

NEW PLACEMENT OF A WOMAN IN TESSA HADLEY'S SHORT STORIES

M.S. Berezhnaya

Abstract. The article dwells on the spatial imagery reflecting modern women's position nowadays in the short stories by a contemporary British writer, Tessa Hadley. Article deals with basic cultural metaphors which had shaped the discourse of women's writing in Great Britain in the twentieth century: "angel in the house" and "a room of one's own". When exposing her heroine's everyday life and ambitions, Hadley places her in different spaces so as to make them semantically significant. By means of comparing and contrasting Hadley purposefully constructs images of female space in order to highlight the complexity of her experience. While the image of a room of one's own used to represent a set of crucial prerequisites for fulfilling women's ambitions towards professional goals and financial independency it provides ontological status to female selves nowadays. The paper develops the idea that a complex set of social and psychological female values are embedded in the spatial constructions of Tessa Hadley's stories. We identify different types of space configuration of material world which serve as metaphors to heroines' selves, including metaphorical space of a room of one's own.

Keywords: Tessa Hadley, one's own room, angel in the house, women writing, feminism, short story.

НОВОЕ ПОЛОЖЕНИЕ И МЕСТО ЖЕНЩИНЫ В РАССКАЗАХ ТЕССЫ ХАДЛИ

М.С. Бережная

Аннотация. Статья обращена к исследованию образов пространства, находимых в рассказах британской писательницы Тессы Хадли, отражающим современное положение женщин. Апеллируя к базовым культурным метафорам: «ангелу дома» и «своей комнате», Хадли изображает повседневную жизнь своей героини в границах различных топосов, что обуславливает их семантическую значимость. Проблемные аспекты женского опыта автор выявляет путем со- и противопоставления различных пространств. Наряду с тем, что образ «своей комнаты» после одноименного эссе В. Вулф репрезентирует основные предпосылки и условия для достижения женщиной профессиональных успехов и финансовой независимости, в рассказах Хадли он выражает ее онтологический статус. В статье утверждается идея о том, что комплекс социальных и психологических женских ценностей встроен в изображенные Хадли пространственные топосы. Особое внимание уделяется классификации различных видов конфигурации пространственных образов, включая метафорическое пространство «своей комнаты».

Ключевые слова: Тесса Хадли, своя комната, ангел дома, женское письмо, феминизм, короткий рассказ.

Two seminal socio-cultural stereotypes, which are still recognizable today, shaped the discourse of British women writing in the last century and are associated with the space and place of a woman. The first construction is a wide-spread image of a Victorian virtuous woman: *The Angel in the House*¹, which introduces a desirable code of gender-conforming behavior, expressing “domesticity, unlimited care, self-sacrifice” [Binder, 2014, p. 27], and compliance with the patriarchal, moral and religious norms of society. Up to now this stereotype has served for the questioning of contemporary female identity.

Another key stereotype is the concept of *A Room of One's Own* manifested in the seminal essay by Virginia Woolf [Woolf, 1929], and it is formulated around the notion of property, which symbolizes the very possibility of the articulation of female experience, views, values and the artistic expression of a woman's selfhood.

Contemporary British writer Tessa Hadley follows the tradition of great British women writers who were apt at raising female issues, citing others such as Virginia Woolf, Elisabeth Bowen, Doris Lessing. Hadley's prose, like its antecedent and exemplar brilliant predecessors' fiction, defines the female politics of the present in terms of place and space.

Tessa Hadley is a relatively new writer who published her first novel in 2002 at the age of 46. 'Accidents in the Home' (2002) was longlisted for the Guardian First Book Award. Since that time she has been a regular contributor to *The New Yorker* and published five more novels and three collections of short stories ('Sunstroke and Other Stories' 2007, 'Married Love' 2013, 'Bad Dream and Other Stories' 2017), which were highly praised by critics and won her prestigious prizes. Her story 'Bad Dream' was short-listed for the BBC National Short Story Award in 2014.

