

Instytut Kultury Regionalnej i Badań Literackich  
im. Franciszka Karpińskiego. Stowarzyszenie

# Inskrypcje

## Półrocznik

Czasopismo naukowe  
poświęcone literaturze i kulturze

R. VI, 2018, z. 1 (10)

[i] WN  
WYDAWNICTWO NAUKOWE IKR[i]BL

Siedlce 2018

## REPRESENTATION OF CHRONOTOPE IN DRAMA OF AGING (A CASE STUDY OF *CHASING MANET*)

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**Abstract.** Inspired by Chekhov's *Swan Song* the essay studies the topos of the nursing home in the context of literary gerontology. Tina Howe's depiction of the institutional care in *Chasing Manet* reflects ambivalent sides of the stereotypical perception of the space: the one of the suffocating hopeless prison and unexpectedly another one of encouraging home. On the basis of works by S. de Beauvoir, M. Hepworth, J. King and U. Kribernegg, the present study of nursing home in *Chasing Manet* identifies the fictional institution as the utopian model. The dramatic depiction of nursing home presupposes surreality. The archetypal literary criticism is used for interpretation of the culmination and denouement of the comedy.

**Keywords:** *Swan Song*, nursing home, late adulthood, aging, literary gerontology, Tina Howe.

In his dramatic vignette with the proverbial title *Swan Song* (1887), Chekhov reveals the 19<sup>th</sup> century's stereotypical attitude toward old age and aging. The one-act scene represents an elderly actor after his benefit performance (special night): on empty stage, Svetlovidov shares the predicaments of growing older with the only viewer, old theatre's prompter. In his late 60s, Svetlovidov is desperate both with physical decline (backaches, headaches, senile tremor) [Чехов 1986: 205-215] and moral aging: addressing the dark auditorium the actor describes the empty space in front of him as 'black, bottomless pit, like a grave, which hides the very death' [Чехов, *Лебединая песня*, 208]. At this time social changes (an extraordinary rise in population) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe led to the unprecedented descriptions of the aged characters in fiction though earlier silenced [S. de Beauvoir 1997: 216]. Unhappy with his career (dirty cues, drinking, motley coat) the protagonist states that he is old and misbehaves. In old age 'it is time to die... at the age of 68 people attend morning services, prepare for death' [Чехов, *Лебединая песня*, 208]. In his further lines, the elderly actor combines memories of his youth and middle age with famous quotes from Shakespeare's *King Lear*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*, Pushkin's *Godunov* and *Poltava*. In the culmination of *Swan Song*, Svetlovidov denies advancing years encouraged by his own acting skills: 'If there is art and talent, then there is neither old age, nor loneliness...' [Чехов, *Лебединая песня*, 214]. Yet his flush of hope abruptly ends – the denouement of the play is in tune with the stereotypical picture of late adulthood as a period of decline. The theatrical topos of stage, which becomes home for the protagonist and the prompter, embodies life itself. Innovative approach to representation of old age is Svetlovidov's

self-consolation (although temporarily) found in the years of experience which enlighten the autumn of his life. Chekhov's ambivalent representation of later years in the lines of Svetlovidov is an important step in changing attitude toward aging and old age in drama of fin de siècle. A century later, depiction of the elderly characters in drama makes aging positive. The essay considers Chekhov's *Swan Song* to be an impetus for the discussion of representation of late adulthood in modern drama.

In the beginning of the action in Tina Howe's *Chasing Manet* the octogenarian Catherine Sargent straightforwardly declares to her middle-aged son: 'Nursing homes are where you're taken to die...' [Howe, 2011: 12]. This categorical phrase is voiced by the permanent resident of the Mount Airy Nursing Home who is the protagonist of the play about aging surprisingly defined by its author as a comedy. The expert in the field of aging studies Ulla Kribernegg outlines nursing home narratives as 'fictional texts and films that are either set in nursing homes or deal with the complex array of problems and feelings associated with moving oneself or relatives into a caregiving institution'. (16) Exploring the intersection of issues of space and place and old age in Canadian fictional texts about assisted living Kribernegg analyzes literary representations of late adulthood from the perspective of literary gerontology. She articulates that 'at the onset of the 21st century, the nursing home seems be firmly established as a setting, and its residents have developed into central figures' [Kribernegg 2015].

