THE ELDERLY CHARACTERS IN DRAMAS OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS©

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ABSTRACT

One of the disturbing issues represented in Williams' dramas is old age along with aging. The paper analyzes elderly characters in the network of playwright's selected texts of different periods, in particular, "The Glass Menagerie", "Sweet Bird of Youth", "The Night of the Iguana" and "Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore" as well as his lesser-known works "The Frosted Glass Coffin" and "This is the Peaceable Kingdom or Good Luck God" from the perspective of literary gerontology. The representative of the literary traditions of the American South, Williams demonstrates in his dramas the vulnerability and fragility of aging. The tragedy of old age in Williams' plays is detected in the old age/youth antinomy. The character of a lonely aging woman or a spinster takes often the center stage. Williams's treatment of his female characters' (Princess Alexandra and Flora Goforth) sexuality challenges the ageist assumption that older women do not have or should not have intimate relationships. The dramatist renders the mentioned above characters sexually visible in the older woman/younger man relationships without pretence or concealing the corporeal transformations. The close reading of six dramas by Tennessee Williams demonstrates the anxiety of aging and old dramatis personae reflecting social ills. The study discerns the foreshadowing of the epigraphs (from poetry by E. Cummings, H. Crane, E. Dickinson, W. Yeats)

implying the anxious aspects of aging and "third age" in four major Williams's works; the dramatist's late style represented by "The Frosted Glass Coffin" and "This is the Peaceable Kingdom or Good Luck God" manifests the explicit gerontophobia through rather grotesquely realistic than poetic imagery in the texts' plot-lines.

Key words: old age; aging; elderly characters; Tennessee Williams; sexuality; epigraph; gerontophobia.

АНОТАЦІЯ

Літні дійові особи в драмах Теннессі Вільямса

Автор досліджує аспекти літнього віку і старіння у драмах Теннессі Вільямса. Стаття аналізує дійових осіб старшого віку низки текстів драматурга різних періодів, зокрема, "Скляний звіринець", "Солодкий птах юності", "Ніч ігуани" та "Молочний фургон тут більше не зупиняється" наряду з його менш знаними п'єсами "Труна з матового скла" і "Це миролюбне королівство або удачі, Боже" в контексті літературознавчої геронтології. Представник літературних традицій американського Півдня, Вільямс демонструє у своїх драмах вразливість пізньої зрілості. Специфіка літнього віку в п'єсах Вільямса виявляється в антиномії старість/молодість. Образи самотньої старіючої жінки або старої діви часто є центральними. Реалізація Вільямсом сексуальності своїх жіночих персонажів (Принцеси Космонополіс та Флори Гофорт) нейтралізує ейджистький стереотип, що старші жінки не мають або не повинні мати інтимних стосунків. Драматург конструює відверту і природну сексуальність у стосунках старшої жінки/молодшого чоловіка. Ретельне прочитання шести драм Теннессі Вільямса демонструє в першу чергу самотність персоносфери літніх дійових осіб як одну з дражливих тем пізньої зрілості, за яку відповідальне суспільство. У статті досліджені епіграфи (з поезій Е. Каммінгса, Х. Крейна, Е. Дікінсон, В. Йейтса), які декодують тривожні аспекти старіння та "третього віку" в чотирьох основних п'єсах Вільямса. Творчість у пізній зрілості драматурга, представлена текстами "Труна з матового скла" і "Це миролюбне королівство або удачі, Боже", гротескно реалістична з елементами драматургії парадоксу на відміну від поетичної образності попередніх текстів.

Ключові слова: літній вік; старіння; старші дійові особи; Теннессі Вільямс; сексуальність; епіграф; геронтофобія.

INTRODUCTION

This year the followers of Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) celebrate the 110th anniversary of the dramatist's birth. His plays are staged all over the world and Ivan Franko National Academic Drama Theater has been producing "The Glass Menagerie" in Ukrainian translation (adapted by Maksym Strikha) for Kyiv theatre-goers since 2013. The popularity of Williams' poetic theatre is justified by the universal nature of his texts: at the beginning of his career in 1940, in the interview with Mark Baron, the young writer revealed his interest in societal problems that spurred him to "carry some social message along with the story" (Conversations, 1986:5) in his plays. One of the disturbing issues represented in Williams' dramas is old age along with aging. The first attempt to consider the themes and motifs of growing old in his texts has been done by the author in her postdoctoral monograph "Discourse of aging in the US drama: problem field, semantics, poetics" (2019). Yet the research lacks the dissection of "The Night of the Iguana", the important Williams's drama in the context of representation of late adulthood in fictional text.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The representative of the literary traditions of the American South, Williams demonstrates in his dramas the vulnerability and fragility of aging. The tragedy of old age in Williams' plays is detected in the old age/youth antinomy. The character of a lonely aging woman or a spinster takes often the center stage.

