

## SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

WILEY

Special Issue on Literature and Global Responsibility, Guest Editor Dr. Stefano Bellin

# A novel for an ageing population? Masculinity and demographic shift in David Lodge's *Deaf Sentence* (2008)

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**Abstract**

This article examines David Lodge's novel *Deaf Sentence* (2008), which focuses on the life of Desmond, a retired professor of linguistics. I argue that this text offers a standpoint through which readers can visualise the global phenomenon of population ageing and address the question of global responsibility. I look at *Deaf Sentence* within the tradition of the Bakhtinian polyphonic novel and through the lens of the campus novel that Lodge discusses in his critical writing. The analysis of dialogism and self-reflexivity illuminates the reverberations of global ageing on the life of Desmond, situating questions of wellbeing and demography within a narrative perspective. Detailing their struggles with isolation, incontinence and erectile dysfunction, the narration of Desmond and his father growing older sheds light on the limitations of biomedical scripts for older men based on bodily control and sexual performativity. Considering the tension of biomedical discourses and gender expectations informing the cultural construction of ageing in the global North, I contend that Lodge's writing exposes the limits of the neoliberal ideals of self-sufficiency and individual responsibility at the heart of the notion of successful ageing. Echoing Desmond's self-reflection, *Deaf Sentence* offers its reader a standpoint through which to reflect on

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his problematic participation in the neoliberal, patriarchal regimes that marginalise him. Interpreting the novel as a space for deconstructing the ideal of an autonomous and independent subject postulated by neoliberal discourses, I read *Deaf Sentence* as an invitation to its readers to embrace their own vulnerability, fostering ethics of care towards themselves and the other.

#### KEYWORDS

ageing, ethics of care, Lodge, masculinity, responsibility, self-reflexivity, Viagra

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

'To understand culture and society you have to be able to analyse their discourses', Professor Desmond Bates, the protagonist of David Lodge's *Deaf Sentence*, used to say in his inaugural pep talk to students (2008a, p. 32). In this essay, I propose that *Deaf Sentence* offers a standpoint through which readers can visualise the question of global population ageing and how biomedical and neoliberal notions of responsibility inform the cultural construction of ageing in the global North.

*Deaf Sentence* has been interpreted in relation to disability and deafness (Eyre, 2012), discussed as a reflection on the notion of writing as therapeutic treatment for anxiety and depression (Necula, 2011), or as a ludic linguistic challenge (Bekhta & Tykha, 2020). However, I contend that a crucial aspect of the novel has been partly overlooked, namely that of ageing. In his interview with Gaberel-Payen (2010a), Lodge stresses that *Deaf Sentence* is about the experience of ageing, 'mainly signified by deafness'. I read Lodge's novel in connection to his comments on Philip Roth's (2001) novel *The Dying Animal*, which focuses on the experience of ageing and the erotic perils of protagonist Professor David Kepesh. According to Lodge, *The Dying Animal* 'lacks the broad social vision of the novels that came before' (2002b, p. 250). The reference here is to Roth's American trilogy including *American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998) and *The Human Stain* (2000), which 'adopted [...] the model of the classic realist novel, in which individual fortunes are traced across a panorama of social change and historical events, the individual and the social illuminating and borrowing significance from each other in the process' (Lodge, 2002b, p. 249). Keeping in mind this criticism when reading *Deaf Sentence*, I argue that Desmond's life sheds light on the tension between his embodied experience of ageing and the complexities of an unprecedented demographic shift that has been defining the globe at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Goldstone, 2012; Livi-Bacci, 2017; UN, 2001, 2019). Reading *Deaf Sentence* through the lens of the Bakhtinian polyphonic novel and the sub-genre of the campus novel that Lodge discusses in his essayistic writing can facilitate our critical engagement with the forms of vulnerability from which older men suffer. Drawing on Lodge's representation of ageing masculinity, my aim is to challenge and interrogate notions of the self, care and responsibility within neoliberal societies.

## 2 | DIALOGISM, AGEING AND GLOBAL ANXIETIES

In *On Old Style* (2007) Edward Said looks at the novel as 'the Western aesthetic form that offers the largest and most complex image of ourselves that we have' (p. 2). Said reads the history of the novel in connection with the stages through which the human life span has been organised and conceptualised in Western societies: from birth to youth, from maturity to the late period of life marked by bodily decay and ill health. Although I find the idea of a correlation