Since the formation and development of the institution in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (there existed alongside each other almshouses and the earliest old age homes) the research of the subject started to enjoy close attention not long ago. Thus, in her study of old age in present-day society (the 1960s) S. de Beauvoir argues that in the USA 'there are greatly increasing numbers of nursing-homes, rest-homes, residences, villages and even town where elderly people who have the means are made to pay as much as possible for an often inadequate comfort and care' [S. de Beauvoir 1996: 219-220]. De Beauvoir draws parallels between public assistance in the UK and the USA: 'For a long while ... the infirm [seniors] were taken to the county institution that was simultaneously a hospital, lunatic asylum, orphanage and home for the old and sick. It was not thought that the aged who were incapable of work had any rights; they were looked upon as idlers, failures, rejects' [De Beauvoir: 243]. In spite of a dark and gendered view of aging de Beauvoir's fundamental work however profoundly explores housing in nursing homes, hospices and beyond, interdisciplinarily combining factual and fictional resources. Another valuable observation in terms of the nursing home history provided by Thomas R. Cole treats the legitimate development of the institution as a result of mediation of the language:

In England and America, the word *senile* itself was transformed in the nineteenth century from a general term signifying old age to a medical term for the inevitably debilitated condition of the aged. Physicians in the United States joined welfare workers and social scientists in constructing a vision of old age as a clinically distinct phase of life requiring special professional attention and care [Cole, 1992: 196].

In her analysis of the nursing home narratives Kribernegg discerns two narratives of institutional care in contemporary fiction: one of them is deeply enrooted into stereotypical 'historic depictions of nursing homes as dreadful places where the old are stored away and that disindividualise men and women linger on in our minds' [Kribernegg]. Another narrative is its opposite domain – 'a site of individual resistance, subversion, and agency' [Kribernegg]. Our essay examines the model of the nursing home in Tina Howe's comedy *Chasing Manet* in terms of the abovementioned account in order to complement the findings of the literary gerontology with the recent datum. I argue that Tina Howe's comedy *Chasing Manet* presents a story with positive glimpse on the impetus which nursing home site adds to the dynamic of aging. Via the means of stereotypical ambience of homeliness and alleged security (especially in relations of the elderly with younger generations) of the institution the play in question brings forth the feeling of imprisonment for the residents of the nursing home. It is the awareness of confinement that liberates the main characters from the nursing home custody. Thus one may interpret Tina Howe's demonstration of late adulthood stay in the institution as contradictory yet optimistic experience with nursing home serving as an animating force for the potential of growth of the elderly. I discuss the modification of traditional stereotypes of old age and its conventional locale in Howe's comedy. On the basis of historical outline of the nursing home establishment and its perception in Western culture the essay studies how invisibility, loneliness, humiliating association of the elderly residents with children, misery and horror are developed into late adulthood's potential by the playwright's imagery.

The range of academic sources primarily sheds pessimistic light upon the notion of nursing home (despite the initially unambiguous role of the institution): elaborating the discourse of invisibility in relation to elderly women J. King mentions the stereotypical attitude to the nursing home in British fiction of the 1960s: 'Old women are seen as frighteningly Other, as witches, crones, or – at their most benign – powerless, if gentle, grandmothers. They belong therefore in a "home", rather than in anyone else's home, since their presence even on the street is a reminder of decay and mortality best kept at a distance' [King 2013: 76]. Therefore the notion of the nursing home acquires the connotation of hosting the unwanted and invisible providing the springboard for ageist ideology. Before the coinage of the term (ageism) de Beauvoir debunks a number of ageist myths and stereotypes insisting that the most vulnerable (unfortunate) are lonely elderly, mostly women. The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century sees housing of older adults as a real challenge due to 'the disappearance of the family unit, the urbanization of society, and the wretchedly low incomes of the aged' [De Beauvoir, 246]. While de Beauvoir associates the problem of housing with that of loneliness, the French researcher notwithstanding mentions plans 'for protecting the aged physically and spiritually against discomfort and loneliness by building residences in which they would live in groups' [De Beauvoir, 250] and touches on the case in Saint Louis, the results of the experiment appear to be wretched.