Today, the scholarly studies (L. R. Hezaveh, N. Abdullah, & M. S. Yaapar (2015); G. Mandelbaum (2017); M. Lisagor (2020)) tackle the general psychological aspects in dramas of the playwright as well as the issues of gender and sexuality of Williams' proverbial characters (D. Dervin (1999); A. J. Saddik (2015); N. M. Iftimie (2018); S. Gontarski (2021)). Also, the researches continue debating the dramatic nature of his works on stage and on screen (R. B. Palmer & W. R. Bray (2009); A. Paquet-Deyris (2011); Y. A. N. Aldalabeeh (2016); V. Tripkovic-Samardzic (2016); G. P. C. De Oliveira (2017); N. Durmisevic (2018); A. de Toledo, L. Marcio (2020)). In addition, the exploration of myth interpretations by Williams in his texts remain to be popular in academia (G. Hendrick (1966); H. Zapf (1988); X. Wang (2016); M. Mohd, L. Al-Mamouri (2019)). Yet, few attempts consider aging and the challenges of old age in

minor drama of Williams: Philip C. Kolin (2000) and Michael Hooper (2012) analyze in-depth the age anxiety in the dramatists' late plays ("The Frosted Glass Coffin" and "This is the Peaceable Kingdom or Good Luck God") whereas the significant studies of the representations of late adulthood of Williams's major works lack.

Although his plays host the elderly characters, Williams often develops the senior dramatis personae from the perspective of decline. In tune with the other important dramatists of his time, Arthur Miller and Edward Albee, Williams depicts the disturbing and unsettling pictures of aging and third age in his texts. The developing branch of the humanities, literary gerontology is a convenient means of analyzing the dramas of Williams through the lens of today's challenges.

AIM OF THE ARTICLE

The task of the paper is to analyze elderly characters in the network of playwright's selected texts of different periods, mainly his major world-famous plays "The Glass Menagerie" (1944), "Sweet Bird of Youth" (1959), "The Night of the Iguana" (1961) and "Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore" (1963) as well as his lesser-known works "The Frosted Glass Coffin" (1970) and "This is the Peaceable Kingdom or Good Luck God"(1978) from the perspective of literary gerontology. The following tasks are set: outline the features of aging female American character in major plays of Williams; study the male nonagenarian Jonathan Coffin in "The Night of the Iguana"; detect common features of late adulthood of Williams's dramas of both periods; specify the shift of theatrical imagery in two plays of the late period; examine the epigraphs of major dramatic texts in relation to age anxiety. Ultimately, the paper aims to demonstrate the undercurrent appeal to love by aging and elderly characters of Williams in the world gerontophobia.

METHODOLOGY

Relying upon the interdisciplinary nature of literary gerontology the methods of analysis involve a set of strategies including sociological tools. The methodological instruments of the article are mixed: close reading technique, comparative approach, synthesis and generalization. In order to understand them and the ambivalence of the elderly characters in his dramas the paper addresses the basic positions of

literary gerontology: selection and explanation of representations of late adulthood, gerontological markers, ageist stereotypes in fictional texts (Gaidash, 2020:31-32).

RESULTS

Growing old and late adulthood are both painful and poetic topics in Williams's dramas. Starting with "The Palooka" (1937) and "The Unsatisfactory Supper" (1946), his early one-acts, Williams introduces the challenge of growing old in professional (old boxer) and family (old maid/spinster) life. The open ending of both one-acts initiates a dialogue with the audience which will be constantly developed in his further works. Named after Williams' sister, the character of the octogenarian Aunt Rose, the unwanted elderly relative in a Southern family, is deep and symbolic, establishing the network of enduring senior female characters in dramas of the following decades. Also, "The Unsatisfactory Supper" sets the tragic incompliance of older and younger generations in "The Glass Menagerie", "Sweet Bird of Youth" and "Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore".

