ЛІТЕРАТУРОЗНАВСТВО

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LITERARY PORTRAYALS OF THE ELDERLY ARTISTS IN TINA HOWE'S *COASTAL DISTURBANCES: FOUR PLAYS*

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Considering increased average life expectancy, the world-wide demographical crisis and discrimination of the elderly, the article studies strategies of aging and various forms of adaptation to changes in late adulthood in fiction. The goal of the study is examination of representations of the fictional elderly artists in a collection of plays by Tina Howe (1989). The author of the article analyzes the interaction of art and late adulthood in Museum, Painting Churches and Coastal Disturbances. Contemplation of art and involvement into artistic activities help establish positive images of aging in three dramas. Life review fragments, discourse of death drive, discussion of elderly suicide and self-stereotyping are defined as gerontological markers of aging. The plays in question build an ambivalent solidarity-conflict model between aging parents and adult child. The involvement into artistic activities becomes a way to cope with aging in lives of the elderly characters.

Key words: *aging, elderly, Tina Howe, comedies, art, gerontological markers.*

Гайдаш А.В.

Літературні портрети літніх митців у збірці п'єс Тіни Хау «Занепокоєння на узбережжі»

Актуальність даної розвідки зумовлена збільшенням середньої тривалості життя, світовою демографічною кризою та дискримінацією людей літнього віку, що знаходить відображення у сучасній белетристиці, зокрема у драматургії. Метою статті є вивчення репрезентацій митців літнього віку в збірці комедій сучасної американської жінки-драматурга Тіни Хау 1989 р. Динаміка геронтогенезу представлена моделюванням позитивних образів, залучених до споглядання або участі у творах мистецтва, у трьох п'єсах. Виявлені наступні геронтологічні маркери: фрагменти перегляду життя у формі спогадів, танатологічний дисурс, розмірковування про суїцид серед представників пізньої дорослості та репліки самостереотипізації. Встановлено амбівалентну модель солідарності-конфлікту у розробці мережі стосунків між старіючими персонажами та їхніми дорослими дітьми.

Ключові слова: *геронтогенез, літній вік, Тіна Хау, комедії, мистецтво, геронтологічні маркери.*

Гайдаш А.В.

Литературные портреты творческих личностей в возрасте в сборнике пьес Тины Хау «Прибрежные волнения»

Актуальность данной статьи обусловлена увеличением средней продолжительности жизни, мировым демографическим кризисом и дискриминацией людей пожилого возраста, что находит отражение в современной художественной литературе. Целью статьи является изучение репрезентаций творческих личностей пожилого возраста в сборнике комедий современной американской женщины-драматурга Тины Хау 1989 г. Динамика геронтогенеза представлена моделированием положительных образов, привлеченных к созерцанию или участию в креативных процессах, в трех пьесах. Выделены следующие геронтологические маркеры: фрагменты жизненного обозрения в форме воспоминаний, танатологиче-

ский дискурс, рассуждения о суициде среди представителей поздней взрослости и реплики самостереотипизации. Установлена амбивалентная модель солидарности-конфликта в разработке сети отношений между стареющими персонажами и их взрослыми детьми.

***Ключевые слова**: геронтогенез, пожилой возраст, Тина Хау, комедии, искусство, геронтологические маркеры.*

Theatre has always been a unique combination of verbal and visual components, which convey multiple dimensions of reality reflecting the very life. American writers for theatre present a vast array of artistic characters. Majority of dramatis personae in plays by such predecessors as Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and such contemporaries as August Wilson, Beth Henley can be classified as artists broadly understood — extraordinarily creative and skillful persons. Taking into consideration the increasing average life expectancy, the world-wide demographical crisis and discrimination of the elderly, also reflected in drama in recent years [1], it is relevant to study strategies of aging and various forms of adaptation to changes in late adulthood in fiction. Often art plays a key role in adapting to changes and choosing a strategy of aging. Therefore, the ***goal*** of the article is to analyze literary portrayals of the fictional elderly artists in dramatic works of the contemporary US playwright Tina Howe in order to detect dynamics of late adulthood. To complete the goal the following ***tasks*** are set: to work out theoretical background of the interaction between "third age" and art; to analyze the intergenerational relations as meaning-producing "format" of aging; to identify gerontological markers.

