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“A WALLED GARDEN” BY P. TAYLOR FROM THE PERSPECTIVE
OF FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM

РАССКАЗ П. ТЕЙЛОРА «САД, ОКРУЖЕННЫЙ СТЕНАМИ»
В СВЕТЕ ФЕМИНИСТСКОЙ ЛИТЕРАТУРНОЙ КРИТИКИ

The article offers an analysis of the short story “A Walled Garden” written by the American author Peter Taylor, a Pulitzer Prize winner, from the perspective of feminist literary criticism. Such concepts of feminist literary discourse as the patriarchal system of values, gender roles and stereotypes, the traditional patriarchal ideal of womanhood and others are considered in relation to the fictional world created by the author, in the cultural and historical context of the writer’s life and works, in connection with the story’s system of images.

К е у w o r d s: feminist literary criticism; patriarchal system of values; gender roles and stereotypes; American literature; Peter Taylor.

В статье представлен анализ рассказа «Сад, окруженный стенами» американского писателя Питера Тейлора, лауреата Пулицеровской премии по литературе, с позиций феминистского литературоведения. Такие понятия феминистского литературного дискурса, как патриархатная система ценностей, гендерные роли и стереотипы, традиционно-патриархатный идеал женщины и т.п., рассматриваются применительно к созданной автором художественной реальности, с учетом культурно-исторического контекста творчества писателя, специфики созданных им художественных образов.

К л ю ч е в ы е с л о в а: феминистская литературная критика; патриархатная система ценностей; гендерные роли и стереотипы; литература США; Питер Тейлор.

Feminist literary criticism remains to be a productive method of examining literary texts and identifying their deeper meanings. The influential works of such 20th-century authors as V. Woolf, S. de Beauvoir, K. Millet, E. Showalter, S. Gilbert, S. Gubar, H. Cixous and others paved the way for literary interpretation practices based on the intellectual and political advances of the feminist movement. Reading through a feminist lens presupposes analyzing women’s experiences as they are represented in literary works written by male and female authors, examining fictional reality in terms of gender inequality, prejudices and assumptions about women, their resistant attitudes and search for identity in the patriarchal (male-dominated) society, the basic assumption being that literature reflects both society at large and the political and social ideologies of specific authors, which it supports or questions. According to the “Encyclopedia of

Feminist Literary Theory,” the value of feminist literary inquiry is that it teaches its practitioners “how to listen to the unheard voice, how to discern what is said in the moment of silence, how to ask about crucial gaps in any account of history or knowledge, and how to frame questions that recognize that “the personal is political” ” [1, p. xxviii].

Feminist literary criticism is one of the critical approaches discussed in the textbook “Contemporary Interpretation Strategies” (Minsk: MSLU, 2009) used by 5th-year students specializing in literature at Minsk State Linguistic University. In Chapter 3 “Social and Political Criticism. Feminist Criticism” the theoretical material is followed by two stories to be analyzed by students – “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and “The Chaser” by John Collier. In each of these texts, it is the male character who represents the ideology of the patriarchal society while the female character can be seen as a victim of patriarchy, her desires and unique subjectivity not considered to be important. Students generally don’t have much difficulty in identifying this dichotomy. On the other hand, in the story “A Walled Garden” written by the American author Peter Taylor (1917–1994) both of the principal characters are female – the mother, Mrs. Harris, and her daughter, Frances Ann, who is in her early thirties. Men appear in the story only in the background: Mr. Harris is dead and the young man who is waiting for Frances Ann to prepare herself to go out does not really materialize as a character in the story. In fact, his words in the conversation with Mrs. Harris are left out by the author, so the story becomes Mrs. Harris’s monologue. My teaching practice has demonstrated that “A Walled Garden” can be successfully used as an additional text to be studied within the framework of the feminist approach to literature. The aim of the article is to demonstrate that “A Walled Garden” can serve as an illustration of how the older generation of women enforces traditionalist, patriarchal values upon the younger one, expecting it to conform to particular ideals of femininity and gender roles, which is a fresh perspective for many students.

Peter Taylor was a well-known American short story writer and novelist, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for his novel “A Summons to Memphis” (1986). “A Walled Garden” appeared in Taylor’s collection “Happy Families Are All Alike” (1959), which featured ten stories set in the cities of the American Midwest and the South. Taylor himself was a Southerner born in Trenton, Tennessee. Among his college teachers and friends were Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Randall Jarrell and other significant literary figures of that time. In his works Taylor explored the psychological impact of socioeconomic and cultural changes upon the traditionally patriarchal, conservative and racially divided southern society, and how it responded to 20th-century pressures of urbanization, industrialization, the Civil Rights movement and women’s movement. It’s important to mention that Taylor was from a distinguished family of politicians, lawyers and businessmen, and his characters are also usually middle and upper-class. Many of them find it hard to change habitual roles and psychological patterns.

