

Narratives of Old Age: Decline, Burden, and Defiance in Representations of Care Home Residents in Contemporary Slovenian Literature

Literary representations of older people, age, and aging, provide readers with various perspectives on the aging process itself, and through the fictional worlds and characters encourage a deeper understanding of one own's aging process. While critically examining our societies' attitudes toward older population, literary works should not be neglected as they are a valuable resource to consider and evaluate how positive and negative representations are shaping our perception and attitudes towards getting and being old. To illustrate this, Diana Wallace leans onto Simone de Beauvoir regarding the positive role of the literary representations in gaining a better understanding of aging and old age: "The imaginative engagement Beauvoir calls for can be enabled through literary representations of ageing and old age. Voice and point of view can be manipulated in a literary text so that we see through the eyes of, for instance, the 76-year-old first-person narrator of May Sarton's novel *As We Are Now* (1973) and identify with her desperation at being trapped in a 'concentration camp for the old' (1973, p. 3)."¹ Literary representations of older people challenge our attitudes and prejudices towards older people, highlighting our ageism,

1 Wallace, Diana: Literary Portrayals of Ageing. In: *An Introduction to Gerontology* (Stuart-Hamilton, Ian, ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 389–415. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511973697.014>.

and provide a better understanding of their identities, through evoking empathy, their experience of aging, and new outlooks into their realities.

Literature has a lot to offer; it “explores the existential and symbolic meaning of life in all life stages.”² Looking at old age, it has been seen as “a motif, metaphor, or symbol for something else,”³ and historically seen, “as a motif and metaphor for decay and mortality.”⁴ Contemporary literary works still touch on mortality, but they also give older people new dimensions, like in the form of the midlife progress novel, novel of ripening, life writing, and other life-course narratives.

This paper explores literary representations of age, aging, and older people in care homes and discusses how the characters’ aging is represented against the backdrop of three prevalent cultural narratives of aging in the Western societies: the decline narrative, the burden narrative, and the defiance narrative. The decline narrative represents aging as loss of function, be it bodily, mentally, or cognitively. Terms such as “frailty,” “vulnerability,” “disability,” “immobility,” “dependency,” and also, “dementia,” are all embedded in the decline narrative. This narrative is inherently ageist; discriminatory towards older people. The burden narrative signals older people are redundant and put a strain onto the society as a whole. They are marginalized, alienated, and othered. The defiance narrative covers efforts to age actively, age healthily, and slow down the aging process. Within this narrative, older people can be represented as physically working out, mentally training (with solving crosswords and puzzles), and having strict dietary regimes, and other routines. It can be seen as a way to defy aging, pain, and illness, but also as a pushback and resistance against ageism and societal norms.

The paper at hand investigates three Slovenian literary works: the novel *Dom dom (Home Home)*,⁵ 2008) by Tone Partljič, the short story collection

2 Skagen, Margery Vibe: How Can Literary Studies Contribute to a Cultural History of Ageing? In: *Cultural Histories of Ageing. Myths, Plots and Plots of Senescent Self* (Skagen, Margery Vibe, ed.). New York: Taylor & Francis, 2021, 16.

3 Wallace, *Literary Portrayals*, 391.

4 Wallace, *Literary Portrayals*, 411.

5 All the translations (for the titles of the Slovenian literary works and quotations) were done by the author of this paper.

Kavni krog (*Coffee Circle*, 2021) by Barbara Hanuš, and the crime novel *Umor v domu za ostarele?* (*Murder in a Care Home?*, 2022) by Vito Komac. All these books have the care home as a setting or, as Ulla Kriebernegg argues “as a spatial frame,” where “the care home illustrates the marginalized social position of old age,”⁶ a characteristic of the care home genre. The paper provides examples of the decline, burden, and defiance narratives seen and analyzed in the selected care home genre⁷ works and scrutinizes the care home as an institution with its personnel, administration, care home residents, and outsiders’ (visitors’) points of view. Through these works, readers get a comprehensive look at how the narratives of aging are constructed, blended, and mimic life.

Another important aspect when reading care home genre, novels or narratives is, according to Sally Chivers, to imagine “possible futures and understandings of the present and the past,” and “to recognize and create alternative visions of the dreaded ‘nursing home.’”⁸ Care homes in literature echo social realities and can be represented as prison-like institutions, with heavy control over their residents, but may also present a starting point for a new life.

The Care Home Genre and Slovene Contemporary Literature

The literary works analyzed in this paper all fit the care home genre as explained by Ulla Kriebernegg.⁹ The genre is providing framework and conventions, typically including narratives of burden, decline as well as defiance. The care home genre takes elements from various other genres and blends their themes and plot elements; from escape narratives, comedy,

6 Kriebernegg, Ulla: “Putting Age in Its Place. Representations of Institutional Eldercare in Contemporary North American Film and Fiction.” *Virus*, 16, 2017, 252. <https://doi.org/10.7146/ageculturehumanities.v2i.130742>.

7 The three prevalent cultural narratives of aging are of course not exclusive to the care home genre.

8 Chivers, Sally: “‘Blind People Don’t Run’: Escaping the ‘Nursing Home Specter’ in *Children of Nature* and *Cloudburst*.” *Journal of Aging Studies*, 34, 2015, 139. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2015.06.001>.

9 Kriebernegg, “Putting Age,” 253.

romance, detective fiction, suspense, mystery, and horror.¹⁰ In their core “nursing [care] home narratives draw ... readers into the world of the care home, permitting them to identify with their protagonists in their struggles against institutionalization, or in their attempts to redefine themselves in a way that makes sense for them in a new environment.”¹¹

The genre of the care home is not new; texts containing threats about “ending at care homes” as terminal stations have been around since the 1960s, and, as Kribernegg determines, the care home narrative in its generic manifestation surfaced in the 20th century after the “the emergence of the public old age home.”¹² Chivers makes a point for why the care home narratives are so compelling: “As a trope [the care home] within literature and film ... offers a setting devoid of life and possibility, teeming with animosity, torpor, and disgust.”¹³ “The genre of the care home novel,” as Kribernegg establishes, is “reflecting care-giving models that range from prison-like, infantilizing, and even abusive institutions to hotel-like retirement facilities with luxurious amenities and responsible caregivers.”¹⁴