She now teaches creative writing at Bath Spa University. Tessa Hadley writes wonderful realistic short stories about women and other important things which alter the life of contemporary women (e.g. motherhood, domesticity, building one's career, searching for one's identity, friendship between women, infidelity and love affairs) with great subtlety and a high degree of psychological perception. Literary critics compare Hadley's prose to the fiction of the other famous contemporary short story writer Alice Munro, not mainly because they both embark on the same problems but due to similarities in their manner of writing: “two writers who would rather be wise than nice. They both write long, realistic short stories that are disrupted by sex and which are interested in time; both are fascinated by the road not taken. Each draws from a personal store, writing and rewriting variations of the same recurrent themes” [Enright, 2007].

In her stories Tessa Hadley aspires to write about her contemporaries, her typical heroine is a British white middle class woman struggling for a balance between family and personal ambitions, as she explains: “Because it's everything I know, and it's everything

¹ Coventry Patmor's verse-sequence which sings the praises and narrates the courtship and marriage of Honoria, a girl whose unselfish grace, gentleness, simplicity and nobility reveal that she is not only a pattern Victorian lady but almost literally an angel on earth.

I've read, and everything I've been brought up in. It's very far from a perfect way of life or sensibility, but it's the only one I can be an expert in" [Gayduk, 2016].

In the opinion of some critics "the narrowness of ... family-based plots" [Jarvis, 2016] prevents Hadley from receiving major literary prizes, although every year her novels can be found in the New York Times Notable books list. However, Hadley objects to underestimating so-called domestic fiction. She unites with the other well-known writer and journalist, Rachel Cusk, in rejecting labels. They both concede that women's writing reflects a complex set of social and psychological values, "important aspects of her modern identity" [Cusk, 2014] and provides an ontological status for narrating the female self.

When exposing her heroine's everyday life, thoughts and aspirations, Hadley places her in different spaces so as to make them semantically significant. By means of comparing and contrasting Hadley purposefully constructs images of female space in order to highlight the complexity and multiplicity of female experiences and preoccupations. We can find in her prose a great number of houses, rooms, cottages, summer huts, etc.

Thus it enables us to identify and distinguish three types of space configurations in Hadley's stories: *space of convention*; *space of transition*; and, *space of creativity*. Each type establishes peculiar features determining the protagonist's experience and behaviour within its limits and can be characterised by various degree of female freedom and accomplishment.

How does Tessa Hadley picture domestic space for her readers? As a rule, in Hadley's stories *space of convention* is represented by highly gendered patriarchal houses (for example: the vicar's house – 'Buckets of Blood', 'Mouthful of Cut Glass'). In the light of *space of convention* a woman is defined by her family, her domestic duties and not by her ambitions and her talents. She has to lead a life following socially prescribed patriarchal norms and domestic patterns. This space doesn't bear a unique imprint of women's personality, on the contrary, it cannot secure any space for privacy and meditation, it tends to encroach and stifle. For example, conventional spaces in 'Buckets of Blood', 'Sunstroke', 'Mouthful of Cut Glass', and 'Married Love' are described as messy, uninviting, overcrowded, gloomy, monotonous, destructive.

Domestic space in 'Buckets of Blood' is represented by an old dilapidated house where a vicar lives with his wife and their nine children. There aren't any common facilities in this house and "the storage heaters in the draughty vicarage gave out such paltry warmth" [Hadley, 2008, p. 47]. Hadley emphasizes a curious conjugation of the human and the spatial when she mentions "the old Ascot gas heater only dribbled hot water", and a queue of "children taking turns each night for the bath" [Hadley, 2008, p. 46]. Furthermore, domestic space can't provide the desired privacy and security of the personal space, where it is possible to stay alone to think, read, meditate, or to leave your things without fear that they might be broken or spoiled. Quite remarkably the only safe place "for keeping anything precious" becomes a child's body "with the keys on a string around their necks". Domestic space is shown as unreliable and unsafe. The elder sisters Hilary and Sheila, both had