In fiction the stereotypical view of construction of aged identity is detected by J. King, who also surveys a humiliating association of the elderly residents with the infants: ‘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’ [King, 77]. These findings are supported by the affirmation of Robert E. Burger, who points out the misleading beliefs about the place of the seniors in America:

Most Americans have accepted the assumption that the aged are better off by themselves. We seem to believe that their medical needs are different, and that they can be treated more efficiently as a group; that their interests and their sensibilities are protected when they are among others of their own age; and that they live longer, happier lives away from the pressures of the competitive, youthful world [Burger, 1977: 607].

While undermining the American ‘solution’ of institutional care (in the form of nursing homes, homes for the aged, rest homes, retirement villages) by exposing business interests of financial circles [Burger, 607], Burger reveals such side effects of the prolonged life expectancy as frustration, lack of meaning and self-sufficiency on the macro level as well as “enforced inactivity” and “disregard for the privacy of the patients” on the micro level [Burger, 612-613]. The writer even blames residential care authorities in elderly homicide: ‘By stripping the patient of his will to live – through daily sniping, snubs, and slurs – a nursing home can kill a man’ [Burger, 612-613].

Mentioned above considerations of nursing homes evoke feelings of misery and horror becoming symbols of failure and despair reflected in fiction, in American drama in particular. The action in *Chasing Manet* is set mainly in the fictitious Mount Airy Nursing Home in Riverdale, New York with its residents as central characters. The protagonist is legally blind Catherine Sargent, a prominent Bostonian painter in her 80s, whose only dream is to get out of what she calls the Mount Airy *Funeral Home*. Catherine’s dream comes to life after sharing her room with a newcomer of the same age – Rennie, wheelchair bound. In spite of being in early stages of dementia Rennie softens Catherine’s harsh temper, becomes her friend and assists in managing the escape from the home<sup>1</sup>. The denouement of the comedy displays two ladies aboard the upper deck of the ocean liner on their way to Paris.

The first scene opens in the protagonist’s room with the news of the death of Catherine’s ex-roommate while the very Catherine is shown lying with her face to the wall. Along these lines we see how the image of the home is reflected in the residents’ attitude: the home is narrated through the dramatis personae’ characteristics. Catherine Sargent occupies a ‘drab room, which is furnished with two beds, two dressers, two closets, four uncomfortable chairs’ [Howe, 9]. However the author remarks that ‘like everything else in the place, nothing is quite moored to the ground’ Howe, 9]. Howe suggests the surreal set of *Chasing Manet*: ‘There should be something dreamlike about Mount Airy, a transparency at the edges of the ceiling and walls so the rooms and hallways

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<sup>1</sup> The essay uses term *the home* in reference to the nursing home establishment.

drift into each other. One should have the feeling it could float away at any moment' Howe, 6]. Such a setting is indicative of Tina Howe's predilection for ephemeral and imaginary locales blended with tangible equipment in almost all her comedies. Yet in her analysis of the proverbial Beckettian novel *Malone Dies*, K. Woodward insists on surrealistic reading of nursing home life [Woodward 1991: 142]. Had one perceived it in realistic terms, the scholar speculates, 'it would seem scandalously cruel, a Kafkaesque vision of the debilitating sterility' [Woodward, 142]. The focus on the surreal ambience can, as T. Eagleton argues, like 'many modernist texts, such as those of Brecht and Beckett, remind us that what we are seeing might always have happened differently, or not happened at all' [Eagleton, 1996: 161]. Alluding to Ibsen and Strindberg's dramatic heritage the literary theoretician justifies the experimental mode which should push the audience beyond the familiar framework to 'a new critical awareness' [Eagleton, 161]. What encoded in *Chasing Manet* is the elderly potential toward progress rather than deterioration or dotage. Constructed in a linear chronological modus the subject line develops from 'overcast morning' [Howe, 9] in March and culminates with 'a blaze of sunlight' [Howe, 68] in May, with action taking place in spring months – symbols of hope and optimism, proving J. King's outcome that 'ageing simply means moving on to another stage in life which represents growth rather than decline' [King, 153].

