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REPRESENTATION OF THE ELDERLY PROTAGONIST IN TRACY LETTS' AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY

A. Gaidash,

Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University
18/2 Bulvarno-Kudriavska St,
Kyiv, Ukraine, 04053
a.haidash@kubg.edu.ua

This article examines the literary portrayal of the female sexagenarian in the Pulitzer-Prize winning play. The gerontological portrait of the elderly is analyzed in the context of "the young old" adults. The theoretical background of the article is formed from an array of humanities-related disciplines: in particular, sociology, literary gerontology, medical humanities. The author of the article studies how the notion of normativity in late adulthood is represented in August: Osage County. The playwright subverts the concepts of successful and healthy aging in the images of Violet and Beverly Westons: Violet is a heavy smoker; Beverly is a heavy drinker. The issue of ableism allows us to detect the element of a new genre of pathography, a battle, which is indicative of the gerontological portrayal of the elderly protagonist. In his drama, Tracy Letts develops active and passive strategies of aging, which his elderly characters choose to cope with their disabilities in late adulthood.

Key words: literary gerontology, aging, elderly, dysfunctions, sexagenarians, gerontological markers, strategies of aging, pathography.

Гайдаш А.В.

Особливості геронтопортрета протагоніста у п'єсі Трейсі Леттса «Серпень: округ Осейдж»

У статті вивчається художня репрезентація геронтогенезу на прикладі головної героїні п'єси, яка отримала Пулітцерівську премію у 2008 р. Геронтологічний портрет протагоністки аналізується в контексті фази ранньостаречого віку. Теоретичні основи даної розвідки побудовані на розробках соціології, літературної геронтології, медичних гуманітарних наук тощо. Припускається, що автор твору «Серпень: округ Осейдж» піддає критиці поняття нормативності у пізньому дорослому віці. Драма підриває поняття успішного і здорового старіння (популярного у США), розкриваючи образи подружжя Вестонів, один з членів якого є завзятим курцем, а другий — гірким п'яницею. Дисфункції персонажів дозволяють виявити наявність такого елемента жанру «патології» (опис хвороби), як битва, характерного для геронтопортрета протагоністки. У драмі Т. Леттса представлені активні та пасивні стратегії старіння, які є вирішальними для адаптації персонажів до пізнього дорослого віку.

Ключові слова: літературна геронтологія, старіння, літні люди, дисфункції, ранньостаречий вік, геронтологічні маркери, стратегії старіння, патологія.

Гайдаш А.В.

Особенности геронтопортрета протагониста в пьесе Трейси Леттса «Август: графство Осейдж»

В статье изучаются особенности репрезентации старости на примере «молодой пожилой» героини пьесы, которая получила Пулитцеровскую премию в 2008 году. Геронтологический пор-

треть протагонистки анализируется в контексте персонажей старшей возрастной группы. Теоретические основы данной разведки заимствованы из разработок социологии, литературной геронтологии, медицинских гуманитарных наук. Очевидно, что автор произведения «Август: графство Осейдж» критично относится к понятию нормативности в позднем взрослом возрасте. Драма подрывает понятие успешного и здорового старения (популяризированного в США), раскрывая образы супружеской пары Уэстон, один из членов которой является заядлым курильщиком, дугой — предстаёт безнадёжным пьяницей. Дисфункции персонажей позволяют выявить наличие такого элемента жанра «патологии» (описание болезни), как борьба, характерного для геронтопортрета протагонистки. В драме Т. Леттса представлены активные и пассивные стратегии старения, которые являются решающими при адаптации персонажей к старости.

Ключевые слова: литературная геронтология, старение, пожилые люди, дисфункции, «молодой пожилой» возраст, геронтологические маркеры, стратегии старения, патология.