The American family in "The Glass Menagerie" represents the lower classes of society, living in a crowded hive-like city center. Although the play, which made Williams famous, lacks the elderly characters, it explores the topic of aging from the perspective of Amanda Wingfield, the mother of two grown-ups. Looking for a fiancé for her ("crippled") daughter Amanda reflects on the social traditions of the US South condemning the role of a spinster whose status is more than humiliating in mid-twentieth century: "What is there left but dependency all our lives? I know so well what becomes of unmarried women who aren't prepared to occupy a position. I've seen such pitiful cases in the South – barely tolerated spinsters living upon the grudging patronage of sister's husband or brother's wife! – stuck away in some little mousetrap of a room – encouraged by one in-law to visit another – little birdlike women without any nest – eating the crust of humility all their life!" (Williams, 1994:1659). Yet while putting pressure on her adult son Tom, Amanda uses self-stereotyping, calling herself an old woman who should not be ignored. However, the female character thinks that old maids have advantages – at least they are "better off" (Williams, 1994:1672) than wives of drunkards. The aging woman escapes from unbearable reality into memories of her own youth, illustrated onstage with slides of inscriptions or images, a unique "play-within-a-play" method protecting Amanda from younger generation.

Apart from the deconstruction of the dramatic chronotope her recollections form an intergenerational misunderstanding between family members. The family routine annoys Tom. In desperation, he calls his mother an "ugly babbling old witch up on a broomstick" (Williams, 1994:1663). His words undermine Amanda's faith in being a Southern belle; even though in stage remarks, the playwright highlights the changes in Amanda's body: "Its light on her face with its aged but childish features is cruelly sharp, satirical as a Daumier print" (Williams, 1994:1665), the character does not admit her growing old. E.E. Cummings final line "nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands" from serves an epigraph for Williams's breakthrough drama. Symbolicity of the poetic metaphor is universal and can be interpreted as anxiety of fading apart from the meaning of uniqueness.

It should be mentioned that the playwright's manner of prefacing his major drama with famous poets' quotations foreshadows the motif of aging and the fear of old age in them. Thus, for "Sweet Bird of Youth" Williams selects as an epigraph two final lines from the poem "Legend" by Hart Crane revealing the youth/old age antinomy: the middle-aged protagonist, Chance, as opposed to and at the same time compared with the fading actress, Princess, who metaphorically represents the noon. In "Sweet Bird of Youth", Williams intensifies the oppositions of youth and elderly, family and loneliness, reality and illusion. The plot focuses on 30-year-old Chance Wayne's arrival in his hometown in company of the former Hollywood celebrity, sexagenarian Alexandra Del Lago. The aging actress, Lago travels under the pseudonym of Princess Kosmonopolis. Chance is her male escort pursuing though his own plans in the town: to reunite with the girlfriend of his youth and get a job in cinematic industry with the help of the Princess. The aged woman stands in stark contrast to Chance who is in prime of his life. Williams ruthlessly and somewhat grotesquely manifests the psychosomatic markers of aging (memory lapses, cloudy vision, neuritis) in the character of Princess.

Although the action concentrates on Chance, the Princess's role is important for understanding the protagonist's fate (and establishing generational interaction). Her portrayal is allegedly a possible projection of Chance's future. As opposed to her gigolo, enthralled by illusions, the Princess is quite aware of the controversy of her fading and her passions. The actress retires because she believes that an artist should be young, yet she cannot "put to sleep the tiger that raged in my nerves… Why the unsatisfied tiger? In the nerves' jungle? Why is anything, anywhere, unsatisfied, and

raging?" (Williams, 2000:170). Her self-pity is poetic: the aging character resorts to cosmic and animal metaphors to conceal her gerontophobia:

PRINCESS: <...> I went at the right time to go. RETIRED! Where to? To what? To that dead planet the moon. . . .<...> if I had just been old but you see, I wasn't old. . . . I just wasn't young, not young, young. I just wasn't young any more... <...>

CHANCE: Nobody's young any more. . . .

PRINCESS: But you see, I couldn't get old with that tiger, still in me raging.

CHANCE: Nobody can get old. . . .

PRINCESS: <...> I could have painted the landscapes of the endless, withering country in which I wandered like a lost nomad <...> (Williams, 2000:170-171).

The fading actress is grotesque because she tries hard to forget her age predicaments: waking up in a hotel room from nightmares, she does not recognize Chance and the place; taking simultaneously pills and vodka, subsides her panic attacks with the oxygen inhalator; has her glasses cracked. The portrait of an elderly actress is complemented by memory lapses: "It gives you an awful trapped feeling this, this memory block... I feel as if someone I loved had died lately, and I don't want to remember who it could be" (Williams, 2000:168). At the same time, the Princess tries hard to obliviate the dreams of further acting career; thus, she is driven into alcohol, drugs and lovemaking with her escort. The elderly American woman travels under a pseudonym after the unsuccessful, in her opinion, premiere of the film, in which she starred in close-up shots. Princess chooses exile, and therefore a passive form of aging. Old age is unacceptable for her, it is a defeat; hence, she practices constant self-escape. The actress's denial of her own age does not find direct support from her 29-year old companion, who is also aware of his own fading: e.g., Chance loses hair and former friends of the character also note his getting older.