an insurmountable desire “to get as far away from home as possible, and not to become anything like their mother” [Hadley, 2008, p. 47]. They dreaded replicating their mother’s and elder sister’s fate, who after getting married and having children started looking and behaving just like their mother, filling up the ranks of domesticated women who were “always busy”, hardly ever had time to themselves, and “stoop their heads down in a broken way...given up on completed sentences or consecutive dialogue” [Hadley, 2008, p. 47], “muttering things to herself” [Hadley, 2008, p. 48]. Tessa Hadley accentuates the central piece of Silvia’s home – “twin-tube washing machine”, which is always working, “always pulled out from the wall, filling the kitchen with urine-pungent steam” thus manifesting an infinite amount of house chores which constitute all women’s concerns and mold their lives. Unpleasant smell of *Mothballs* and *Hermolene* in the parent’s house echoes the “urine-pungent steam” of masses of boiling nappies in Sylvia’s flat, both mark the negative reception of conventional space by the younger sisters, who associate this unpleasant smell with an outdated unsatisfying conventional way of life.

Space constructed in accordance with patriarchal laws reveals its suppressing and confining properties and is also perceived as destructive for women in terms of depriving them of their identity and hindering the potential for personal development.

Quite often in Hadley’s stories space of convention is opposed to another type of space configuration – *space of transition*. Her female protagonists are intimately captured in the midst of a disintegration and identity crisis. We can identify a specific range of spatial images in Hadley’s prose that considerably problematize the traditional “women’s question”. They are *heterotopias*, *transit spaces* and *open spaces*. *Heterotopias* are – “a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live” [Focault, 2008, p. 17]. For example: a deserted house or a room in the hotel or other places not suitable for permanent living (‘In the Country’, ‘Buckets of Blood’). *Transit spaces* usually connected with a short stay within the space limits. For example: in a train or station or visiting somebody’s place (‘The London Train’, ‘In the Cave’, ‘She’s the One’). *Open spaces* are attributed to female acting or behaving under the circumstances of liberating nature beyond restricting limits of material world (‘Phosphorescence’, ‘Mouthful of Cut Glass’, ‘Sunstroke’).

Such kinds of space construction declares an absence of gender hierarchy, patriarchal tyranny and embraces changes, creating a new experience which leads to revisiting gender politics, patterns of conventional behavior and stimulates further self-determination and awakening among women. The interpretation and reading of *space of transition* reveals its metaphorical meaning and testifies to its metaphorical transformation, which renders it devoid of any items of control, stereotypes or standards. So, we arrive at the insight that such a space can be found everywhere. Tessa Hadley deliberately employs *spaces of transition* in as having an emancipatory function. Within the space of a dark moonless night (‘Sunstroke’) “deep and complete and astonishing to these city folk” [Hadley, 2008, p. 18] Kiran and Jenny, who barely knew each other but as they felt a mutual attraction started kissing on the dark road. The author describes the space of darkness as “solid and prohibitive”, which “feels counter-intuitive” [Hadley, 2008, p. 18] and upsets conventional moral

concepts. Despite the fact that Jenny thought she loved her partner and was devoted to their three children, she didn't have doubts that "a real adventure with a man mustn't be wasted" [Hadley, 2008, p. 22]. In her view "Everything is running away so fast" and impenetrable darkness enabled her to succumb to the temptation "to snatch at all the living you can" [Hadley, 2008, p. 22]. In 'Phosphorescence', during a family vacation, Claudia "a grown-up mother of three" [Hadley, 2008, p. 74] started paying attention to her host's teenage son, Graham, "in an extraordinary way" [Hadley, 2008, p. 74] barely acknowledging that to herself. In the rowing boat with Graham on the beach flooded with phosphorescent water, Claudia descended into a trance-like state and set free her imagination, feeling liberated from her duties, morals and family. The phosphorescent surface of the water, caused by glowing sea creatures which produce "an enzyme-catalyzed chemical reaction" [Hadley, 2008, p. 77] symbolizes desire, attraction, and an apparent alchemy between a young man and mature woman. This unconventional experience had a galvanizing effect on Claudia, who left her husband shortly after. The space of phosphorescent water implies a truth about woman and her body, and her nature. The apparent transgressive behavior of a grown-up woman aware of her own actions we see as a protest against hardships and tedium in a marriage, and against transient female beauty and youth.