between the history of the novel as a genre and the human ages problematic—Said himself presents his readers with examples of literary deviations ‘from the overall assumed pattern to human life’ (p. 2)—I would like to stress that the turn of the century has seen a proliferation of fictional works informed by the experience of ageing and produced a subsequent rise in critical interest (Aghacy, 2020; Concilio, 2018; Hobbs, 2016; Sako, 2022; Taberner, 2013). du Toit’s (2013) discussion of ageing in literature considers a number of novels published between 2000 and 2011 in French by Hélène Cixous, Michel Houellebecq, Pierre Jourde, Yasmina Reza, and François Weyergans, and in English by J. M. Coetzee, Lodge, and Roth. The number of authors and novels that might be considered in a discussion of ageing is too extensive to be addressed in a single study. For instance, just limiting ourselves to the English language, Julian Barnes’s *The Sense of an Ending* (2011), André Brink’s *The Rights of Desire* (2000) and *Before I Forget* (2004) and John Updike’s *Seek my Face* (2002), all fall within the parameters of du Toit’s research. Extending the time frame slightly, novels published after 2011 such as Bernardine Evaristo’s *Mr Loverman* (2013) could be included, as well as texts published in the late 1990s such as John Updike’s *Toward the End of Time* (1997), Doris Lessing’s *Love, Again* (1997), and Jackie Kay’s *Trumpet* (1998), not to mention Alice Munro’s short story entitled ‘The Bear Came Over the Mountain’ (1999). Literary representations of ageing are also abundant in other languages, for instance, Claudia Piñeiro’s *Elena Knows* (2021, originally published in Spanish in 2007) and Olga Tokarczuk’s *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* (2018, originally published in Polish in 2009). In view of my interest in masculinity, I opt to focus on Lodge’s writing. Unlike the narratives of Brink, Coetzee and Roth, which centre around an older protagonist’s romantic interest for a younger partner, *Deaf Sentence* explicitly evades this narrative trend showing Desmond’s resistance to the advances of a younger student. More importantly, Lodge’s writing offers a point of entry to address global ageing: reading *Deaf Sentence* in connection with the understanding of the novel as a genre that Lodge expresses in his critical writing, I examine the dialogue that the novel establishes with media and biomedical discourses about old age.

Lodge is a novelist as well as a theorist of the novel. In *The Practice of Writing*, focusing on the novel as a literary genre, he underlines how ‘[i]ts discursive variety and complexity is one of the reasons why it imitates the social world with a verisimilitude unequalled by other literary forms’ (1997, p. 182). This insight recalls Lodge’s appreciation of Lennard Davis’s study into the origins of the English novel, *Factual Fictions* (1983), which focuses on how early English novelists, such as Daniel Defoe and Samuel Richardson, wove documentary reporting, letters and confessions into their novels, merging the factual and the factitious (Lodge, 1988b, pp. 131–132). This discursive variety emerges in *Deaf Sentence*, which combines journal entries, metaliterary reflections, stylistic exercises, intertextual references, quotations from poems, literary texts and newspapers, emails, medical texts, passages of telephone conversations, ekphrasis and proverbs (Necula, 2011, p. 84). I will return to the intertextual dimension of *Deaf Sentence* in the following pages, but for the moment I would like to focus on the dialogue that Lodge’s novel establishes with media discourse to examine how it impacts Desmond’s experience of ageing.

Throughout the text, Desmond repeatedly refers to watching the news and reading newspapers about global threats. ‘I thought about watching the *News at Ten* but the news is so depressing these days—bombings, murders, atrocities, famines, epidemics, global warming—that one shrinks from it late at night’ (Lodge, 2008a, p. 10). Desmond’s sense of impotence facing worldwide crises is conveyed through the *mise-en-scène* of his spectatorship. These negative intensities conflate with his everyday life. After a frustrating conversation with his father, Desmond juxtaposes the insecurity that arises from news about global warming and the world spectacle of the execution of Saddam Hussein with his concern for his father’s wellbeing and his marital unhappiness (p. 245). Media-induced depression is a theme also discussed in Lodge’s critical writing. In his essay on Kierkegaard, Lodge writes:

As I have grown older I have become more and more vulnerable to bouts of anxiety and depression, though the material circumstances of my life have become steadily more comfortable and secure. This seems to be a fairly common experience. To judge by newspaper reports and magazine articles, there is something of an epidemic of depression in contemporary British society, and in the world generally.

(Lodge, 2002a, pp. 269–270)

As for *Deaf Sentence*, the media is presented as the agent of this increasing anxiety. Without suggesting deterministic interpretations of *Deaf Sentence*, I would like to discuss its incorporation of media discourses in light of the Bakhtinian tradition of the polyphonic novel that Lodge traces and praises in his essays (Bakhtin, 1981, 1984; Lodge, 1985, 1988b). He stresses that dialogism includes 'the relationship between the characters' discourses and the author's discourse [...] and between all these discourses and other discourses outside the text' (Lodge, 1988b, p. 136).

I contend that in *Deaf Sentence* the tension between biographical, national and global discourses gravitates around Desmond's experience of ageing and the demographic shift.