Yet, Princess Kosmonopolis is an embodiment of American pragmatism with a strong belief in the American dream and determination to succeed at any age. In her dialogues with Chance, the Princess claims her right for life: she forbids her escort to refer to death even though her behavior manifests the death drive: "No mention of death, never, never a word on that odious subject. I've been accused of having a death wish, but I think it's life that I wish for, terribly, shamelessly, on any terms whatsoever" (Williams, 2000:178). The aged character opposes fading by all means.

One of her cures is love-making that distracts the woman from the things she wants to forget. Williams's treatment of his female characters' (Princess Alexandra,

Maxine Faulk, Flora Goforth) sexuality challenges the ageist assumption that older women do not have or should not have intimate relationships. The dramatist renders the mentioned above characters sexually visible in the older woman/younger man relationships without pretence or concealing the corporeal transformations.

Aside from the markers of old age pertaining to the fading actress there are other features of aging detected in Chance's beloved Heavenly and her father. The former experiences an encompassing emptiness after the surgical misadventure which "cut the youth out" of her body making her "an old childless woman. Dry, cold, empty, like an old woman" (Williams, 2000:198). The latter, Heavenly's father, the mighty Boss Finley, is described "like an aged courtier", "aging father", "too old to cut the mustard" in reference to his lover (Williams, 2000:193-195). The motif of aging as the law of life and the fear of old age embraces a number of characters in "Sweet Bird of Youth".

At the finale of the play, the destinies of Princess and Chance drift apart. The good news of the actress's success in her latest film empowers the character with hope whereas Chance's future is just the opposite. Though the stage directions specify: "<...> the Princess is really equally doomed. She can't turn back the clock any more than can Chance, and the clock is equally relentless to them both <...> Both are faced with castration, and in her heart she knows it. They sit side by side on the bed like two passengers on a train sharing a bench" (Williams, 2000:235). The play's denouement promises hope for the career of the faded actress regardless of her age and eccentricity.

"The Night of the Iguana" manifests a particular approach to the representation of old age in general and fading female character in particular. Hannah Jelkes is a self-sustaining spinster whose life goal is meaningful – she takes care of her nonagenarian grandfather Jonathan Coffin (aka Nonno). In the limelight of "The Night of the Iguana" is an ex-minister, the Reverend (now inoperative) Lawrence Shannon, whose interaction with other characters helps reveal the temper of everyone involved (the mirror effect).

Using Emily Dickinson's last quatrain from her poem "I Died For Beauty But Was Scarce..." (And so, as Kinsmen, met a Night / We talked between the Rooms / Until the Moss had reached our lips / And covered up – our names –) as an epigraph for "The Night of the Iguana", Williams outlines the subject-line of his drama – meeting of the kindred souls of Shannon and Hannah whose predicaments make these different if not polar characters really close. Leading a group of tourists

(referred to as "a football squad of old maids", (Williams, 2000:331)) the protagonist arrives to a Mexican hotel for a respite. There he gets to know Hannah whose dramatic portrayal adds new features to Williams's earlier representations of aging and lonely female character (e.g., Aunt Rose, Amanda Wingfield, Princess Alexandra, Heavenly Finley). Hannah's image of a spinster is enhanced by the unique feature of timelessness which makes her look androgynous (Williams, 2000:338), perhaps, as a result of her grave responsibility for Nonno. The grandfather, a poet with a powerful voice literally and metaphorically, is determined to finish writing his last verse. Even though embodying the physical decline associated with the advanced old age (poor eyesight and hearing, wheelchair user, lack of concentration), Nonno's character is devoid of ageist stereotypes: he is neatly dressed, funny (makes jokes), confident, optimistic, but above all, "[t]here is a good kind of pride and he has it, carrying it like a banner wherever he goes" (Williams, 2000:348). Yet the old poet engages in self-stereotyping talking about his own "disgraceful longevity", "temporary decrepitude", problems with memory (Williams, 2000:351).

