

## DYSTOPIAN VISION OF 2052 IN HENLEY'S "SIGNATURE"

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Modern drama tends to catch up with the representation of the dystopian alternative worlds much like the contemporary mass culture. Sci-fi and dystopian productions become popular onstage because the medical and technological breakthroughs occur so rapidly in our present-day life that the humanity fails to reflect them properly. There are the following main features pertaining to science fiction in drama, namely dystopian play: fantastical concepts in tune with the modern scientific theory; the illusion of authenticity via scientific methodology; creation of a fictional world on the basis of the factors and tendencies of wide public importance. The aim of this article is to study the generic features of sci-fi subgenre of dystopia on the material of Henley's drama "Signature" (1990). The play written by the US woman dramatist introduces the world deprived of meaningful lives for its characters whose fake values drive them to grave consequences (death, loss of the beloved). This text for staging warns the audience about the devaluation of human life in favor of elusive success. Henley's 2052 Hollywood is a dystopic space for rather emotionless characters (the T-Thorp brothers, L-Tip, the Reader), who understand their failures and losses when it is too late. The only exception is William, selfless and unafraid of predicaments. The fundamental for the Western civilization phenomenon of love is distorted and disregarded in favor of immediate satisfaction and addiction to fame. Like her predecessors in sci-fi Henley predicts a mass human alienation in not so distant future. Yet the open end of Boswell's story somewhat decreases the horror of dystopia — there is a remote chance that after anagnorisis the protagonist will find his beloved and make peace with her even though for a very short time. Henley's dystopia constructs the ambivalent vision of the future, charged with questions of cryonics, cloning, global digitalization, omnipresent euthanasia, environmentalism and feminism.

**Key words:** dystopia, drama, signature, Beth Henley, 2052, sci-fi.

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### Жанрові особливості дистопії в драмі: 2052 рік очима Бет Хенлі

Подібно до творів сучасної масової літератури сучасна драма не стоїть осторонь від репрезентації дистопічних альтернативних світів. Науково-фантастичні та антиутопічні постановки набувають популярності на сцені, тому що медичні та технологічні прориви відбуваються так швидко в нашому сучасному житті, що людство не встигає усвідомити їх належним чином. Основні риси наукової фантастики в драматургії, а саме дистопії — наступні: фантастичні концепції, співзвучні сучасній науковій теорії; ілюзія автентичності за допомогою наукової методології; створення вигаданого світу на основі таких чинників і тенденцій, які мають широке суспільне значення. Метою даної статті є дослідження особливостей жанрового різновиду наукової фантастики дистопії на матеріалі драми Хенлі «Підпис» (1990). П'єса американської жінки-драматурга представляє світ, позбавлений значущого життя для своїх героїв, чий фальшивий цінності доводять їх до тяжких наслідків (смерть, втрата коханого). Цей текст для постановки попереджає глядачів про знецінення людського життя на користь невловимого успіху. Голлівуд Хенлі у 2052 році — це дистопічний простір персонажів (брати Т-Торп, Л-Тіп, Графолод), які втратити здатність відчувати людські емоції та які розуміють свої невдачі й втрати, коли вже занадто пізно. Виняток становить лише жіночий персонаж з чоловічим ім'ям Вільям — безкорислива і не боїться труднощів. Фундаментальний для західної цивілізації феномен кохання спотворюється та ігнорується на користь миттєвого задоволення та пристрасті до слави. Як і інші письменники-фантасти, Хенлі пророкує масове відчуження людини в досить близькому до нас майбутньому. І все ж відкритий фінал в житті протагоніста дещо знижує жах дистопії — ймовірно, що

після усвідомлення своїх помилок Босвелл знайде свою кохану і помириться з нею, хоча й на дуже короткий час. Драма Хенлі створює амбівалентне бачення майбутнього, пов'язане з питаннями кріоніки, клонування, глобальної цифровізації, всюдисущої евтаназії, захисту навколишнього середовища та фемінізму.

**Ключові слова:** дистопія, драма, підпис, Бет Хенлі, 2052, наукова фантастика.

«We live in a dystopia now.»  
Dawn King, playwright (2015)

**Introduction.** Written three decades ago “Signature” (Henley’s play of 1990) tackles issues relevant to the conditions of the future represented later by the popular show “The Black Mirror” in its standalone episode “Fifteen Million Merits” (2011). Henley’s play has several microthemes, one of which is indicative of present-day cultural obsession with talk shows and reality television broadcast in every possible format. Modern drama (“Exstasy Rave” by Constanze Dennig, “Die Damen warten” by Sibille Berg, “Suicide of Loneliness” by Neda Nezhdana, “The Charmed Monsters” by Sergiy Schuchenko, “House for Demolition” by Alexey Slapovskiy) often relies upon the structure of these televised genres because they build on dialogical architecture, too. The screenwriters and playwrights, Henley included, warn us about the media manipulation and psychological violence.