The incorporation of media discourse in *Deaf Sentence* reproduces the cultural and social landscape through which Desmond orients himself. In the first pages, Desmond refers to an article from *The Guardian*: 'I was in the middle of a rather interesting if depressing article about the ageing populations of the developed world, who combine increased life expectancy due to advances in medicine with a diminishing capacity to enjoy it because of physical and mental deterioration' (2008a, p. 22). This reference to *The Guardian* reveals the positionality of the novel within what the newspaper describes as the 'developed world'. In addition, it strengthens the sense of the novel's veracity, hinting at the phenomenon of population ageing which periodically receives media attention when reports on the subject are published by international organisations. However, this demographic change is not limited to the global North. The United Nations' 2001 landmark report, *World Population Ageing: 1950–2050*, presented population ageing as 'unprecedented, without parallel in the history of humanity' (2001, p. xxviii). The report forecast that by 2050, the number of people aged 60 or older in the world will 'exceed the number of young for the first time in history' (UN, 2001, p. xviii), a reversal in relative proportions of young and old which had already taken place in the global North by 1998. This demographic trend was confirmed by the United Nations' 2019 report, which describes population ageing as a global phenomenon: '[v]irtually every country in the world is experiencing growth in the size and proportion of older persons in their population' (2019, p. 1). The number of people aged 65 or older in the world is expected to raise to 1.5 billion in 2050, doubling the 703 million recorded in 2019, driven by the four regions in which population ageing has been fastest, namely Northern Africa and Western Asia, Central and Southern Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Eastern and South-Eastern Asia (UN, 2019, p. 1).

Contrasting life expectancy and advances in medicine with mental and physical deterioration, Desmond's words shed an ambiguous light on the 'triumph of civilisation' represented by increasing life expectancy and address its unforeseen global and personal consequences (Formosa & Shankardass, 2023, p. 4). The implications of this demographic shift are not limited to older people but also involve the increasing age of first-time parents like Desmond's daughter Anne, who is about to have her first child nearing her forties. Grandparenthood thus emerges as a site of anxiety: 'I don't think I have ever felt so pessimistic about the future of the human race, [...] there are so many possible ways civilisation could come to a catastrophic end, and quite soon. Not in my lifetime probably, but conceivably in the lifetime of Anne's unborn child' (Lodge, 2008a, pp. 112–113). The life course of his daughter's child is not filled with hopes and expectations but merely represents a further degree of separation from the end of civilisation. Driven by better nutrition as well as medical and hygienic progress, global population growth over the last two centuries has seen the number of humans increasing from less than 1 billion in 1800 to 6 billion in 2000 (Livi-Bacci, 2017, p. 26). *Deaf Sentence* illustrates the phenomenon that Jack Goldstone, sociologist and expert of political demography, defines as demographic transition, a process in which 'societies move from having a combination of low life expectancy and high fertility to the opposite condition, with high life expectancy and low fertility' (2012, p. 18). Desmond's family history and the demographic changes depicted by the British media offer an insight into the demographic transition unfolding in Europe, and more specifically in England.

Reflecting on my own attempt to address global ageing drawing on *Deaf Sentence*, I echo Timothy Clark who, discussing the challenges of representing environmental issues, wonders: 'how to present a complex global issue in an effective and coherent literary work?' (2019, p. 38). No single literary text can fully represent the extraordinary geographical, cultural and social variety and complexity of population ageing. Global ageing reveals the limitation of the north/south geopolitical division (Dados & Connell, 2012). Indeed, countries within the global North are at different stages of the demographic transition. With one of the world's lowest total fertility rates and the highest life

expectancy, Japan is already experiencing population shrinking, facing the challenges associated to labour shortages and the growth of expenditures in the fields of pensions, health and long-term care to sustain satisfying standards of living (Klein & Mosler, 2021, pp. 196–197, 212). The intricacies of global ageing become more apparent when considering the global South. While the demographic transition in Western Europe and the US took almost 150 years, the transformation from a very young to an ageing society is taking place within the lifetime of only one or two generations in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines (Ziegenhain, 2021, pp. 170, 188). Premature ageing in emerging economies might inhibit the transition into high-income status: '[g]etting old before getting rich' as Ziegenhain phrases it (p. 180). Besides the economic differences, scholarship on ageing in the global South has often stressed the role of the family and intergenerational care. Drawing on their investigation of Brazil and South Africa, Barrientos et al. (2018) emphasise the need for 'a multidimensional perspective and a focus on households' to study wellbeing among older people in developing countries (p. 318). Concentrating on the surge of elderly care homes rising across India's major urban centres, Lamb (2011) emphasises that, while the multigenerational family is still a cornerstone in Indian society, elderly care homes are becoming increasingly attractive to cosmopolitan middle classes despite being associated with stereotypes of 'bad families' and modern degeneration (Cohen, 1998). Similarly, when discussing the future ageing of the population in Sub-Saharan Africa, Aboderin et al. (2015) underline the crucial role of older adults in the provision of family support and the need for further investigation of the notion of African family. The focus on the family of older people is crucial in view of age-based inequalities in access to health care in the region (Aboderin & Beard, 2015; Adebowale et al., 2022, p. 698). The global context of ageing reveals how Desmond's anxieties and family dynamics need to be contextualised geographically, in particular the feeling of isolation, which is epitomised by the figure of his father, Harry, as I will discuss in the next sections.