Tina Howe is the outstanding US dramatist in the generation of the turn of the millennium including Marsha Norman, Beth Henley, Wendy Wasserstein, and others. Her comedies are in the limelight of such credible drama critics as Ch. Bigsby, B. McNamara and R. Brustein. A theatre historian Brooks McNamara identifies a central theme in Tina Howe's works as the description of "wealthy WASPdom". McNamara writes: "Howe comes from a distinguished Boston family and is well qualified to examine the folkways of the Eastern Establishment" [23, 11]. In terms of playwright's style the British expert Christopher Bigsby associates Howe's writing with the European theatre of absurd. As protagonists in her plays are often artists and art-related persons, Bigsby states that "<…> art plays a major role" in Howe's dramatic heritage [4, 50]. Starting from her *Approaching Zanzibar* (1989) and on with *One Shoe Off* (1993), *Pride's Crossing* (1997), *Rembrandt's Gift* (2002) and *Chasing Manet* (2009) there are a number of gifted artistic characters who challenge their environment: painters, photographers, actors as well as the poet, orchestra conductor, writer, editor, composer, and the architect. In Howe's comedies, the artists often belong to the older adult age group. Their representations are the stomping ground for age studies and its subdiscipline literary gerontology (M. M. Gullette, K. Woodward, M. Hepworth, J. King). The present article relies methodologically on the basics of literary gerontology among other interdisciplinary approaches (social gerontology, age studies, age psychology, close reading). Sylvia B. Henneberg defines literary gerontology as "the critical examination and theorization of age as a marker of identity" [19, 106] in late adulthood period. This definition leads to understanding of the elderly age embodiments and the process of aging, which are salient in Tina Howe's dramatic tradition.

The age dynamics of the elderly characters-artists is studied in Tina Howe's *Museum*, *Painting Churches*, *Coastal Disturbances*, which are compiled in the collection *Coastal Disturbances: Four Plays*. In the framework of the given analysis the age dynamics is seen as an adaptation of the fictional characters to the physical and cognitive changes in their late adulthood, often in the context of and with the help of art. To give just one example, in the *Introduction* to her memory-play *Pride's Crossing* (about a nonagenarian who used to swim the English Channel) Howe argues somewhat controversially: "*For some time now I've wanted to write about the passion of old ladies. When men age, they just get older, but women become very powerful. It's the female thing: that we bear children and nurture the family. As time passes, the membranes between what we should do and what we want to do get thinner and thinner. There's no rage like old lady rage, just as there's no tenderness like old lady tenderness*" [18, viii]. Yet Howe is not gender biased. The woman dramatist deftly deploys aging men in recent comedies *Rembrandt's Gift* and *Chasing Manet*.

The dynamics of the "third age" in fiction is analyzed by the British social gerontologist Mike Hepworth who defines aging as "a complex and potentially open-ended process of interaction between the body, self and society" [14, 1]. The scholar assumes aging to be both subjective individual experience and at the same time collective practice. Hepworth coined the term "aging into old age" which means "a symbolic construct <…> interactively produced as individuals attempt to make sense of the later part of life" [14, 2]. The American age critic Margaret Gullette argues that "human beings are aged by culture" [12, 12], therefore age and aging are cultural constructs which can be criticized and reconsidered. Both scholars believe our times to be obsessed with oldness.

Although in Western culture old age has long been regarded as the period of decline (S. de Beauvoir, M. Gullette, K. Woodward, M. Hepworth), the second half of the 20th century watches a shift in the commonplace perception of late adulthood. Since the late 1960s "America witnessed a formidable effort to eliminate negative stereotypes of and prejudice toward older people", writes the US historian [8, 227]. Scholars attempt to debunk myths of old age implementing the concept of successful aging. Lucille B. Bearon defines the notion of successful aging as "conceptual frameworks or schema to describe ideal outcomes of the aging process" [3]. The mutual efforts of the humanities result in the new representations of positive images of later life in fiction. To give just one example, S. B. Henneberg demonstrates with the poetess May Sarton's image of the creative crone that "creativity and senescence can blissfully cohabitate" [19, 114].