Examples of care home novels that have been translated into a variety of different languages and became global bestsellers are Jonas Jonasson’s book *The 100-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out of the Window and Disappeared* (2012), Hendrik Groen’s *The Secret Diary of Hendrik Groen* (2014), and Richard Osman’s *Thursday Murder Club* (2020) series. A look at Slovenian care home novels reveals that there are not many literary works that have the care home as the main setting and care home residents as protagonists. Taking the relatively small size of the Slovenian literary space into consideration, however, there are plenty of texts that belong to the care home genre. Some of the “earlier” works include Andreja Pšeničny’s *Na visokih petah* (*In High Heels*, 2007) and Tone Partljič’s *Dom dom* (*Home Home*, 2008). Later, other works emerged, including Sebastijan Pregelj’s well-known novel *Kronika pozabljanja* (*A Chronicle of Forgetting*, 2014) and Milan Petek Levokov’s *Ljudje na burji* (*People in*

10 Kribernegg, “Putting Age.”

11 Kribernegg, “Putting Age,” 268.

12 Kribernegg, “Putting Age,” 253.

13 Chivers, ““Blind People,”” 135.

14 Kribernegg, “Putting Age,” 252.

the Bora, 2015). In Slovenia, the interest in care home narratives seems to have been (re)sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic where the discourse in the national news included care homes, be it limiting visitors due to the virus, increasing covid infections, saving lives and death tolls, staff shortages etc. Apart from Vito Komac's crime novel *Umor v domu za ostarele?* (*Murder in a Care Home?*, 2022) and Barbara Hanuš's first short stories collection *Kavni krog* (*Coffee Circle*, 2022), as well as her second collection titled *Od sedem do sedemindevetdeset* (*From Seven to Seventy-Nine*, 2022), there are some other literary works falling under this genre, including Bojan Macuh's novel *Vrni se* (*Come Back*, 2021) that touches upon the pandemic in a care home directly, Marjetica Senčar's dystopian novel titled *Rezidenca* (*Residence*, 2022), and Jože Roblek's diary *Lepo je biti star. Dnevnik duhovnika iz doma starejših* (*It is Nice to Be Old. The Diary of a Priest in a Care Home*, 2023).

In this paper, three literary works chosen for the analysis were selected primarily because of their publication years; two were published during the pandemic (Hanuš and Komac's works) and one a good decade before (Partljič's book). Partljič's novel is therefore a temporary contrast to the former two. While Tone Partljič is well known among readers in Slovenia, his novel *Home Home* has been rather obscure among the readership. Whether this is because of the themes, a care home and older people, including the topic of dying, one can only speculate. Vito Komac's novel *Murder in a Care Home?* gathered interest from literary critics and readers precisely due to of its theme.¹⁵ Barbara Hanuš has been so far primarily engaged as a writer for children and youth, and her first short story collection *Coffee Circle*, intended for adult readers, was clearly prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic; the second story in her collection opens up with a notice in a care home stating "Closed due to the virus."¹⁶ All the books can be classified under the care home genre; the main setting is a care home, or in Komac's novel, a major theme or frame, protagonists are care home residents, and the stories revolve around the institution. In addition to the publication years, the books were also selected because they blend with additional genres: a novel, a crime novel, and a short story collection,

15 Vodopivec, Dora: "Umor v Domu Ostarelih?" Občina Bovec, MojaObčina.si, 23 June 2022.

16 Hanuš, Barbara: *Kavni krog*. Ljubljana: Hart, 2022, 8.

respectively. Specifics of each cannot be disregarded as they rather add to the comparison and analysis of the literary works.

Care Home – A Prison, Terminal Station, or New Start?

Care homes in literary works or in the care home genre are represented as a prison-like organization or a total institution. The latter well-known term defined by Erving Goffman in his study on the asylums defines a total institution as “a place of residence and work where large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society ... together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life.”¹⁷ The care home is seen as a “bubble,” as a self-sufficient community from where there is no escape (and there should be no need to escape from). Kribernegg sees the care home as “a microcosm of society—a disciplinary institution that is often run by overbearing and despotic administrators”¹⁸ and elaborates on the institution being a panopticon in “Michel Foucault’s sense by using discipline and punishment.”¹⁹ These definitions and descriptions might seem harsh and unjustified, however, they are not farfetched when looking at literary representations of care homes. The selected works perpetuate stereotypes of old age and aging through the narratives of decline and burden, including clichés. Care homes work on a schedule; from mealtimes to washing and bedtime. There are rules and regulations for everything. Residents’ freedom is restricted; there are prescribed visitor hours and times for (brief) outings. Everything is overseen by care home management and staff. For newcomers, the admission to a care home can be a shock despite how well they had been prepared for a life in a care home. Entering a care home is also seen as a failure, loss of independence and autonomy. Wyatt-Brown, Ray Karpen, and Kivnick include moving into a care home into a category of “the big moves,” where a big move “represent[s] turning points in our lives ... and pose many challenges to our sense of identity

17 Goffman, Erving: *Asylums. Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2022, XI.

18 Kribernegg, “Putting Age,” 257.

19 Kribernegg, “Putting Age,” 258.

and belonging.”²⁰ What such a move means includes familiarizing with new environment, people, regulations, activities, and so on. There is a stigma around the care home still persisting, according to Wyatt-Brown, Ray Karpen, and Kivnick, “of the dreaded ‘old age home’ of yesteryear, where couples were separated and care was negligent.”²¹ Sally Chivers explains the fear of care homes stating: “Nursing homes invite fear because they house a conglomeration of what people often dread about old age.”²² As James Struthers elaborates on care homes and what they mean in our society: “[the care homes] bear the weight of cultural and economic uncertainties around population aging, changing perceptions of frailty and family ties, the meaning of dependence and independence, and fears of mortality.”²³

The care home in Partljič’s novel *Home Home* is shown very clinical with typical imagery for describing a care home or a hospital: “... and they got to Home 3 [the home for immobile people], where it smelled stuffy and ammonia and urine hit your nose.”²⁴ What other scholars have shown (e.g., Kribernegg, Chivers) is how care home spatiality is very important: “a movement to or within the space of the care home is often used to signify transition, change, or crisis.”²⁵ To illustrate this, certain people can be isolated from others through space; for example, dementia ward is regularly placed on the third floor in care homes, behind locked doors where there is no escape. In *Home Home*, “Home 2” (“Dom 2”), a different building, not a ward, is accommodating people with dementia. Resident Teja Marinčič’s state is worsened to such degree that a doctor decides to place her in “Home 2” because her symptoms show signs of dementia. Teja is quickly moved there, within half a day, much to her husband’s shock who does not have access to her in her new environment.

20 Wyatt-Brown, Anne M., Karpen, Ruth Ray and Kivnick, Helen Q.: *The Big Move. Life Between the Turning Points*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016, 5.