Seemingly Lodge discounts the potential for *Deaf Sentence* to depict the wider social landscape of ageing. He places *Deaf Sentence* along with Roth's *The Dying Animal* as a novel that lacks a broader social vision as he states that *Deaf Sentence* 'is about universal personal experiences [...] rather than social and cultural change' (Gaberel-Payen, 2010a). However, in the next sections of my essay, by adopting a gender lens, I challenge Lodge's idea that Desmond's ageing is representative of a universal experience. I suggest that the social and cultural changes affecting Desmond are symptomatic of the biopolitical discourses disciplining ageing in neoliberal societies. My next step is to address the sub-genre within which Lodge situates *Deaf Sentence*—the campus novel—and how its self-reflexive dimension offers an insight into the conflation of gender dynamics and the neoliberal notions of productivity and individual responsibility characterising Desmond's retirement.

### 3 | EARLY RETIREMENT AND GENDER IN THE CAMPUS NOVEL

As a white, heterosexual, middle-class, British retired male linguistics professor at Midlands University, Desmond's experience is representative of only one piece of the kaleidoscopic, global phenomenon of population ageing. Focusing on the subgenre of the campus novel in which Lodge situates *Deaf Sentence* can shed light on how the tension between the local and the global is embodied in Desmond's life.

*Deaf Sentence* establishes an intertextual relationship with Lodge's previous novels, namely *Changing Places: A Tale of Two Campuses* (1975), *Small World: An Academic Romance* (1984) and *Nice Work* (1988a), which belong to the subgenre of the campus novel (Diaconu, 2014, 2019; Fuchs, 2019; Gaberel-Payen, 2010a, 2010b; Showalter, 2005). Lodge describes the campus novel as 'a work of fiction whose action takes place mainly in a college or university, and which is mainly concerned with the lives of university professors and junior teachers' (Lodge, 2006), identifying Mary McCarthy's *The Grove of Academe* (1952) and Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954) as the forerunners of this subgenre. In his interview with Gaberel-Payan (2010a), Lodge outlines its potential, explaining how his previous campus novels 'dealt with the counter-culture of the 60s, the globalization of high culture in the 70s and the impact of the Thatcherite economic revolution on Britain in the 80s, respectively'. Describing *Deaf Sentence* as a campus novel 'about retirement, specifically "early retirement"' (Gaberel-Payen, 2010a), Lodge explores the experience of

ageing within neoliberal societies, from the perspective of a character who embodies academic institutional privilege (Docherty, 2022, p. 595).

*Deaf Sentence* examines how the neoliberal urge to maximise costs and efficiency of British universities shapes the composition of academic staff (Shabat, 2020; Taylor et al., 2022). Desmond is offered early retirement at sixty-one as a result of 'one of the periodic organisational upheavals to which the University's senior management had become addicted' (Lodge, 2008a, p. 29). While at first Desmond enjoys his retirement, soon he begins to miss the structure that the academic calendar year gave to his life as well as the low-level satisfaction of completing trivial everyday tasks. The administrative tasks he grumbled about ensured that he 'never, ever, had to confront the question: *what shall I do with myself today?*' In retirement, he confronted it every morning as soon as he woke' (p. 31). These words reveal how his sense of purpose is conflated with ideals of productivity. While initially he thought that being released from administrative and teaching duties would have made it possible for him to focus on his research, Desmond feels no drive to pursue it. Outside the institutional context of academia, the intellectual labour associated with doing research appears overwhelming (Foucault, 1997b).

Nevertheless, thanks to his education, Desmond can understand his age-related hearing loss in connection to literature, art and music. He discerns the frustration that his wife must feel having to repeat the same things to him over and over again by reading the polite irritation expressed by Miss Bates, his fictional namesake, towards her mother's deafness in Jane Austen's *Emma* (Lodge, 2008a, p. 85). This reference illuminates the alienation from social events and personal interactions that Desmond experiences. The impossibility of hearing conversations if there is background noise turns theatre, cinema or social occasions into a source of anxiety. At the same time, the prospect of giving up social events entirely 'filled him with a kind of terror: more empty hours to fill, sitting alone at home, with a book or the telly' (p. 36). Desmond evokes the case of the Spanish painter Francisco Goya whose major works belong to the period when he turned deaf as a consequence of a paralytic illness. Desmond is particularly impressed by Goya's painting known as *Dog Overwhelmed by Sand* (1819–1823) depicting the head of a little black dog buried up to its neck in sand. 'There are lots of theories about what the picture means, like the End of the Enlightenment, or the Advent of Modernity', Desmond comments, 'but I know what it means to me: it's an image of deafness, deafness pictured as an imminent, inevitable, inexorable suffocation' (p. 87). To Desmond, the painting conveys a feeling of an ineluctable social and physical deterioration which is exacerbated by his readings of Alexander Thayer's *Life of Beethoven* (1896–1908). Acknowledging that deafness paradoxically enhanced Beethoven's music as it forced him to concentrate exclusively on composing rather than pursuing a career as a musician, Desmond underlines Beethoven's isolation (pp. 86–87). He quotes the words Beethoven wrote in a letter to his brothers about his feeling of banishment and sufferance after being regarded as misanthropic because he had to conceal an infirmity which would affect his reputation as a musician. The letter is 'an outpouring of suppressed emotion' which culminates in Beethoven's confessions of his suicidal desires: '*a little more of that and I would have ended my life—it was only my art that held me back*' (p. 88). While Goya and Beethoven found a reason to live in their art, Desmond feels as though he exhausted his interest in discourse analysis a long time ago. 'What comfort can I draw from these case histories?' Desmond wonders, 'Not much' (p. 88). While his education allows him to learn about great artists who lived with the same disability he does, cultural privilege does not relieve Desmond from his sufferance.