One of the most popular US women dramatists, Beth Henley is known as the author of “Crimes of the Heart” (the Pulitzer Prize, 1981), one of Broadway’s favorite plays. In the 1980s, Henley would write dramas inherent of the Southern literary tradition, developing a style of her own. Much like her peers Henley elaborated mother-daughter relationships, the bonds of blood and mental sisterhood, pathological perversions and violence in the network of characters in her early texts for staging. Built in rather conventional structures the dramas of the eighties are scrupulously studied by an array of scholars (S. Wimmer-Moul, S. Watson, L. Porter, J. Karpinski, J. Gapton, J. Guerra, J. Hagen, N. Vysotska, A. Gaidash). Yet the following decade challenges Henley’s fans: her plays (“Signature” (1990), “Control Freaks” (1993), “Revelers” (1994), “L-play” (1996)) adopt more experimental and innovative forms and address the themes beyond the scope of the canonical family drama of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century American theatre. “Signature” represents the alternative future of American societal values prioritizing male characters as opposed to Henley’s early works.

Although different academics produce in-depth readings of Henley’s early plays, “Signature” is thoroughly examined by three scholars. Miriam Chirico studies the drama from the standpoint of grotesque. Convinced that “[t]he grotesque is a force that coexists with human existence” (Chirico, 2002, p. 19) Chirico proves that this force becomes “the very fabric” of Henley characters’ world.

The scholar detects the dramatist’s two-level use of the grotesque (as both content and form) to subvert the “*belief system of southern gentility and beauty*” (ibid.), which is a common background in a number of Henley’s plays.

Applying a psychoanalytical approach to the reading of Henley’s text Plunca claims that in the imagined 2052 “*libidinal desires for human happiness*” are diminished (Plunca, 2005, p. 149), thus “Signature” “*presents a microcosm of a society that is directly responsible for human misery*”, namely confirming “*to the notion of image and celebrity*” (Plunca, 2005, p. 137). The scholar infers that “Signature” “*demonstrates the Freudian notion that the modern neurosis leads to impaired social development, including an inability to work or love*” (p. 148).

In her study of the network of dramatic personae of “Signature” Gaidash applies a close reading accentuating the playwright’s shift towards the centrality of male characters as opposed to Henley’s earlier dramas (Gaidash, 2007). At the same time the scholar considers the verbal aspect of the play detecting the wide use of the abbreviations, neologisms, buzzwords and weasel words of the future English that adds a touch of absurdity to the dystopia (Gaidash, 2007, p. 23).

The theatrical reviews are diverse in their appreciation of the play’s productions: Klein regards its 1996 staging as “*an exploration of caring*” and detects in it “*lovely, aware subtext*” (Klein, 1996). The (failed) revival of 2000 produced by “Actors’ Gang Theatre” is explained by the inconsistency of dramatic vision and the impoverished language of the characters (Lohrey, 2000). Yet this critical response leads us to suggest that language poverty in the play is a deliberate dramatist’s strategy to employ in dystopia. In his review, Oxman determines the production as “*Henley’s absurdist sensibilities*” against the play’s apocalyptic background (Oxman, 2000).

The academic interest in the play written thirty years ago is spurred by the contemporary mass culture trends to describe the dystopian alternative world, particularly in popular streaming shows. One of such representations is found in “Fifteen Million Merits”, the episode of the British television anthology created by Charlie Brooker, which seems to grow in worldwide popularity with time. Less known Henley’s drama enjoyed however several professional (1995 and 2000) and amateur revivals since its first

production in 1990. Intended to be performed both “Signature” and “Fifteen Million Merits” operate in the domain of entertainment forecasting quite grim future, not so distant though. The texts introduce the worlds deprived of meaningful lives for their characters. Both pieces study fake values that drive their protagonists to grave consequences in terms of sci-fi genre conventions.