21 Wyatt-Brown, Karpen, Kivnick, *The Big Move*, 4.

22 Chivers, Sally: *From Old Woman to Older Women. Contemporary Culture and Women’s Narratives*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2003, 58.

23 Struthers, James: Home, Hotel, Hospital, Hospice. In: *Care Home Stories. Aging, Disability, and Long-Term Residential Care* (Chivers, Sally, Kribernegg, Ulla, eds.). Bielefeld: transcript, 2018, 283. <https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839438053-023>.

24 Partljič, Tone: *Dom dom*. Ljubljana: Pisanica, 2008, 74.

25 Kribernegg, “Putting Age,” 258.

In Hanuš's collection, *Coffee Circle*, the care home as an impenetrable world is nicely shown as soon as the reader starts reading the second story titled "Doors." The story starts like this: "They locked the entrance doors."²⁶ The residents notice that they are enclosed, it is a new situation for them and, so far, the doors had always been opening and closing with visitors coming and going. Their world had been at least partially pervious to their brief exits (for instance, smoking breaks) and now they are caged in for their safety. The residents are intrigued by the doors and are in disbelief about the doors being locked: "On their faces, surprise, fear, sadness, anger, powerlessness ..." ²⁷ are visible. Due to the closed doors, the residents' everyday routine changes and the care home feels different and alienated.

In her article, Krieberegg discusses one of the central topics of care home narratives, which is "the question of what it means to be 'at home.'"²⁸ All the three books are touching on "home;" what it means to be *at home* and *in a home*. Tone Partljič's novel bears this notion in its title: *Dom dom*, in English, *Home Home*. The repetition of the word *home*, might suggest this is *really* a home where you are *at home* and you should feel like being *in* your home. The residents themselves in the novel are widely discussing "home," what it means, where is home, and where they feel at home. They collectively name the care home a "waiting room for death ... or purgatory,"²⁹ which would signal they do not feel at home in the care home by any means.

Two of the residents, Janko and Jasmina, find that escaping their current home for some time is liberating. Jasmina can put on make-up, jewelry, and a proper dress. For Janko, escaping the care home and pursuing a love interest gives him motivation for living. Removing themselves from the care home also means escaping their identities as the care home residents/patients and stepping back to their old identities and feeling like their old selves: "Yes, let's go to the café... there I don't feel like everyone else, not as a resident of the Home"³⁰ Jasmina asserts. Change of the environment and a

26 Hanuš, *Kavni krog*, 8.

27 Hanuš, *Kavni krog*, 13.

28 Krieberegg, "Putting Age," 258.

29 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 200.

30 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 170.

temporary escape is cherished between them: “And they went [to the café], he ordered a beer and she a sparkling wine. And they were not like other residents at all, but they felt like a man and a woman.”³¹

For any newcomer, moving in a care home can be a shock. When Angela moves into the same care home, she has a hard time adjusting. She politely asks whether she can return home for her dog and gets a harsh reply by the home’s director: “Pets are prohibited according to the home rules!” When the director leaves her, she stands alone in her new room “in a foreign room in a foreign home.”³² She tries to orient herself and continue with normal activities; she finds her slippers, takes her shoes off, realizes they are smelly, and places them in front of the room’s door to air. Her “old” life is facing her “new” life. She tries to eat, but is overwhelmed with the situation, questions whether she will ever return home and thinks: “I was a housekeeper at home, I am nothing here. ... Who would have thought I will end my life here!”³³ When the director comes back to check up on her, she encourages her to “feel at home.” This is not received well by Angela who cannot fathom to feel at home in a foreign space after just ten minutes. Later on, Angela feels relieved when she returns to the care home after spending the weekend with her family. She feels at home in the care home and is surprised by this fact: “I am rather here than with [my] children. I simply belong here, I am at home here, and I am scared of everything outside.”³⁴ In the care home, she is removed from worries and troubles and has no wish to meddle with her children’s business, let alone inheritance. She is content sitting on the balcony of her room with her roommate and chatting away without any concerns.

Among the members of the coffee circle, from Hanuš’s short story collection, the perception of the care home varies drastically. Marija, a woman visiting Zarika in the home, terms the care home “a cage” and “a beehive, where everything is bustling and whirring, the doors keep opening constantly, personnel, visitors, and residents are walking here and there,”³⁵

31 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 171.

32 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 39.

33 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 40.

34 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 180.

35 Hanuš, *Kavni krog*, 10.

absolutely refusing to move into the care home. Dora, another member of the coffee circle, nods to Marija's definition and calls it a "chicken coop."³⁶ The noise and commotion can be irritating. Other residents got used to the care home habitat and find it quite comfortable. One day, a motivational quote by George Herbert appears on the locked door and it reads: "Storms make the oak grow deeper roots."³⁷ Dora is unbothered by the locked doors and is more intrigued by the handwriting on the piece of paper. Nada, a fellow resident, observes Dora's cheeriness and comments: "Well, her [Dora's] roots are really here now,"³⁸ suggesting Dora's home is the care home and she feels at ease here.

The care home in the crime novel *Murder in a Care Home?* is mostly perceived through the outsider's perspective, Jure's, who is searching for his missing relative Milan, and Milan's friends, who share the concern with Jure. The reader never gets an assessment of the care home from a resident's perspective, although the reader can have a good idea what their view would be, considering the manipulative care home director, allegations of poor treatment and exploitation of the residents. Through the story, the novel offers a look into a care home, where residents are vulnerable, powerless, isolated, and inhumanely treated.

Care Home Residents and Institutional Dynamics in Three Selected Slovenian Literary Works

Focusing on care home residents, the three selected works offer similar yet distinct representations, revealing how the residents perceive themselves and each other, as well as how they are viewed by others—from care home staff to the wider society. Through different narrators and focalizers these perceptions and perspectives are made visible, and, in many instances, they overlap with the cultural narratives of aging.