Not only is Tracy Letts' black comedy *August: Osage County* (winner of the 2008 Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award) popular across the USA but it is also in demand in Europe and East Asia (the play was adapted and staged in Taiwanese Greenray Theatre). 2013 film version of the play with an all-star cast (Meryl Streep, Julia Roberts, Benedict Cumberbatch, to name just a few) spurred forward the popularity of *August: Osage County* across the world. Professor G. Kovalenko claims that there are three Russian translations of the play proving relevance of the text for theatrical productions [4, 177]. Since February 2017 Ukrainian theater-goers have enjoyed the performance of the internationally acclaimed play in Ukrainian (modified to a certain extent) in Molodyi theatre in Kyiv. Although critical readings of Letts' text focus largely on the issues of identity, American family models, cultural and historical context of the drama [1; 2; 4; 5], yet the representation of late adulthood in *August: Osage County* is understudied.

In order to study gerontological portrait of the elderly protagonist in the Pulitzer-prize winning drama the following theoretical insights are considered: the problem of normativity in aging and old age discussed by H. O'Rourke and C. Ceci [14]; the corporeal norms in aging examined by A. Moore and P. Reynolds [13]; the systems of ableism and ageism explained by C. Overall [15]; the development of the new subgenre of "pathography" in medical humanities formulated by Anne Hawkins [18]; the social study of aging with disabilities worked out by G. Zarb [20]. The mentioned above works are instrumental in understanding the representations of late adulthood in drama in the framework of the author's larger project on dynamics of aging in the US theatre [3; 6]. Relying upon the interdisciplinary nature of literary gerontology the methods of analysis involve a set of strategies including sociological tools.

In the three-generation family (13 characters crowd the stage) in *August: Osage County* the matriarch Violet Weston plays the leading role. Together with her husband Beverly Weston and her brother-in-law, Charlie Aiken, Violet forms

the group of sexagenarians in the play. Here may also belong Violet's younger sister, Mattie Fae Aiken, in her late fifties. To use M. Hepworth's term the four characters are "aging into old age" [10, 2] or late adulthood. In terms of the life-span developmental perspective Violet and her husband as well as Mattie Fae with her spouse group the company of the "young old" (65–74 years of age) [17, 485]. In the analysis of the gerontological portrayal of the protagonist, Violet Weston, the representations of late adulthood of minor characters are also taken into account. In the senior group of four members of one family Tracy Letts seems to question the notion of normal aging, namely the principles of the concept of successful aging implemented in the US society in the second half of the 20th century — "health and maintenance of physical and mental health, and the avoidance of disability" [19, 95]. Violet Weston is a chain smoker and her husband Beverly is a confirmed alcoholic. In his drama, Tracy Letts develops two different strategies, which his elderly characters choose to cope with their disabilities in late adulthood. The following approaches on growing old and advancing years taken from the disciplines of literary gerontology and medical humanities demonstrate the process of aging as complicated individual experience.

The recent public expectations of late adulthood are compiled in the concept of successful aging: "it is more about how an older adult *should* age rather than how individuals actually age" [14, 57]. The experts specify that "this successful ageing discourse, similar to the healthy ageing discourse, results in an individual duty to age well" [ibid.]. The definition stirs the issue of the correlation of the normal and the abnormal. "Statistics, for example, suggest that 80 % of seniors who live at home 'suffer from a chronic condition'. If the majority of seniors who reside in community live with chronic disease... then normal ageing is ageing with a chronic disease" in terms of biological norms [14, 53]. In biology, "Normal is not defined only by the average. It is understood that there will be some natural variation around this average and that it is the values that encapsulate 68.26 %

of the population that are considered normal. However, there are individuals who fall outside of this normal range who do not actually experience any pathological effect” [14, 52]. This is a critical point for subversion of ageist stereotypes. “In contrast, social norms are selected by members of a society... they are created” [ibid.]. O’Rourke and Ceci sum it up: “Western discourse on ageing is strongly shaped by social norms rather than biological norms” [14, 58].

