daily trivialities. Yet Denise's arrival breathes new life into Henry's world, like a shot of youthful adrenaline to a stagnant routine. To escape from this loneliness, Henry began to look forward to the newlywed life of Henry Thibodeau and Denise Thibodeau, brimming with youth, vibrancy, and vitality. Henry imagines the young couple's life over and over again, picturing them like the "overgrown puppies tumbling together", and such a scene make him "could not have said why this gave him the particular kind of happiness it did, like liquid gold being poured through"(Strout 8). After the death of Henry Thibodeau, Henry Kitteridge finds out he has already fallen in love with Denise and desires to live together with her, which in essence stems from the fact that the old-age marriage between him and Olive has lost its freshness, and he seeks to escape loneliness in this way, much like when he realized Olive had somehow become an unapologetic atheist. It was not true when they were first married because they once discussed animal dissections during their college biology course, marveling at the miracle of the respiratory system, "a creation by a splendid power"(Strout 15). Their marriage has totally changed. However Henry's interior monologue has shown the importance of maintaining an accepting mindset when faced with unchangeable facts. As he passed the site of the old pharmacy, a large chain drugstore now stood there. The once-standing trees had been cut down completely, and replaced by a newly built parking lot. Facing this scene of things changing and people departing, Henry's state of mind appeared exceptionally open-minded. "You get used to things, he thinks, without getting used to things"(Strout 16). It is impossible for Henry to fantasize about a life with Denise. Perhaps the only way is to persuade himself to be open-minded, a compromise to face the unchangeable facts, although he has to rely on fantasies to dispel the loneliness in his heart.

IV. LONELINESS STEMMING FROM THE FEELING OF BEING UNNEEDED

When invited to New York to help her son, Olive is

undoubtedly expectant because Christopher, who has long been out of touch with his family, takes the initiative to contact Olive for help, which rekindles her hope. Although it is Olive's first time taking a plane, the scenery on the flight is quite enjoyable, which makes Olive feel something "she has not expected to feel again: a sudden surging greediness for life"(Strout 202). This results from the sense of being needed: "the way the plane was plowing forward to a place new, and where she was needed. She had been asked to be part of her son's life"(Strout 203). The loneliness of the elderly can be deeply devastating. In the twilight of life, offspring scatter here and there, leaving them as empty nesters. Days drag on like years, yet they cannot resist the advancing pace toward death. As Wu Jie pointed out that the more social support the elderly receive, the easier it is to reduce their experience of lonely emotions. The stronger the social support is, the more it can alleviate the emotional loneliness of the elderly(986). On the contrary, elderly people lacking social support feel isolated and at a loss when facing stressful events, which makes them prone to emotional loneliness. At the outset, Olive regains the hope to live because her son needs her help. However, the reality leaves Oliver deeply distressed in the following plots.

The warmth of anticipation dissipates the moment she steps out of the airport. Right after exiting the airport, she is scolded by Christopher for failing to find the correct exit. Christopher complains as he turns a blind eye to Olive pulling her luggage: " 'Godfrey', he said, not even reaching to take her bag. 'Why can't you just get a cell phone like everyone else?' "(Strout 203). This is the first remark he says to his 72-year-old mother, no words of greeting, no offer to help, just blame. It is not surprising that elderly people cannot use mobile phones but it is unimaginable that a person could be so indifferent. When Olive steps on the dog mess, Christopher does not care about his mother's condition at all but only complains. The contrast between Christopher's taciturnity since childhood and his current loquaciousness is utterly striking, rendering Olive confused. Christopher has already become the most familiar stranger to Olive. When the house Olive steps into is replete with "old dog hair" and the acrid stench of "soiled laundry", with even the walls exuding a "sourness" of mildew. These details deliver a dual sensory blow to Olive, olfactory and visual, to shape the home as a decaying vessel, which forms a startling contrast to Olive's own home, and makes Olive feel a great sense of estrangement, and the first unpalatable dinner intensifies Olive's sense of loneliness. When she steps down into the basement, Olive encounters her first mental breakdown, though the surrounding is as clean and tidy as her own home with the white-painting wall and a white telephone; she still "wanted to wail like a child"(Strout 208) because she do not belong to this home. While walking with her son and daughter-in-law, Olive mentions to her son that she has called his father. Christopher pays no attention at all, only focusing on talking with Ann. The loneliness in her heart reminds her that "She'd never had a friend as loyal, as kind, as her husband"(Strout 224). As she stands behind her son and daughter-in-law waiting for the traffic light to alter, she suddenly feels "a loneliness so deep that once"(Strout 224), and a recent visit to the dentist where the gentle turn of her chin by the dentist's soft fingers had in that moment felt like a tenderness so acute it ached, causing her to swallow with a groan of longing and tears to spring to her eyes. This detail uncovers the loneliness pent up deeply within her: even besides family, her psychological world has become as barren as a wilderness, such that the touch of a stranger could shatter her defenses. This moment of treatment for emotional comfort acts like a mirror, reflecting the long-neglected emotional needs in her family relationships. The loneliness hidden in the folds of daily life has already hollowed out her ability to perceive intimate connection like a cavity, and it is only in the kindness of a stranger that she suddenly realizes how deep her yearning to be treated gently truly was. But apparently, Christopher does not realize what exactly her mom needs.