36 Hanuš, *Kavni krog*, 10.

37 Hanuš, *Kavni krog*, 13.

38 Hanuš, *Kavni krog*, 13.

An important agent in Partljič's novel is a schoolgirl tasked with writing an essay titled "Looking through a Window" about her observations. She peers through a window from her home and spots a care home in a form of three buildings: one for active people, one for those living with dementia, and one for those who are immobile. Writing her essay, she sees the care home as a different world; she is aware that the home is part of her society and that older people live in it, but at the same time, this world is self-sufficient with medical, cleaning, and cooking staff, including its own set of rules and regulations. The schoolgirl is not a main character in the story; she serves as the first observer to locate the care home from the outside world and as a catalyst to establish the position "us vs. them."³⁹ "Us" includes the wider society out in the "free world" and "them" the older people who live in a care home. There is a whole variety of characters residing in this care home. The most prominent resident is Jasmina, a retired theater actress who is special, with many demands, and does not wish to mingle with other residents. Her peculiar lifestyle is disapproved by the other residents and the care home staff who are of the opinion that she is no different than the rest of the people living there and is just "one of the patients" and not an actress.⁴⁰ She recites parts from her previous productions and monologues from known plays and holds on to her identity of an actress. She refuses to eat dinner because the actresses cannot "act with a full stomach"⁴¹ and she resists going to bed at a time set by the care home. Apart from Jasmina, other care home residents include Angela, a humble farmer, Lučka, a retired professor, Frankie, a Slovenian expat who spent most of his life in Australia, but returned to Slovenia to die in his homeland, Joža, Frankie's roommate and an ex-railway worker, Karel, an ex-prop theater manager, a married couple Teja and Franc Marinčič, Janko, the president of the active residents, engaged in many cultural and sports activities himself, and others. The backgrounds of the characters are diverse: from middle class residents who are highly educated (e.g., the actress, a professor) to lower class residents who can be seen a bit "unpolished" (e.g., a railway worker, grave maintenance worker). Quite an interesting

39 For more on "othering," see Silke van Dyk's paper "The Othering of Old Age: Insights from Postcolonial Studies." *Journal of Aging Studies*, 39, 2016, 109–120. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2016.06.005>.

40 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 5.

41 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 7.

array of characters, especially since many literary gerontologists observe that the majority of the characters in care home novels are the ones who are white, (upper) middle class, and relatively healthy.⁴² The various identities and backgrounds clash when the residents meet. When Angela moves to the care home, she moves into Jasmina's room. Their first encounter is described as: "And the doors open, a grey dress and a black hat and a pearl necklace carry in the actress Jasmina Rudolf. ... The actress steps towards the farmer and offers her a hand and [introduces herself]."⁴³

There is of course the staff; Marija, the care home director seems tired of her job and dismissive of her residents. She sees the residents in terms of money; her main concern is to have all the beds nicely filled and is rearranging people like building blocks between the units. When a visitor comes and meets Marija, they both realize they were classmates together. Marija's feelings towards her residents are very clear when Zvonko, the visitor, asks her about her occupation: "You are the care home's director?" She replies: "Unfortunately." She continues to explain her busy schedule: "I have to deal with a very unpleasant business. We got an immigrant back from Australia and he does not want to stay."⁴⁴ The director's behavior is clearly aligning with seeing the old people as the burden. She is not openly against towards them, but through her interactions with Zvonko and other staff, where she does not hide her feelings. The medical personnel includes Rozika, a carer in the home, who is not so happy with her job either; work is hard and she complains about the residents being grumpy and behaving like children. Other nurses are stereotypically represented as authoritative and telling residents off for behaving inappropriately or breaking the rules. Sometimes, nurses are depicted as tyrants, a trait of a nurse as a stock character in many works, according to Kribernegg.⁴⁵ With more nuances in recent literary representations, the authoritarian model of nurses is still dominant. In *Home Home*, the nurses are neglecting their patients; nurse

42 For example, see Amanda Ciafone's paper (The Third Age in the Third World. Outsourcing and Out-running Old Age to The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel. In: *Care Home Stories. Aging, Disability, and Long-Term Residential Care* (Chivers, Sally, Kribernegg, Ulla, eds.). Bielefeld: Transcript, 2018, 155–173. <https://doi.org/10.14361/97838389438053-015>).

43 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 41.

44 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 72.

45 Kribernegg, "Putting Age," 263.

Melita is frequently hiding from the residents, smoking and having coffee, ignoring calls for help. Like the home's director, she is not shy with her feelings towards the residents: "I will have this cigarette in peace, they [the residents] can go fuck themselves!"⁴⁶ and she elaborates: "When the old ones go crazy, it is hell to be a nurse in the care home."⁴⁷ The nursing staff and the authoritative nature of it represents the rigid institution of the care home, where older individuals are the Other.⁴⁸

The novel offers various stories and perspectives of the characters and staff, with another character who works as a link between the worlds of the care home and the wider society, and between the staff and the residents. Zvonko is a member of parliament (MP) and a visitor in the care home. Due to his function as an MP, he is used to being approached by people for favors and connections. He decides to visit Lučka, his old professor and a care home resident. He gets quite a shock seeing his old professor; she is familiar, yet different. Her body is frail in his eyes, and she promptly debriefs him on her medical developments (broken hip, constipation, pain etc.). The old professor is quick to seek help from Zvonko and instructs him to write down her last will. Zvonko, completely at a loss for words and overwhelmed by all the medical issues, the care home itself, and having a last testament dictated to him, he feels that "everything that has been happening is somewhat a necrophilic uneasiness."⁴⁹ Through his reunion with his beloved professor, his old schoolmate Marija, and entering the care home, Zvonko realizes that a care home might be in his future. While he is not at a life stage yet to be entering the care home as a resident, his mother might be. After the care home visit, Zvonko pays a visit to his 80-year-old mother and recounts his care home visit. This makes her afraid that her own son is placing her into a home. While he tries to assure her that is not the case, she protests saying: "I would rather go to the Drava [river]!"⁵⁰ The care home evokes feelings of hurt, horror and dread in her to such extent that she would prefer death rather than being put into a care

46 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 50.

47 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 51.

48 See Gilleard, Chris: "Aging as Otherness: Revisiting Simone de Beauvoir's Old Age." *The Gerontologist*, 62, 2022, 2. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnab034>.

49 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 78.