Contemporary age psychologists claim that "old age is a time of continued growth and development, as important as any other period of life" [10, 466]. Namely, Barry Smith refers to productivity and high functioning of such older artists as Frank Lloyd Wright, the septuagenarian designer of New York Guggenheim Museum; Grandma Moses, the centenarian painter; George Burns, the centenarian actor [24, 405]. Yet the correlation of late adulthood and art is understudied. A.Cohen-Shalev explains the lack of research in "third age" and art with the exclusion of the elderly form the canon "<…> by the ageist or age-centric perspective of mid-life preferences" [7, 2]. In her postdoctoral thesis N. Yermak considers art therapy as a means of resisting old age stereotypes, which associate late adulthood with "decline of creative potential, uncertainty, fear, lack of expertise and other external and internal obstacles" [2, 6].

The representations of blissful cohabitation of creativity and senescence are also reflected in drama. Speaking of theatre, American scholar Valerie Lipscomb is convinced that "among the arts, drama is especially ripe for examining the performance of age, as issues of age and aging arise in all aspects of a play, from the script to casting and staging choices" [21, 285]. Yet the basic constituent of a traditional performance — the dramatic text — provides the springboard for the meaning of old age that is the focus of the present article.

Museum (1976)

One of the first comedies by Tina Howe *Museum* does not deal with age and aging obviously, yet this comedy suggests the intergenerational network, which will be the medium for portraying and understanding the age-related theme in the successive plays by the American dramatist. The subject line with non-stop rotation of entrances and exits of multiple characters seems to be eclectic and incoherent, although it is linear in temporal dimension and tends to reproduce real-life experience, close to Aristotelian notion of mimesis. The action takes place in the museum of modern art. By all means postmodern exhibition, titled *The Broken Silence*, is attended by numerous visitors, mainly young adults. So young are the artists whose provocative works are displayed. This show, Bigsby aptly explains, is "<…> anything but silent satire on the modishness of art criticism, on the consumption of art by gallery visitors and on the lives of those who pass through this unlikely space" [4, 55]. The most challenging among them are four gigantic white canvases, all identical, by fictional artist Zachery Moe. It is clear that his works are the brightest embodiment of the metaphor of the broken silence after one visitor's remark: "*You know, his parents are deaf mutes <…> Can you imagine what it must have been growing up with parents who couldn't hear you? <…> They're consigned to absolute and lifelong silence*" [16, 12–13]. Whereas some visitors find Zachery's canvases blank and laughable, other guests admire the artist's landscapes, seascape and starscape. They are done with acrylic emulsion and wax to create salient projections of land, sea or stars. First, one can see just white rectangles, and only with an intent look one can discern outlines of mountains, waves or stardust: "The white canvases become a kind of Moby Dick whose meanings lie not in themselves but in what people choose to see in them" [4, 55]. Apparently, Zachery Moe encodes the traumatic experience of communication with his deaf mute parents into white/white dichotomy making the recipients look deeper for the shades, nuances, details invisible at first glance. In the course of the play, one of the characters exclaims: "*He chose painting as his voice!*" [16, 14]. It is important that the final visitors who step on stage in *Museum* (there are 38 of them) are an elderly couple of Mr. and Mrs. Moe, Zachery Moe's deaf mute parents. In front of their son's canvases, "radiant with pride and happiness", they speak in sign language:

> *Mrs. Moe:* Remember the drawings he used to make as a child?
> *Mr. Moe:* The sketches he did of all his toys in his nursery…
> *Mrs. Moe:* How wonderful they were, bursting with life…
> *Mr. Moe:* Noisy with life!
> *Mrs. Moe:* Remember how he'd make the walls shake when he wanted something?
> *Mr. Moe:* And how they shook! He shouted with the voice of a thousand men!
> The lights fade on their rhapsodic hands as the curtain slowly falls [16, 53–54].