The **aim** of this study is to study the generic features of sci-fi subgenre of dystopia on the material of Henley’s text for stage warning about the devaluation of human life in favor of elusive success. Henley’s play is a case of “satiric science fiction” (Weinert-Kendt, 2012), and the dramatist herself becomes a realist visionary of a *broken* world. For achieving this aim the following **tasks** are set: 1) outline modern sci-fi drama, particularly dystopian drama; 2) single out the main features relating to science fiction, namely pertaining to dystopian drama; 3) read closely Henley’s play; 4) detect the dystopian features of the drama in question.

**Theoretical Background.** There are numerous theatrical adaptations of classical science fiction, authored by Mary Shelley (“Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus”), Jules Verne (“Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea”), Herbert George Wells (“The Invisible Man”), Robert Louis Stevenson (“The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde”) in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Dystopian novels are popular onstage because our present-day life seems to embody the visions of sci-fi writers as the epigraph to this article argues. The author of the epigraph’s quote, Dawn King, explains it in detail: “*We’re walking round with these tiny computers in our pockets: your government probably knows everything about you <...> We live in the future and the future’s kind of failed us*” (Williams, 2015). The scholar of science fiction argues *inter alia* that biopunk authors represent modern reality as already apocalyptic predicting no other possible alternative but total reconsideration of contemporary way of living (Schmeink, 2014).

Apart from the dystopian novels’ adaptations and few authentic sci-fi plays (i.e., “R.U.R.”, “Věc Makropulos” and “Bílá nemoc” by Karel Čapek), there are modern playwrights addressing the fantastic dimensions: Caryl Churchill (“Far Away”, “A Number”), Mark Ravenhill (“The Cut”), Eric Coble (“Ghosts in the Machine”), Tom Arvetis (“Spark”), Stephen Gregg (“Crush”), Michael Druce (“All’s Well in Roswell (Isn’t It?)”, “Sherlock Holmes and the Portal of Time”), Richard Bellamy (“Apocalypse”). Finally, in the Internet Science Fiction Theatre Database the dystopian dramas of the new millennium are not exceptions: M. McDonagh, Ph. Ridley, L. Kirkwood, S. Smith and P. Skinner are deeply concerned with the vision of humankind in the future (Callow, 2017).

Billington explains the rare employment of dystopian drama on modern stage, “*possibly*

*because the form has echoes of science fiction, and theatre’s strength lies less in futuristic visions than fidelity to the here and now*” (2014). This feature of “the here and now” immanent to the theatre is the powerful instrument of sci-fi drama. As Pressley argues, “*<...> the more potent choice often is to keep it pretty real, even when a script is set in a disturbing dystopia, a virtual reality or inside a speculative view of decades to come*” (2016).

Lunin brings seven basic features pertaining to the SF genre forward (Лунін, 2021). His encompassing list allows us to single out three such features indicative of Henley’s drama. They are: 1) a fantastical concept in tune with the modern scientific theory; 2) creating the illusion of authenticity using scientific methodology; 3) creation of a fictional world on the basis of such factors and tendencies of wide public importance as save-ecology movement, feminism, or others (ibid.). We will consider them in the context of Henley’s play which Jim McGrath, the 1996 director of the production by “Passage Theatre Company”, describes in terms of dystopia: “*The characters of Signature live in the future at a time when the forces of death would seem to have won. Many citizens die young from an omnipresent plague. The government has conquered individual liberty and severely hampered free will. Addictions abound, the strongest being to the Warhol fifteen minutes. The Springer cult has turned every breakup of every personal relationship into a televised event. A tar-like substance is eating the environment alive. Every man is a Job, every woman is a Joan of Arc. In such a world, hearts have reasons to be heavy*” (Henley, 2000, p. viii).

**Methods.** New criticism (with its close focus on the very text rather than on authorial dominance), structuralism (attending to fiction as social practice), and hermeneutic analysis (which helps establish alive communication between past, present and future, in Eagleton’s words) are employed to study in-depth the salient dystopian elements in the text for staging.

**Results and Discussion.** The subject line of “Signature” focuses on the elder of two T-Thorp brothers, middle-aged Boswell, once an art philosopher and developer of the Box Theory. The fact of his incurable disease propels Boswell into despair: relying upon the prophecy of a weird graphologist, he concentrates his efforts on changing his handwriting, signature and way of living making one mistake after another. Maxwell (Max), his 30-year old sibling, gets so unhappy after the divorce with his wife that applies for euthanasia because of heartbreak becoming thus the transient (the Warhol fifteen minutes) celebrity.