The spinster granddaughter of a minor romantic poet, Hannah seems to share the self-esteem of her Grampa (in Shannon's words) whose age she repeatedly exposes as "ninety-seven years young" (put in italics in the source text). Denying the adjective "old", traditionally used to designate one's age, Hannah reveals her own fear of late adulthood. She claims proudly that Nonno is the oldest living and practicing poet who gives recitations. Selling her water color sketches Hannah earns her living in hotels in tandem with Nonno reciting his poems while traveling around the world. The bond between family members transcends kindred blood – the tenderness of the granddaughter toward her ancestor sets the model for Shannon in stage remarks: "a thing we are when the pathos of the old, of the ancient, the dying is such a wound to our own (savagely beleaguered) nerves and sensibilities that this outside demand on us is beyond our collateral, our emotional reserve" (Williams, 2000:376). Yet Nonno's mental frailty ("cerebral accidents") can sometimes drive Hannah crazy in spite of her strong will. Also, her understanding of desperate circumstances is revealed in the surrealistic description of her grandfather as "a blind man climbing a staircase that goes to nowhere, that just falls off into space" (Williams, 2000:404). At the same time, she defends Nonno fiercely from condescendence, thus, acquiring the role of generational mediator. The recent study of animal metaphors in Williams's dramas infers that the woman assists in setting the iguana free drawing parallels with the resolution of Shannon's emotional dilemma and Nonno's end of his

corporeal life (M. Mohd, L. Al-Mamouri, 2019: 209).

It is Hannah who contributes the Orient experience of the final moments of the elderly in her recollection of Shanghai's House for the Dying where "<…> those eyes of the penniless dying with those last little comforts beside them, I tell you, Mr. Shannon, those eyes looked up with their last dim life left in them as clear as the stars in the Southern Cross <…>" (Williams, 2000:412) which Hannah considers to be the most beautiful view in life. Albeit Williams admits that "The Night of the Iguana"'s theme "how to live beyond despair and still live" (Conversations, 1986:104), with the help of Hannah's character the dramatist subverts the ageist representation of the elderly and the fear of death in his text. Even though the drama ends with the grandfather's decease his bond with Hannah provides desperate Shannon with the hope – life is meaningful when you find a belief in something or someone proving Williams's definition of drama in his plays – "nearly always people trying to reach each other" (Conversations, 1986: 86).

If "The Night of the Iguana" stands alone with the touching character of Nonno from the perspective of literary gerontology among Williams's dramas, "The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore" (further – "The Milk Train") builds an interaction between the elderly lady and the young man closely to "Sweet Bird of Youth". As an epigraph the playwright chooses the second quatrain from the third strophe of Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" focusing on the powerful imagery of the human suffering from earthly desires as "fastened to a dying animal" before passing away. The character who embodies poetic image reaching the deathbed in "The Milk Train" is the aged protagonist, Flora Goforth, an even more eccentric woman than Princess Kosmonopolis. The final episode of Goforth's life represent her inner self-struggle incarnated by the golden griffin, "a mythological monster, half-lion, half-eagle, yet completely human" (M. Mohd, L. Al-Mamouri, 2019:209), her inside dying animal, to whom the character is symbolically fastened.

The drama, which takes place on an Italian estate overlooking the Mediterranean Sea in August of mid-twentieth century, depicts the last two days of Mrs. Goforth's life. The luxurious chronotope is designed to enhance the character of a once great international beauty, now an elderly lady engaged in writing memoirs about her private life with six husbands and countless lovers. The woman is lonely. She explains her solitude by the fact that people are very similar to each other and remind her of the same face. Mrs. Goforth is subconsciously aware that she is living her last days,

although she does not admit it (she does not eat anything, drinks only alcohol and takes pills). Like with some other Williams's characters, in Mrs. Goforth's mind illusions dominate the reality: for example, she believes that her memories will surpass M. Proust's novel "In Search of Lost Time". The entire estate is filled with portable mikes and tape-recorders, as the legendary owner wants to be able to record salty details of her life.

At the same time, Flora Goforth is a strong-willed person, a self-made woman, the one who came out of the grassroots. Sharing some features in common with Princess Kosmonopolis (nightmares, thanatophobia, even some similar diseases – neuralgia, neuritis, bursitis), she is sincere in recognizing her late adulthood self-referring to as the old Sissy Goforth. Like Princess Mrs. Goforth loves metaphors describing her ex-husbands as apes or ostrichs (Williams, 2000:497) in her memoirs. The protagonist of "The Milk Train" is busy with meeting the publishers' deadlines in spite of her deteriorated health. An important feature of Mrs. Goforth is her desire to understand the meaning of life on the verge of death. Developing the Princess's ideas about recollections, Mrs. Goforth contemplates life as "all memory except for each passing moment" (Williams, 2000:525).