In Taylor's story Mrs. Harris tells the young man, her daughter's companion whom Mrs. Harris has never met before, about the efforts she has put into creating a beautiful garden *out of a virtual chaos of a backyard*, as well as into raising her daughter as a lady. She describes her garden (which is modelled on her mother's garden) in a very detailed manner, naming the plants (magnolia, marigold, larkspur, roses, hyacinths, jasmine etc.) and foregrounding the connection between her own life and the life of the garden: *...I lost Mr. Harris in the dreadfully hot summer of '48 (people don't generally realize what a dreadful year it was – the worst year for perennials and annuals, alike, since Terrible '30. Things died that year that I didn't think would ever die. A dreadful summer)...* [2, p. 165–166]. It becomes clear to the reader that this garden with its carefully but artificially created beauty is Mrs. Harris's major sphere of interest and a projection of her personality.

Mrs. Harris stresses the fact that her daughter, just like the back yard of the house, for a long time remained a wild creature. She describes what she disliked most about her daughter as a child and a teenager – her dirty clothes and her uncivilized behavior: *Yes, in those days she used to run here and there with people of every sort and variety, it seemed to me. <...> And you should have seen her as a tot of twelve when she would be somersaulting and rolling about on this very spot. Honestly, I see that child now, the mud on her middy blouse and her straight yellow hair in her eyes* [Ibid, p. 166]. Mrs. Harris's efforts to "civilize" her daughter met with resistance from both her husband (*But Mr. Harris would let me put no restraint upon her*) and Frances Ann herself who refused to be the sweet girl her mother expected her to be. Mrs. Harris recollects: *When I used to come back from visiting my people at Rye, she would grit her teeth at me and give her confidence to the black cook. I would find my own child become a mad little animal* [Ibid]. Mrs. Harris still remembers *the strongheadedness of her teens that had to be overcome and the testiness in her character when she was nearer to twenty than thirty* [Ibid].

One particular episode became a turning point in the woman's struggle with her daughter's disobedience and "savage" appearance. Mrs. Harris had been absent for two months caring for her sick mother, and upon return she was displeased with her daughter's unwillingness to communicate and her lack of interest in the new ruffled dress and paper cutouts that Mrs. Harris brought her as presents. The girl tried to run away intending first to hide in the hedge at the far end of the yard and later to climb the wire fence. To Mrs. Harris her daughter more than ever resembled a *little Indian or an angry little cat, a scowling little creature*, so she kept raising her voice *in more intense rage and greater horror at her ugliness* [Ibid, p. 166–167]. She herself was immaculately dressed (high heels, a hat with a veil, a heavy travelling suit) and had some difficulty chasing after Frances Ann. In fact, before she managed to catch the girl by the hand and force her down the fence, Mrs. Harris had torn the veil and turned her ankle in the ditch; and when she tried to catch up with her running daughter again, she turned her other ankle and fell on the ground. According Mrs. Harris, while she was lying there, Frances Ann

climbed into the swing that was hanging from a *dirty old poplar* and began to swing staring *straight down at her mother through her long hair – which, you may be sure, young man, I had cut the very next day at my own beautician’s and curled into a hundred ringlets* [2, p. 168].

This episode changed the power dynamics in the mother-daughter relationship. Now, as Mrs. Harris puts it, *she does see it my way*, suggesting that her daughter, like her unruly hair, has been tamed: *Gardens and floral design have occupied her – with what guidance I could give – have been pretty much her life, really* [Ibid, p. 165]. In fact, Mrs. Harris is surprised that her daughter has met someone outside their little circle of “flower-minded people”: *She makes so few friends nowadays <...>, sees so few people outside our own garden here, really, that I find it quite strange for there to be someone who doesn’t know flowers* [Ibid].

If we examine Mrs. Harris’s system of values and her focus on appearance and female occupations such as gardening from a feminist perspective, it will become clear that she has a very rigid understanding of female gender roles. Women for her are primarily care-takers (*For three years I nursed that little magnolia there, for one whole summer did nothing but water the ivy on the east wall of the house... [Ibid]*), their task is to cultivate themselves, their children and their environment, because uncultivated, unconquered nature, including human and especially female nature, is “evil” and “savage.” The mother’s actions reveal her as a socially constructed, artificial product of the patriarchal society, deprived of natural feminine intuition, unaware of how to behave in unpredictable, non-standard situations. Her daughter’s as well as her own uncontrolled, natural behavior terrifies and repulses her as improper, “unfeminine” (*I believe it was the extreme heat that made me speak so very harshly... I did not jerk her, I didn’t jerk one bit, as she wished to make it appear... [Ibid, p. 167]*).