Even if Desmond is not a novelist, he is reminiscent of a writer figure. Not only because the references to Beethoven and Goya recall Lodge's own search for deaf artists (Lodge, 2008b), but because Desmond inscribes his life into the cultural history of deafness, and he is able to interrogate his experience by deploying novelistic devices such as self-reflexivity. Desmond draws on his teaching experience to better understand his life, an exercise which is framed in opposition to the homogenising experience of global spectatorship:

I thought about watching the *News at Ten* [...] let it wait, you feel, till the next day's newspaper and the cooler medium of print. [...] I decided to write an account of my conversation, or rather non-conversation, with the woman at the ARC private view [...]. First I did it in the usual journal style, then I rewrote it in the third person, present tense, the kind of exercise I used to give students in my

stylistics seminar. First person into third person, past tense into present tense, or vice versa. What difference does it make to the effect? Is one method more appropriate to the original experience than another, or does any method interpret rather than represent experience? Discuss.

(Lodge, 2008a, pp. 10–11)

This explanation in the very first chapter reveals to the reader that the diary entries composing *Deaf Sentence* are from Desmond's journal. By exposing the oscillation from a first-person narrator to a third-person narrator and vice versa, *Deaf Sentence* fulfils Lodge's own definition of metafiction as a 'fiction about fiction: novels and stories that call attention to their functional status and their own compositional procedures' (Lodge, 1992, p. 206). Within this metafictional campus novel, Desmond's past as a university professor informs the stylistic exercise through which he tries to understand his life as a narrative. On the one hand, the third-person narration represents Desmond's attempt to establish the necessary critical distance from his life as a senior citizen. On the other, it allows the reader to assess the lucidity of Desmond's self-reflection and to examine the patriarchal and biopolitical underpinnings of his individual experience of ageing in the twenty-first century.

The third-person narration appears in the novel for the first time when Desmond reflects on his retirement and the impact it had on his marriage. His lack of purpose in old age is exacerbated by the comparison with the experience of his second wife Winifred, whose interior design and soft furnishings business starts prospering just before his retirement. Later life is, for Winifred, an opportunity to express her talent for retail trade that had been suppressed by her unhappy first marriage and family duties. Free to pursue her own ambitions and plan her life ahead, Winifred embodies the ideal of the third age as 'a period of ageing self-fulfilment' (Gilleard & Higgs, 1998; Laslett, 1989, p. 234). Her success turns her into a figure in the local community who sits on boards and committees. Desmond perceives her accomplishment as detrimental to his status:

His retirement [...] shifted the balance of their marriage. His career was over while Winifred's was steaming ahead, and she now brought considerably more money into the household than he did. [...] When he accompanied her to this or that social event he sometimes felt like a royal consort escorting a female monarch, walking a pace or two behind her with his hands joined behind his back, a vague unfocused smile on his face.

(Lodge, 2008a, p. 36)

The erosion of privilege that came with his retirement has therefore also entered his private sphere. Desmond's feeling that Winifred's financial success and increasing acknowledgement within the community have changed the dynamics of power reveals the patriarchal foundations of heterosexual marriage. When Winifred undertakes 'a general personal make-over accompanying her new career', including breast reduction surgery and beginning to exercise regularly, Desmond is upset by the fact that '[t]his wasn't done for my benefit' (p. 70). The realisation that his wife's decision to sculpt her body was not made for his pleasure frustrates his patriarchal expectations.