In their discussion of an erotics of aging sexual body, Allison Moore and Paul Reynolds discern the background of the Western bodily norm in the Vitruvian model. They prove that “what does not meet that normative cast is the nonsexual or the fetishised, the exception that amuses or repels” [13, 90]. To redirect the existing normative articulations of age the scholars suggest “a struggle against a materiality that provides determinant points at strategies must be rethought and refreshed, not just against changing discursive pathologies but against that unintelligible yet signifying materiality of bodily change” [13, 102–102].

Christine Overall also explores both old age and impairment as “socially created, sustained, and elaborated” [15, 131]. She argues that the systems of ableism and ageism “function to make, respectively, certain bodily features and certain numbers of years lived, into social liabilities, rationalizations for subordination, and sources of shame” [ibid.]. Christine Overall detects paternalistic treatment, disrespect, reduction of autonomy, and disregards of the rights as markers of disability and growing old.

It is relevant to mention Maria Vaccarella’s study of integration of humanistic knowledge into clinical practice in medical humanities via the genre of pathography. The term “pathography” coined and developed by Anne Hunsaker Hawkins means “a form of auto-biography or biography that describes personal experience of illness, treatment, and sometime death” [quoted by 18, 192]. Pathography becomes an adventure of survival [18, 193]. The adventure comprises 4 myths or elements — battle, journey, rebirth, and healthy-mindedness [ibid.] (the concept is in tune with the studies of narrative structures developed by Vladimir Propp, Joseph Campbell, Christopher Vogler). In *August: Osage County*, battle constitutes one of the elements indicative of the genre of pathography. Violet’s storyline in Letts’s drama can be interpreted in terms of Hawkins’ paradigm.

In his social study of people aging with an impairment, Gerry Zarb works out “the important common denominator” reported by respondents in his research. Gerry Zarb argues that independence, autonomy and responsibility are at stake throughout “the disability career”. The phobia of dependence is also represented in Violet’s character in Tracy Letts’s play.

The event around which the action is centered is family reunion. Prologue presents Violet through

the eyes of Beverly and Beverly himself. Act 1 depicts arrival of the Westons’ children and the Aikens couple. Act 2 brings message about Beverly’s suicide followed by funeral ceremony and reception. Act 3 narrates departure of all the family members.

In the Prologue, Beverly hires the housekeeper and in the run of the interview, which is largely a monologue, Beverly introduces himself and his wife Violet. His role is similar to those of the messenger or the chorus in ancient Greek drama — in his rambling country house with “a complete absence of outside light”, Beverly informs us of past and present of his marriage. While embroidering his questions, instructions and memories with the references to modernist poets (the play is framed with the final lines from T. S. Eliot’s poem *The Hollow Men*) Beverly also acts as his wife’s caretaker. Enumerating the pills Violet takes in catalogue-like manner the elderly character stands out as a medical person integrating clinical practice into daily routine:

BEVERLY: Valium. Vicodin. Darvon. Darvocet. Percodan, Percocet. Xanax for fun. OxyContin in a pinch. Some Black Mollies once, just to make sure I was still paying attention. And of course Dilaudid. I shouldn’t forget Dilaudid [12, 14].

Beverly’s preoccupation with the illness of his wife may be assumed as integration of the therapeutic discourse in fiction as Vaccarella suggests for the medical humanities.

Violet Weston appears episodically in the Prologue to demonstrate her uneasy mood. From Beverly’s explanations it becomes clear that his wife experiences some physical disabilities caused by her disease, which is mouth cancer, and its treatment. Thus the Prologue sets the conflict of the play — the story of a woman of advancing years confronting her disabilities and her family.

The theme of Violet’s conflict with her world is conveyed in all three acts. Named after a flower, Violet is the opposite of the idiomatic shrinking violet (even though her sister Mattie Fae refers to her once in such a way). The playwright often makes use of reminiscences of the elderly character to show Violet’s life journey has been full of hardships. Her literary portrayal is built with the help of the character’s life review fragments (one of the frequent markers of drama of aging [3, 102; 6, 95]). Surrounded by her three middle-aged daughters, Violet retells the story from her childhood. It is the story about cowboy girl boots she begged her mother a hundred times. Finally, young Violet got a package wrapped in nice paper for Christmas. Inside there was a pair of men’s muddy work boots with holes.