The elderly protagonist's portrait is revealed deeper with an unexpected and uninvited guest, 35-year-old Christopher Flanders, nicknamed "Angel of Death" because of his habit of "coming to call on a lady just a step or two ahead of the undertaker" (Williams, 2000:527). Instinctively, old Goforth avoids contact with him because, like Princess Kosmonopolis, she is most eager to live. The purpose of Christopher is to reconcile an elderly woman with her own self at the end of her life (providing «agreeable companionship <…> to old dying ladies, scared to death of dying"). Almost until the last minutes of her life, Mrs. Goforth resists the charm of the young man and his assistance – Christopher offers the elderly woman his company to save her from the most terrible human malady – loneliness. In the same scene, Williams exposes the taboo subject of sexuality of older women:

MRS GOFORTH: Aside from this allergy and a little neuralgia, sometimes more than a little, I'm a healthy woman. Know how I've kept in shape, my body the way it still is?

CHRIS: Exercise?

MRS GOFORTH: Yes! In bed! Plenty of it, still going on!… but there's this worship of youth in the States, this Whistler's Mother complex, you know what I mean, this idea that at a certain age a woman ought to resign herself to being a sweet old thing in a rocker. Well, last week-end, a man, a young man, came in my bedroom and it wasn't

too easy to get him out of it (Williams, 2000:553).

The young man's vocation (in his words, "a professional duty") is to care about old dying people. Mrs. Goforth states emphatically: "This milk train doesn't stop here anymore" (Williams, 2000:579), refuting the implicit intention to profit from her, though in drama's end, the naked woman asks Christopher to share her bed. The gorgeously bizarre and controversial Flora Goforth dies after a long struggle with a terminal disease and herself.

In "The Milk Train", Williams uses a technique that serves as a chorus in an ancient Greek tragedy. The playwright considers his text an allegory and an elegant fairy tale and borrows the narrative technique of the Japanese Kabuki theatre in forming the plot-line of the drama: two actors depicting theatrical editors comment on the play in the course of its action. Williams's setting is dominated by the white color, which is known to symbolize mourning and death in Orient culture.

Although the death motif pertaining to "The Night of the Iguana" and "The Milk Train" saturates the plays "The Frosted Glass Coffin" and "This is the Peaceable Kingdom or Good Luck God" there is a sharp shift in tonality in the playwright's late style. Two latter texts are far from the lyricism and poetry of preceding dramas; the aesthetics of the drama of paradox prevails in them. As Kurmelev asserts Williams's late dramas follow the conventions of Artaud's theatre of cruelty elaborating the alienation and wickedness via non-verbal means rather than rhetorically (Kurmelev, 2012:14). The scholar is convinced that the tendency towards anti-theatre (indicative of other US playwrights of the era apart from Williams) attempts to return to myth and ritual in drama to represent the vanity of contemporaneous Americans incompliant with the ideals of the father-founders (Kurmelev, 2012: 15).

The very title of "The Frosted Glass Coffin" is one of the powerful symbols of death, one of the defining markers of aging frequently referred to in drama's text. A coffin made of frosted glass embodies old age. The explanation provides character One (as a tribute to the theatre of absurd some dramatis personae are named by numbers) discussing the infirmities of the third age, specifically vision disorders: "In our age bracket you're living in a glass coffin, a frosted coffin, you just barely see light through it" (Williams, 1981:205). A coffin made of frosted glass symbolizes both physical corporeal changes of the elderly, in particular cataracts, which do not allow to see the world clearly, and psychological cognitive vagaries, which slow down and obscure the perception of reality by older adults.

The action of the drama takes place against the backdrop of the facade of an inexpensive hotel resided by septuagenarians; an alternative for the elderly who can do without geriatric facilities. Three elderly male characters (One, Two and Three), whose conversation is the play's backbone, are waiting for the opening of a cheap cafeteria with limited number of seats across the street. Long before the café opens, there is a long line of hungry and thirsty elderly people. The characters' small talk turns gradually to the topic of death as common in this hotel as the breakfast they are waiting for. When an elderly woman character in the line faints, One, Two and Three remain uninvolved, just interested in the diagnosis. A subscriber of the geriatric journal, One informs his companions in misfortune about the biological processes of aging, the age-related diseases of women and men, the gender difference in life expectancy and aging strategies. One's "diagnosis" of an unconscious elderly woman is immediate: "Then it ain't coronary, women don't git coronaries" (Williams, 1981:204). Speaking of aging One claims: "<…> the first sign of senility in a man is losing his sense of humor, and senility don't have as close a connection with actual age as people imagine; it has more to do with the condition of the arteries of the brain, the amount of cerebral atherosclerosis that has set in and how far advanced it is. <…> In some folks less'n sixty, senility has already set in because the cerebral bloodstream is clogged and brain cells are undernourished. That's when they turn to crotchery old eccentrics, not at a certain age but at a certain level of calcification or of fatty deposits in the cerebral arteries, boy" (Williams, 1981:203). One's interest in geriatric information testifies to his attempt to understand his own physical and cognitive aging, and to reduce anxiety and fear of the transformations. Talking about the death of their peers the dramatis personae avoid saying "dead" and "died" using instead the euphemism "gone".