Nevertheless, the fact that the reader has no insight into Winifred's thoughts makes her makeover ambiguous: despite destabilising the subordinate role she held throughout two marriages, it should not be interpreted as entirely emancipatory. Her makeover reproduces notions of female beauty modelled on youth, which configure attractiveness as the only way for women to avoid exclusion and invisibility (Calasanti & King, 2017; Holstein, 2015). This ideal of ageless ageing perpetuates gender stereotypes that promote white, middle-class heterosexual notions of female beauty (Calasanti, 2007). Committing herself to an exercise regime and undergoing surgery, Winifred is fully invested in the project of ageing successfully. Introduced by Robert Havighurst, the notion of successful ageing has become 'a dominant paradigm in gerontological research' in Europe and the United States (Katz & Calasanti, 2015; Lamb et al., 2017, p. 1). The concept owes its fortune to the formulation proposed by Rowe and Kahn (1998, pp. 38–39), who identify three criteria for ageing well, namely avoiding disease and disability, high cognitive and physical functioning, and remaining productive and actively engaged. While the notion of successful ageing and its criteria have

been increasingly criticised, the exclusionary assumptions at the heart of this model 'underpin worldwide efforts to promote successful, active, and healthy aging' (Lamb et al., 2017, p. 17). In this regard, it is worth focusing on the ways in which Rowe and Kahn's notion of successful ageing informs a moral project based on individual responsibility: 'To succeed in something [...] means having desired it, planned it, worked for it. [...] successful aging is dependent on individual choices and behaviours. It can be attained through individual choice and effort' (1998, p. 37). These words configure health and longevity as the result of an individual's self-governance and their ability to choose responsibly and plan efficiently. Within this neoliberal notion of agency, ageing well becomes a biopolitical project and a new moral imperative (Foucault, 1988a, 1988b; Katz, 1996). An imperative that, as I discuss in the next section, Desmond and his father, Harry, can no longer abide by.

#### 4 | AGEING MASCULINITY: BETWEEN VIAGRA AND ETHICS OF CARE

As underlined by Strawbridge et al., the model of successful ageing is problematic since 'it implies that there are winners and losers' (2002, p. 728). Desmond and Harry emerge as the subjects who cannot live up to neoliberal standards of success. No longer a productive member of society, Harry can adhere to the neoliberal project only by economising on every aspect of his life: 'All the more poignant, then, is it to contemplate him now, stripped of all these life-enhancing interests. He has only one hobby these days: saving money, observing prices, economising on food, clothing and household bills' (Lodge, 2008a, p. 61). Measured on the pressing parameters of successful ageing, the isolation that Harry experiences in his everyday life emerges as the epitome of his individual, moral failure. After his wife passes away, Harry goes on to live on his own for 13 years. His inability to form new relationships and maintain old ones is demonstrated when he tries to get in touch with his old friend Arthur and learns that he died 8 years earlier. Harry expresses his desolation by commenting that '[t]here aren't many blokes I knew in the business who are still around' (p. 57). This feeling of despondency is caused by the idea that the social world he has grown up in is crumbling away. Realising that the only people who cross the threshold of his father's house are the doctor and the man who reads the electricity meter, Desmond understands that his father lives 'a lonely and vulnerable existence' (p. 66).

Old age thus emerges as a sphere in which the gender constructions dictating stereotypical masculine behaviours—such as recalcitrance to seek help and emotional reticence—corrode the privilege that white heterosexual men are endowed with in patriarchal societies, aggravating their health and isolation (Davidson & Meadows, 2010; Garfield, 2010; Oksuzyan et al., 2008; Springer & Mouzon, 2011; Thompson, 1994). Desmond's inability to nurture a more meaningful connection with his father is echoed in the relationship he has with his son Richard, a low-temperature physicist at Cambridge. Richard and his field of study are enigmas to Desmond: 'I understand hardly anything he says about [low-temperature physics], and even less about Richard' (Lodge, 2008a, p. 109). Desmond's alienation from his child is such that he wonders whether his son might be hiding his homosexuality from him. Unable to breach the distance that separates them, Desmond can only contemplate the time passing and the physical changes that are marking his son's body—'I noticed his hair was getting thin' (p. 188). This sense of mutual intelligibility is echoed by Harry who resists the idea that his son is also old:

'Take my advice, son,' he said. 'Don't get old.'

'But I *am* old, Dad,' I said.

Not what I call old.

I'm retired. I'm on a pension. I have a Senior Citizens railcard and a bus pass. I always have to get up in the night at least once. And I'm deaf (p. 63).

Evocative of the demographic shift, these father-son relationships reveal the gendered, relational struggles of Desmond as the father of a son approaching middle age and as a son taking care of his 89-year-old father.

Even more significant, in *Deaf Sentence*, is men's embodied experience of ageing as being centred around sexual and excretory functions. In his diary, Desmond remembers that when his sexual vigour began to decline and Winifred grew less attractive to him, he thought they would eventually enter 'a serenely chaste old age' (p. 78), conceiving of older people as post-sexual (Simpson et al., 2018). However, his belief in this stereotype is shaken as the first signals of his erectile dysfunction (ED) coincide with Winifred's makeover: 'Winifred acquired her rejuvenating new career and new look, while he grew older and deafer and subject to occasional ED' (Lodge, 2008a, p. 78). The use of the third person narrator to discuss his sexuality reveals his need to establish a critical and emotional distance from this destabilising event. Winifred's 'rejuvenation' is threatening for Desmond as in his mind it raises the expectations imposed on his manhood. On the advice of his general practitioner, he tries Viagra but has an allergic reaction. Unable to take ED drugs, Desmond cannot inscribe his body into the sex-for-health discourse, which configures 'the male erection as a vascular, physiological event [...] induced by chemical injection' (Marshall, 2006, p. 349). While Winifred does not believe Desmond's erectile issues affect their relationship ('There were, as she observed, other ways of giving and receiving sexual pleasure, and she was up for most of them, but to him they were only foreplay', Lodge, 2008a, p. 78), Desmond cannot think of sex beyond penetrative sex nor conceive of 'male sexual morphologies more broadly' (Sandberg, 2011, p. 258). Unable to rely on drugs, Desmond starts policing his own body, developing a meticulous routine including abstinence from alcohol and adjusting the heating in the bedroom to enhance his chances of having an erection. The ageing body thus emerges as a site of governance shaped by Foucauldian technologies of the self (Calasanti & King, 2005).