The final trigger is a stain. When Olive sees the prominent strip of sticky butterscotch sauce on her blouse in the basement bathroom mirror, she is abruptly thrust into a confrontation with aging and indignity. The stain evokes the memory of Aunt Ora, whom she once repulsed for spilling melted ice cream, forcing her to recognize she has become the very figure she once despised. Christopher and Ann's silence about the stain deepens her sense of being treated as a burdensome "baby", a stark contrast to her own habit of immediately pointing out such mishaps to her son. Her act of wrapping the stained blouse in a plastic bag instead of washing it becomes a silent rebellion—an attempt to shield herself from the humiliating reality of aging while clinging to the remained dignity. Her terror of becoming invisible and irrelevant, trapped in a cruel cycle where the repulsion she once felt for Aunt Ora now mirrors her own fear of being seen as pathetic and overlooked is present. Olive makes up her mind to leave. She has said "stink like fish" three times; one is before she comes to Christopher's house and the other two are when she is ready to depart. When Christopher and Ann begin to keep Olive to stay, Olive just says: "you needed help, but you weren't even honest enough to say that"(Strout 228). The escalating emotional conflicts between Olive and Christopher stem from the collision of unspoken needs and generational misunderstandings. Olive decides to leave because of the humiliation of being ignored while wearing a blouse stained with butterscotch sauce. She believes the

family would have been more attentive in cleaning such a mess for a child, a detail symbolizing the emotional indifference she experiences. Her anger arises not only from the stain itself but also from Christopher's "dishonesty" in masking his real need for help behind the pretense of an "invitation to visit", a deception that tears apart the fabric of trust. Christopher's defense, blaming her "extreme capriciousness" for her emotions, highlights the chasm in communication: he struggles to acknowledge her pain, while she interprets his interactions with Ann (such as stroking her hair or exchanging glances) as signals of a "conspiracy" to marginalize her. This confrontation reveals a tragic cycle: Olive's fear of loneliness fuels her aggression, while Christopher's resistance to her moods deepens her sense of rejection. Olive became an outsider in Christopher's family, feeling unneeded, which deepened her sense of loneliness.

V. LONELINESS TRIGGERED BY THE LACK OF COMPANIONSHIP

In the final chapter River, the motif of loneliness—already a narrative undercurrent—collides with the escalating weight of mortality. The opening lines reveal that Henry has died in a nursing home from a severe stroke, his passing coinciding with the birth of their grandson. This double-edged event, new life intersecting with death, rips the last thread of Olive's emotional straw: her husband, the "loyal and reliable" companion who had weathered decades of her tempests, is gone, leaving her adrift in a world where even familial bonds feel tenuous. "The emphasis on the life story itself may allow the person experiencing trauma"(Kenyon and Randall 3). One and a half years later after the demise of Henry, it "still squeezed Olive so hard she felt like a package of vacuum-packed coffee"(Strout 252). Since then, when walking by the river for daily exercise, she would always fall into a long period of deep thought. Her interior monologue uncovers her will to be alive is not that strong: "Let it be quick, she thought now, meaning her death, a thought she had several times a day"(Strout 253). Loneliness is not a transient emotion but a physical presence, as tangible as the stroke that felled Henry and also felled Olive in spirit. Olive's wish for a swift death is less a desire to die than a yearning to escape the constant tingle of loneliness, an ache that the river, where Olive does daily exercise and feels "such daily exercise might make her live longer"(Strout 253), with its relentless flow, seems to mock. Strout here elevates loneliness to a metaphor for the human condition: even in a town where everyone knows her name, Olive stands apart, a testament to the irreplaceable nature of true companionship and the fragility of the will to live when it vanishes. A similar case can be seen in Jack Kennison, who has also been deprived of his wife's companionship. When he slumps on the path, Olive can only drive to seek help because she does not have a mobile phone. But Jack insists on stopping her from leaving. Even when Olive repeatedly stresses that he might die without prompt treatment, he still responds he do not care and Olive finds out that "A small smile seemed to come to his eyes"(Strout 254). On top of that, Jack says "I don't care if I die" and emphasizes twice "don't leave me here alone". This reflects Jack's ultimate fear of "loneliness" after losing companionship. He is indifferent to death itself, yet regards "being left alone" as a fate more terrible than death. Olive is also a fellow sufferer. She replies to Jack that she does also not care whether she dies or not. She would like to, in fact, "long as it's quick". Jack's response reinforces the theme of loneliness again that he dose not "want to die alone". But Olive points out "We're always alone. Born alone. Die alone"(Strout 255). For Olive, loneliness is a compulsory course in life, and humans must learn to accept it. In the following dialogue, what can be revealed is that the group of the elderly are particularly afraid of loneliness.