A powerful gerontological marker of the elderly characters' dialogue is reminiscing. The experts (Robert Butler and Erik Erikson are the first

theoreticians in memories exploration) believe that reminiscence is "<…> important for the affirmation of personal identity and self-esteem" [9, 301] in late adulthood. The final scene of the play invokes interaction of verbal and non-verbal components: sign language is translated into speech and voice is translated into painting. According to the recent findings of the social gerontology, population aging produces "uncertainty" in intergenerational networks: the scholars observe the construct of "ambivalence" emerging from the solidarity-conflict model [11, 413–414]. It means that family relations between aging parents and their adult children convey positive and negative elements being "the intersection of affection and conflict" [ibid.]. The denouement of the play sets forth the issue of intergenerational network, which, on one hand, involves stress and conflicts, and, on the other hand, demonstrates the way to overcome these predicaments.

What Howe explores in *Museum* is the nature of communication and the role of art in it. Art thus becomes a form of communication — an encoded message the artist sends to the public. As Bigsby suggests, "the gallery space becomes a site of insecurity about language, meaning and the processes involved in the construction of art. To that extent *Museum* is a metatheatrical piece in which Howe, with wit and genuine originality, acknowledges the problematic nature of art, her own art, and its reception" [4, 57]. Howe forms the intergenerational ambivalence using binary oppositions to introduce the dichotomy of elderly / young (parents and son), past / present (memories and current moment), conditions of being silence-struck / image-struck.

Painting Churches (1983)

Televised on *American Playhouse*, the winner of three prestigious theatre awards *Painting Churches* explores the model of aging parents / adult child dichotomy detected as one of the productive binary oppositions in the previous comedy. *Painting Churches* is about a move of the elderly couple of the Churches to the smaller accommodation. There are three characters in the play — sexagenarian Fanny, "*a Bostonian from a fine old family*", her husband septuagenarian Gardner, "*an eminent New England poet from a finer family*", and their daughter Mags, who is a young adult painter. Justifying the Churches' move to another house as a symbolic act, Bigsby argues that "<…> they are leaving for <…> their death" [4, 64]. Taking into account textual implication that Churches' move has economical concern, the scholar's argument sounds somewhat ageist: does any move mean approaching death?

The animating force of the comedy is Mags' ambition to draw a portrait of her parents to expose at her soon coming exhibition. Although Mags is the professional artist, the dramatic focus is on her aging parents: a lady of artistic and elegant taste and a gentleman-poet, the winner of Pulitzer Prize. Painting the elderly parents' portrait becomes the major metaphor of the play. The subject line revolves around the identities of art-absorbed Fanny and Gardner, their coping with physical bodily changes and their interrelations. Keeping in mind Howe's predilection with theatre of absurd the general impression of the drama's structure is that all three characters act and speak on their own, often ignoring the cues of their partners. This strategy helps develop each family member conspicuously. Thus the image of Fanny, responsible for the move, builds on short monologues (composed of memories, references to the passed away persons), which can be analyzed in terms of life review concept, developed by R. Butler [5].

In the exposition scene Fanny is engaged in the selection of the objects of art she will take to her new home. Studying the tasteful family objets d'art the elderly lady immerses into memories referring to her deceased relatives. "*A certain flamboyance*" aimed to characterize the Churches' living room, is embedded in the literary portraits of the elderly couple in the run of the play.

In his studies of "old age style" (works produced by the representatives of late adulthood — A. G.) Cohen-Shalev states, that "the discourse of old age, for example, is dominated by the non-old" [7, 1]. Yet Howe's *Painting Churches* seems to overrule Cohen-Shalev's statement. The elderly characters' cues focus on their current state of affairs, like packing, selection of stuff, eating etc. Certainly, there is an interaction between the elderly parents and their daughter, which supports the discourse of the aged couple. On and off Fanny and Gardner exchange their lines crammed with Thanatos veneer. These lines, however, are self-ironic with no macabre implications: "*This damned move is going to kill me! Send me straight to my grave!*" [17, 133]. Gardner's dreadful typing irritates Fanny so much that the elderly lady foresees her future in a straitjacket in the nut house [17, 132]. Waiting for Mags is also unbearable: "*Well, if she doesn't show up soon, I'm going to drop dead of exhaustion. God, wouldn't that be wonderful?... Then they could just cart me off into storage with all the old chandeliers and china…*" [17, 135]. In the last quote Fanny imagines the picture of her burying among her flamboyant housewares. This is a powerful gerontological marker. Obviously, Fanny associates herself with her home, which she is reluctant to leave. Therefore her subsequent suicidal thoughts aloud ("*I'm sick to death <…>*" [17, 140]; "*I have one foot in the grave and you know it!*" [17, 166]; "I'M DEAD!" [17, 168]; "*I've always admired people who kill themselves when they get to our stage of life*" [17, 169]; "*I'd put a bullet through my head in a minute, but then who'd look after him?*" [17, 177]) demonstrate an ambivalent reading of Fanny's death drive. On one hand, the character's cues are reflections of life's bounds; on the other hand, the cues concern the topic of elderly suicide,