The inciting incident occurs when Boswell comes across a woman graphologist (Reader) who encourages the ill philosopher to change his handwriting in order to save his own life. After a thorough analysis of the protagonist’s signature the Reader infers: “*Your heart. It has shrunk and turned brown. You have a raisin for a heart. And your life. Your life is*

like an empty cereal box infested with microscopic bugs” (Henley, 2000, p. 82). Her rather lengthy monologue is desolate — after Boswell’s death, no one will ever mention the philosopher. For this episode it is important to refer to Henley’s true life experience which inspired the dramatist to write this play: coming across graphologist on the street Henley paid the fee and wrote a couple of sentences which the expert in handwriting correlated with pettiness, selfishness and lack of talent in the writer. Henley’s response (“*I went away consumed with grief. Later I pondered why and how I had so eagerly given over my power, had paid ten dollars to give over to some stranger who would interpret my signature. My essence. My mark on the world*” (Henley, 2000, p. viii)) was to write “Signature”. Also the edifying moment lies in introducing of the character of charlatan in popular mass culture, as we can see on the example of Pina, the fortune teller, in the much-talked-of *House of Gucci* (2021).

In the run of the drama the protagonist desperately endeavors to change his handwriting. Boswell genuinely believes in the words of the Reader and follows all her advice in spite of their absurdity: for example, write the word pickle ten thousand times in small, precise letters using green ink. The philosopher draws a huge poster “Death and a Jar of Pickles” as his symbolic signature; yet the future Hollywood doesn’t appreciate his idea (“*I wanted them to understand my pickles. Their thoughts, their feeling, their predicament. What it was like for them to inside that jar*” (Henley, 2000, p. 104)). People throw things at the poster because they believe Boswell makes fun of their food system. Thus, Boswell is unable to grasp the central message of the Reader: the protagonist learns the outside world, undergoes certain (external) changes, but remains inside the same empty box as before (just like his Boxdom or the Box Theory). On the advice of the mad graphologist, Boswell betrays both his own feelings and the hopes of William, the sympathetic young woman he was about to marry.

Although Henley builds the main character of the “Signature” as an “*awful*”, “*really conceited*” (Dellasega, 1996, p. 257), he appears to be somewhat human in that he allows the stranger to manipulate his life. The writer argues that her play studies “*what is your signature, what do you leave in life, what’s important that you’ve done or haven’t done — or is anything important?*” (Wimmer-Moul, 1995, p. 108). Signature becomes more than just one’s autograph; it acquires symbolic meaning of life’s significance.

The plot is further developed in the context of such a dystopian aspect in “Signature” as the Euthanasia Hotline. With its help Henley implements the effect that her play should produce: “*strange, chaotically horrifying, deathly beautiful, sadly silly world*” (Henley, 2000, p. 58). In love with his wife for 14 years, Max turns a blind eye to the fact that L-Tip is seeking

a career. Unemployed, homeless, divorced, neglected by his brother, Max turns to the Euthanasia Hotline because of a “broken heart”. The further existence of the younger T-Thorp changes dramatically — his poems are published, popular television programs invite him, because he is the very first person to be euthed for love: “*I’ll be remembered as the most romantic figure of the twenty-first century. I’ll make history*” (Henley, 2000, p. 85), states Max. At the Celeb Bites’ (the futuristic talk show) his ex-wife L-Tip interviews him doubting the character’s true intentions. Max considers love the greatest secret of life yet unable to define the genuine emotion. He is not “*one of [your] twenty-first century use and cruisers who disposes of love like it was last meal’s fuel frock*” (Henley, 2000, p. 95). Yet his enthusiasm is subsided — in her appeal to the audience L-Tip tells about Maxwell’s attitude to her own self in the third person: “*You never even treated your wife that well <...> I’ve done my research. You pogoed around. You always pogoed around. You forgot her birthday eleven times. You ignored her at parties. You complained about the meals she clicked. They tore the arms off her Chee Chee Kitty*” (ibid.). The interview turns into mutual accusations of former spouses that is the evidence of the playwright’s perhaps prophetic fear of the lack of caring in the future. At the same time the additional subject line with Max and his wife reveals feminist reflections of the author in the importance of woman’s career, transparent relations and respect in the family.

