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THE PORTRAIT OF THE OLD LADY IN ERIC COBLE'S *THE VELOCITY OF AUTUMN*

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This article examines the portrayal of the elderly lady in the play "The Velocity of Autumn" (2014). Content analysis of the play suggests that the author modeled a charismatic ambivalent character who overcomes the oppression of the cross-generational bond. The female protagonist of the male playwright subverts disempowerment stereotypically associated with aging. Yet the oppression still takes place in the form of the language: there is a great deal of ageist self-stereotyping in the language of the elderly character. In terms of the play's poetics the images of home and the tree in front of the window turn out as the projections of the character's elderly self.

Key words: *the elderly, octogenarian, self-stereotyping, military discourse, aging, disempowerment, loneliness.*

У статті досліджено форми репрезентації персонажу похилого віку у п'єсі «Швидкість осені» (2014). Здійснений аналіз демонструє моделювання драматургом образу харизматичної та амбівалентної 80-літньої пані, якій вдається подолати утиски міжпоколінних стосунків. Виявлено, що в тексті присутні форми опресії на лінгвістичному рівні — у самостереотипізації та ейджистських висловлюваннях головної героїні. Поетикальний вимір твору представлений образами будинку та дерева, які виступають проекціями ідентичності літнього персонажу.

Ключові слова: *похилий вік, самостереотипізація, військовий дискурс, старіння, самотність.*

В статье исследуются формы репрезентации персонажа пожилого возраста в пьесе «Скорость осени» (2014). Проведённый анализ демонстрирует моделирование драматургом образа харизматической и амбивалентной 80-летней дамы, которой удаётся преодолеть гнёт межпоколенческих отношений. Определено, что в тексте присутствуют формы опресии на языковом уровне — в самостереотипизации и эйджистских высказываниях главной героини. Поэтикальный аспект произведения представлен образами дома и дерева, которые выступают проекциями идентичности пожилого персонажа.

Ключевые слова: *пожилой возраст, самостереотипизация, военный дискурс, старение, одиночество.*

With the unprecedented increase of the elderly population in world demography of the 20th century the representations of late adulthood occur more and more frequently in fiction. In his "Stories of Ageing" the British sociologist Mike Hepworth observes that fictional representations of ageing "often reveal a wide gulf between public images and definitions of later life and the subjective experience of the individual" [5, 30]. Another British scholar Jeannette King discovers "the emergence in our cultural landscape of a fiercely independent and self-determining class of "third agers", strongly resistant to dominant narratives of aging-as-decline" [6, xii]. A recent development in the humanities, the age studies, advances in a number of new directions, with the literary gerontology among them. This budding interdisciplinary branch operates in the similar to feminism domain especially concerning the literary representations of female aging. The Austrian scholar Roberta Maierhofer (1999) argues:

<...> literary gerontology — not only when dealing with women and age — has much to learn from feminist criticism... The feminist concept that individual identity, both in literature and society, is culturally constructed and tied to race, class, and gender can be extended to the notion of age.

As feminist theory distinguishes between sex and gender, so should a distinction be made between chronological age and the cultural stereotypes associated with old people, which should help escape the confining binary opposition of young and old [7, 130].

Maierhofer's instrument of analysis is the feminist concept of the "resisting reader" suggesting that "readers who resist the imposition of traditional interpretation, question the overt meaning of the text, and challenge the codification of meaning and received opinions about specific texts, perform political acts that transcend the realm of literary studies" [ibid.]. In her "La Vieillesse" Simone de Beauvoir articulates: "the problem of old age is one of power" [1, 89]. Literary gerontologists explore inter alia forms of power or its lack in relation to subjective experience of aging dissecting fictional characters. The scholars in literary gerontology reveal and analyze ageist representations as stereotypes and look for the models of resistance and subversion which break the prescribed social roles. The US scholar Barbara Waxman claims that "literary critics are social critics <...> to foster social change regarding old age" [10, 2]. One of the pioneers in literary gerontology Kathleen Woodward writes that "... in the West our representations of old age reflect a dominant gerontophobia. Almost any text can confirm it" [11, 7]. The American scholar argues: "In our culture we are profoundly ambivalent, and primarily negative, about old age" [11, 8]. Therefore, the *relevance* of the present study is important in the context of the world-wide demographical crisis and discrimination of the elderly. The *goal* of my paper is to elaborate the male playwright's construction of female aging identity, namely the way the old lady portrayal is built. To complete the goal the following *tasks* are set: to identify the gerontological markers in the literary portrait of the protagonist; to detect her strategy of adaptation to the late adulthood; to single out the peculiarities of the language of aging.