All through the play the dramatist employs the single binary to represent two characters: Catherine identifies herself with a ruin and a broken down old crone whereas Rennie wears nice dresses with matching hats. The antithesis develops the archetypical pair of dualist twins, initially antagonistic relationship of whom is being mildly transformed into delicate sisterhood. This is also reflected in the description of Catherine and Rennie's shared accommodation: 'Catherine's side is as spare as ever, but Rennie's explodes with furniture and personal effects – scatter rugs, a chaise longue, an antique chest of drawers, standing lamps, fabulous bedding, mirrors, a blizzard of framed family photographs and a fancy white telephone' [Howe, 23]. Rennie is a fashionable dowager lovely dolled up, while Catherine enters the room as Oedipus with 'hair flying, fists in her wildly rouged eyes' [Howe, 20]. The reference to Oedipus is meaningful for *Chasing Manet*. The playwright challenges the destiny in the image of the legally blind female artist to prove that nothing is impossible. Put in the nursing home by her son Royal, Catherine manages to overcome the typical paradigm of the reversal, which often takes place in the intergenerational relationships: there is an important exchange of cues between the aged protagonist and her son who, after his visit, wants to get home as soon as possible.

ROYAL. I've got to get out of here!

CATHERINE. *You've* got to get out of here? ....

CATHERINE. What about *me*? This is where I live, thanks to you... and where I'll die! Give up the ghost! (*yelling after him*) DID YOU HEAR THAT? THIS IS WHERE I'LL MAKE MY EXIT, KICK THE BUCKET, BITE THE DUST, LEAVING YOU ALL SOUL ALONE! [Howe, 45]

De Beauvoir is convinced that interaction with the middle-aged often arouses insecurity and suspicion of the elderly, since they are 'acquainted with the double-dealing of the adult world' and 'this distrust is the figurative expression of the dependence in which [they] live' [De Beauvoir, 465]. The elderly distrust produces simultaneously the reverse response of the middle-agers as 'in the West our representations of old age reflect a dominant gerontophobia. Almost any text can confirm this' [Woodward, 7]. The protagonist of *Chasing Manet* succeeds in avoiding the power of 'a demeaning reversal of the parent-child dynamic' [King, 104]. The legally blind painter resists 'the infantilisation so often forced on to older people' [King, 105]. Whatever motherly feelings Catherine possesses toward her only son the octogenarian is determined to live her own independent life even at the cost of abandoning their not so strong family ties. As Hepworth notices, aging is 'a process of disengagement from others which is deliberately chosen by the individuals concerned rather than being imposed upon them by others' [Hepworth 2000: 89].

Rennie asks Catherine to get her out of the home. Catherine agrees yet comments that 'the blind leading the cripple' [Howe, 35]. As a result of their chance friendship Catherine changes: she's 'spread out on Rennie's chaise, wearing one of her shawls, her hair pulled in an elegant Gibson knot' [Howe, 37]. Not only does Catherine's appearance changes, but also her attitude to people around harmonizes. Hepworth considers home-making to be 'a process of physical and emotional effort, establishing and creating the self. Home-making is self-making' [Hepworth, 90]. Recognizing her loneliness ('My family has never taken me anywhere. Well, how could they? They're all dead') [Howe, 51], accepting the current circumstances and pursuing her goal of getting out, Catherine demonstrates an exceptional example of the identity growth in later life proving de Beauvoir's manifest -'change is the law of life' [De Beauvoir, 11]. Thanks to Rennie's atmosphere of domesticity Catherine could transgress her loneliness and accept her roommate's sisterhood.