Violet recalls: “Lord, my momma laughed for days... My momma was a nasty, mean old lady. I suppose that’s where I get it from” [12, 80].

In the research of Apostolos Poullos, “elderly speakers seem to find some joy in talking about pain” [16, 167]. On the whole, “the linguistic expression of pain and joy plays an important role in the construction of an old person’s identity” [16, 157].

Letts depicts Violet as a direct, forthright and uncompromising elderly. When her daughter reassures Violet that she is beautiful, Violet remarks: “Women just get old and fat and wrinkly” [12, 51]. The following exchange of cues even fuller emphasizes the protagonist’s attitude to late adulthood:

MATTIE FAE (57 years old): I’m still very sexy, thank you very much.

VIOLET (65 years old): You’re about as sexy as a wet cardboard box, Mattie Fae, you and me both. Don’t kid yourself... [12, 51].

The critic Christine Overall writes, “because disability and aging are considered shameful, weak, and low in value, those who are disabled and/or aged by culture experience pressures to pass as non-disabled or non-aged, to engage in various sorts of pretense that they are as much as possible like the so-called young and healthy social norm” [15, 132]. Mattie Fae (Violet’s sister) pretends that she is not old, thus trying to pass for normal. Violet refuses to take part in the social conspiracy:

IVY: Mom believes women do not grow more attractive with age...

VIOLET: I didn’t say they “don’t grow more attractive with age,” I said they get ugly [12, 70].

Violet’s vision of old age conforms to the common stereotype of decline. She denies the active verb *to grow*, using instead the neutral substitute *to get*. Surprisingly, the exposition scenes reveal young Violet in retrospect as a tender, delicate and tactful girl through the lines of Beverly and Mattie Fae who had known the protagonist for a long time. The discrepancy between the sexagenarians’ memories of young Violet and the verbal battle of aging protagonist on stage adds to the ambivalent portrayal of the leading character. The reason of protagonist’s transformation can be her illness and sufferings. Here are several considerations of her transformed identity.

The first reason is the hardships of Violet’s childhood. Beside the episode with the cowboy boots, Violet recollects assaults of her mother’s numerous boyfriends: one of them attacked young Violet with a claw hammer and Mattie Fae who had come to rescue her sister still has “dents in her skull from hammer blows” [12, 71]. Hard life on Plains also affected Beverly who used to live in a car with his parents from age four until about ten. Public health researchers claim that “unhealthy childhood is associated with unhealthy adulthood” [7, 115].

Second, Violet’s mature years in marriage with Beverly are to be taken into account. Amazingly enough in the Prologue, Beverly’s references to his wife are full of love and care in spite of the famous line: “She takes pills and I drink. That’s the bargain we’ve struck...” [12, 11]. Before his suicide, Beverly hires a nurse and housekeeper for Violet, who is his muse and his love. His first and popular book of poems was dedicated to his wife. Hypothetically Beverly’s suicide is the refusal to cope with Violet’s diagnosis. In terms of literary gerontology, his solution (self-euthanasia) demonstrates the passive strategy of aging. By contrast, Violet fights. Her battle takes the form of truth-telling. One of the examples is her reminiscence of her husband during the post-funeral reception: “Man was a world-class alcoholic, more’n fifty years” [12, 67]. Violet narrates the story of Beverly’s talk at his university alumni dinner, when her husband drank a whole bottle of rum: he “got up to give this talk... and fouled himself... He didn’t get invited back to any more alumni dinners...” [ibid.].