Tessa Hadley's short stories are abundant in heterotopias as well. In 'Buckets of Blood' we meet Sheila in a strange desolate squat under extraordinary circumstances. "The place ...had been an elegant house once" [Hadley, 2008, p. 55] with "tall arched windows", "smooth polished wood" with crazy shadows of mushrooms on the kitchen walls, where "everything smelled of a mineral decay" [Hadley, 2008, p. 56]. Here Sheila was initiated to life, in the small bare room upstairs she miscarried an illicit pregnancy into the chamber pot. As she explained this accident to her sister she claimed she hadn't done it deliberately. But we get a strong impression that her decision was obvious – not to join the "ranks of women submerged and knowing amid their biology" [Hadley, 2008, p. 57]. The dark secluded space on the fringes of the society functions as protecting, and keeping safe from social censure mechanisms. The heterotopic space of the squat serves as a shelter and salvation. It enables Sheila to realize that you may have sexual intercourse and don't have to get married; you can have freedom to decide not to give birth to an unwanted child, and have possibility to choose one's future life.

When picturing her heroine in a heterotopic space, Tessa Hadley makes her have an alternative experience and tries to compose for her another possible identity. This new experience might become a healing practice which emancipates the real Self and liberates from her from the conventionally prescribed Self.

In 'Mother's Son', 'Exchanges', 'Enemy', and 'Experience' Hadley delineates a *space of creativity* which differs dramatically from both *space of convention* and *space of transition*. *Space of creativity* becomes a real representation of female freedom and self-expression. We see this space as a peak of evolution in comprehending women's space imagery. Tessa Hadley offers *space of creativity* to be deciphered from perspectives and opportunities for women's self-discovery, development and self-expression. Female characters in 'Mother's Son', 'Exchanges', 'Enemy', and 'Experience' have their own flats, studies and

studios, furnished and renovated in accordance with their personal requirements and taste. Their spaces meet the demands of harmonious solitude and stimulate creativity. Kristin (*Mother's Son*) has her private study for work at her disposal – “this big one, the centre-piece. Here she worked at a long cherrywood table” [Hadley, 2008, p. 26], Hadley unequivocally alludes to Woolf's essay. Moreover, Kristina's flat interior and magnificent windows infallibly resembles the lodging of Virginia Woolf in Bloomsbury.

Hilda ('She's the One'), after her children had grown up and left the parental home, moved to another country and starts living on her own. Her new home becomes her renewed self: “The room was uncluttered, considering how small it was, but everything in it was striking and eccentric: the faded rugs, the pictures on the walls, a wool blanket woven in bright colours flung over the back of the sofa, collections of stones and twisted weathered deadwood from the moors. The effect seemed spontaneous ... it must have taken a huge effort to get it to this state, removing all the layers of paint and wallpaper and carpeting and cosiness” [Hadley, 2012, p. 181].

Interestingly enough, Tessa Hadley sets forth her view of women inhabiting “rooms of their own”, and in so doing she grants them a great bent for creativity or artistic talent. Thus Hilda is an aspiring writer, Kristin is a scholar and literary critic.

They enjoy their status of single independent accomplished women, living on their own. Hadley's characters don't follow socially-approved patterns of living, they advocate “an-other set of choices” [Soja, 1996], deliberately reject conventional marriage or sever the relationships which are detrimental to their progress, they face risks and hardships which comes with independency and originality. For these women personal space is closely connected to the flourishing of their creative potential. Literarily speaking, some of Hadley's female characters have solved the problem which was raised in Woolf's thought-provoking essay. They have entered their “own room” which in a metaphorical sense means that they have managed to find their true selves.

Tessa Hadley actively employs a framework of socio-cultural concepts, such as *The Angel in the House* and *A Room of One's Own* for representing various images of the female space, highlighting different parameters of female experience and status. Carefully delineated space constructions mirror the evolution of social practices of gender treatment from the oppression of women (*the space of convention*) towards recognition (*the space of creativity*).

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