The musings on love become crucial in the dialogues of the male characters in “Signature” — in the exposition scene, Boswell instructs his younger brother: “*Love is cheaper than free. It grows all over your feet like yellow fungus in tent town. It drops like acid rain from the sky. Just go outside and open your mouth. Let it fall down your throat and let it burn your insides <...> it’s nothing more than an archaic form of egotism. A tawdry reflection of all the holes in your own shredded soul. Be a human being. Forget about love*” (Henley, 2000, p. 60). Boswell’s attempts to overcome the deadly disease are futile because the protagonist has no faith in the warmth of human feelings: he does not remember how many children he has and refuses to see them; invites William to marry him only with the hope that marriage will help him recover. But when the Reader convinces the philosopher that he chose the wrong woman, Boswell immediately breaks off his relationship with William, explaining: “*Love is a mendacious myth. Everyone is just an egg. A slimy yolk in their own shell. Smash two eggs together, what happens? They break. The result is two chickens are killed <...>*” (Henley, 2000, 101). The philosopher’s bitter reflections on the metaphysical issues in “Signature” achieve the “*view of oblivious soullessness in 2052*” (Klein, 1996). The latter also include Boswell’s reflections on human existence which define his being as “*a miserable life in a filth-ridden world*”. His lines

build bleak if not absurd pictures: “*You sit a legless dancer at a harp with no strings*” (Henley, 2000, 71). The T-Thorp brothers hope that in death they find oblivion, peace, silence, loneliness, the lack of emotions (Henley, 2000, 72; 95). After all, they achieve their goal: Maxwell’s body is capsulized in the Eutanasia Gardens; Boswell meets Reader after her brain fiber treatment. She recognizes no one and confesses that before the treatment she was mentally handicapped. In the final glimpse of drama, the protagonist moves forward in despair to find his beloved William.

Dystopian vision of the future in Henley’s play builds on the following features: 1) fantastical concepts in tune with the modern scientific theories of cryonics and human cloning. William’s infants are kept on ice in a Frozen Dorm until the character earns enough K (money in the future) to thaw them. Desperate for a child L-Tip gets one: “She’s the newest thing <...> Her natural life span is only three years <...> She’ll be adorable all her life. And I won’t have to worry about those awkward years. Not to mention the high cost of education <...> I don’t have time for a full-term child” (Henley, 2000, p. 106). Also the playwright 2) creates the illusion of authenticity referring to (pseudo)scientific devices and technologies as video divorce (which echoes present-day global digitalization), application for euthanasia over an interactive television (in Oxman’s words), use of micro-meal machine the prototype of which is Star Trek food replicator, clothes decorated with food and drug vials, super-safe-sex kits, soul sedatives, pain executioners, obituaries of people who are not yet dead (the Up and Coming Obits), portable TVP and TVP remote, new ultra surgery getting the face fixed into a permanent smile, shared housing (Boswell, William and C-Boy). As Pressley aptly notes, “<...> futuristic stories have been around forever, even if sci-fi has never been one of the theater’s top genres. What’s changed is the omnipresence of technology in everyday life” (Pressley, 2016). Finally, 3) Henley creates her fictional future world involving

ecology considerations (William as a representative of Splat Out crew fighting the ooze that is eating the environment), and lobbying women’s rights in yet patriarchal society.

**Conclusions.** Modern drama tends to catch up with the representation of the dystopian alternative worlds much like the contemporary mass culture. Sci-fi and dystopian productions become popular onstage because the medical and technological breakthroughs occur so rapidly in our present-day life that the humanity fails to reflect them properly. There are the following main features pertaining to science fiction in drama, namely dystopian play: fantastical concepts in tune with the modern scientific theory; the illusion of authenticity via scientific methodology; creation of a fictional world on the basis of such factors and tendencies of wide public importance.

“Signature” by Beth Henley (1990) introduces the world deprived of meaningful lives for its characters whose fake values drive them to grave consequences (death, loss of the beloved). This text for staging warns the audience about the devaluation of human life in favor of elusive success. Henley’s 2052 Hollywood is a dystopic space for rather emotionless characters (the T-Thorp brothers, L-Tip, the Reader), who understand their failures and losses when it is too late. The only exception is William, selfless and unafraid of predicaments. The fundamental for the Western civilization phenomenon of love is distorted and disregarded in favor of immediate satisfaction and addiction to fame. Like her predecessors in sci-fi Henley predicts a mass human alienation in not so distant future. Yet the open end of Boswell’s story somewhat decreases the horror of dystopia — there is a remote chance that after anagnorisis the protagonist will find his beloved and make peace with her even though for a very short time. Henley’s dystopia constructs the ambivalent vision of the future, charged with questions of cryonics, cloning, global digitalization, omnipresent euthanasia, environmentalism and feminism.

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