

DISCOURSE OF LATE ADULTHOOD IN AMY HERZOG'S PLAY *4000 MILES*

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This article deals with the characteristics of late adulthood in Amy Herzog's play 4000 Miles; it defines the notion of literary gerontology and ageism; it analyzes the gerontological markers in the plays. In my article the discourse of late adulthood and gerontological discourse are addressed as synonymous.

Key words: *late adulthood, Amy Herzog, aged woman, self-stereotyping, drama, literary gerontology, gerontological markers.*

Introduction. With the advent of breakthroughs in medicine and technology, the average age of society drastically increases in comparison with earlier decades. It causes the problem of ageism as prejudicial attitudes towards people of late adulthood. As the mirror of political, social and cultural issues fictional literature represents elderly protagonists who are discriminated on the basis of age. There are stereotypes, misjudgments and reproaches in terms of old age in prose, poetic and dramatic works. Like prose and poetry drama “tells the story of humankind in conflict with its world” representing “universal picture, on stage, of people confronting physical, mental, and spiritual obstacles” [6, p. 485] examples of which late adulthood abounds today. Thus, the North American scholar Lawrence Switzky calls to build strong connections between dramatic works and literary gerontology [8, p.136]. **The aim** of this article is to analyze the play *4000 Miles* (2011), which addresses the problems of late adulthood, in the framework of literary gerontology. This drama, written by a modern US woman dramatist Amy Herzog, has never been an object of research in literary criticism. In order to fulfill the aim, the following **tasks are set:** to define the discourse of late adulthood (or the gerontological discourse); to single out the markers of gerontological discourse in the play *4000 Miles*; to find examples of self-stereotyping in Herzog's play.

Theoretical background. Literary gerontology, a budding sub-specialty in literary studies, is being developed by a number of scholars and critics. Its pioneer, Anne M. Wyatt Brown, asserts that literature and aging should be interrelated [11, p.

300]. Next Roberta Maierhofer believes that the age studies (which is a broader discipline including literary gerontology) need to take into consideration the notion of old age as a social construct: a distinction should be made “between chronological age and the cultural stereotypes associated with old people, which would help escape confining binary oppositions of young and old” [5, p. 256]. Likewise, Ulla Krieberrnegg presumes that “literary gerontology can contribute to fostering productive interdisciplinary dialogue on how aging as a lifelong process is understood and experienced” [4]. It means that focusing on late adulthood in literary texts “a critical analysis of fictional representations of the life course can promote better understanding of the aging process” [4]. Steven Weiland affirms that gerontology influences fiction and it makes drastic changes in people’s minds in questions of age [9, p. 435]. As a result readers become more aware of ageist stereotypes in fictional works and better understand the problem of ageism. Sarah Falcus sums up that literary gerontology became “the prominent content-based study of ageing representations within fiction” [2, p. 53]. The study of gerontological markers in drama is performed by Anna Gaidash in the close reading of Tina Howe’s plays in the framework of literary gerontology [1, p.96]. The scholar assumes that the discourse of late adulthood represents a dynamic process filled in with such gerontological markers as elements of life review (memories), death drive, move to a new accommodation, discussion of elderly suicide, ageist remarks and self-stereotyping [1, p. 97]. It is fair to add that the discourse of late adulthood treats age in fiction not only in terms of biological process but also through social and cultural perspectives.

Research Methods. Amy Herzog is one of the most talented young American playwrights who is renowned for such outstanding plays as *After the Revolution*, *4000 Miles*, and *Belleville*. Furthermore, Herzog wins the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award for the Best Play *Mary Jane*.

It should be mentioned that the plays *After the Revolution* and *4000 Miles* have one thing in common – a protagonist, an aged woman in her nineties, whose name is Vera. In *4000 Miles* we encounter a young man Leo who seeks the answer to the

question how to grow up and take responsibility in a confusing and complicated world. He asks for advice his nonagenarian grandmother Vera, who is eager to set her grandson on the right track in life. The character of Vera first appears in the play *After the Revolution*. The dramatic image of Vera is based on Amy Herzog's grandmother as Leo's character is based on the playwright's cousin.

There are two types of markers of gerontological discourse in the play *4000 Miles*: somatic and psychological. On the one hand somatic features, or bodily markers appear in the dramatic works in the form of physical description of an aged woman: "...tiny and frail but not without fortitude, is in her nightgown. Her eyes have not adjusted to the light. She covers her mouth because she hasn't put her teeth in. Her speech is altered for the same reason" [3, p. 99]. Also in her age Vera finds it difficult to hear properly: "I can't hear a word any of you is saying" [3, p. 5]. The main character accepts her physical health problems and openly speaks about them. These descriptions show the protagonist's current state of health, yet despite her old age Vera still has the strength to enjoy her life.

On the other hand, psychological features are demonstrated through protagonist's inner feelings: "Some days I'm myself, and some days my head isn't right" [3, p. 109]. The woman's attitude to herself is natural and real as she considers her signs of old age as completely normal phenomena. Vera also tries to evaluate herself in terms of age: "...but the worst one is not being able to find my words" [1, p. 112]. As gerontologists believe that memory impairment is common among the elderly, our character gets accustomed to this.

Furthermore, there is a number of self-stereotyping examples in the plays. Self-stereotyping is prescribing judgments about oneself. Vera uses stereotypes about her age: "Oh sure, they're all useless, they just tell I'm old and I knew that already", "I'm old and close-minded..." [3, pp. 112, 113]. Regardless of her age the protagonist knows the drawbacks of being old, yet she proudly accepts them.

Focusing on somatic and psychological features we see Vera as a woman who has troubles with her general well-being, but she actively and vigorously lives the life: "It's the time of the year I usually do all my donations and I can't find the list of

charities...That's the kind of morning I'm having" [1, p. 158]. The lead character depicts the harmonious identity paired with self-acceptance; she tends to celebrate her strengths.

Conclusions. In Herzog's drama, the gerontological discourse comprises somatic characteristics and psychological characteristics. In Herzog's play, I detect both markers of late adulthood in the literary portrayal of the protagonist, an aged woman in her nineties. The playwright uses stereotyping to define old age as a social construct in her drama. The instances of self-stereotyping occur when Vera evaluates her well-being through the prism of an "old" lady. Amy Herzog undermines the stereotype that an old age means the end, giving her protagonist the capacity to live active social life establishing productive intergenerational contacts.

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