of which M. Gullette writes with anger: "<…> suicidal ideation is becoming familiar to millions of Americans in a casual, conversational way" [13, 55]. Fanny finds relief in "traipsing around the thrift shops" looking for artistic objects, making a magic lantern from a lain lampshade and taking care of her husband.

In opposition to his wife, Gardner experiences physical decline, "getting quite gaga" [17, 141]. Gardner's gerontological portrayal is as much ambivalent as Fanny's one. Bigsby is pessimistic in his view of the elderly poet: "As the play continues so the stripping of the house proceeds in tandem with the psychological stripping bare of the characters as the cruelty of Gardner's decline is underlined <…>" [4, 65]. Yet Gardner resists his decline with writing criticism, reciting favorite poems, making faces while posing for the family portrait. The denouement in *Painting Churches* stands out rather happy-endish — aged husband and wife waltz slowly to Chopin's music watched by their daughter. What is important in the network of intergenerational relations between the elderly parents and their adult child is productive dialogue worked out by the end of the subject-line. Fanny demands Mags to portray her and Gardner as they really are, the old people. Mags learns how to grow old from her parents. Bigsby observes the lyricism in aging father / adult daughter shared memories in one of the final scenes in the comedy: "It is a moment of understanding, involving that pattern of possession and loss which defines the relationship between parents and children and equally the shape of individual lives" [4, 67]. Similarly to *Museum*, *Painting Churches* builds the solidarity-conflict model in the relationship of the aged parents and adult child.

Gardner's and Fanny's artistic endeavors represent active strategy of aging. Old age style, Cohen-Shalev writes, "<…> implies the potentiality of change and regards this change as creative" [7, 38]. The elderly couple is an embodiment of Howe's central concern: "<…> the affirmation of a vital, dynamic, life-heralding spirituality" [22, 76]. In *Painting Churches* the playwright builds an ambivalent portrayal of an elderly couple using such gerontological markers as move to the new accommodation; discussion of elderly suicide; death drive references, and involvement into artistic activities to resisting decline.

Coastal Disturbances (1986)

Nominated for a Tony award the comedy *Coastal Disturbances* brings the audience to a private beach on Massachusetts' North Shore. Beside the major subject line (a love story between the characters of a younger generation), there is a subplot with an elderly couple of the Adams — retired Doctor Hamilton, 72, and his wife M. J., 68, an amateur painter. Serving as a background to the basic plot, the line of the elderly husband and wife exhibits the models to follow for their younger counterparts. The Adams demonstrate positive image of late adulthood: parents of nine common children, they still enjoy each other's company at the resort.