The protagonist of *The Velocity of Autumn* is an 80-years-old Alexandra living on her own in Brooklyn, New York. The play is built according to the Aristotelian principles of dramatic unity: the action takes place in Alexandra's second-floor living room within an hour, the scene remains the same in the run of the play thus presenting a unifying whole. The plot is centered around the intention of the octogenarian Alexandra to put her flat on fire in case of being attacked either by her children, or police. Her intention is spurred by the fear of moving to a nursing home whereto her elder middle-aged son and daughter plan to place the old lady. In fact, the abovementioned characters do not appear onstage. Instead, the youngest son Chris clambers into Alexandra's apartment through the window using a large tree nearby as a ladder. Their encounter is the jumping-off ground for further action of the play. Living apart for twenty years, mother and son seem to misunderstand each other at the exposition yet they manage to come to terms in the denouement. Chris gets to listen to his elderly mother and hear what is significant to her persuading Alexandra to finish her siege and go together outside.

What comes to the front while reading the play is that the dramatist Eric Coble employs the military discourse in developing his subject line and the characters. The language the playwright uses is often metaphorical in terms of the concept "Argument is war". Alexandra's first response to the appearance of Chris through the window is negation. When Chris declares that he came to see her, Alexandra denies him: "No. No... no... no... You're not here. You're *not* here" [2, 6]. What follows next is the author's remark: "*She tries to get out of her chair — it's a battle — He's trying to get in the window — it's a battle*" [ibid.]. The concept of battle organizes the further action. Asking for help while hanging two stories above the ground Chris does not get a helping hand. À la guerre comme à la guerre! Alexandra steps away from the window saying: "Should have thought of that before you tried to break into an old lady's house" [ibid.]. This first reference to the literary portrait of the protagonist in the play is the strong gerontological marker of the text. Alexandra's next identification with a lady in the old-fashioned meaning of a woman who behaves in a way that is traditionally considered to be suitable for a woman is ageist and self-stereotyping. Addressing her son Alexandra mentions: "You shouldn't be spending [time] with some demented old lady" [2, 20]. Also she adds: "Some crazy old lady locked in her own house?" [2, 38]. In spite of the generally positive identification with the old lady, adjectives "demented" and "crazy" are examples of negative self-perception of the individual aging or self-stereotyping. According to the recent data presented by Spanish gerontologists, "... when young people are around older people they adjust their behaviors in ways that reflect age stereotypes, and thus, activate the age stereotypes in older individuals" [4, 128]. Next allusion to the lady status has rather striking negative connotation: Alexandra narrates her experience of feeling old for the first time. Interestingly enough her feeling is a mirror reflection of her grown-up children:

<...> it was a few years ago, when I saw how Jennifer and Michael started looking at me. Or how they treated me. They never said anything, but... I saw myself so clearly in their eyes... And this time I was fragile. I needed help. I needed protection. I was an old lady [2, 27].

This short fragment of life review in the form of reminiscence (with which the play abounds) emerges as an important gerontological marker shedding light upon the protagonist's identity. Even though "ageist stereotypes are often conveyed through spoken words" [3, 520], one can observe ageism practice performed via non-verbal interaction. One more self-reference to the image of lady completes the portrait of the protagonist for it visualizes her integrity —

"Everyone has to follow their own compass especially little old ladies" [2, 24]. The collectivity used by the character in the combination with diminutive form (*little old ladies*) displays the positive attitude to late adulthood and presupposes the further development taking into account the meaning of the whole sentence.