50 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 97.

home. Clearly, the care home is seen as the lowest point in one's life, loss of independence, and abandonment in a horrible institution by one's family. This aligns with what Sally Chivers determines for the care home as "a fate worse than death"⁵¹ where escaping in any form is preferable, be it "into the past, fantasy, death, [or] surrounding community."⁵²

An interesting part of Partljič's novel is the narrator and the shift between narrators with different focalizers. The schoolgirl that prompts a look at the care home is the first-person narrator, then her perspective changes to a third person omniscient narrator. The reader is transported from the schoolgirl's window to the care home and later to residents' rooms and is privy to their thoughts, emotions, and feelings. The reader can experience this clearly in the third chapter of the novel: "Where am I? Am I alive? It is so hot, am I sweaty? Was I splashed by the sea? Where am I? ... Where is my hair? Am I wet? I am!" and then: "I am not alone ... Amalija Vrečko's throat is rattling. They said she will die in 24 hours."⁵³ The reader first meets another resident, Amalija, through Lučka's thoughts in a form of an internal monologue and gets more information about Lučka herself: "I am in Maribor ... Where is my Trieste, where is the sea, Duino, Jakob, Ponte Rosso ..."⁵⁴ Her memories and feelings are intertwining with sensations prompted by the care home: "I am sweating, I am thirsty, how can I get to this damn teacup on the nightstand ... how everything hurts! ... If I call a nurse, she will say to give it a rest. How did I end up here?"⁵⁵ Sensations being prompted by the care home strongly appeal to the reader through imagery (be it visual, olfactory, auditory, tactile, etc.). Through stirring unpleasant sensations in the reader, care home representations maintain negative image and reputation. The residents being the primary focalizer is something that Kribernegg points out is quite common in the care home

51 Chivers: "Blind People," 134.

52 Chivers: "Blind People," 135.

53 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 9.

54 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 9–10.

55 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 10.

narratives.⁵⁶ This viewpoint prompts empathy in the reader towards the residents.⁵⁷

The second novel, Vito Komac's crime novel *Murder in a Care Home?*, is not set in a care home per se, however, the novel is about a care home resident who goes missing and a distant relative is trying to figure out what happened to him. The care home is still a major point of discussion and a spatial frame, where the conditions are dreadful and its background is incriminatory. One day, Jure, the protagonist, gets an interesting phone call about his relative Milan who is a resident in a care home in Croatia. He is asked to come to Rijeka urgently to help find his lost relative. Milan had suffered a stroke and was then placed into a private care home. The story quickly prompts many questions: who put Milan into a care home, what exactly happened to him, does someone want him dead and take his money, and last but not least, is Milan still alive? When Jure and his wife arrive to Rijeka, it is clear that the situation is complicated and strange. The care home's director where Milan was supposed to be residing is not upfront, even more, she is hiding information and does not answer any of Jure's questions. There is even a claim that Milan was kidnapped. The narrator in this novel is the first-person narrator, still the focalizer is not a care home resident, but Jure, the relative of the missing care home resident. The reader gets an interesting perspective into a grim narrative of running a care home, exploiting care home residents, and treatment of older people. Since the readers do not have any direct input from Milan himself, his personal history and character are uncovered through Jure and Jure's memories of Milan.

Milan's unfortunate fate comes to light through the care home as an institution. The care home staff in this novel is described as monstrous and corrupt, and Jure's concerns are quickly raised. Milan's friends call one of the nurses "the care home beast,"⁵⁸ and they also elaborate on criminal activities by the home's director; the director wants to profit from the "poor old people who were left alone, nobody wants them anymore or are helpless

56 Kriebenberg, "Putting Age," 263.

57 Nussbaum, Martha C.: *Cultivating Humanity. A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.

58 Komac, Vito: *Umor v domu za ostarele?* Brežice: Primus, 2022, 74.

...”⁵⁹ They imply she takes them in, makes them sign over all their property and money to her, and then waits for them to die. It is apparent that the residents’ lives are not worth much, but are seen as financial opportunity. This novel provides a negative view of the care home and puts themes, such as exploitation, manipulation, and fraud of older people, in the foreground. Milan’s fate is chilling, hopeless, and difficult to follow. Komac’s novel is not the main focus of this paper, however, it does provide another perspective on the care home residents’ narratives in the care home genre.

The third literary work discussed in this paper, the short story collection *Coffee Circle* by Barbara Hanuš, is from the style and plot lines similar to the novel *Home Home*. Every chapter is a story that connects residents’ past with the present and a third person omniscient narrator with care home residents as focalizers. Like in Partljič’s novel, the reader is immersed into residents’ perceptions of the care home through their thoughts, feelings, and emotions. The collection’s title *Coffee Circle* is taken from a coffee circle which is a group of women who live in the care home and always start their day together with coffee. This circle serves as a microcosm within a bigger system and as a support system to the women in it. The circle is a safe space for complaining about aging and woes, sharing stories about the past, and making care home life happier. The author explained her motivation for writing this book: “To find strength to age joyfully” and “to be open until the end for new things that life offers, which are also offered by a care home.”⁶⁰

Coffee Circle is a complete opposite to the crime novel. While *Murder in a Care Home?* represents the care home as a horror story and age as an epitome of the decline and burden narratives, the short story collection romanticizes old age: “The gift that old age gives you is time,”⁶¹ and builds the stories on humor, sentience, and community. The collection opens with a story called “Coffee,” and the first sentence paints a picture of old age claiming: “Old age is a deep winter.”⁶² The page paints a picture of a calm

59 Komac, *Umor*, 176.

60 Ličen, Nataša, Radio Ognjišče. “Kavni Krog.” *Radio Ognjišče*, 30 May, 2022. <https://radio.ognjisce.si/sl/250/oddaje/34657/kavni-krog.htm>.

61 Hanuš, *Kavni krog*, 7.

62 Hanuš, *Kavni krog*, 7.

landscape where memories are buried, nevertheless, there is still potential in the winter to have the memories and feelings provide comfort in the last days. Old age portrayed as winter is a common metaphor in representations of aging. As Skagen acknowledges, the imagery of “the leafless trees symboliz[e] winter and old age ... even approaching death.” She then contrasts this to winter as “the positive stereotype of contemplative old age,” expanding on Gaston Bachelard’s positive connotation of winter being “reflective, retrospective or imaginary.”⁶³

Cultural Narratives of Aging and Old Age – Notions and Dominant Narratives

In her book, Margaret Morganroth Gullette, aging studies scholar and activist, proposes that “we are aged more by culture than by chromosomes.”⁶⁴ Before Gullette, Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Coming of Age* pointed to some of the key concepts in the Western culture. De Beauvoir characterizes the “notion of decline” through biological terms as a point saying “the organism declines when its chances of continuing to live are reduced.”⁶⁵ However “it is not solely a biological, but also a cultural fact.”⁶⁶ One prompt for claims of cultural aging are definitely consumerist societies that praise good looks and are obsessed with looking youthful⁶⁷ (therefore wrinkles and old bodies have no space in such societies); Wallace and many other scholars assert that the Western culture is “youth-obsessed”⁶⁸ and is Othering old age. Othering of old age can be defined with aging viewed “as a process of increasing alienation from one’s self and from the wider society.”⁶⁹ Othering can be, in the extreme, a complete exclusion from humanity.⁷⁰ Taking the role of media aside, literature