Catherine and Rennie's escape from the nursing home becomes a 'declaration of independence' (to use Hepworth's metaphor) from the confines of the place 'where you're taken to die'. The dramatic climax and open denouement of the comedy once again subvert the notions of home, the home and family. Not only does Catherine disengage from Mount Airy and her son's alleged care, but also Rennie begins to understand that it is the hotel as she used to believe, thus symbolically healing herself from oblivion and memory loss. Neither frequent visits of her family members, nor parental attitude of the professionally trained staff help Rennie to recover. It is the interaction with her peers that lets Rennie comprehend the bitter truth of staying in nursing home. Appealing to her passed away husband reproaching the latter in abandoning her, Rennie repeats Catherine's statement: 'Nursing homes are where old people are taken to die! .... *Where did I go after you went away? Did I do something bad? Was I a bad girl? Did you put me in a nursing home because I was a bad girl?*' [Howe, 63].

The laments of the widow reveal her own hidden emotions which other characters fail to demonstrate because of either rage (Catherine) or dotage

(Henry, Iris). Rennie's monologue is significant for understanding collective settings for elderly represented in fiction. Her rhetorical questions addressed to the dead husband develop the notions of guilt, punishment, lack of love, imprisonment, exclusion, which are associated with the establishment of nursing homes and on the whole with old age. In spite of the opinion that home care, long-term care and hospice serve as forms of alleviation for the elderly '[l]ong-term home-based care is cheaper than nursing homes and is what people say they want' [Morganroth Gullette 2011: 27, 60]. Deprived of their own home, a couple of 'the blind leading the cripple' do not hesitate to get out and chase a new genuine home demonstrating the model of growth in their late adulthood.

The final act of the elderly subversion in Howe's play is putting the nursing home on fire. The arson is just a part of escape plan yet it can be read as a protest against the institution with Catherine becoming another Ancient Greek hero – Prometheus, a symbolical embodiment of both disobedience and knowledge.

CATHERINE: We're going to set a small fire on the premises.

RENNIE: *And burn the fucking place to the ground!*

CATHERINE: No, just set off the smoke alarm so we can slip out during the ensuing *mélée* [Howe, 63-64].

The dialogue exposes powerlessness and despair of later life in Rennie's rage and fire becomes the weapon of purification. In terms of the basic philosophy Bachelard considers fire one of the cornerstones of cosmological imagination: 'Les images du feu ont une action dynamique et l'imagination dynamique est bien un dynamisme du psychisme. Cette frange d'excès qui colore tant d'images littéraires nous dévoile une réalité psychologique qui nous aurons à mettre une lumière' [Bachelard 1998 : 38]. Thus the archetype of fire represents metaphorically characters' anger and fury. On the other hand, referring to Carl-Martin Edsman's *Ignis divinus* Bachelard envisages fire as a means of youth and immortality [Bachelard, 46], likening this devouring element with the image of Phoenix and therefore revival.

The nursing home becomes an exemplar of the crisis heterotopia, defined by M. Foucault, as 'privileged or sacred or forbidden place, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis' [Foucault, 1986: 24]. However the French philosopher argues that

... these heterotopias of crisis are disappearing today and are being replaced, I believe, by what we might call heterotopias of deviation: those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed. Cases of this are ... retirement homes that are, as it were, on the borderline between the heterotopia of crisis and the heterotopia of deviation since, after all, old age is a crisis, but is also a deviation since, in our society where leisure is the rule, idleness is a sort of deviation [Foucault, 25].

Foucauldian assertion propels to suggest the heterotopia of growth in case of the protagonist of *Chasing Manet*, since Catherine Sargent definitely

acts as an impressive and powerful person ‘with ribald sense of humor’. Her dominant and artistic personality is revealed through her son’s cue: ‘You never look before you leap. You just run to the top of the precipice, spread your arms and whoooosh – you are airborne... leaping into the void’ [Howe, 40]. This verbal portrait conveys the artist’s image at its best.