Final reason for Violet’s transformed identity is smoking, a self-destructive habit. Smoking is a leading cause of cancer and death from cancer. In contemporary societies cancers become the major killers [7, 109]. In particular, smoking causes a mouth cancer. If once tobacco smoking used to be a part of sacred rituals and spiritual practices of Native Americans, nowadays tobacco’s harm to health is common knowledge.

These reasons — difficult childhood, marriage and smoking — form the background of Violet’s dysfunctional body and identity. The elderly protagonist takes many pills. She forgets how many. Violet describes her illness as “mouth burning... like a son-of-a-bitch... tongue is on fire” [12, 24]. “And it burns... like a bullshit” [12, 34]. Yet Violet does not quit smoking. Her argument is simple: “I have enough to worry about right this minute...” [12, 24].

There is more than one reference to smoking in the text of the play. Uncle Charlie, Mattie Fae’s husband, smokes a lot of grass. Violet’s teenage granddaughter smokes marijuana presumably for fun. In the case of the senior generation, smoking becomes a form of defense: Violet’s sister Mattie Fae had a discreet love affair with Violet’s husband. Mattie Fae’s son is the child of this relationship. This skeleton in the closet affects Violet and Uncle Charlie who smoke heavily, whereas the people responsible for breaking the marriage vows, Mattie Fae and Beverly, are the non-smokers. Consequently addiction to pills which Violet label as muscle relaxers provokes disorientation. The elderly character loses her equilibrium. “So she (*Violet — A.G.*) falls when she rambles...” [12, 11], Beverly mentions.

Another bodily dysfunction is Violet’s slurred speech also caused by drug use. It is especially obvious in the moments of the strong stress, for example,

when Violet finds out that her husband is dead. One more dysfunctional characteristic is her literal cold-bloodedness. Despite impossible August heat in the southern state of Oklahoma, Violet keeps her house free from air-conditioning while other characters wet with sweat.

These bodily abnormalities transform mentality of the elderly woman. Her views of herself becomes vulnerable and contradictory: in Act 1, Violet declares that she is not old [12, 24] and in Act 2, she recognizes that she is [12, 51]. Violet's perception of the world through the relationships often reveals the lack of "empathy and capacity for the complex, nuanced representation of others" [9]. As Charles Isherwood writes, "for Violet, a child of poverty, neglect and abuse, the will to endure is inextricably tied up with the desire to fight and the need to wound" [11].

From the psychological perspective, Violet's personality is partly dysfunctional because she has "difficulty empathizing with others in complex and effective ways... difficulty trusting or having compassion for others..." [9].

The bodily and mental dysfunctions make Violet fight for her autonomy. In the course of the scandalous funeral dinner, she becomes enraged protesting against her family's attitude toward her: "Stop telling me to settle down, goddamn it! I'm not a goddamn invalid! I don't need to be abided, do I? Am I already passed over?" [12, 71]. In the denouement of the play, Violet's relatives leave the elderly character on her

own. Violet develops an active strategy of aging despite her frailty. As Zarb comments, "because women are generally expected to take a more dependent role in society than men, disabled women face a particularly acute struggle to overcome the obstacles to controlling their own lives, or even defining their own identities" [20, 57].

Zarb sums it up: "it is not surprising, then, that many disabled women place an even stronger emphasis on maintaining their independence in late life than men" [ibid.]. Healey argues that Violet's demons are partly the result of a nation not paying attention to the struggles of the elderly. The reviewer assumes that Tracy Letts "describes the United States as a whole as pill addled, in a sense — self-medicating to avoid looking hard at its social and political failings" [8].

To conclude, in his play *August: Osage County* Tracy Letts questions the normality of growing old in the representations of late adulthood. The playwright subverts the concepts of successful and healthy aging in the images of Violet and Beverly Westons: Violet is a heavy smoker; Beverly is a heavy drinker. The issue of ableism allows us to detect the element of a new genre of pathography, a battle, which is indicative of the gerontological portrayal of the elderly protagonist. Two strategies of growing old with impairments — active and passive — diversify the general framework of representations of late adulthood in *August: Osage County*.

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