63 Skagen, *How Can*, 7.

64 Gullette, Margaret Morganroth: *Aged by Culture*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004, 101.

65 De Beauvoir, Simone: *The Coming of Age*. New York: Putnam, 1972, 17.

66 De Beauvoir, *The Coming*, 13.

67 See scholars like Gullette (*Aged by Culture*) and Cruikshank (*Learning to Be Old*).

68 Wallace, *Literary Portrayals*, 289.

69 Gilleard, “Aging,” 2.

70 van Dyk, “The Othering of Old Age,” 109.

and literary representations with negative depictions of old and older people, and old age and aging, all contribute to seeing older people as alien, as the Other and instill apprehension towards the aging process. Literary representations work through various narratives, among the most prevailing cultural narratives of aging and old age are the decline narrative and the burden narrative. On the opposite end is the defiance narrative, which is confronting the negative depictions and fighting back. These narratives are not mutually exclusive but coexist and sometimes overlap.

a) Decline Narrative

The decline narrative can be defined as the “narrative [that] constructs ageing as a feared process that needs to be stopped or at least slowed down.”⁷¹ This narrative “tends to be marked by one-sided negative stereotypes emphasizing physical and cognitive deterioration, and ultimately marginalizes older people by rendering them socially invisible.”⁷² Gullette identifies that “the dominant cultural narrative of ageing [is] ... decline”⁷³ at least in the Western cultures. Wallace, who explores aging as a decline in the English literature, provides a reason why the decline narrative is prevalent in the Western society: “These images of ageing [for example, ‘poor’ King Lear, images of decaying flesh, and fear of aging] from the traditional canon of English literature are some of those which are most familiar in Western culture, to the point of cliché in some cases.”⁷⁴

The decline narrative is problematic on many levels. Literary representations of the decline (can) perpetuate ageism. The term ageism was established by Robert Butler, denoting “age discrimination ... prejudice by one

71 Falcus, Sarah, Hartung, Heike and Medina, Raquel: Introduction. In: *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Ageing in Contemporary Literature and Film* (Falcus, Sarah, Hartung, Heike and Medina, Raquel, eds.). London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023, 2.

72 Schrage-Früh, Michaela, O'Neill, Margaret: Novels of ripening: The maturation of the Bildungsroman. In: *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Ageing in Contemporary Literature and Film* (Falcus, Sarah, Hartung, Heike and Medina, Raquel, eds.). London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023, 11.

73 Gullette, Margaret Morganroth: *Declining to Decline*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997, quoted in Schrage-Früh and O'Neill, Novels, 12.

74 Wallace, *Literary Portrayals*, 393.

age group toward other age groups.”⁷⁵ As Russo elaborates on the ageist rhetoric, which is concerning, “the old [is perceived as] the culturally residual, the decrepit, the distorted, and finally, the alien.”⁷⁶ This can manifest in generalization of older people and labelling them as incompetent and completely disregarding them. Moreover, Cruikshank stresses, “old women [in particular] are reviled as grumpy, frumpy, sexless, and uninteresting.”⁷⁷ In addition to discriminating older people as another age group, older people themselves can internalize ageism and consequently be self-discriminatory. In a general form, internalized ageism means being ashamed of one’s age, but it can take up more forms, like depreciation, feeling of shame, affecting “self-esteem, motivation, risk-taking,”⁷⁸ and other.

In literary representations, the decline narrative is frequent. Descriptions of older people alone confirm this: “Milan was sitting at the back [of a car] in a stripped care home pajamas ... with a deformed face pressed to the glass window. I will never forget his tormented expression, open-mouthed, suddenly he looked toothless, and he looked like Munch’s ‘The Scream,’ resembling mute and awful pain of a helpless person.”⁷⁹ A muted scream, an oxymoron, a shocking and disturbing image of a poor, helpless man.

Furthermore, the body starts failing and declining: “She is staring at the stairs before her. ... with difficulty she walks five steps and rests. ... Her heart says she cannot. ... With agony she moves her leg. ... In that moment, she realizes she will have to move into a care home.”⁸⁰ In other cases, people feel as failures: “I cannot come [to the coffee circle], my legs do not hold me, I feel nauseous, I just can’t anymore.”⁸¹ Bodily frailty plays a big part in the decline narrative, with dependency and often times mixed with the feeling of humiliation by the older person: “He stood up, bowed, she only

75 Butler, Robert N.: “Age-ism: Another Form of Bigotry.” *The Gerontologist*, 9, 1969, 4, 243. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/9.4_Part_1.243.

76 Russo, Mary: Aging and the Scandal of Anachronism. In: *Figuring Age. Women, Bodies, Generations* (Woodward, Kathleen, ed.). Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999, 27.

77 Cruikshank, Margaret: *Learning to Be Old. Gender, Culture, and Aging*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013, 139.

78 Cruikshank, *Learning*, 153.

79 Komac, *Umor*, 141.

80 Hanuš, *Kavni krog*, 43.

81 Hanuš, *Kavni krog*, 97.

saw a silhouette of a shadow in her own glittering grayness, which was the type of her blindness, and she was left alone... after a while, she had to call for help because the laxative started to work. Oh, how she felt humiliated when they were taking off her underpants ... Have I really deserved this?”⁸²

In more extreme cases, residents wish to die because they have been struggling with their ailments and illnesses, and their situation seems hopeless. Lučka’s roommate Amalija is in a poor state, the care home staff said she will die soon, but she is still alive, and Lučka is deliberating about her own fate: “She is lucky she will die. I want to die to.”⁸³ Apart from thinking about death, some residents are more proactive in planning their funerals and instructing last testaments as a result of their declining health: “You know, I won’t last long. I will stop eating. ... I will rebel otherwise they will feed me like the one [the woman] in a coma. With a plastic tube through the nose ... I will pour [the food] into the toilet ... you will write down I am, of my own will, leaving all my organs and bones to the anatomic institute of the medical faculty.”⁸⁴

Internalized ageism also makes an appearance in literary representations. The dialogue between Janko and Jasmina is telling how ageist residents themselves can be. Janko is trying to persuade Jasmina to get out of her room more: “Listen! You did not come to the [care] home to die, you came to live.” She is stubborn and resists: “Do you think I don’t see hearses that at least three times a month take an old body away?” However, Janko is not to be deterred: “But you do not see 300 alive residents. Among them 100 active ones. And you are very much so. This is not a waiting room for death, this is our second home ...”⁸⁵ Care home personnel show ageism in their treatment of older people. A vivid example is offered in the novel *Home Home*: “[the home’s director] locked the doors with the demented people, who looked so timid and lost, sitting on the benches in the hallway and looking through the window to the park or onto the road, behind

82 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 27.