Despite his intolerance to Viagra, as an old man, Desmond is still the target of worldwide marketing campaigns which promote performances of masculinity beyond the sex for health discourse (Baglia, 2003; Ferrero Camoletto, 2019; Johnson, 2016; Wentzell, 2013):

Sex had become an object of anxious rather than pleasurable anticipation, and his peace of mind was not helped by the daily penetration of his computer firewall by spam advertising Viagra, Cialis, and quack herbal remedies promising enhanced virility. *'Impress your girl with prolonged hardness, plentiful explosions and increased duration. Boost your manhood to astonishing levels [...] Did she ever tell you your size is insufficient? No? Maybe she was just being polite? Just imagine your new happy life with more size, more adoration from females and more self-assurance. Come in here...'*

(Lodge, 2008a, p. 78)

Desmond's anxiety about sex is exacerbated by ads promoting Viagra and Cialis which, unlike his non-performative penis, are able to 'penetrate' his firewall. Referring to prolonged hardness, explosions and increased duration, the wording of the message conveys an ideal of sexual performativity built on youthful energy (Marshall, 2009), while playing with men's insecurities about penis size, and with their narcissistic fantasies of becoming the object of women's adoration. Incorporating fictional ads about Viagra and Cialis (Lodge, 2008a, pp. 78, 154, 174), dialogism in *Deaf Sentence* articulates Desmond's struggles to live his sexuality beyond the standards promoted to older men by the authority of biomedical and pharmaceutical discourses (Baglia, 2003).

Desmond's sexual life as an old man brings to light the interconnectedness of two global phenomena, namely population ageing and the medicalisation of impotence, offering a Eurocentric perspective on them. The globalisation of Viagra, or the viagrification of the modern world (Botz-Bornstein, 2011), has been addressed by studies examining the tension between Viagra and national-traditional cultures in China, Mexico and Nigeria (Okeregbe, 2011; Wentzell, 2013; Zhang, 2007, 2015). Through the narration of Desmond's sexual and intimate struggles, *Deaf Sentence* reveals Viagra as 'a material-semiotic node for discursive production and identity formation' (Åsberg & Johnson, 2016, p. 88). Desmond suffers from the biopolitical discourses surrounding penetrative sex and performances of masculinity, which he nevertheless tries to reiterate and live up to. While the corporate responsibility and design behind the global spread of Viagra and ED drugs can be ascribed to a multinational pharmaceutical and biotechnological corporation such as Pfizer, Desmond's ambiguous position poses further questions: to what extent are Desmond and other men who live with similar struggles within patriarchal societies responsible for the

perpetuation of such cultural scripts? Drawing on Michael Rothberg's notion of the implicated subject, Desmond could be described as 'a participant in histories and social formations that generate the positions of victim and perpetrator' (2011, p. 1), whose alignment with power and privilege has shifted as he has grown older.

At the peak of his sexual crisis, Desmond wonders, 'what will I have to live for, when social and sexual intercourse are effectively at an end too?' (p. 89). His struggle with ED recalls the progressive deterioration of bodily control Harry is experiencing. While visiting his father, Desmond comments on the smell in the toilet and observes that 'the linotiled floor reeks of pee because Dad's aim is not as good as it used to be' (p. 42). Harry wets himself while Desmond is driving them to his place so that they can spend Christmas together. On Boxing Day, on the way home from the pub, Harry relieves himself on the internal gate after realising he cannot reach the bathroom in time, and passes gas loudly in front of people in the kitchen because of the curry. Though framed with humour, these episodes evoke the erosion of social status associated with incontinence. As Mitteness & Barker observe, '[i]ncontinence symbolises this disorder and is proof that the elder is no longer an adult person but is on the road to the ultimate in disorderliness and decrepitude, to becoming a nonperson' (1995, p. 206). The journey towards the erosion of subjectivity Harry experiences is marked by the first symptoms of dementia, the inaugural signs of social death associated with the inability to recognise our loved ones (Lamb et al., 2017; Taylor, 2008). This process of social exclusion is dramatically accelerated by a stroke that puts Harry into a vegetative state, unresponsive to outside stimuli including the news that he has become a great-grandfather (Lodge, 2008a, p. 274). Even if Desmond places great emphasis on the gravity of Harry's condition—'Dad was a pathetic sight' he observes (p. 273)—what marks the sense of Harry's downfall from his status as an individual rather comes from the infantilisation of having his diaper changed:

It was an extraordinary experience, which took the reversal of the infant parent relationship through the taboo barrier. Basically I was helping to change a nappy on an eighty-nine-year-old man, but he happened to be my father. [...] Delphine [...] removed [...] the paper diaper. He had passed a small bowel movement [...]. She washed and powdered his private parts, in a respectful but matter-of-fact way, then attached a tube to his penis and strapped a reservoir for the urine to his leg (p. 282).

Desmond's emphasis on the unusualness of changing an adult's nappy is a testament to the exclusion of vulnerable older people from domestic settings (Lawton, 1998). The inversion of the father and son relationship focuses on the infantilisation of the father rather than offering a glimpse into the significance of intergenerational reciprocity. Twigg describes this erosion of social status, outlining that '[i]n the modern west, to be incontinent is to have one's fundamental social status questioned, one's personhood as an individual denied' (2004, p. 66). The focus on Harry's faeces and the catheter inserted into his penis marks the need to sanitise the dirt produced by the body and confine it within the boundaries of institutionalised care (Lawton, 1998). This same scene symbolises the banishment of his body from the ideals of self-sufficiency and sexual performativity imposed on ageing masculinity.

To contextualise the significance of this scene, I look at *Deaf Sentence* as a laboratory probing the experiential and aesthetic complexity of reading and the fluidity of the pattern of recognition (Felski, 2008). Though embodied and located socially and geographically, Desmond's and Harry's experiences of ageing are significant even to readers who cannot identify with them at first. As Kathleen Woodward observes, '[w]e all have a stake in representations of age and aging body. Age necessarily cuts across all our lives and our bodies in a way that other differences fundamentally do not' (1988, p. 127). As a lifelong process of change which begins at birth, ageing is relevant to virtually every human being. In addition, the trajectories of Desmond and Harry, Winifred and Richard reveal how this process is not biologically fixed but is rather 'an open-ended subjective and social experience [which is] highly variable depending on the meanings given to the body and the self' (Hepworth, 2000, p. 2). Their subjective experiences of ageing are informed by the tension between loss, connectedness, physical impairment, social expectations, family relationships, retirement, new professional challenges and the cultural meanings and expectations with which they are associated. As Desmond's intellectual journey into the history of deafness reveals, the impairment, which Lodge presents as the signifier of Desmond's ageing, affected the lives of celebrated artists such as Beethoven and Goya at a much

earlier age. Resonating with Liz Lloyd's formulation of a feminist ethics of care, *Deaf Sentence* invites the reader to abandon the illusions of an independent individual, 'the standard against which the quality of life is measured', and 'to re-conceptualize care as a fundamental aspect of all human experience' (2006, pp. 1182–1183). Revealing dependency as intrinsic to the human condition, Lodge's writing exposes the limits of notions of self-sufficiency, offering a standpoint through which to criticise today's neoliberal governmentality (Foucault, 1997a). As a literary text, *Deaf Sentence* cannot play a fully emancipatory role against neoliberal notions of health, ageing and sexual performativity but it does contribute to their destabilisation, by inviting its reader to embrace their own vulnerability and fostering ethics of care.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

Drawing on Rita Felski's idea that '[a] work of art is a potential source of knowledge rather than just an object of knowledge' (2015, p. 84), in this article I argued why *Deaf Sentence* should be read in connection with the social and cultural changes prompted by population ageing. The analysis of literary aspects such as dialogism and self-reflexivity that Lodge discusses in his critical writing illuminates the reverberations of this global trend on the life of Desmond, situating questions of wellbeing and demography within a narrative perspective.

The metaliterary dimension of *Deaf Sentence* allows the reader to engage with Desmond's self-reflection on his experience of ageing at the crossroads between neoliberal and biomedical discourses. My analysis addressed the notion of individual responsibility that neoliberal paradigms of successful ageing and sexual performativity force upon men (Okeregbe, 2011; Wentzell, 2013; Zhang, 2007, 2015). Considering the entanglements of global ageing and the viagrification of the world, I problematised Desmond's participation in the oppressive patriarchal regimes that marginalise him. At the same time, examining how ageing emerges as a continuum, I identified a space for deconstructing the ideal of an autonomous and independent subject postulated by neoliberal discourses. The adoption of feminist ethics of care not only allows the reader to consider their vulnerability, but also offers a framework through which to practise care towards themselves and others, exercising their agency within the global context of an ageing population.

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**How to cite this article:** Rossoni, S. (2023). A novel for an ageing population? Masculinity and demographic shift in David Lodge's *Deaf Sentence* (2008). *Literature Compass*, 20(10-12), e12755. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12755>