Alexandra continues to oppose her son's intrusion in both verbal and non-verbal ways: when Chris finally makes it to the room, his mother refuses to look at him. Rather her arguments are tuned in to combative manner: "Now go back the way you came in. I'm serious... I'll blow this whole house to kingdom come. I'm a dangerous woman" [ibid.]. Although her warning doesn't produce the desirable effect one can detect implicit rage and lack of power in her lines. Yet Alexandra positions herself as an authoritative person — she is serious, dangerous and can hurt. When Alexandra looks at her son for the first time she doesn't recognize Chris who grew old into "a skinny old raggedy man" [2, 7]. The old lady becomes aware of the strategy of her elder children — to send the youngest son with a purpose. Alexandra labels this plan "the sheer cruelty" yet pursues her goal of staying independent at her own house. The specter of the nursing home makes Alexandra look for any possible kind of defense. She argues: "I need to hold off an army! I have that kitchen knife set... I have one solid frying pan. But all of that's hand-to-hand, I can't move worth a damn anymore. I needed a distance weapon" [2, 8]. Thus Alexandra's major ammunition becomes film-developing fluid in jars and a lighter to keep her elder children at bay. She is sure that if she opens the front door there is an army of police outside to tackle her and haul her off in a straight-jacket. Alexandra equals the move to nursing home to a kind of imprisonment. Identifying the essential role of places and spaces for the elderly age Mike Hepworth claims that "To be out of place is to lay oneself open to possible criticism or even moral condemnation" [5, 78].

"The move from the private home to a residential 'home' or to hospital, often described in the gerontological literature as a stressful transition in the ageing process," argues Hepworth, "is also a prominent narrative turning point in stories of ageing" [5, 94]. In *The Velocity of Autumn* the threat of the move constitutes the dramatic tension of the intergenerational conflict. It lies in the reversal of parent / child paradigm. It is a common knowledge that parents believe that they know what is best for their children. The old age is stereotypically regarded as the second childhood and this is the reason for Alexandra's middle aged children (Chris included) to stick to this way of thinking. As the dialogue unfolds Chris suggests to his mother that she "... could sell this place and have enough to live in A-One nursing home for fifty years!" [2, 8]. Otherwise "That's tear gas, that's SWAT team, that's snipers on the roof across the street to shoot you in the head!" [2, 13]. In his play Eric Coble models aging as "a risk of loss of independence and institutionalization" [5, 94].

Obviously, Alexandra is in opposition to all her children whom she labels the Mongol Hordes, invaders, the tribe, again using the martial rhetoric. Since Chris doesn't believe that she is able to blow it all up, burn down the whole block and kill innocent people, Alexandra declares: "I'm a cornered animal, Christopher. I'll do whatever it takes" [2, 9]. The awareness of the disempowerment produces the outbreak of rebellion in the elderly lady which takes the literate form of Molotov cocktails. What is most painful for Alexandra is her awareness of the reversal of family roles. Although in the beginning of the action she ardently denies it (She says "I'm not their child. I'm not still growing" meaning her absent elder children) in the run of the play Alexandra has to admit that "the reversal is now complete": "... I am the child and they are the parents". The octogenarian lady points out that the reversal produces humiliation and further decline: "... the more they offered help, the older I became" [2, 27]. The scholars claim that "dependency can be regarded as the result of the actual interactions between older people and their social partners, frequently influenced by ageist stereotypes" [3, 517]. As a result "priming stereotypes of aging can have reliable influences on various aspects of older adults' functioning including cognition, behavior, and physiology" [3, 516]. So, Alexandra becomes aware of the pressure from her elder children side and resists the imposed models of dependency.