When Catherine runs away from the home she chooses Paris as her destination – once she left her family and ran off there. Going back to her memories and her past literally and metaphorically the character protects her identity and thus resists despair. Manet’s *The Luncheon on the Grass* always floating over Catherine’s bed in the home serves as an animating force of the play – the notion of home is being implicitly examined. There are minor yet fundamental references to the notion, which meaning stands for the place where you live, especially with your family: Catherine sings fragments of a classic western song ‘Home on the Range’, replacing *artichoke* with *antelope* and *discouraging* with *intelligent* thus producing the satirical effect on the much popular lyrics. Catherine subverts the notion of home as a place where seldom is heard a discouraging word, according to the classic song. Instead her home is ‘where seldom is heard an *intelligent* word’ [Howe, 33].

Similar to the exercise-book in Beckettian *Malone Dies*, in Howe’s comedy *The Luncheon on the Grass* becomes ‘both a tangible object and the container of that intangible system’ – art, under influence of which one sunny day Rennie would revise her intimate relationship with the deceased husband:

I did that once. Took off all my clothes outdoors. Just last week, as a matter of fact... Herschel and I were having a picnic at the lake... I was so hot, I thought I’d croak! A hundred and fifteen in the shade... So I stripped... Then Herschel stripped. You know men, they like to fool around... Well, who doesn’t? So there we were, stark naked, chasing each other in that delicious cool water... There’s like doing it under water... Whoooooee! Ohhh-hahhh! (*emitting a series of sexual grunts and groans*) [Howe, 47].

The moment of stripping clothes symbolizes freedom and power, of which the elderly are often deprived of. Lake and ocean as anti-fire elements constitute another powerful archetype embodying a sense of revival leading to a rite of passage. According to Bachelard’s metaphysics water images are extrapolated onto the reverie of death [Башляр, 1998: 19]. Associated with water and closer to water than any other cosmological elements death is implied in the surreal aura of the play. Howe enriches her comedy by introducing the Charon complex whose figure the dramatist splits into the image of the Captain – the greatest fan of Catherine Sargent’s paintings – and the elegant Steward being thoughtful of the passengers of the transatlantic liner. The rewriting of the traditional mythical ferryman of Hades from grim implication into positive coloring is another Howe’s peculiar marker of the aging process.

The escape to the ocean liner favors the outdoor matrix in the indoor/outdoor dichotomy of nursing home narrative. In case of Catherine and Rennie in Howe’s comedy the protagonists’ cruise aboard luxurious ship promises further growth and development of the characters. Ultimately the journey can be read as a rite of passage taking its roots in nationally celebrated allegoric

landscape by Thomas Cole *Old Age* (1842), the fourth painting in his series *The Voyage of Life*<sup>2</sup>. The characters undermine the seemingly homely ambience of the institutionalized home which symbolizes for them stifling imprisonment choosing instead readiness to embrace freedom as metaphorical representation of death. Similar to Chekhov's protagonist in *Swan Song* who finds some comfort of old age in his professional skills stirred up by the theatre's auditorium Catherine and Rennie find their animating force for coping with late adulthood in the nursing home.

In Tina Howe's consideration of the residential care establishment the peremptory association of nursing home with the deathbed gets a contentious connotation: either you empower and self-actualize or you decline and degrade. In *Chasing Manet* the nursing home model is represented in accordance with the goal of contemporary institution – to serve mainly as a transitional point and short-stay rehabilitation center for further continuation of life. The Mount Airy Nursing Home plays a catalyst role for Catherine and Rennie who establish an alternative stereotype of late adulthood in fiction. In Tina Howe's *Chasing Manet* the representation of the aging process provides certain positive psychological traits of later life and the notion of the nursing home acquires the connotation of the home of hope.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Thomas\\_Cole\\_-\\_The\\_Voyage\\_of\\_Life\\_Old\\_Age,\\_1842\\_\(National\\_Gallery\\_of\\_Art\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Thomas_Cole_-_The_Voyage_of_Life_Old_Age,_1842_(National_Gallery_of_Art).jpg)

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