All three characters self-stereotype themselves and other residents as in the conversation about the death of Winnie, old Mr. Kelsey's wife:

ONE: <…> You know, it's not so surprising that Winnie went first after all, because old Kelsey has crossed that age limit where the human body, all its functions and its processes, are so slowed down that they live a sort of crocodile existence that seems to go on forever. The question is what to do with him.

TWO: He ought to have a practical nurse but he can't afford one, I reckon.

ONE: The answer's a nursing home, huh?

TWO: I reckon that's the only possible answer unless they chloroform him like an old dog (Williams, 1981:208).

Also, in "The Frosted Glass Coffin", Williams tackles another relevant aspect of old age – social and material insecurity. Short of money, trying to save a penny a line of more than 50 elderly visitors is patiently standing at the door of the café at 7:10 a.m., 20 minutes before the opening. In One's words, "It ain't so bad at breakfast and in the spring, but at noon in summer, it's a terrible thing. The management could put an awning up for them. Do they? Nope, they don't. Too cheap to protect their customers from heat prostration in summer. [There is a pause.] The hotel stationery has a line at the bottom of the page that gives out the information, totally false, that heat prostration is unknown in Miami, despite the fact that directly across the street from them they can observe every noon that senile brigade, that line-up, of two or three hundred geriatric cases, exposed to prostration and sunstroke. I've seen them drop in summer, I've seen them drop to the pavement like a silent revolver had shot them through their hearts <…>" (Williams, 1981:209-210).

Mr. Kelsey's case exposes the problem of widowhood in an advanced age. One repeats that a woman's life expectancy is longer and therefore it is logical that she becomes an older man's nurse by default. In case of the frail Mr. Kelsey (the only male character with a proper name in the play), the death of his wife means for him the move to the nursing home, otherwise in his infant-like condition the old man won't survive. The finale of the play metaphorizes senile infirmity, "the frosted glass coffin", in the character of Mr. Kelsey, who being unaware of his wife's death stays waiting for her when everyone leaves.

The motif of senile infirmity is salient in the play "This is the Peaceable Kingdom or Good Luck God" (further – "The Peaceable Kingdom"), too. Hooper provides a close and comprehensive reading of this grim drama alluding to the eponymous series of paintings by Edward Hicks; drawing parallels with Beckettian monologue "Not I" (1973); setting wider context of the dramatist's late style; analyzing the historical background of Williams's plotline. Based on the 1978 strike of New-York nursing-home employees, the drama is close in its representations of "[r]eports of abandoned patients suffering from untreated bed sores and dehydration, many of whom were also forced to lie in their own excrement <…>" (Hooper, 2012). The late dramas of Williams comply with the aesthetic paradigm in the European literature of the end of the millennium, so called "critical fiction", with "writers' aspiration for

comprehension of the environment" (Kryvoruchko, 2014).The US dramatist employs some aspects of "critical fiction": address to history, use of linearity, synthesis of styles, social determination, combination of material and spiritual (Kryvoruchko, 2014:214-215).

The characters of "The Peaceable Kingdom" are nursing-home residents Lucretia and Ralston, as well as visitors Bernice and Saul, adult children of lifeless Mrs. Shapiro who totally depends on them: "An ancient woman, entirely helpless, is being spoon-fed by her daughter, in her mid-sixties <...>" (Williams, 1981:333). The inmates are frustrated because there is no medical staff in the home – they are on strike. Aside from hunger, break in medical routine and basic care the patients' situation is aggravated by social alienation: the residents of the nursing home have outlived their peers. Lucretia explains: "I survived all relations. They put me in here eight years ago. I seen one or two of them for the first month or so, and then they stopped appearin. I figured that they'd put me here to forget me and they'd forgot me. Then found out – all gone, dead, all..." (Williams, 1981:340). Both Hooper and Kurmelev assume that the topos of institutions in Williams's late dramas is synonymous with "prison or exile, where the "unwanted" of the society are sent, and where they cannot find comfort" (Kurmelev, 2012:19) and "only an inhumane form of death or, at most, a prison sentence favored by a society that seeks to shut away and forget its aging population" (Hooper, 2012).