Chris ageist response that it is "<...> natural order of things <...> [and] It's been going on for centuries" [2, 25] produces a storm of emotions on behalf of his elderly mother. What is true to other people is not true to Coble's protagonist. The central character (who likes being alone) finds her rescue at her home: "I am ready to go and I want to go in my own house. I do not want to be put in a hospital. I do not want tubes and extraordinary measures, and I certainly don't want a living death that drags on and on for years. If you find me at the foot of the stairs some morning and I'm not dead already, put a blanket on me, tell me you love me, sit with me and tell me jokes if you want, even if I don't respond. But leave me there" [2, 27]. Alexandra is quite determined about her future: "I am not going to end up in some nursing home. I am NOT" [2, 32]. In her determination to die at home the old lady liberates herself from the family confines which are made more difficult with the shifts of traditional roles. Jeanette King remarks: "Since the old are perceived as children, moreover, they are not expected to want the independence of their own homes, but to want to go into 'homes', according to the myth that old people prefer to be together..." [6, 77]. The protagonist of *The Velocity of Autumn* is portrayed as myth-buster.

Also Alexandra subverts a stereotypical association of aging with loneliness which stands out as the conventional gerontological marker. After rearing three children she enjoys finally being on her own: "... it was like climbing out of a pit, fingers torn from the climb, blinking, blinded by what I used to take for granted — but Free at last, thank God Almighty, I was FREE at last" [2, 32]. In her examination of discourses of aging in fiction and feminism J. King elaborates the necessity for independence which has nothing to do with the inner sense of loneliness and exclusion: "Without freedom there is no way to find out who she is or could be. The self is a product of freedom. And without freedom she has no permission to love" [6, 87]. Alexandra wants to stay on good terms with her children, to spend time with her grandchildren, yet unless free she will not be able to do it.

Alexandra's pursuit of freedom is inextricably connected with her individual subjective experience of aging. The protagonist cannot get accustomed to the changes in her world:

My world. The Old People world. Every day another piece peels off and slides to the floor. Another friend dies. Another body part shrivels. A kid, or a, people on TV talk about things, made-up words and ideas like you should know them. It sounds like they're speaking English, but it's not your English; you think you are still living in your country, but it's not your country anymore. You're a foreigner. Your world is ending and every hour taps your back [2, 16].

In her study of the discontents of aging Kathleen Woodward detects the language negative connotations as for the aging body [11, 18]. The adjustment to aging is one of the tasks of the elderly people. In *The Velocity of Autumn* Alexandra states that her way of life has been constantly changing — "One of the many unpleasant surprises of my decaying body is that food doesn't have much taste anymore. It's all going gray in my mouth. I've gone a day without eating and not even noticed it" [2, 13]. Alexandra says, "In fact, I'm shrinking. I'm physically getting smaller..." [2, 14]. Being an artist she can't hold the brush anymore: "Any small gripping-thing, like a pencil, my knuckles and wrist just start aching" [2, 15]. Alexandra also complains about her back and knees. The abovementioned and other textual references to bodily dysfunctions may constitute the new genre of pathography, which designates "a form of auto-biography or biography that describes personal experience of illness, treatment, and sometime death" [9, 192]. Alexandra's pathography correlates with K. Woodward's argument, that "... our language about the aging body is so heavily charged with negative connotations that it is difficult to even express the matter in a neutral register. If we speak of the aging body in terms of the *weakening* of various functions of the body (hearing diminishes, eyesight dims, etc.), we are necessarily invoking the corresponding notion of strength, which is associated with youth and gathers all possible value to itself" [11, 18]. One of the solutions to the "polar opposites" problem highlighted by Woodward is suggested by R. Maierhofer's recommendation: "Only if we realize the inherent ambivalence of life and its representation in literary texts can we escape the dualistic mode that governs our thinking" [7, 130].