> "My wife died in December," he said. Olive watched the river. "Then, you're in hell," she said. "Then, I'm in hell."(Strout 255)

For Jack, the trauma of wife's passing has plunged him into an existential void, where his physical collapse is merely a physiological crisis, while the "loneliness of abandonment" represents his true existential dilemma. For Olive, this dialogue showcases her understanding of widowhood as an existential "hell" for the elderly, rooted in her own trauma of losing her husband. Olive's experience of her husband "shriveling for years in a nursing home"(Strout 255) has etched the image of old-age loneliness as a "hell" where companionship's absence transforms existence into a slow death of the soul. Jack's mention of his wife's decease triggers her empathy: both are survivors being lack of companionship, and their days now are replete with the silent torture of unheard thoughts and unshared moments. The "hell" she refers to is not a supernatural realm but the tangible reality of emotional starvation in old age. Knowing her friend Bunny often bickers and quarrels with her husband, Olive thinks Bunny "won a lottery", because her husband is still alive, and "Bunny could see what it was like, her friends losing their husbands and drowning in the emptiness"(Strout 257). In Olive's worldview, Bunny's "lottery win" isn't about marital happiness but about escaping the ultimate old-age penalty, surviving alone. While "the time spent in the waiting room while Jack Kennison saw the doctor had, for one brief moment, put her back into life"(Strout 257). For Olive, the sense of being needed and the desire for companionship are activated during the waiting room's

brief because it breaks the vicious cycle of " loneliness equals death" in old age. At the end of the novel, Olive and Jack lie side by side, a rare feeling of happiness washing over her. Jack's love and companionship make her "did not want to leave it yet"(Strout 270). When Olive shifts from passively waiting for her own death to actively participating in another's life, even the most ordinary act of companionship becomes a beam of hope piercing the darkness of loneliness. This light proves that the ultimate way aged people combat loneliness may lie in the moment of "I am here when you need me".

VI. CONCLUSION

In *Olive Kitteridge*, this paper employs the framework of narrative gerontology as a lens to dissect the multifaceted loneliness of the elderly, using the coastal town of Crosby as a microcosm of human isolation. Through the interwoven stories of Henry, Olive, and Jack, the novel reveals that late-life loneliness stems from three interconnected voids: Henry's estrangement within a family defined by emotional coldness, Olive's marginalization as an unneeded mother in her son's life, and Jack's existential panic at facing death without companionship. Strout's narrative strategy, alternating between omniscient perspectives and intimate interior monologues, exposes how aging is not merely a biological process but a cultural narrative fraught with societal invisibility and the erasure of emotional needs.

The study demonstrates that narrative gerontology offers a crucial framework for understanding how literature mirrors the elderly's psychological struggles. By presenting aging not merely as a biological process but as a culturally constructed narrative, the novel challenges readers to confront the silent crisis of loneliness in late life. By the novel's end, Olive's fleeting moment of connection with Jack Kennison underscores a poignant truth: the antidote to elderly loneliness lies not in escaping its inevitability but in acknowledging shared vulnerability and seeking small, authentic human bonds. Strout's work thus serves as both a critique of modern society's neglect of the elderly and a manifestation of the redemptive power of narrative in giving voice to the overlooked experiences of aging.

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