83 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 9.

84 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 77.

85 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 121.

her.”⁸⁶ The nurses always feel the residents are a nuisance, calling them “old fools, degenerates, idiots, wheelies,” and so on.

In addition to ageism, the decline narrative works through metaphors. In the story titled “A Cup,” Nadja is drinking tea from a cup that was a gift from her daughter. Her hands are shaking and she feels dizzy. She lets go of the cup because she gets burned by hot water and the cup falls to the floor and breaks. The cup is a metaphor for her life and age: “Her dreams are broken, the cup is gone ...”⁸⁷ Nadja glues the cup back together and some of the pieces are “not at the right place,” and she sees cracks in the cup and “in her and on her,”⁸⁸ equating the cracks from the cup to the wrinkles on her face.

b) Burden Narrative

The burden narrative sees the old people as a social and economic burden on society as a whole. Even more, the old people are seen as “a distinct group that threatens social and economic stability.”⁸⁹ This narrative is prompted by “alarmist demography,” a term proposed by Stephen Katz, asserting that “the growing aging population is threatening to create an economic crisis with profound consequences for healthcare systems, social security programs, industrial and intergenerational relations.”⁹⁰ Mass media is very good in keeping the alarmist demography thriving with sensationist reporting on topics related to older generations and employ “terms like the ‘silver (or grey) tsunami,’ ‘age wave,’ ‘grey hoard,’ ‘avalanche,’ or ‘flood’”⁹¹ and “‘onslaught,’” and “‘time bomb’”⁹² to signal the extent and

86 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 113–114.

87 Hanuš, *Kavni krog*, 40.

88 Hanuš, *Kavni krog*, 40.

89 Kribernegg, Ulla: “‘Time to Go. Fast Not Slow’: Geronticide and the Burden Narrative of Old Age in Margaret Atwood’s ‘Torching the Dusties.’” *European Journal of English Studies*, 22, 2018, 1, 49. <https://doi.org/10.1553/virus16s251>.

90 Katz, Stephen: “Alarmist Demography: Power, Knowledge, and the Elderly Population.” *Journal of Aging Studies*, 6, 1992, 3, 204. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0890-4065\(92\)90001-M](https://doi.org/10.1016/0890-4065(92)90001-M).

91 Charise, Andrea: “‘Let the Reader Think of the Burden’: Old Age and the Crisis of Capacity.” *Occasion: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities*, 4, 30 August 2012, 2. <http://occasion.stanford.edu/node/96>.

92 Cruiksank, *Learning*, 29.

repercussions. On the one hand, the burden narrative can concern the older population as a whole, making the aging population a wider societal problem, and on the other, it can provoke the feeling of being a burden in older people themselves.

A good example of this narrative is represented in Partljič's novel. While watching the evening news, the news segment echoes the cultural narratives of old age as a burden, defining old generations calling "old people the biggest problem of Europe's future," even a "real threat for Slovenia."⁹³ The show adds the notion of the old population being "a dark cloud and the sword of Damocles over Europe"⁹⁴ and creates an uproar in the care home community. The TV news segments support information with demographic data (statistics in the form of a rising percentage of old population) and put blame on old people for bankruptcy of the retirement and health funds, with claims that the future generations will have to work for them, implying not for themselves and their children, but for people who are retired and living in care homes. Janko, the president of the active residents, is disgusted by the TV news and wants to call up the TV station to complain: "I will not allow this, I am still active and I have not dropped dead yet." He manages to get a phone number and vents his opinion: "I told them what I think. Not just in my name. In the name of all us old people that are living in these ghettos for old people. Not for nothing I am the president of the active residents."⁹⁵ Prompted by the news, an instance of the burden narrative, Janko's complaint, an act of pushing back, is an example of the defying narrative, showing how these narratives coincide.

Being a burden to oneself and others is visible in a conversation between residents. When Janko confesses his love to Jasmina, she responds in a way that confirms the burden narrative premise: "How do you mean ... 'I love you'? In a care home? I am an old woman. Everything is behind me. I am *redundant* (emphasis added by U. M.), I am waiting for death, how can you love me in a care home?"⁹⁶ In this example, not only does Jasmina

93 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 51.

94 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 85.

95 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 52.

96 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 122.

feel a burden, but is also ageist towards herself. Marija, a resident from Hanuš's stories shares the same sentiment with Jasmina. When Marija's son announces he is picking her up so she can spend a Christmas eve with them, she is not too happy with the idea. She is reluctant to go saying: "I would prefer to stay in the care home, I would like to be among my own [people]." He is surprised by this, asking her: "How do you mean, with your people? We are your people."⁹⁷ Marija eventually gives in and joins her son and the rest of the family for the holiday. The reader gets an insight into her thoughts and they confirm the feeling of being a burden to others: "She does not want to be a nuisance, it is not necessary that they drive her here and back."⁹⁸

Feeling abandoned can also be a consequence of being seen or feel as a burden. There are many instances of this in the care home genre. In *Home Home*, through Lučka as the focalizer, the reader gets her perspective on this when one night she lies in her bed and needs to go to the bathroom. She does not want to call the night shift nurse because she has been accused of making things up (this is of course an ageist remark toward Lučka from the nurse's side). Her situation is dire; she is suffering with constipation and having no air, making her feel she is suffocating. As seen through Lučka's experience, the care home staff can be patronizing in addition to being ageist. This is by no means a rare occurrence in the care home stories. The medical staff is exerting power over the residents, using rules to excuse their actions, and ordering the residents around however they please. Franc Marinčič's wife Teja is separated from him due to dementia and moved to "Home 2" where people living with dementia reside. He is now alone and misses his wife. He sneaks out of his room intending to visit her. While he cannot enter "the dementia home," he comes to a glass wall and spots her. A nurse on call finds Teja because she got lost on her way to a bathroom, sees Franc and starts shooing him away saying: "You ... go back to your room, you cannot help her, do you hear me?" He signals he will wait and when the nurse comes back, she tells him off in a stern manner: "Do not come here in front of the door so late. You are only making her

97 Hanuš, *Kavni krog*, 100.

98 Hanuš, *Kavni krog*, 101.

more confused.”⁹⁹ He does not give up that easily and wants some reassurance, however, the nurse is annoyed with him and losing patience with him replies harshly: “Mister Marinič [*sic*] where do you live? She did not recognize you. ... Now, go to bed!”¹⁰⁰