For Mrs. Harris, women are expected to control their movements, thoughts, feelings and actions, and most obviously, their appearance. Their clothes and hair should demonstrate cleanliness and discipline. As noted by Thom Hecht, “disciplined hair is a powerful representation of controlling authority on and off the body,” it shows “women in control or in need of control” [qtd. in: 3, p. 156]. Moreover, in the patriarchal society outward beauty is one of a woman’s chief commodities, consequently, many efforts go into women’s ‘self-cultivation’ – their use of cosmetics, fashions and hairstyling. This emphasis on female beauty is what feminists have always seen as denigrating women, turning them into objects and causing their fears and anxiety. No wonder the agenda of early feminists included “the right to ignore fashion” [4, p. 12]. The peak of the second wave of the feminist movement in the USA was the boycott of 1968 Miss America pageant in which ‘a freedom trash can’ was created for discarded copies of *Cosmopolitan*, hair curlers and restrictive undergarments. Many modern-day feminists, as Edith Snook notes, “have detailed and contested the dilemmas adhering to beauty, including standards informed by racist, classist and sexist ideals, the veneration of thinness

and youth, the violence adhering to its production, including cosmetic surgery, and its economic consequences, including the trivialization of women's work, the drain on female resources and the commodification of the beautiful woman in media culture" [3, p. 8].

The southern setting of "A Walled Garden" (the action takes place in or around Memphis, Tennessee) adds another dimension to its feminist interpretation. In the 19th and much of the 20th centuries the symbolic image of the white upper-class southern lady was central to the hierarchical structure of southern society. As noted in "Encyclopedia of Southern culture," "...southern womanhood has much in common with the ideas of British Victorian lady and of American true womanhood. All deny to women authentic selfhood; all enjoin that woman suffer and be still, all show women as sexually pure, pious, deferent to external authority, and content with their place in the home. Yet southern womanhood differs in several ways <...>. The southern lady had been from the start at the core of a patriotic impulse; the identity of the South is contingent in part upon the persistence of its tradition of the lady. Secondly, the ideal of southern womanhood seemed to have lasted longer than the other ideals, even to the present. Thirdly, southern womanhood has from the beginning been inextricably linked to racial attitudes. Its very genesis, some say, lay in the minds of guilty slaveholders who sought an image they could revere without sacrificing the gains of racial slavery. And finally, the class – aristocratic – that the image of the lady represents has deeper ideological roots in the South than elsewhere in the United States" [5, p. 1528]. The white southern lady's appearance was thus an important part of cultural semiotics in a social fabric structured by class and race, as well as gender. In this context the attempts of the mother in the story to confer "a clothing conscience" upon her daughter are meant to emphasize not only her femininity, but also her high placement in the social ranking.

All in all, Mrs. Harris seems to have a clear understanding of her mission as a mother and an upper-class woman – to create out of her daughter an ideal lady, a proper woman for the androcentric world. This is probably Mrs. Harris's way not only of controlling her daughter but also of loving and protecting her. The story becomes an illustration of what the French philosopher and writer Simone de Beauvoir noted in her sensational book "The Second Sex" (1949, 1953 English translation): "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman", it's a destiny that is "imposed upon her by her teachers and by society" (qtd. in [6, p. 342]).

Frances Ann, on the contrary, represents a new generation of women, with a strong urge towards liberty and independence. She is still weak to confront the existing traditionalist assumptions but is nevertheless able to express her dissatisfaction. In spite of her mother's constant pressure she readily socializes, as seen from Mrs. Harris's words: *She throws herself into whatever work she undertakes. <...> She simply spent herself on the Chest Drive this year* [5, p. 165]. Frances Ann doesn't want to limit her world by the walled garden, as the presence of the young man suggests.

In conclusion, it can be said that the story transcends its immediate theme – intergenerational conflict – and may be seen as a tale about shaping and revealing gender identities, obeying rules and strengthening hierarchies. The garden in the story is not a feminine paradise but rather a prison for Frances Ann, associated with restrictions and limitations (besides the wall separating the garden from the outside world, there are all kinds of ornamental hedges, fences, partitions in it). By stressing the self-justifying and domineering tone of Mrs. Harris’s speech Taylor implies that he doesn’t endorse the values that this character represents. The story becomes a critique of women’s psychological dependence on traditionalist assumptions concerning femininity; Taylor suggests that these assumptions are losing their legitimacy in a changing and developing 20th-century southern society.

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