Even when the visitors from television attend the nursing home, no one bothers to assist the frail old people abandoned by the staff. Although Mrs. Shapiro is an exception allowing Williams demonstrate that at least Jewish families still revere their elderly, her daughter Bernice exposes anti-Semitic and religious intolerance in the play.

If Bernice feeds and cares for her mother, Saul keeps protesting. Accusing Mrs. Shapiro of "becoming ugly" ("drooling, no teeth in her mouth, deaf, blind, reduced to a vegetable"), Saul prefers her to be dead. Saul's response to his own mother's circumstances seems to evolve from "Make Way for Tomorrow" (the US film, 1937) representing the middle-aged children getting rid of their elderly parents.

In "The Peaceable Kingdom", the development of subject-line acquires the features of grotesque with the arrival the Matron (Mrs. Whitney, a Westchester Colonial Dame) enveloping the nursing home into a surreal mist. Matron's "charity" ends with a pandemonium – the inmates assault the visitors, the police enter with a

tear gas causing asphyxiation and death of the elderly. On a background, a strange voice repeats sporadically: "This is the Peaceable Kingdom, the kingdom of love without fear" interrupting the dialogues of the characters. The drama grows more surreal with old Mrs. Shapiro's death. Bernice ties "her dead mother's jaws with a gaily flowered crêpe scarf" infusing the scene with a touch of grotesque absurdity.

In spite of all odds wheelchair-bound Ralston and Lucretia, especially the latter one, come to terms with each other and themselves. Even though Lucretia is anxious of the decreptitude when they won't recognize each other or one of them will remain alone, Ralston is convinced: "<…> let's just think about love, this love that we found here together at the end. And be encouraged to live" (Williams, 1981:359). The network of the elderly characters of "The Peaceable Kingdom" manifests alienation and loneliness of the Americans, their human need of communication and love.

DISCUSSIONS

The paper sheds light upon the network of elderly dramatis personae in four major and two less known plays of Tennessee Williams. The character of the aging American woman is primarily in the limelight of the dramatist's imagery. The prominent exception is nonagenarian poet, Jonathan Coffin, in "The Night of the Iguana". The in-depth discussion of each character of the early period demonstrates the unique representation of late adulthood, yet a set of common features is established: corporeal markers of growing old, loneliness as the ontological challenge, the binary opposition of older woman/younger man, subversion of sexual stereotypes pertaining to older adults, active strategies of later life. The late period is rich with more abstract (nameless characters) and absurd (Mrs. Shapiro) representations of deep old age. The relation of the epigraphs implying age anxiety with the discourse of aging in the dramas of the early period is exposed. These findings contribute both to the studies of Tennessee Williams's legacy and the data of literary gerontology. The paper is limited with its survey design; the further study focuses on each dramatic text in detail engaging the theatrical production analysis or/and its film adaptation.

CONCLUSIONS

The close reading of six dramas by Tennessee Williams demonstrates the anxiety of aging and the aged dramatis personae reflecting social ills. Williams's

imagery depicts his elderly characters in rather gloomy colors as period of weakness and loneliness, when characters become heavy burdens for their loved ones; they live no longer, but just exist. At the same time, love in old age can save from depression, alienation and despair.

The female characters are active in their late adulthood – Aunt Rosy (housekeeping), Amanda (making family ends meet), Princess (acting career), Hannah (career of an artist), Mrs. Goforth (writing memoirs) as much as the male character of Nonno (career of a poet). Also, Williams debunks the stereotype of older women characters asexuality revealing necessity of intimate relationships in "Sweet Bird of Youth" and "Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore".

The study analyzes the epigraphs (from poetry by E. Cummings, H. Crane, E. Dickinson, W. Yeats) foreshadowing the anxious aspects of aging and "third age" in four major Williams's works; the dramatist's late style represented by "The Frosted Glass Coffin" and "This is the Peaceable Kingdom or Good Luck God" and devoid of the use of epigraphs manifests the explicit gerontophobia through rather grotesquely realistic than poetic imagery in the texts' plot-lines. The results of the paper enrich the field of literary gerontology and pay tribute to the poetics of drama of the social melodramatist Tennessee Williams.

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