Furthermore, the staff is infantilizing the residents and some take to this better than others. Angela, the resident who adjusted to the care home life fairly well, experiences infantilization firsthand in an occupational therapy session. She was sent to join a session where women were busy with embroidery. Angela was offered to create a necklace from dry pumpkin seeds, which have to be painted first. The therapist is trying to “sell” her this “amazing” activity, while Angela sees it just as “toying around for keeping women occupied, and not to be working or have something done.”¹⁰¹ Being a farmer, she was used to hard work and the reader gets a sense how ridiculous and waste of time Angela finds this “therapy session.” The therapist is over enthusiastic about painting the seeds with bright colors, claiming they are “full of positive energy,”¹⁰² while Angela thinks very little of the whole thing. Apparently, the work is paying off and the therapist is absolutely beaming with praise for Angela. After a busy session, Angela realizes she is stained from coloring the necklace, but does not get upset, rather she comments: “Thank god I am stained in positive colors!”¹⁰³ She turns this ageist and patronizing session well naturedly into an activity she is willing to try.

c) Defying Narrative

Defying age and aging go hand in hand with the decline and burden narratives. Being branded as declining (frail, vulnerable, dependent, etc.) and being a burden is not preferred. Therefore, “‘active’ and ‘healthy ageing’ has now become the positive norm.”¹⁰⁴ In the foreground to defy age and

99 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 161.

100 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 161.

101 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 142.

102 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 143.

103 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 144.

104 Skagen, *How Can*, 1.

aging is exercise in the form of physical and cognitive exercise (i.e., mental training). Trying to age healthily is seen as an important goal of one's life course, otherwise one might not be successful in aging. Apart from maintaining body and mind, older people resist being pushed to the margins of society, being othered, and can push back the alarmist discourse blaming them for wider societal problems.

The decline and burden narratives are dominant in all the three literary works discussed in the paper. While the crime novel *Murder in a Care Home?* provides negligible instances of the defiance narrative, the defiance narrative is more prominent in the novel *Home Home* and the short story collection *Coffee Circle*; the works provide substantial examples of (inter) actions where the residents themselves show resistance to the cultural notions of decline, burden, and ageism.

Many care home residents try reassuring each other that life is still worth living. Ada, one of the coffee circle ladies, counters Milka's complaint about ailments: "We do not talk about illnesses and pains, we do not complain, we do not have many more days left, we need to use them for happy things."¹⁰⁵ The residents are also proving that life can still be nice and living makes sense. When a picnic is organized for the whole care home, one of the residents happily comments on the event: "Those [residents] that had died before the picnic, can be really sorry [for not attending]."¹⁰⁶

Others try to push back and resist being seen as burdens or as frail individuals with diminished capacities. Zvonko's mother, afraid he came to tell her he will place her in a care home, is appalled by the idea of moving to a care home. She showcases her mental capabilities in form of reciting poems she learnt in school, a long time ago, and still knows them by heart. Zvonko is quick on the uptake; it is clear to him she is making a point of having a clear mind (not being forgetful or having dementia) and not wanting to move anywhere. When they are saying goodbye, she says to him and stresses her capabilities: "But tell them [people in the care home], your

105 Hanuš, *Kavni krog*, 59.

106 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 193.

mother is still well up here!” as she knocks on her head,¹⁰⁷ emphasizing her cognitive state is not declining.

In Hanuš’s short story “Camera,” Dora, a care home resident, is invited to speak about life in a care home to a journalist. She describes how their daily life looks like, shows understanding for the nursing staff, for their schedules and being understaffed, and does not want to criticize the care home. Even more, she defends the medical staff saying they are really hard working, sacrificing their time with their children, and work for a low pay. Towards the end of her time at the TV station, Dora asks if she could address the viewers directly and they roll the camera for her. While she recognizes the challenges of old age, she stresses older people are part of the society. She says poignantly:

*Dear viewers, ... You will also be old one day. Can you imagine needing care, waiting helplessly to have your diaper changed by a carer, to be dependent on employees having the time to feed you ... ? Maybe you will wish to get a diaper more because you have sensitive skin, maybe your only wish will be to have someone come by, to put you in a wheelchair and take you to a balcony. You cannot know how your old age will look like. Think about this when you are deciding about norms, about renovating and budling new care homes.*¹⁰⁸

After Dora’s part, it is the director’s turn. She talks about the finances, lack of staff, having a social responsibility, etc. Once the filming wraps, the journalist and the cameraman seem most impressed with Dora. Her outreach to the public makes him envision himself as an “old man in a care home,” however, this is rather difficult. He then “chases away the thoughts [of aging and a care home] as some annoying flies.”¹⁰⁹ It is clear from this example how the literary representations of care home residents and their situation (life in a care home, state standards affecting their treatment, policies etc.) appeal to readers directly to evoke empathy and understanding for them.

107 Partljič, *Dom dom*, 98.

108 Hanuš, *Kavni krog*, 125–126.

109 Hanuš, *Kavni krog*, 127.

Conclusion

The selected contemporary Slovenian works all belonging to the care home genre, Partljič's novel *Home Home*, Hanuš's short story collection *Coffee Circle*, and Komac's crime novel *Murder in a Care Home?*, illustrate a diverse range of literary representations of old age, aging, and older people, each engaging with the prevalent cultural narratives of aging. These examples demonstrate the ways in which care home residents are seen, perceived, and treated, particularly through the lenses of the decline narrative, the burden narrative, and the defiance narrative. The works highlight how residents face both external ageism and internalized ageist attitudes. While some characters actively resist discriminatory perceptions and try to defy aging, others internalize negative cultural narratives, perceiving themselves as burdens and declining individuals.

Through these narratives of aging, readers are offered meaningful insights into residents' lives, shaped by their actions, past experiences, and behaviors, revealing their identities. The narrators or focalizers, in many cases the residents themselves, place the readers directly inside the care home, immersing them into a daily life within it, giving residents a voice, exposing and bridging the gap between them and the broader society.

This paper demonstrates that the negative cultural representations and narratives of old age and aging are very much present in the selected Slovenian literary works, however there is also resistance and a call for older people to be valued and not dismissed. There are at least two aspects to consider: first, the way care homes are perceived, whether as terminal stations or closed institutions at the margins of society where older people go to die, and second, the possibility of viewing the care home as a space for new beginnings and continued life. Thinking about the cultural narratives of old age, aging, and representations of care home residents, an additional thing to contemplate is how do these representations influence our relationship and attitudes towards aging and our ageism.

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