M. J. is good at water color sketches: these drawings help her briefly convey the current impressions of always changing environment — sea waves, coastline, birds in flight, bathers, beach sand. M. J. complains about these instant changes — yet it is crucial for go on. Contemporary recommendations for the seniors suggest art as therapy of adapting to new circumstances. A 2010 review by the Oxford Institute of Ageing says: "<…> why older people, even if they have never been involved in any art before <…> should not be able to tackle similar sorts of creative challenges as do other adult groups <…> The participants are often surprised by the quality of their own work" [20]. Although Hamilton, M. J.'s husband, is generous with compliments on M. J.'s sketches, the aging couple's relations are unquiet, often with arguments and even accusations: for instance, M. J. does not like being watched while she works with her drawings. Cohen-Shalev remarks that solitude is indicative of old age style [7, 25]. M. J. stereotypes her own and Hamilton's age, complaining, for example, that "*Poor's thing* (Hamilton — A. G.) *as deaf as a stone*" [15, 207], "*The man's over 70 and he still carries on like a three-years-old!*" [15, 247] or that they are "*a handful of old crocks*" [15, 209]. US social gerontologist Toni Calasanti writes that aging often becomes an ultimately oppressive process: "<…> either subjects try to avoid the aging process or they lose self-esteem because of the selves they feel they are becoming" [6, 8]. The image of aging amateur artist is ambivalent, since the character of M. J. represents not only the creative crone, but also the negative self-stereotyper. Besides her image arises the issue of heterotopia of aging while M. J. is often described by the playwright as home-obsessed: "*Also on the beach is M. J. Adams, who has created an entire home away from home complete with quilted flooring, oversize umbrella, roomy but creaky reclining chairs, food, cold drinks, extra blankets*" [15, 195]. The elderly artist associates home with freedom, setting her stuff on the beach in front of the endless watery space. It is another powerful and revolutionary gerontological marker in Howe's work. According to Hepworth, the identification of the elderly is "shaped by the location in which they are encountered" [14, 77]. The representation of the Adams on the beach subverts the stereotype of specific locations for the elderly (nursing homes or other enclosed premises).

One can detect the positive image of late adulthood in M. J.'s openness to her environment, although she is not yet ready to share her watercolor sketches with people around her. In terms of complexity of M. J.'s character it is significant to decipher her name. This anthroponym consisting of two letters is a kind of encoded sign to describe typical representative of her age, gender, or social status. As the beginner artist she

shows a tendency to overcome age stereotypes but not always succeeds. To sum up the poetics of elderliness in *Coastal Disturbances*, the ambivalent character of the amateur painter M. J. Adams establishes an active strategy of aging in drama. It is relevant to add a comment on Hamilton's behalf: although his character is far from arts, the septuagenarian retiree is a romantic model to follow. Loomis remarks, that "even if Hamilton Adams is sometimes a womanizer, his wedding anniversary picnic with his wife causes young Leo Hart (the character of younger generation in the comedy — A. G.), when he observes the old couple together, to leap up and run off, several states away, in order to find his own potential bride, Holly" [22, 76].

Tina Howe offers an interesting scope of plays dealing with dynamics of aging of elderly characters. Bigsby convinces, that Howe "<…> did stake out of a territory inhabited by no other playwright, constructing her drama out of a blend of the absurd and, whatever she may say, the realistic, out of comedy and an acute sensitivity to the pain as well as the joy of living" [4, 52]. In her comedies, Tina Howe studies and subverts stereotypes of aging through the construction of artistic characters who offer new opportunities for the elderly population. The dramatist's message echoes Sylvia Henneberg's idea that age and aging should be understood as "<…> a public responsibility that requires certain kinds of action and certain kinds of art" [19, 121].

To conclude, the dynamics of aging in the collection of plays by Tina Howe *Coastal Disturbances: Four Plays* is represented via the literary portrayals of the elderly characters. Art helps reveal diverse, individualized and ambivalent aged identities in *Museum*, *Painting Churches*, and *Coastal Disturbances*. Either contemplation of art (Mr. and Mrs. Moe) or involvement into artistic activities (Fanny and Gardner Churches; M. J. Adams) establish positive images of late adulthood in the discussed plays. The intergenerational relations (Mr. and Mrs. Moe / Zachery; Fanny and Gardner / Mags) build an ambivalent solidarity-conflict model between aging parents and adult child. The gerontological markers include elements of life review (memories), Thanatos-oriented discourse (Fanny Church), move to a new accommodation (*Painting Churches*); discussion of elderly suicide (Fanny Church), ageism and self-stereotyping (M. J. Adams). The involvement into artistic activities becomes a way to cope with aging in lives of the elderly characters. The present article deals a subject open for further development in the budding field of literary gerontology. The author considers analysis of Tina Howe' play *Pride's Crossing* to be a prospective direction in the age studies of drama.

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