The culmination of the play is as tense and dramatic as prior mother / son dialogues. Chris takes his mother's side. After sharing common memories and understanding individual subjective experience of aging Chris becomes Alexandra's accomplice. During telephone talks with his siblings Chris quarrels with them and makes up his mind to realize his mother's intention. It is Alexandra who stops him because she finally has someone she wants to talk as adults, as equals. She has so much to say about her new period of life with new experiences. She confesses: "The whole world is a double-edged sword now...". [2, 37].

One of the few pleasures, I have to say, of growing old is that I can re-read some of my favorite mysteries and still have no idea who's going to do it. But look around. No stacks or newspapers or pets going unfed or filthy clothes piling up. I would posit that I'm keeping a better house than most college students, and nobody is threatening to lock them away! [2, 25].

Referring to the play's title *The Velocity of Autumn*, one should mention the poetic connotations which add one more direction to the debate on representations of aging. Symbolically Eric Coble uses traditional term "autumn" with etymological meaning of the passing of the year, not typical of US vocabulary, which popularize the word "fall". The transitional season from summer into winter, autumn is associated with richness, abundance, and beauty. It is the understanding of beauty in late adulthood that the play develops. As Woodward notes ageist fiction may imply that "old age and beauty are antithetical" [11, 15]. In *The Velocity of Autumn* Alexandra "wearing a nice outfit and jewelry as if she's going out soon" comments on that: "If I was going up in flames, I wanted to at least look my best. I want beauty. Wherever I end up — whoever I end up — I want the ugliness mixed with the beauty. Well-mixed" [2, 40]. Her desire of "some grace and beauty", "[a] little touch of grace" is reiterated in the run of the play. The protagonist brings forward the idea, that "there can still be beauty in the coming apart" [2, 39].

There are two more significant layers in terms of the play's poetics: the images of home and the tree in front of the window. Alexanrda's living room is filled with stuff which "hasn't been kept up, but it's not frightening" [2, 4]. The only change Chris detects in Alexandra's home (after 20 years of absence) is "several empty patches of wall where paintings clearly hung and are now missing" [2, 4]. As Alexandra experiences sometimes memory loss, looking at her own paintings and having no idea who had created

them, she takes them down in order not to feel that way ever again. Her choice demonstrates the resistance to aging markers and active position of the protagonist. It is metaphorically contemplated later on by the old lady artist: "What the world is taking away from me, what time is taking away from me, what *God* is taking away from me... is me! And that is one hell of a betrayal..." [2, 36]. However, Alexandra's home is her shelter, a fulcrum resisting physical shrinking of the body and as a result of lessening of the individual's "I"/ (Self).

On the other hand, the image of the tree with its final leaves becomes for the protagonist an animate object with which Alexandra forms relationship. Once the city wanted to chop down all sick and old trees the old lady saved the one in front of her window and other trees in the block. The character personifies the plant: "My tree was still healthy and strong and getting old, but doing just fine on its own..." [2, 29]. I argue that the tree is suggestive of Alexandra's alter ego. The plant symbolizes her conceptualization of old age. Both images of tree and home turn out the projections of the character's elderly self.

To conclude, the gerontological markers in the play are represented by life review monologues of the octogenarian Alexandra; the protagonist's need of loneliness, opposite of exclusion; the reversal of parent / child paradigm. Yet the old lady's vocabulary is ageist and self-stereotyping; the intergenerational conflict is reflected via military discourse. Alexandra's strategy of adaptation to her late adulthood is active — the old lady resists the disempowerment and copes with the memory loss. "Our image of the oldest old (eighties and older)," writes the expert in the human life span John W. Santrock, "is predominantly of being disabled and frail" [8, 496]. The portrayal of elderly lady in *The Velocity of Autumn* subverts this image; Alexandra's character is rich and ambivalent. The female octogenarian reveals the realm of aging body, analyzes her anxieties of aging, sheds light on dichotomy of old age / midlife and aging as postmaternal experience. Positive outcome of intergenerational interaction is befriending of mother and son. Through the lens of male representation Alexandra demonstrates her individual subjective velocity of aging.

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